THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Among Objects: Percussion Ontology, Mediation, and Violence

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts

in

Contemporary Music Performance

by

Michael David Jones

Committee in charge:

Professor Steven Schick, Chair
Professor Amy Cimini
Professor Nancy Guy
Professor Megan Wesling
Professor Shahrokh Yadegari

2024

The Dissertation of Michael David Jones is approved, and it is accepted in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically

University of California San Diego

2024

EPIGRAPH

To live is to echo the vibrancy of things.

Alphonso Lingis

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The creative and scholarly work that forms the bedrock of this dissertation was made possible by the support of a Teaching Assistantship/Fellowship from the UCSD Music Department. Without this support, the dissertation's scope and depth would have been greatly reduced. Beyond financial support, I am thankful to the Music Department in general for six years of community and resources, which have made an indelible impact on my career.

In particular I want to thank the members of my committee. Steve, for his practical guidance, generosity, unconditional support, and daily inspiration (this last item certainly precedes my time at UCSD). To Amy, for always encouraging me to follow threads that seemed cloudy or entangled, and for making multiple trajectory-changing reading recommendations during our time working together. To Nancy for holding me to the highest standard, encouraging me to put myself out there, and always asking the important question of why my work should matter and to whom. To Shahrokh Yadegari and Keyavash Nourai for fostering an inimitable Persian classical music community at UCSD. My humble participation as a nascent performer of this music has simultaneously extended by musicianship's branches and strengthened its roots. To Meg Wesling for her incisive and clear-eyed ability to see where my work was trying to reach towards.

I would also like to extend thanks to the many colleagues I have performed with at UCSD. To my colleagues in red fish blue fish for giving me six years of the highest level of percussion ensemble performance. In this vein I would like to especially thank Rebecca Lloyd-Jones, my cohort-mate, who served as a companion, confidant, and collaborator during both the most joyous times as well as the most challenging. This work – and my career – would look very different without her influence. I would also like to thank my duo partners Ashley Zhang and

Sasha Ishov for taking risks and dreaming big with me. I can't wait to see where our work will take us.

I would again like to thank Steve Schick, as well as Bill Solomon and Sarah Hennies, for making their unpublished work available to me. Readers will quickly see the influence these thinkers have had on my own work, and I thank them for their generosity in allowing me to dialogue with them.

I am deeply indebted to my students, both at UCSD and Villa Musica. Thank you to the former for the incredible gift of one fish two fish. It has been an honor getting to make music with all of you and to see your growth. Thank you to the latter for reminding me on a weekly basis the joys and frustrations of first encountering sticks and the surfaces they fall upon. The central mantra of this dissertation, that "at some point every percussionist held a stick over a drum and didn't know what to expect," comes directly from my engagements with teaching. It has become a core philosophical axiom not only for my pedagogy, but, as the reader will see, my percussion ontology more generally.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family: Mom, Dad, Kat, and Deanna. Your support means the world to me, and none of this work -- nor who I am -- would be possible without you.

VITA

2017 BM in Percussion Performance and Music Management, The Hartt School / University of Hartford

2020 MA in Music Performance, University of California San Diego

2024 DMA in Contemporary Music Performance, University of California San Diego

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Among Objects: Percussion Ontology, Mediation, and Violence

by

Michael David Jones

University of California, San Diego, 2024

Professor Steven Schick, Chair

Among Objects seeks to explore the concepts and structures of thought that underlie Western percussion ontology. As an artform, percussion is often understood as not being rooted to a material practice, but instead defined based on practitioners' intentions and relationships to any number of materials, from conventional instruments to so-called "found sounds." This dissertation, itself invested in the ethical dilemmas of the art form, seeks to complicate this understanding. I begin, through a phenomenological lens, by analyzing the structures of action and consciousness that make such an ontology possible. I then illustrate, through the concept of

touch, the contingent bodily and material elements that support these structures and mediate this action: conditions that are often overlooked in accounts of the artform. I argue that the predominant ontology of action is shaped by certain orienting structures of power, and that percussion's ontology must be understood based on the consequences of these orientations. I proceed to imagine and outline a metaphysics of percussion rooted not in subjective action but in a form of inter-objective self-interpretation. Within this framework, the percussive work or event creates a more complex object of which the human is just one component part, rather than master or sovereign. The dissertation closes with a discussion of how, given this alternative metaphysics, the relationship of percussion to violence takes on a different form: no longer something that one commits only by choice, but something that is immanent to the embodied, material, and cultural practices of the artform. Given this understanding, I argue for an embodied, object-oriented ethics to help create and maintain a more habitable percussive world.

Introduction

It's awkward at first. The natural instinct is to grip the stick with all the fingers of the hand, but doing so cancels out any motion around the fulcrum. This fulcrum, created with the thumb, pointer, and middle finger, is needed in order to utilize the rebound of the stick off of the surface it comes into contact with. Locking the hand around it puts all of the energy back into the body, rather than transferring it into the surfaces around you.

It's awkward at first. Again, one wants to grip the mallets with all the fingers of the hand to maintain control, but in so doing the motion is transferred entirely to the wrist. The wood of the marimba responds harshly to a technique that puts so much power and tension into the stroke. Instead one has to learn to cradle the mallets in the hand by pinching them, lightly, strategically, in space – the "front" and "back" fingers must learn to act independently of each other. Doing it right feels almost like the motion of a puppeteer: falling, catching, and gently lifting.

It's awkward at first. The *riz* begins with a wrist motion powered by the arm, like most drum strokes. However, the fingers must be totally relaxed in order to get the "buzz" sound heard in so many Persian classical music performances. The natural tendency is to fake it: to use the actual muscles of the fingers to manually strike the drum with each digit. However, this is a form of micromanagement. The power comes from a subtle rotational moment in the wrist that must be practiced until it is rapid, and the illusion of a smooth roll is complete.

It's awkward at first. To put into words what one does in percussion and why. And yet, with each awkward sentence, a picture of an artform steeped in the body's contact with the world becomes visible.

Percussionists and composers have been philosophizing about percussion since its first iterations within the Western modernist repertoire. At the heart of many of these musings is a recurring concern regarding percussion's ontology. The returning question is: what exactly *is* percussion? How do we know percussion is what it is? How is it similar or different to other Western musical practices, or, more often, to percussion traditions outside of the West? Many percussionists have taken a crack at the question. Steven Schick writes that the foundation of his philosophy is the mantra: "No instruments, just sticks."[1] To Schick, percussion instruments are the conveyors of human action, not the anchoring of a practice in-and-of-themselves. This definition has been definitive, with younger generations of percussionists has further developed the theory of percussion-as-action. Håkon Stene describes percussion as more an attitude than an instrumental practice proper, and his own work seeks to "decouple the *intent* of percussion from the materials of percussion[.]"[2] Louise Devenish, similarly invested in what has been termed a post-instrumental practice stemming from percussion, remarks that "percussion is not restricted to musical instruments, but extends to any object from which sound can be drawn."[3] Greg Stuart offers a sense of percussion that, though similarly rooted in "corporeal sensibility," situates itself less as an "agent of action" and instead as a "'thermometer, or a filter which registers a particular sonic intensity."[4] Taken together, these percussionists and others have theorized a rich musical practice. It is one that is diffuse and mercurial, centered not on a single material body (such as an instrument) but instead a performer's orientation to sounding material more generally.

---

[1] Steven Schick, *The Percussionist's Art: Same Bed Different Dreams* (Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2006), 33. Schick wryly borrows this mantra from the decision of his mother, "a frugal Iowa farm wife," to send Schick into percussion as a young boy rather than his other choices because to join the school band as a percussionist he would only need to purchase sticks, rather than a given instrument itself.

[2] Håkon Stene, "This is Not a Drum: Towards a Post-Instrumental Practice," PhD Diss. The Norwegian Academy of Music. 2014. 1.

[3] Louise Devenish, *Global Percussion Innovations: The Australian Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 138-139.

[4] Greg Stuart, "A Percussionist's Practice," (DMA diss., University of California, San Diego. 2009), 75.

Percussion thus seemingly always implies some kind of philosophy, and has developed a rich current of thought that has generated any number of creative and capital endeavors, from the noisy modernism of John Cage to the pulsing minimalism of Steve Reich to the energetic spectacle of Stomp or the Blue Man Group. At the heart of percussion ontology in the West is the understanding that anything can be a percussion instrument, and, therefore, the possibilities are endless.

Historically, this ontology has had a number of political applications. To Varèse and Cage, percussion offered a rich palette from which to escape Romantic European aesthetics. In their hands, percussion became one of the first tools of 20th century modernism's war against tradition. More recently, though certainly still rooted in these early composers, queer percussionists have turned towards the artform as a way of escaping oppressive forms of heteronormative capitalism and the toxic masculinity that belies much of percussion's more militaristic aspects. Perhaps most recently, percussion ontology has served as a jumping-off point for questioning the nature of instrumentality in general. Again, Louise Devenish writes that "Instrumentality is a much more useful term... than instrument, because there is no contemporary agreement on what a musical instrument actually is..."[5] If, as percussion's nature shows, instrumentality is so diffuse, relative, and contextualized through performer use, then what's keeping musicians of all stripes of similarly casting off the chains of instrumental tradition in order to see their practice with new eyes?

This diffuse ontology, however, is not without its pitfalls. In the last two decades especially, percussionists have been looking at the multi-cultural elements of their art form with

[5] Louise Devenish, "Instrumental Infrastructure, Instrumental sculpture and instrumental scores: a post-instrumental practice," *Music and Practice* 9 (2021): 8.

a more critical eye. Western percussion, because of the global sources of its instruments, borrowed traditional idioms, and historical Orientalist fantasies, is comprised of musical ideas and presences from cultures found around the world. Percussion-as-action allows what is considered by contemporary standards to be cultural appropriation and, as a result of this, a project of 20th century colonization. In reviewing the literature of 20th century percussion, one finds instruments and idioms from all over the world: Africa, the Middle East, and Asia especially. The narrative for the past 100 years has been equal parts civilization and progress on one hand and dialogue and multiculturalism on the other. Particularly in the hands of American percussionists, this multiculturalism has been an escape hatch from European aesthetic hegemony. This narrative, however, is more often than not told by Euro-American practitioners educated in Euro-American academies and conservatories. It manufacturers a "world music held together by Western glue," as Roger Turner puts it.[6] When percussion works that are influenced by non-Euro-American musical traditions skew too closely to their source of origin it is repudiated as localized and folkloric. Moreover, those composers who create sufficiently sophisticated works that use non-Western instruments as abstract sounding objects are lionized as innovators. The broader point here is not that Western percussion is damned to be a colonial project or that these works should no longer be performed. The point is rather that when action is the sole ontological grounding of a musical practice, the performers and composers *doing* the action alone set the terms of its context and interpretation, and that this context largely remains Euro-American. This makes any ethical grounding impossible, as the other who might hold oneself accountable is subsumed into an impression or fantasy the percussionist-subject has of them. This impressionistic or fantastic faculty is what enables cultural-ontological leaps such as

[6] Roger Turner and Mari Kamada, *Junk Percussion: Notes for the Future* (Cold Spring, NY: Terra Nova Press, 2022), 140.

when Steve Reich's *Drumming* is understood somehow as an "African" piece of music or when Varèse's *Ionisation* is seen as broadly and unproblematically ecumenical in its abstraction. I will argue that to a certain extent, the abstraction that an ontology-of-action offers percussionists in fact impedes the radical experience of alterity that constitutes authentic intercultural dialogue.

The second problem of an ontology action is seen in the relationship of percussion to consumption and waste. Percussion is an instrumental practice perhaps uniquely conducive to commodification. As any percussionist might tell you, there is seemingly no end to the quantity of tools and instruments a percussionist could own: endless varieties and qualities of sticks and mallets, drums, cymbals, bells, and even their supporting hardware. This commodification has accelerated in recent decades to the point where it is a common practice for performers to have multiple corporate brand endorsements that they then apply to their academic institutions. An ontology of action plays well into the hand of what sociologist Hartmun Rosa calls dynamic stabilization: the idea that modernity can only maintain itself through constant acceleration and escalation.[7] To a percussionist, this means that there are always more mallets to own, more drums to purchase, in order to best present the performer's intended action, musical result, and artistic self. My critique is not of new products. I am constantly amazed by the new innovations being made by drum-makers, metallurgists, and mallet-makers, and I find the applications of new materials to my existing practice always galvanizing and exciting. My critique is instead aimed at a social and phenomenological world where the only way a percussionist is encouraged to relate to their materials is through a logic of consumption. I go so far as to argue that musical

[7] See Hartmun Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 2019).

action as it is understood in the context of percussion is itself *a form of consumption,* and must be ethically accounted for as such.[8]

Percussion, in the language of John Cage, seems to gesture towards an "all-sound music of the future," where possibilities for innovation and disruption were limitless.[9] It is this same narrative we hear echoed in the post-instrumental theorists cited above: a language of "frontiers," "exploration," and "liberation." Cast in aesthetic contexts, these terms feel somewhat quaint, hearkening back to a heroic composer/performer who doesn't really exist anymore, and whom contemporary culture doesn't seem to need. However, the idea of liberation, possibility, and alternative life is something that percussion has historically offered marginalized groups: it has been a platform for queer and racialized artists to find access in the Western concert tradition. An ontology of action in the hands of a marginalized person is politically-oriented and queer. It allows a performer to constantly poke and prod at a dominant practice through selective appropriation of objects. This orientation has generated a large amount of important works for percussion, from the early days of John Cage, Henry Cowell, and Lou Harrison to the more recent work of Sarah Hennies, among others. However, the position of marginalization, despite the perspectives of dominant culture that it offers, is not immune from the pitfalls of percussion's ontology-as-action in general. We see ethical concerns regarding marginalized identity and action manifest through the appropriation of instruments and objects by queer percussionists for the purpose of articulating their queerness: a selective interpretation of what I will show is a

[8] Timothy Morton describes consumerism as "identity in process," where "one doesn't just eat carrots, one styles oneself as a carrot eater." The same can be said of the negative: by *not* eating carrots, one styles oneself as *not* a carrot eater. Understood in the context of percussionistic exceptionalism, we can say that the sometimes the distancing of oneself from the problematic modes of consumption can be a form of identity creation more than a mode of actual politics. Too often in percussion history these two avenues, the identitarian and the political, are conflated at the expense of difficult, but productive encounters with alterity. Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 111.

[9] John Cage, *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition* (CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 5.

more multi-faceted object.[10] In addition to the concerns of cultural appropriation identified above, marginalized percussion practices have a unique relationship to trash and waste. Ontology-as-action allows for a percussionist to take the waste products of modernity (tin cans, frying pans, scrap metal, etc.) and salvage them for the purpose of aesthetic intent. On one hand, there is something undeniably rehabilitative about this practice. Objects otherwise destined for the landfill find a second chance at life on stage. On the other, however, I again argue that even this marginalized consumption is still a form of consumption – a form of "identity in process" -- in need of a nuanced ethics. That is to say that identity, while offering perspectives and critiques of immeasurable value, does not in-and-of-itself create ethically reciprocal approaches. Percussion is an artform shot through with colonialism, imperialism, appropriation, indigeneity, and hope. These are complicated, entangled, contemporaneous, and often contradictory conceptual and material networks.

Ontology-as-action is thus one side of a very complex equation. On one hand, it is radically inclusive compared to other instrumental ontologies. I think here of music therapy workshops where children, the elderly, and the neurodivergent can participate in the joy of drumming with little-to-no technical instruction. Ontology-as-action can also be queer and politically oriented. It is not rooted to a single instrument or material and can thus weave between the interstices of hegemony and normativity. It is well positioned to envision alternative worlds to the ones artists currently occupy, a project that percussionists have been investing themselves in for nearly a century. However, an ontology-as-action seems to skew towards breadth and novelty rather than depth and intimacy. It is ill-equipped to conceptualize itself in a meaningful way in relation to decolonization, as the potentially colonizing action in question is

[10] For more on queer appropriation-as-survival, see in particular the work of Bill Solomon and Sarah Hennies, discussed more at-length in Chapter 3.

rationalized along relative lines of performer background, experience, and identity. It also seems ill-equipped to formulate an ethical grounding in relation to its material consumption. Ontology-as-action often drifts into either corporate fetishism on one hand, or a form of avant garde contrarianism on the other. Neither route, I will show, sufficiently encounters or ethically regards a percussive world that sits beyond human action.

These difficulties are manifestations of a larger philosophical problem facing percussion in general. That is, they point towards a certain imbalance in the subject-object relationship in percussion's instrumental ontology. This imbalance falls heavily on the side of the subject: it is the *percussionist* who sets the terms of their art. It is the *percussionist* who surrounds themselves with various objects over which they exercise their expertise, mastery, liberation, or political resistance. What this subjective emphasis critically downplays is a grounding in a phenomenal or material world outside of the percussionist's intentions: the same world Stene would seemingly discard entirely. A percussion ontology that is able to ethically account for itself amidst the 21st century problems of consumerism, colonization, and waste will require a reduced, or at least recalibrated, emphasis on human action in the role of conceptualizing the art form. It will require a return to the real (as opposed to the ideal) that lies outside of and pushes against a percussionist's instrumental action. It is the development of this more balanced ontology that this dissertation tasks itself with.

Percussion's ontology-as-action, as I will show, is developed through certain phenomenological investigations and assumptions. My own work will similarly begin at this level of experience: the contact point between subject and world. Phenomenology is a philosophical methodology and tradition originating in continental Europe in the late-19th century and finding its height of popularity and influence in the early-mid 20th. The major names of the

tradition include Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others. What phenomenology seeks to do is to bridge the gap between the idealist subject and the realist world this subject exists in. In other words, it asks the question of how human consciousness and experience in the world reveals and discloses the world in its being. It opposes itself to certain idealist philosophical strains that claim that knowledge can only be derived from reason and logic, and instead asserts that knowledge can only ever be gained by returning to the world and the "things themselves" within it.

Each of the percussionists cited above practice phenomenology in their own way, though rarely in explicitly phenomenological terms. The first task of this dissertation is then to transpose the language of percussion theorists into the language of phenomenology proper. The question at this juncture is: what is to be gained through this philosophical exercise? If percussionists seem to already be doing phenomenology, if a crude kind, then is it really worth the effort to connect the artistic practice to 20th century philosophical terminology? I argue yes, and for two reasons. First, an undisciplined phenomenology errs more towards a style of description than a philosophical methodology proper. That is to say that percussionists, even particularly astute ones, are more likely to describe their experiences uncritically without a sufficiently informed and rigid philosophical grounding. Such a positioning reinforces what in phenomenology is called "the natural attitude" – the seemingly straightforward, common sense appearance of the world. Second, and perhaps more importantly, phenomenology itself as a discipline is not without its limitations and pitfalls. In the latter half of the 20th century and the 21st, many philosophers and theorists identified that phenomenology had seem to run out of steam, as continental philosophy moved towards a more excited engagement with what has come to be termed the linguistic turn. My own work does not situate itself within this later emphasis on

language, but takes well certain criticisms philosophers working in this tradition levy at phenomenology. Percussionists practicing crude phenomenology without a grounding in the larger historical developments of continental philosophy are thus ignorant of now decades-old discourse that contests their natural assumptions.

This dissertation will show that in approaching percussion and its instrumentality, we arrive not at an ontology of action but instead an ontology of *access*. Percussionists act on the world through their engagement with sounding objects. However, for each action that pushes on the world, I will show that the world escapes domination, either through resisting musical action, or by sliding promiscuously out of the percussionist's grasp through errant and eclectic resonances. Human action is, again, one half of an ontological equation, and the one more focused on appropriation (cultural and material), exploration, and liberation. The other half of this equation are the variables of percussion which resists, escapes, limits, and mediates this action. I analyze our access to the enigmatic quality of percussion's instrumentality through a concept that any percussionist would quickly recognize: touch. Touch often serves as pedagogical signifier in percussion practice, and here I point towards the concept's invocations of embodied life and existential metaphor, which make instances of percussive touch ripe for phenomenological investigation. Touch shows that percussive action, be it physically striking an object, managing an instrument's reverberation, or situating oneself in the flow of time, brings with it complex phenomenological considerations that go beyond the mere intentions of a human subject.

One of the longest lasting criticisms of phenomenology as a tradition is that, despite its claims of bridging the subject-object divide, it remains firmly on the side of the subject. Though a phenomenological subjectivity is concerned with and immersed in the things of the world, it

nonetheless inevitably must resort to reducing them to how they appear to consciousness. Despite phenomenology's best efforts, knowledge of the world outside of human consciousness, or the "things-in-themselves," remain out of grasp. What percussionists touch and hear in their playing is always an interpretation within a broader context of human understanding, never an actual, disinterested grasp of the instrument or sound in question. This is not to say that such a grasping of the things of percussion in themselves would even be desirable. The point is that phenomenology can glean a certain kind of knowledge about the world: it can discover how objects, art, and discourses are constituted. It can theorize the relationship between the self and world and self and other. Even as a crude style of description it can bring a subject more in touch with the poetic, enchanted currents of the world. What it cannot do, however, is imagine a world outside of human experience, and this external, radically de-anthropized being is, I believe, needed to craft a more ethical relation to the material world that percussionists consume.

We might pause here and ask: "do we really *need* a conception of percussion that comes in part from outside the human?" It's true that, as stated above, even our best efforts to speculate about the world in-itself will ultimately return to how it appears to us. The best we get, as Merleau-Ponty observed, is "being-in-itself-for-us." What can an attempt at speculation of a world outside human consciousness give us in general, and percussionists in particular? The phenomenologies of percussive touch and access that I present open up a world that pushes in on and conditions percussion practice. Furthermore, it reveals certain metaphysical fissures in the concept of percussion as a subject-driven art form. When percussionists experience resistance or contingency in their tools, or encounter the failure of some material they use in the process of using it, this points to not only the subject-object divide but to a more profound *object-object* divide. The percussion phenomenology found above in Stene, Devenish, and Stuart is rightfully

concerned with the relationship between percussionist and instrument, what Schick calls "the sweet kink of contact."[11] What they seem to miss, and what I hope to fill in in this dissertation, is a metaphysical consideration of how our materials relate *to each other*. Such an approach, I argue, presents a robust and vibrating world of objects that the percussionist-subject builds their own among and between. Such a metaphysics of percussion presents a performer who borrows, negotiates, and leases their artform from a rich inter-objective world. This is held in opposition to the current model: a heroic subject who appropriates and breathes life and meaning into an otherwise meaningless, inert material existence. Furthermore, an object-oriented metaphysics holds implications not only for percussionists and their instruments and tools, but also the concept of the musical work that percussion has been in tension with from its earliest modernist days.

Such a metaphysics also reveals that, outside of historical and cultural conditioning, there is nothing ontologically exceptional about percussion in its relationship to diverse materials and behaviors vis-à-vis other instrumental practices. All musicians experiment with, appropriate, and explore new modes of sounding and instrumentality. Indeed, all *objects*, as I will show, go through some kind of similar process even with each other. With this consideration in mind, percussionists logically arrive at a split in the road. On one hand, they can cede the exceptionalism of their diffuse instrumentality to other instrumentalists. This instrumentality, which is rooted in a type of subjective approach rather than any determining technique or material, can then be applied not just in the strange corner of percussion, but anywhere humans engage with sounding materials. This subjective approach can be extended to even non-sonic elements such as movement, staging, speech, and costuming. This instrumentality can be shared

[11] Steven Schick, "Three convergences: a percussionist learns to conduct," in *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion,* ed. Russell Hartenberger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 156.

by all musicians, and is at the heart of the post-instrumental practice described above. With this orientation, *all* musicians become what Western percussionists have been all along – mavericks, explorers, and experimenters.

The other path, and by some measurements the more conservative but no less urgent one, is to return to percussion specifically *as* an instrumental practice in order to render its ontology more distinctly. It is a return to a scenario where one looks at a percussionist vis-à-vis a pianist, sees difference, and attempts to disclose that difference ontologically. Drawing boundaries (between genres, disciplines, or cultures, etc.) is by some standards unfashionable in today's academic and artistic culture. However, it is the gambit of this essay that there *is* something ontologically distinct about percussion, or at the very least that to work towards such a distinction is intellectually and philosophically profitable. This is not a renewed claim of exceptionalism, which I flatly reject. It is instead an insistence that an ethical relationship to the world as a percussionist is dependent on a conception of what it means to *be* a percussionist, and that *being* a percussionist holds ethical implication itself. It is a commitment to the problematic ground of the cultural, artistic, and material world of percussion. Of accepting it as one's own, without the escape hatch of interdisciplinarity or post-instrumentality.

The main thesis of this dissertation is that percussionists, once they are understood not on the basis of their autonomous, migratory action, but instead on the basis of their imperfect and entangled access to the world, are best ontologically understood through an ambiguous relationship to violence. Violence here can connotate a number of things that will need to be specified and qualified. It relates to the beating and striking of the instruments themselves. It relates to the animal lives that are taken to make drum heads, or the deforestation that yields high quality rosewood. It relates to the militaristic pedagogy that lies at the heart of percussion

technique and musicianship. By some metrics it even relates to the discursive building of an ontology at all. In being a percussionist, violence is something that one takes upon oneself through their inflicting of violence upon the world. The point is not that violence is some dark, primal holdover from a more barbaric time that must be exorcised from the practice. The point is rather that percussionists in the West are conditioned by and live their artform through various forms of violence, which have yielded equal parts joy and tragedy. Furthermore, Western percussionists lack rituals or contexts through which to understand their relationship to the violence they inflict – something that consumerist alienation and an ontology of action aids and abets. The final task of this dissertation, then, is to characterize on an ontological level the relationship of percussionists to the violence that is inextricable from their art form, and to argue that such an ontological certainty of violence demands ethical constraints and considerations.

Chapter 1 begins by translating percussion's ontology-as-action into phenomenological terms. This translation is centered around two currents of thought: one percussionistic, the other phenomenological. The first comes from percussionists Steven Schick and Greg Stuart. In *The Percussionist's Art,* Schick identifies as essential to percussion ontology what he characterizes as "bongo-ness," in short the idea that percussion instruments, in the hand of the percussionist, act as interchangeable tools to serve specific musical moments.[12] I link bongo-ness to the phenomenological work to be found in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Central to understanding bongo-ness and therefore percussion ontology in general is the relationship between a percussionist and the things that appear to them in the world. Heidegger characterizes this relationship famously through what has become known as the "tool-analysis": the observation that, in using a hammer, we are only ever conscious of the hammer *as* the material

[12] Schick, *The Percussionist's Art*, 7.

thing that it is when it breaks and ceases to be *useful*. Otherwise, the hammer is instead a tool that extends human consciousness towards its task and reveals what Heidegger terms a "totality of relevance." For example, a hammer is relevant to and because of the house it constructs, which is relevant to and because of the field it sits on, which is relevant to and because of the nation that defines the field. To Heidegger, the *being* of a thing is reliant not on its "mere" presence or "objective facticity," but on this totality. The task of Chapter 1 will thus be to reveal bongo-ness as a concept that assumes such a totality of relevance in the world of percussion, and to consider to what extent such a totality is philosophically sound or even desirable.

Chapter 2, building off of the doubt won from Chapter 1, approaches the artform from a different phenomenological direction. With touch as my underlying phenomenological concept, I attempt to build a phenomenology that *includes* and is *defined by* the failures, frustrations, and escapes that a Heideggerian ontology-as-action would reduce to mere facticity. I do this through the phenomenological consideration of my own repertoire and artistic projects over the last six years. Acting as case studies, each piece reveals moments where action is frustrated or redirected by the objective realities of their material (both compositional and instrumental). By the end of Chapter 2, I will show that such frustrations and redirections are not problems to be solved, but instead central to an understanding of what percussion, and therefore a percussionist, is. Each failure, each reduction to facticity points to a real world just as much as felicitous action does.

Chapter 3 turns to more contemporary strains of phenomenology. This younger generation is often characterized under "critical" phenomenology, as opposed to the "classical" phenomenologies of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and others of that vintage. The main difference between these two epochs of the philosophical discipline is that the latter arrives in the wake the critiques launched at classical phenomenologists by post-structuralist thinkers in the latter

decades of the 20th century. These critiques are often levied at classical phenomenologists' reliance on a transcendent subjectivity, understood to be endowed with the ability to apprehend true Being underneath its various manifestations. Such a position ignores the fact that subjectivity is always socially mediated and conditioned by forces of power, and that any knowledge is always mediated by language. Critical phenomenology takes these criticisms and uses them to innervate the tradition. Though abstract, quasi-theological concepts such as Being, reality, and truth might be to some extent out of reach, the critical phenomenologist sees the phenomenological reduction nonetheless as an effective tool at elucidating the currents of power and habitation that work on a given embodied, gendered, and racialized subject. It is this kind of critical phenomenology that I turn to in order to explore percussion's history of self-appointed exceptionalism, its masculine-leaning habitus, and its heteronormative modes of production and self-understanding.

Chapters 2 and 3 reveals a percussionist's art that is pressed in upon by a real world that sits outside subjective action. Chapter 4 builds on this discovery through speculation. Drawing on speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, it attempts to construct a metaphysics of percussion that, to quote philosopher Graham Harman, is "objects all the way down." Pulling from philosophers such as Harman, Bruno Latour, and others, I advocate for an ontology that considers the relations *between* objects as a real site of metaphysical importance. Each striking of a mallet on an instrument ceases to be a seamless extension of human action, but a point in a network of inter-objective contact: human to hand, hand to mallet shaft, mallet shaft to mallet head, mallet head to yarn, yarn to surface of drum, and so-on. Each of these points provides a site where human action must be negotiated in order to achieve its result. Thus, if there is such a

thing as a percussionist, they are a figure who is absolutely mediated by the objective world that they exist in. Furthermore, the human themselves is simply one object among many.

With the metaphysical privilege of the human subject stripped from the percussionist's art, Chapter 5 returns to and confronts the question of violence in percussion's ontology. I conclude that a metaphysical understanding of percussion, formerly rooted in action and human agency, can be better understood as an ethical space enveloped by a percussionist's reciprocal relationship to the violence they inflict. This does not mean percussionists should practice some form of nonviolence, even if such a thing were possible. What it instead means is that being a percussionist, rather than an individual who merely loses themselves in the bodily euphoria of drumming, means holding oneself accountable to the material world they consume. To articulate this point, I turn to the recent moral philosophy of Judith Butler and other feminist philosophers. These theorists continue to speculate towards an ethics, both person-to-person and person-to-world, in order to confront the myriad issues of violence we experience daily. Ultimately, as a work of philosophy, the goal of this dissertation is not to moralize or proselytize. It is not intended to tell percussionists or other instrumentalists that their practice and/or ethics is lacking because they have not previously assimilated the arguments in this dissertation into their own work. The goal of this dissertation is simply to continue to develop the act of theorizing that has always accompanied percussion practice, and to in particular orient this theorizing towards accountability. Though this philosophy is centered around constraint, denial, and resistance, I hope that others, as I have, will find a world of resonance and possibility in the intransigent materials they build their artform among.

To close, there are a number of directions this text begs to further develop. The history of percussion's modernism is deeper than this dissertation could give credit to in Chapter 3, and is

worthy of its own critical and metaphysical exegesis. Furthermore, absent are engagements with metaphysical ideas contemporaneous with early-mid-century phenomenology, most notably the work of Henri Bergson. Bergson's thought hovers over many of the thinkers cited here, most notably Jane Bennett and Graham Harman, and a metaphysics of percussion objects could gain much from including Bergson and his explicators more directly in the discussion. Similarly, this paper only hints at the offerings an engagement with American pragmatism might offer the understanding of an instrumental practice. Lastly, any philosophy considering human violence beckons towards the religious, and this religious aspect is even more prescient given that many traditional percussion instruments find their origins in global religious ritual. Exploring modernist and contemporary percussion's relationship to religious theory would be in line with what many of the metaphysicians in this paper (most notably Latour) have begun to do.

Chapter 1: Heidegger's Bongos

Despite the richness that the phenomenological tradition offers instrumental practice, few accounts of percussion have been cast into phenomenological terms. This is not to say that percussionists have not been *doing* phenomenology, however. After Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology most broadly understood is a style of being in the world. It is a methodology through which to explore and analyze conscious experience and the body. In this regard, percussionists perform phenomenology each time they practice a drum stroke, tune an instrument, or parse through the notation of an unfamiliar work. The main goal of this chapter is to take two accounts of informal percussion phenomenology and to cast them in phenomenological terms. The purpose of this is to better bring the discipline of percussion into dialogue with the phenomenological tradition with the hope that they will be mutually illuminative. Percussionists already operate with an understanding of what their art form is, to various levels and depths. What phenomenology, and philosophy more broadly, may offer percussion is a continued interrogation of the natural attitude, that is, the popular consensus and assumptions about the art form's ontological structures.

The critical aspect of this chapter is built on the following claim: contemporary percussion ontology is best understood as an "ontology of action," which I argue presents an imbalanced account of the art form. Such an ontology dictates that at the heart of percussion's self-understanding is the event of a human acting through an object, which, I will argue over the course of this work, does a disservice to the object itself. Critiquing this ontology first requires that I establish its existence as true – that I bring its subterranean elements to the surface. By doing so, I aim to paint a clear picture of the structures of intentionality that make the

interpretation of percussion's ontology-as-action coherent. This analysis sets out with two key concepts theorized by percussionists Steven Schick and Gregory Stuart. Schick's work in particular serves as the wellspring for most contemporary theories of percussion practice, and thus will be a central interlocutor throughout this essay.[13] Schick's primary ontological concept is that of bongo-ness, defined as the abstracted use-quality of any percussion object that enables it to fulfill a range of musical needs. Embedded in this concept, and one of the features that makes bongo-ness so compelling, is a kind of radical interchangeability: the fact that percussion instruments can be swapped, substituted, and replaced per the percussionist's desire. The second concept is Gregpry Stuart's concept of "handedness," which is the bodily balancing of the hands through discipline that aims towards the fluidity of action that makes bongo-ness possible. My analysis of both thinkers will be rooted in the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, to whom the encounter of worldly tools and things is central to his analysis of human being-in-the-world, termed *Dasein* (German for "being there"). *Dasein* connotes not only human existence but specifically how this existence is posed to understand its own being, and, to Heidegger, therefore broader structures of Being in general. Any analysis of percussion ontology-as-action then, necessitates, even if indirectly, an analysis of *Dasein* as it manifests through intentionality in the world of percussion.[14] An analysis of bongo-ness and interchangeability thus aims towards disclosing the structures of *Dasein* as it interprets itself through the art of percussion.

[13] Schick is a mentor and friend, and I intend the work of this essay, despite its often-critical stance to his work, as an homage. I hope that by taking his thoughts seriously as a philosopher that this text will read not as a rejection of older generations but instead an act of humble inheritance: one that honors what it takes up by radically transforming it.

[14] Heidegger uses his own term, "care," in place of "intentionality" to denote the idea that intentionality is never entirely transcendent, as Husserl might argue, but is instead already a part of the world it apprehends. I maintain "intentionality" because it is a far more often-used term in phenomenological literature, and its contemporary definition has by-and-large incorporated Heidegger's critique into itself.

Heidegger's phenomenology is not without its critics. It has suffered accusations of totalitarianism, anthropocentrism, and ethno-nationalism, this latter critique unfortunately vindicated by Heidegger's historical affiliation with Nazi Germany. With an understanding that percussion ontology shares many of the same organizational structures and emphases as Heidegger's, the second part of this chapter is dedicated to seeing in what way critiques of Heidegger's phenomenology may be transposed into the world of percussion. To do so I turn primarily to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, whose phenomenology of the Other sits in stark contrast to Heidegger's totality of relevance. Through Levinas and the generations that have followed him, we see cracks in an ontology of action, where subjects are conditioned to assume too quickly the nature of what they act upon. At chapter's end, we will have established contemporary percussion ontology as it is understood today, as well as the immanent problems of this ontology.

Bongo-ness and Handiness

Steven Schick's percussion ontology begins on his family's farm in Iowa. Remembering fondly his father's work while growing up, he writes: "My father's need for a hammer was really his need for 'hammerness.' For him a hammer was a tool: a generic and interchangeable object that was valuable only if it was useful."[15] To Schick, percussion instruments are not dissimilar. A stick is a tool used for drumming, but it does not necessarily *need* to be a stick. The act of drumming is to be found not in specific materials but in the conscious intention of the drummer,

[15] Steven Schick, *The Percussionist's Art*, 7.

or, for that matter, anyone who has tapped out a rhythm on a steering wheel while stuck in traffic. Percussionists encounter the objects of the world *as* tools of percussion. This is true not only of conventional instruments like drums and xylophones but also non-conventional instruments (often referred to as "found sounds") such as flower pots, kitchen pots and pans, and automobile brake drums. If a stick can act *as* a stick only because of human intention, so too can a metal rod, a superball, or a grain of rice. Each will excite a drum in different ways, and can be utilized by a percussionist's aesthetic sensibility. To Schick, this vagueness is liberational and frontier-like. He writes that "most percussionists do not need bongos they need 'bongo-ness.' Bongos are sonic tools; they are interchangeable objects that are wielded with precision to address a specific and momentary musical need."[16] With these specific instruments in mind, a pair of bongos' bongo-ness can here be sonically understood as a kind of high-pitched, acute drum sound, which makes it potentially interchangeable with a other instruments such as a snare drum, a high tom-tom, or timbales (Figure 1.1). Many percussionists have found that most of the time substituting bongos for one of these options keeps the desired musical effect intact. Bongo-ness understood more abstractly reveals itself as a fundamental relationship that percussionists have to their instruments: one of interchangeability and appropriation in the service of musical need.

[16] Ibid.

Figure 1.1: Bongos, a snare drum and timbales. Though different dimensions, materials, and constructions, each is a small drum that shares certain dimensions of bongo-ness with each other.

This analysis of bongo-ness bears striking resemblance to the tool-analysis found in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Heidegger's reflections are centered around the hammer, one such tool listed in Schick's own example. Heidegger notes that a hammer presents itself to consciousness in two different ways. First, he describes the hammer in what he terms its "objective presence" (*Vorhandenheit*). This is how the hammer presents itself in material facticity: it is a thing made of wood and metal, it weighs such-and-such weight, etc. Heidegger observes that generally speaking humans only encounter a thing's objective presence when the object breaks. We're only reminded of the material facticity of the hammer when it ceases to be able to serve its function *as* a hammer. Heidegger notes that, for the most part, humans encounter the things of the world in their "handiness" (*Zuhandenheit*). As Schick's description of his father's farming tools above illustrate, a hammer is not primarily a wooden shaft connected to a metal head with a flat edge. A hammer is *something that one hammers with*. As Heidegger goes on to show, the hammer actually *withdraws* from consciousness in the act of hammering. Anthropologist Tim Ingold, himself working through Heidegger, makes a further point that the

use of something like a hammer is not categorically limited to the tool itself. "Hammerness" can be found in any number of objects. "Hammerness" makes itself known "within the context of involvement in a real world of persons, objects, and relations."[17] Ingold is arguing against a rational intelligence that stands separate from the world à la Descartes. Such a figure, theoretically, looks at an environment abstractly and comprehends it without being a part of it. With his example of stones, Ingold argues that a stone only becomes a stone, metaphysically speaking, on the way to becoming something else: "missiles, anvils, axes or whatever, depending on the project in which [a person] is currently engaged."[18] We do not stand separate from a world but are immersed within it; the objects around us are not abstract entities we disinterestedly consider but become these objects by how we use them or *imagine* using them. What Schick and Ingold both identify through their tool-analysis is in phenomenology known as the "as-structure." The as-structure serves as a scaffolding revealed by intentionality, the idea that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something (often presented in prose as "consciousness of..."). When a drummer picks up a stick in the midst of performance, they encounter it not by means of its physical and material qualities but instead *as* a thing through which to hit an instrument. They encounter a drum similarly *as* a thing to be hit. Our intention is not directed towards the hammer in our hand as we prepare a strike but is instead aimed at the nail.

What is the relationship between Schick's bongo-ness and Heidegger's handiness? Do they describe the same phenomenon of consciousness or does percussion's bongo-ness drape additional layers onto Heidegger's tool analysis? Let's begin with the similarities. At first glance,

---

[17] Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2002), 418-419.

[18] Ibid., 417.

using a hammer is not all that different from using a mallet or a drum stick. In both relationships the beater itself withdraws from consciousness. Percussionists holding an implement in the moment of performance are not thinking about the width of the shaft or the weight of the head unless something is going very wrong. Instead they are directed towards a certain musical result. The preparation that makes this result possible in performance has already been taken care of outside of rehearsal. By this I mean that the instruments, implements, and gestures have previously been chosen and rehearsed. The moment of hammer-in-hand that Heidegger describes sits upon a sedimented layer of bongo-ness created in rehearsal. This however, reduces Heidegger's analysis to a simple pragmatism when in reality it has a much deeper target than the relationship of mankind to tools. To Heidegger, the fact that tools in general *can* be appropriated as tools illustrates something about human being (*Dasein*) in general. The fact that the objectively present things in the world such as a hammer withdraw from consciousness to him serves as proof that Dasein has a certain privileged position in disclosing the truth of Being. It is exactly *because* a thing in its handiness achieves a more authentic level of being (when compared to its objective presence) that Heidegger stakes the claim that Dasein is posed to understand Being through its entanglement in the world. Thus, to Heidegger, handiness is not just about how human beings use tools, but how in their use of tools humans are (with the added considerations of care, attunement, and a number of other Heideggerian terms) situated to understand themselves and the world they are entangled in.

This analysis ultimately leads to the conclusion that equipment to Dasein ultimately becomes embedded in a "totality of relevance." In its use, the hammer becomes relevant to the nail, which is relevant to the house, and so on. Dasein thus holds a privileged role through its ability to give meaning to the things of the world through such a totality. Tools and other objects

that are merely objectively present and thrown into the world are made meaningful and world-building through the relevance that Dasein finds in them. Thus, the existential nature of Dasein takes on an element of interpretation. One person, depending on their background, culture, and language can purpose things for the sake of a very different totality of relevance from another.[19] Oftentimes the breaking down of a single tool can lead to a breaking down of an entire system, as we will see in Greg Stuart's work later in this chapter. Schick, again moving in parallel to Heidegger, seems to identify such a totality when he identifies that the handiness of an instrument is dependent on its relevance to a musical moment or need. To Schick, instruments do not have an inherent profile outside of their context within a greater musical system, be that a collection of timbres (which can be substituted through identification of an instrument's bongo-ness) or within the context of a musical work.

Let us now carry out a more detailed analysis of bongo-ness in its own right. To a percussionist like myself, one educated in American conservatories and music departments, the bongo-ness of a pair of bongos takes a certain profile. Sonically, it is high and sharp when played with sticks. It is thuddy and muted when played with mallets. There is a tunefulness to its pitch that is not clouded by a complex layer of overtones. It decays quickly, not lingering or causing large amounts of sympathetic vibrations. Bongo-ness is not only limited to an instrument's sonic qualities, however. A pair of bongos' bongo-ness is also related to the fact that it can be put on a stand to rest at an optimal playing position for a standing player using sticks. It is related to the fact that it is easily transportable and tunable. It is related to the fact that it is mass-produced and

[19] This argument is more contemporary than Heidegger's own, which remained invested in a singular, authentic Being outside of cultural conditioning. Contemporary phenomenologists, in the wake of post-colonial and post-modern studies, are not so convinced of an onto-theological Being that serves a as the essence of *Dasein*.

thus relatively cheap. Many instruments share a certain overlap with a pair of bongos' bongo-ness, such as a Japanese *shime-daiko,* for example (Figure 2.2). A single *shime-daiko*, however, is much more expensive than even most *pairs* of bongos, and are often much harder to find as they are not mass-produced to the same scale. Bongo-ness is about more than just the quality of a "high-sounding drum" but is about all of the considerations involving its use. Just as much as an analysis of bongo-ness reveals a certain degree of interchangeability, it also demarcates the lines upon which interchangeability is constricted.

Figure 1.2: A Japanese *shime-daiko*.

Additionally, bongo-ness is not *just* about bongos. Any percussion instrument has its own bongo-ness profile. As an example, I offer an anecdote. My undergraduate institution didn't own any *almglocken*: large, tuned cowbells often used in European percussion music. Instead the members of the percussion department commonly substituted Thai nipple gongs: similarly tuned instruments, though round with a protruding dome (the so-called nipple) rather than a bell shape. (Figure 1.3). More often than not such substitutions were successful, but not always. We can again begin with a comparison of similarities and differences. They are both made of metal and tuned to specific pitches. They can both be suspended or laid on foam to achieve various degrees

of resonance. They both react relatively similarly to sticks and mallets. Where the differences lie is found is in their possible usages. An *almglocken* can have a metal clapper hung inside so that the instrument can be activated through shaking (the name itself literally means "cow bell" and is taken from the sound of alpine cows clanking along Swiss and Austrian mountain paths). Similarly, even without a clapper, a percussionist can lay an almglocken flat and perform a *tremolo* on it by putting their beater inside the "mouth" of the cowbell. By rapidly wiggling one's wrist so that the stick hits one side of the mouth and then the other, a percussionist can cause the instrument's sound to sustain indefinitely with one hand. No such thing is possible with a single beater on a Thai gong, whose tuneful striking zone is much smaller. If one strikes the "non-nipple" part of the gong, which lies closer to the outer perimeter of the instrument, the result will be a wash of overtones that are nowhere to be found on almglocken. Furthermore, Thai gongs can be tuned much lower than an almglocken can, extending all the way down to an A2 or lower, while the largest almglocken one can usually find is around an F3. Thus, an analysis of abstract bongo-ness seems to reveal certain overlapping areas between instruments, but never a 1:1 relationship. Bongo-ness, then, is just as much about the possible techniques applied to the instrument as it is their sounding characteristics, and is equally limited by them.[20]

[20] Schick notes the illusion that seemingly "open" notation provides in his work on Brian Ferneyhough's *Bone Alphabet (1992)*. The work is left up to the performer's choice with a few small caveats, but Schick observes that working through the piece reveals that the range of instruments and materials that will actually *work* for the musical demands of the piece is quite narrow. I would argue that this is an example of instrument, notation, and technique all coming together to dictate the bongo-ness of the possible instruments used. See Schick, *The Percussionist's Art,* 98-99.

Figure 1.3: Thai nipple gongs and Swiss-German *almglocken*.

Thus, Bongo-ness is fundamentally a term that connotates relation. Firstly, bongo-ness describes certain pitched and timbral qualities that can be similarly achieved using other instruments. Second, bongo-ness describes an object's playability. Two instruments can sound very similar when struck, but if they respond differently from each other to certain beaters, or are physically positioned so that certain techniques work on one but not the other, then the relationship of bongo-ness is extinguished. To summarize the discussion so far, bongo-ness is closely related to the Heidegerrian concept of handiness. Both are reliant on a withdrawal of an object from consciousness so that it can serve a purpose within a totality of relevance. Where bongo-ness differs from the tool-analysis is that bongo-ness doesn't only refer to the ability of an item to fulfill the purpose of a specific instrument, but *also* refers to its similarities to *other* instruments that may fulfill the same purpose. A bongo obviously has "bongo-ness", but so can a snare drum. However, two *different* sets of bongos, or two sets of *differently tuned* bongos, or two sets of bongos with *different heads*, etc. also have a tension between them that is resolved in consciousness for the sake of a totality. Handiness directs the hammer at the nail. Bongo-ness

asks the question of what else might serve as a hammer, and in this curiosity takes on an aesthetic valence.

Heidegger tackles the aesthetics of his philosophy most famously in his later essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." In this essay, Heidegger confronts what he calls the "thingly" nature of art, its relationship to the work, and the relationship of both to his concept of world. To Heidegger, art relies a certain kind of thing: equipment. Equipment to Heidegger doesn't only refer to mechanical tools, but really to any thingly material used in art, from axes and jugs to sound and color. In an often-cited passage from the essay, Heidegger rehearses, with much poetic effect, his argument from *Being and Time*: that it is in "the use of equipment that we must actually encounter the character of equipment."[21] Looking at a pair of shoes renders their objective presence, but it is in the wearing of these shoes that one gains access to their tool-being. Heidegger illustrates this with the description of how a peasant woman uses these shoes in her daily life and how this use creates the world that she lives in. Heidegger accomplishes this within the context of looking at Van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* (1886). This seems to throw a wrench in Heidegger's philosophy for a moment. If we only understand a piece of equipment's being through its use, and thus understand it within the context of a world, then how is it that we can interpret, indeed resonate aesthetically with this world, from merely looking at a rendering of a piece of equipment from it? From this consideration Heidegger makes the philosophical leap that it must be true that the work of art has its own form of handiness, a work-being, so-to-speak. With regards to his discussion of the thingly nature of the work, he concludes with the following: "The thingly feature in the work should not be denied; but if it belongs admittedly to the work-

[21] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013), 32.

being of the work, it must be conceived by way of the work's workly nature. If this is so, then the road toward the determination of the thingly reality of the work leads not from thing to work, but from work to thing."[22] In other words, trying to understand the nature of a work by looking at its materials goes in the wrong direction of the purpose of art. Instead, one should consider the materials *by way of the work* to arrive at what Heidegger calls "truth." Equipment and things are thus subsumed under an aesthetic totality. Their tool-beings are ingredients in a greater disclosing of the world of the work.

One key difference between tool-being and work-being should be elucidated before returning to the discussion of how this philosophy resonates with bongo-ness. In an equipment's use, the piece of equipment withdraws in its handiness – the stone of an ax head, in Heidegger's words, "disappears into usefulness."[23] This is not the case when a piece of equipment is used in art. Instead, Heidegger argues that it is in the context of a work of art that we encounter equipment in its true form for the very first time:

> The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the lighting and darkening of color, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power of the word.[24]

Through art, then, we come to understand the things that make art possible in a heightened way from the understanding gained from using them in the passing of daily life. The

---

[22] Ibid., 38.
[23] Ibid., 44.

[24] Ibid., 45.

work of art is something that, in Heideggerian terms, reconciles *earth* with *world*. However, despite the fact that this language drips with the Teutonic mysticism that informs much of Heidegger's later philosophy, this distinction is again simply another iteration of the objective presence/handiness divide. The former is the facticity of the world as it is, the latter is how this facticity is employed in the search for human meaning and truth. The work of art is thus perhaps the paradigmatic appropriation of the things of the world that mankind can do. To Heidegger, the construction of and reflection upon a work of art is a handiness that, theoretically, reveals truth itself.

With this distinction between the various strata of handiness that Heidegger's analysis of the work of art reveals, we can once more return to bongo-ness and the handiness of percussion instruments. Taking Schick's lead, we can again understand percussion instruments as tools that serve a musical need or moment. The percussionist's metaphysical role, then, is to identify this-or-that need in this-or-that moment and choose the correct tool. However, bongo-ness shows us that there is an endless number of solutions to a given problem. The solution, then, is not only an aesthetic one but one that is practical. If a percussionist doesn't have access to a certain instrument, then more often than not a substitution can be made, just as we did in my undergraduate school with our Thai gongs masquerading as *almglocken*. Indeed, a certain amount of "genius" is afforded to percussionists who can make particularly clever or effective substitutions: the deeper one's understanding of bongo-ness, the deeper their level of artistry.[25] This, however, appears to cause problems for Heidegger's theory of the work of art. If the work

[25] Though Schick would no doubt wince at this observation, I think it is his particular understanding of bongo-ness, as well as its manifestation in his practice, which contributes to him being termed "The Philosopher King of Percussion." See Woolfe, Zachary, "The 'Philosopher King' of Percussion Starts His Next Chapter," *The New York Times,* May 23, 2022.

of art exists to make us see our materials with new eyes in their true form, then what does it mean that we can substitute materials at will? Indeed, it seems as though Heidegger's theory is one that the modernists who pioneered percussion repertoire explicitly set out to contest. Indeterminate scores and instrumentation are hallmarks of percussion literature. If a work of art is not constructed with its specific thingly nature decided in advance, can Heidegger's analysis still hold?

Heidegger's philosophy can only be saved by doubling down on its idealism. By his logic, it is not *this* bongo or *this* xylophone that are the things in question, but bongos or xylophones as concepts. In fact, it's not even conceptual bongos or xylophones in their specificity, as we have already seen that time and time again these items can be substituted without damaging certain works. With an analysis of bongo-ness in hand, the material nature of a work of percussion must be performance, as contemporary percussionists have shown. We are not seeing the truth of a bongo, but of a percussionist *using something with bongo-ness*. Dasein becomes a figure that cycles back on itself, that comes to understand only *itself* through its whims, necessities, and tastes. Bongo-ness, a concept rooted in handiness and conscious intention, turns the subject in on itself through the guise of interchangeable objects. This is perhaps the great failure of modernist percussion literature – for all the freedom it provides practitioners in their practical and aesthetic considerations, it also more often than not profoundly fails to present the performer with a model of fidelity to an external world beyond their conscious intentions. Within the context of bongo-ness, inconvenience can be substituted for the convenient, the broken can be discarded and replaced, and subaltern cultures can be reduced to sonic qualities.

There is a fine line to be tread here between fidelity and fetishism when it comes to percussion objects. I am certainly not advocating the idea that percussionists adopt a model from the most conservative of orchestral musicians, where one travels everywhere and cannot perform unless they have their specific instrument there as they like it. With all of percussion's moving parts this would be impossible. Nor do I wish to invert the Dasein relationship and claim a form of mysticism where what one has to offer as a percussionist is laid at the altar of an instrument that one must make themselves worthy of. My philosophy, and this will become particularly apparent as the dissertation continues, is committed instead to a form of material fidelity that tempers bongo-ness run amok in consumer waste culture. One need not commit to a single snare drum their whole life, as one would a marriage. However, any instrument that a percussionist regards has certain material and cultural contexts and demands, and exchanging it for another is thus laden with ethical baggage. As I will show in the next section, the particularities of specific instruments become apparent when the engine of one's handiness, training, and technique breaks down.

Handiness and Handedness

Greg Stuart's "A Percussionist's Practice" opens with the phenomenological description of a drum stroke. Moment by moment, Stuart walks us through the movement of his body with mechanical and architectural metaphors: his body becomes a "single-stroke engine," and the drum stroke acts as the "the solid foundation" of drumming's "architecture." From the outset of the action, Stuart imagines the sound and calibrates his body to the instrument, intending a stroke that will "give the drum enough energy to speak but not so much as to overpower its heads, rim,

and shell."[26] He traces the intention of this stroke to its physical and physiological manifestations: the flick of the tip of the stick upwards, the rotation in the shoulder, the falling of the arms and loosening of the wrist. Just prior to impact, Stuart's fingers relax and allow the stick to rebound and pivot around the fulcrum made between the stick and his forefingers. The next step, from the perspective of developing the technique in practice, Stuart says, is to speed up the conscious aspects of this stroke until they are automatic and reflexive. The body, through this stroke, becomes an "exquisitely tuned corporeal instrument."[27] What Stuart describes is intimately familiar to any percussionist. So intimate, in fact, that I would wager that many percussionists have forgotten much of what Stuart describes. We are often reminded through teaching a beginner: I often find myself standing at a drum, working through my own movements because an insightful question from a student causes me to realize that I do not know the answer *a priori*. At least, I do not know the answer consciously. Performing a double-stroke roll is very different from explaining it to a student. This is because, through practice, repetition, and intention, the implements of percussion have *withdrawn* from consciousness.

One of the most impactful analyses to be found in Stuart's work is his analysis of what he terms "handedness." His work grows out of his own experience living with focal dystonia, a "neurologically-based movement disorder that causes uncontrollable, sustained muscle contractions resulting in abnormal postures and/or repetitive motions."[28] Stuart suspects that his development of this condition, which in his case affects his left hand, is attributed to extreme overuse in the context of his undergraduate conservatory education. In a struggle to keep up with

---

[26] Gregory Stuart, "A Percussionist's Practice," 1-2.

[27] Ibid., 6.

[28] Ibid., 19-20.

his talented peers, he found increasingly that it was painful to perform percussion in the technical way demanded by his conservatory environment. Due to his condition, the *Zuhandenheit* of Stuart's hand had, for seemingly neurological reasons, broken. What is left is the hand's mere objective presence: its flesh, muscles, and neurological connections devoid of percussive context. This breaking of the tool-being of his hand serves the purpose of grounding Stuart's analysis of the *world* of percussion in general, and is what I will turn to in this section.

Stuart begins his analysis of handedness by describing something obvious: percussion is something that is done with the hands. However, through his experience with focal dystonia, the handedness that is so often taken for granted takes on a new aspect. "From the perspective of FD [focal dystonia]," he writes, "handedness functions as a kind of 'balance' between the hands, similar to the 'sense of balance' when learning to ride a bicycle."[29] He goes on to discuss that a vast amount of focus is invested when one first learns to use their hands in the context of percussion, similar to how one learns to balance a bike. Balancing the right and left hand with each other becomes an object of intense patience and cathexis in the early days of one's training. After this balance is accomplished to a varying degree, however, the managing of the hand /stick/drum equation recedes from conscious attention. Stuart clocks this as a Heideggerian moment: "

> Indeed handedness is something that the philosopher Martin Heidegger might term part of the 'equipment' of the percussionist's practice. Just as a woodworker perceives a broken hammer as simply a piece of metal attached to the end of wooden dowel... a dystonic hand reveals handedness as part of the equipment of percussion — that is, as an element in a 'referential totality' including things like sticks, strokes, instruments, hardware, and a body of music."[30]

---

[29] Ibid., 49.

What Stuart's experience with FD reveals is that the handedness of percussion, the ability of the hands to balance themselves in harmony and control, is one part of a broader totality that is, in the art of percussion, and as we see through Stuart's observation, a privileged one. Whether one is celebrated or ostracized within the broader social world of percussion often depends on whether one has achieved a suitable level of virtuosic handedness. This qualification, whether one has "earned" the title of percussionist through their handedness, is often the nexus of violence and toxic masculinity, as I will show in Chapter 5.

Stuart's experience with FD causes him to turn towards a percussion practice that, out of necessity, turns away from work that centers handedness in the totality of the work. Stuart seems to ask what is left of percussion when one removes the virtuosic balancing of the hands. Through the performance of Michael Pisaro-Liu's *Ricefall*, Stuart arrives at a conception of percussion that he terms "post-instrumental." Pisaro-Liu's work entails an ensemble of performers dropping grains of rice in varying intensities onto a specified timbre, but unspecified object (for example, a performer is assigned "wood" but is left to choose the specific wooden object they use). Stuart observes that, though there is an experience of the impact of a grain of rice on an object as there is when a stick strikes it, that the handedness part of the equation is "subtracted" from the musical action. "On a practical level, *Ricefalls's* subtraction from handedness is the result of two interlocking procedures. First, the sticks have turned into a kind of dust, the anonymous stuff of percussive collision; and second, technical hand-to-hand coordination is a non-issue because the hands are... motionless as grains slip between the fingers to the surfaces below."[31] What we are

[30] Ibid, 50. Stuart and I are using two different translations of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. What he refers to as a "referential totality" appears in my edition as "totality of relevance."
[31] Ibid., 62.

left with in Pisaro-Liu's work is the sonic experience of percussion decoupled from the totalizing technique previously believed to make the art form possible in the first place.

With the discovery of this conception of percussion that eschews the necessity of a traditional handedness, Stuart arrives at a practice based on what he calls "lo-fi" techniques, such as dropping rice, shaking paper, or rubbing sounding objects such as leaves on the head of a drum. He situates these techniques most directly against a conception of instrumentality that he identifies in the modernist percussion work of Vinko Globokar, which is centered around the heroic, appropriative exploration and manipulation of percussion instruments by a composer or performer.[32] Stuart bucks against this framing of instrumentality that is reduced to technical mastery vis-à-vis an inert instrument, instead envisioning contact with instruments that is *not* totalized within a larger practice. He writes that "the relative 'difficulty' of each technique is a non-issue because the resultant sound is no longer in contact with the rest of the instrument, only the elements proper to the point on the instrument from where the sound is played."[33] To Stuart, there is no broader conception of "proper" rice dropping technique, and thus no ideal spots on a wood block to attempt to place each grain. Nor is there a normative conception that certain grains sound better than others.[34] The broader thrust of Stuart's argument effaces technique and its sonic and social constructions in favor of isolated percussion collisions. Such an orientation reframes percussive action less as "action," per se, and more as what Stuart calls "temperature taking" – single, isolated techniques that attune a player to a certain technique's sonic profile.

---

[32] See Vinko Globokar, "Anti-Badabum," trans. Nancy Francois, *Percussive Notes* (October 1992).

[33] Stuart, "A Percussionist's Practice," 73.

[34] Though of course opinions abound within the *Ricefall*-interpreter community.

Ultimately, Stuart defines his practice through the terms "post-percussion" or "non-instrumental." The practice he pioneers, and which has been taken up by a subsequent generation of percussionists, invests itself in percussion without the totalizing technique of beating and striking. His allergy seems to extend to instrumentality in general, which he considers laden with historical baggage and conservatory trauma. The benefits of a post-percussion non-instrumentality is that it forms "a network that crosses the various borders between musician and non-musician alike."[35] Non-musician can of course mean other artists, but it can also mean total amateurs, and thus takes on a democratic orientation. To summarize, Stuart makes an important intervention in an understanding of percussive action and its fallibilities. Handedness props up the Heidegerrian handiness that Schick's bongo-ness in part relies on, and when handedness is removed, a new sensibility towards percussive contact becomes necessary. Stuart gives us a first glimpse of a return to the thingness of percussion objects, to their facticity outside of human Dasein. They are not merely inert materials that come into Being through percussion action, but instead are, as theorist Bill Brown argues, telling of a shifting subject-object relation that changes based on historical contexts.[36]

This is a point that Sarah Indriyati-Hardjowirogo argues with regards to a 21st century conception of instrumentality. She argues that instruments can't only be reduced to their physical materials, a charge she levies at traditional organology, but instead should be understood within their cultural context and usage. Instrumentality thus "represents a complex, culturally and temporally shaped structure of actions, knowledge, and meaning associated with things that can

---

[35] Stuart, "A Percussionist's Practice," 73.

[36] Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Things: Autumn, 2001): 4.

be used to produce sound."[37] She argues that, because of the contemporary use of objects such as laptops, combs, and oil drums in music-making that "instrumentality... must not be understood as a property an object as such has or has not."[38] Instead, instrumentality boils down to intention and human purpose, not to material facticity. This however, brings us right back to the downplaying of the object that returns us to bongo-ness with all of its ethical pitfalls. We see this evidenced in the work of Louise Devenish, whose own post-instrumental practice, despite heavily emphasizing the fact that "post" means not "after" or "past" instruments but "beyond" or "in addition to," continues to use a kind of heroic modernist language when she writes that "as the role of the instrument is liberated, so too is the role of the instrumentalist."[39] The question to ask here is: liberated from what? And a follow up: how do we make ethical sense of this freedom? The post-instrumental practice is not so much an artistic innovation as much as it is an exportation of percussive bongo-ness to other disciplines. Where Stuart's post-percussion turns inwards towards the site of a single point of contact, Devenish's post-instrumental practice turns outwards towards a frontier horizon of possibility.

With these theories in hand, we thus have a re-contextualized conception of bongo-ness. Bongo-ness describes the interchangeable nature of percussion objects through a combination of their physical properties and how those properties respond to certain techniques. Part of bongo-ness is dependent on a kind of Heidegerrian handiness, where each object is able to dissolve into

---

[37] Sarah Indriyati-Hardjowirogo, "Instrumentality: On the Construction of Instrumental Identity," *Musical Instruments in the 21st Century: Identities, Configurations, Practices,* ed. Till Boverman, Alberto de Campo, Hauke Egermann, Sarah-Indriyati Hardjowirogo, and Stefan Weinzerl (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2017), 17.

[38] Ibid., 11.

[39] Louise Devenish, "Instrumental Infrastructure," 16.

a totality of relevance through the technique of a performer. When this technique breaks down, the ability to appropriate with impunity does so as well, as a performer must reattune themselves to the object they had previously taken for granted, as we see with Stuart's analysis of living a life as a percussionist with focal dystonia. This slowing down gives percussionists an opportunity to be exposed to the alterity an instrument presents its performers: an experience that bongo-ness by definition tries to efface. Stuart remarks that this alterity enriched his experience of objects he had taken for granted. As Stuart took their temperatures, so to speak, "instruments as mundane as a wood block appeared to be teeming with unknown possibilities (to say nothing of found objects or other non-traditional percussion instruments)."[40] However, Stuart here begins to draw a boundary that he himself has already dissolved. Why distinguish between the traditional instruments of the percussion battery and the various "non-instruments" that percussionists have appropriated over the last century? One gift that history has given percussionists is the perspective that such a line isn't needed: porcelain bowls and clay flower pots are, at this point, just as much instruments to a percussionist as they are useful objects in other contexts. A common sense understanding of whether a thing is an instrument doesn't give percussionists any useful ontological demarcations. It is along this line that I take issue with the term "found sound" as an ontological signifier, a task I will take up further in Chapter 5. Aren't all sounding objects, even the snare drum, encountered somewhere – "found" -- for the first time? Even the greatest percussion master at one point held a stick uncertainly over a snare drum, not knowing what the contact was going to sound or feel like. I argue that we should not draw a line between instrument/non-instrument but instead orient percussion to encounter *all* of its material objects with the curiosity of Stuart's post-percussion practice. Furthermore, I argue that if an ontology is

[40] Stuart, "A Percussionist's Practice," 76.

to be theorized that accounts for ethical difference, then the line between the handiness of conservatory technique and the handiness of non-instrumentality should also be similarly dissolved. Though conservatory trauma is something many percussionists (myself included) have experienced and continue to work through, it should not set the terms of understanding the art form. Conservatory training must not dominate the terms of discussion, but nor should it be excluded from the conversation altogether. A properly ontological understanding of percussion should be equally inclusive towards an intensely trained technique, such as an orchestral snare drum roll, as it is with a "lo-fi" sound such as a grain of rice dropped onto a woodblock.

Percussion and the Infinite

Proceeding from the previous section, we are now equipped to reapproach bongo-ness and the metaphysical implications it holds for percussion as an instrumental practice. Bongo-ness, and the various criteria of interchangeability it is built around, is oriented towards the construction of a totality of relevance. This totality is sometimes a specific musical work in question, sometimes the culturally embedded concepts of sound and technique, sometimes the logistical considerations of a percussionist's practical affordances (what instruments they have access to and which they do not), or most commonly a combination of all of these factors. Can we imagine a percussion ontology without a totalizing nature? Is ontology in general possible under such conditions? We get a glimpse of potential new directions of inquiry through Stuart's phenomenological investigations of a percussion without handedness. Without the smoothing-over effect of this handedness, the points of friction that abound in the art form become much more apparent. As Stuart notes with his observation of a woodblock's suddenly striking

appearance of infinitude, each object's uniqueness and potentiality manifests in *every* point of percussive contact, betraying what Amy Cimini and Jairo Moreno call an "indefinite inexhaustibility of the sonorous."[41] With this newfound point of view, an ontology-of-action seems somewhat reductive. No instrument in its infinitude can be successfully totalized through a percussionist's technique (or any hypothetical technique), or any specific work that employs it.

As has become clear, percussive action brings a performer into contact with an instrument to an extent, but what is critically lacking in percussion theory is an equal treatment of action's inverse. In what ways in the course of being a percussionist; in the act of beating, striking, scraping, or otherwise activating a sounding object, is one passive? Understood phenomenologically, passivity, rather than focusing on how consciousness acts on the world, instead considers how the world acts on consciousness. Understanding that intentionality is always "consciousness of...", phenomenologists over the last century have worked to understand how it is that the "of..." shapes and conditions the intentional faculty that attempts to apprehend it.

Passivity is something that any musician is intimately acquainted with. Any time one experiences the feeling of being lost in a work, flowing with a performance, or being emotionally moved by a particular listening, one is being acted upon by the world just as their consciousness apprehends it. In this way musical passivity has a distinctively affective dimension. A person, through the experience of their body, becomes affected by things outside of its own intention. "With affect," Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write, "a body is as outside itself as in

[41] Amy Cimini and Jairo Moreno, "Inexhaustible Sound and Fiduciary Aurality," *boundary 2* 43, no. 1 (Feb. 1 2016): 7.

itself—webbed in its relations—until ultimately such firm distinctions cease to matter."[42] Thus, any action always has a reciprocal affective process that solicits a reaction, and one that is by definition involuntary. To some extent, then, percussive action must be a relinquishing of subjectivity to an objective world that makes this action possible, but also resists it. Simon Høffding defines such an experience as an instance of "performative passivity." In speaking with musicians about their experiences performing music, he charts the performers' inability to describe exactly what they do when they perform. He also identifies a common thread in performers: feeling as though the person who performed was someone different from their mundane self. Most successful performances are accompanied by hazy memory of what actually took place on stage. In fact, the performances that often feel the worst are those in which the performer is *too* conscious of what they are doing. Høffding terms the suspension of conscious action in musical performance as "musical absorption," which helps to define performative passivity as "a radical objectivity... of something which lacks the sense of agency that accompanies almost all mental and physical acts of the conscious ego."[43] A percussion ontology-as-action seems then, despite the common experience of its performers, to put too much stock in this agency. It assumes ontological action *a priori* rather than conditional upon an objective encounter with alterity. Musical expertise is not *a priori*, as, again, even the most masterful musician at one point stood uncomfortably over their instrument unsure of what it was going to sound like. To Høffding, this uncertainty never entirely goes away. Musical expertise is about

[42] Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader,* ed. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

[43] Simon Høffding, "Performative Passivity," in *Music and Consciousness 2,* ed. Ruth Herbert, David Clarke, and Eric Clarke (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 130.

how "the active and passive can coexist at the forefront of awareness."[44] A master musician then is not a sovereign reigning over an empire of objects, but someone who understands very well the boundaries of their action. They understand at what point they must trust the world to support them in their passivity.

The action of percussion and its generative agency is a distributed one. This means that, rather than the act of percussion coming from the sole agency of the performer, the act of percussion is ultimately one of mediation: mediation by the instruments, by the performer's history, preferences, and orientations, and by their material and social affordances. If subjectivity manifests through the action of percussion music, it is always only as a partial agency that leases itself from the world it acts in. Though it is undeniable that some aspect of the performer's inner life must be heard (albeit ambiguously) in the performance of a work, just as present in such a performance is the presence of the mediators that translate this self.[45] Still, we should be careful not to reduce the human agent to their material and social contexts. Despite my reliance on instruments, I myself remain a discrete ontological entity from them, even as we come together in the act of playing percussion. Rejecting human action in favor of material, social, or linguistic mediation arrives at the same ethical pitfalls as an ontology that reduces these latter categories to the former. Instead, an ontology of instrumentality must be, in some form, reciprocal. Stefan Östersjö identifies this need for reciprocity in his research centered around his guitar practice. "I would argue," he writes, "not only that... musical transformations must be reciprocal but also

---

[44] Ibid., 134.

[45] See Naomi Cumming, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000).

that, even more, their ethical merit depends on the qualities of the interactions."[46] An instrumental ontology that forms a totality with no regard for the reciprocity of this process does not have the logical means to theorize an ethical dimension. An ethics of instrumentality is reliant on the discrete, but reciprocal encounter based on the alterity between performer and instrument. If one is subsumed into the other, then the question of accountability is moot, as there is no longer an Other to be accountable to. Following Edouard Glissant, Östersjö identifies that a degree of opacity is a pre-requisite for ethical contact.[47] No culture can have total access to another and remain in ethical relation. I would extend this argument not only to intercultural contact but to instrumentality in general.

In search of an ethics of instrumentality, it seems that we must arrive at an end of the totality that percussion is reliant on. Bongo-ness and its tenets of interchangeability subsume difference in favor of a specific sonic result specified only by the whims of human consciousness. Affect and passivity give us a hint, however, that musical action in the context of instrumentality hints at forces that lie outside of this totality, that press in on it and give it form. To return to the phenomenological tradition, perhaps no philosopher has so trenchantly critiqued Heidegger's empire of equipment than Emmanuel Levinas. At its core, Levinas's philosophy is concerned with the encounter with the Other that brings us radically outside of totality. The

---

[46] Stefan Östersjo, *Listening to the Other* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2020), 163.

[47] Glissant writes compellingly that even the acknowledgment of difference can sometimes be a stepping stone on the way to assimilation, itself a tool of colonial power. Instead Glissant emphasizes his concept of opacity, in which certain cultures remain in part unknown to each other even in their contact, and each mutually honors this reservation. In Glissant's words: "Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics" and the right to opacity "would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms." In other words, relation can only exist between two parties who can neither exhaust each other nor truly know each other in their entirety. See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190.

being of the Other is irreducible to our apprehension of it. It is always and infinitely outside of our experience. To Levinas the formation of a totality, as Heidegger directs his ontology, constitutes a form of violence. He writes that "violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action."[48] This point is no doubt levied at the later findings of *Being and Time*, where Dasein finds its destiny and purpose in its history and self-realization through the triumph over the objectively present world. Levinas is less concerned with totality as it pertains to inanimate equipment as much as it pertains to people, but I take this same logic to extend to the encounter of the non-human world, while acknowledging that these experiences are worthy of nuanced differentiation.

Levinas's philosophy of the Other is centered around his concept of the Face. The Face is not a literal visage, but is instead the phenomenal presence of another consciousness that one recognizes as Other, and in doing so acknowledges its irreducibility to representation and appropriation. When I stand face-to-face with another person, there are any number of expressions, movements, and, most importantly to Levinas, words that signal to me that they are like me in my experience of consciousness, but are absolutely *not* me. The experience of the other is one of encountering resistance; an inability of the "I" to incorporate the other into itself. It draws us up in our failure to appropriate it and, in this experience of embarrassment and self-consciousness, calls on us to be responsible. Thus, the resistance of the other to Levinas is a positive force, and a pre-requisite for ethics. Levinas relegates this experience to existing only in

---

[48] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority,* trans. Alphonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 21.

an encounter that is human-to-human, though more recent thought has attempted to extend this theory of radical alterity to animals, other life forms, and even inanimate objects. For example, Glen Mazis, drawing on the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, finds in Merleau-Ponty's concept of physiognomy something akin to Levinas's Face. Physiognomy is the expressive way that things in the world appear to us, how they seem to take on certain sensual qualities that traverse and combine the senses. The expression that we glimpse in a thing's color, smell, sound, or way of movement, Mazis argues, is not so different from the infinite depths that we glimpse in the face of another consciousness. "The world of other beings also mirrors back the human regard of the face with its myriad faces that, if attended to, have a compelling quality and enriching depth."[49] In other words, though certainly different in kind from a face-to-face encounter with another human being, the "faces of things," through their expressive reflections, similarly opens onto a depth that calls for responsibility. Mazis goes on to argue that the presentation of the expressive depths of things is the job of the artist, a point that Liza McCosh echoes in her account of what she calls the "material sublime." Through the use of artistic materials, artists come into contact with the inexhaustibility of their uses, contexts, and combinations. This depth, to McCosh, overwhelms the artist in a similar way to the aesthetic experience of the sublime presented by Kant. However, McCosh differentiates between the aesthetic sublime of Kant, which emphasizes the frustration and domination of reason, with her own conception of the material sublime, which instead emphasizes co-constitution and reciprocity. She writes that "rather than viewing the material world as 'other', a material sublime emphasizes a subject's development through the interaction and co-emergence of matter and this

[49] Glen Mazis, *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World: Silence, Ethics, Imagination, and Poetic Ontology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016), 82-83.

is readily exemplified through creative practice, which in turn, relies on interaction with the world."[50] McCosh is right to identify the expressive depths of things and their ability to compel us to answer to them. However, as I will further argue in Chapter 3, she is too quick to subsume the otherness of materials into the development of the artist. Recognizing their depths here is provisional, and only on the terms that they feed the becoming (even a mediated one) of the human agent. Contra this, I will argue that an ethics of instrumentality, itself a material practice, relies on a Levinasian encounter with a material Other that is in some regard absolute in its exteriority to the self.

Levinas critiques Heidegger's propensity to reduce our encounters with the things of the world to their usefulness to us. Instead, Levinas emphasizes the fact that just as much as we use an object, so too do we *enjoy* said object. Each use of an object that sustains oneself through action also has an affective dimension; a charged encounter with what sustains the self but is not the self. He writes that "life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun. Distinct from my substance but constituting it, these contents make up the worth of my life."[51]

---

[50] Liza McCosh, "The Sublime: Process and Mediation," in *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' Through the Arts,* ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 128.

[51] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 112. Working from Levinas's philosophy, Alphonso Lingis develops the concept of enjoyment in tandem with Levinas's concept of "the elemental," which is understood as a sort of gestalt sensibility against which we perceive the things of the world, equal parts in-itself and a product of phenomenological perception. Enjoyment of the elemental to Lingis "is not the movement of need or want, the movement in the emptiness that seeks, in the distance, a content; it is a movement of immersion in a plenum. The sense of the elemental senses itself affected with, filled with, and nourished by the elemental in a sensuous accord which the word *enjoyment* designates." Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 125.

Critiquing a certain kind of instrumental reason, Levinas draws a distinction between need and Desire. The former is the appropriation of the world in order to continue one's existence – one must eat and sleep in order to continue to live. The latter is no less urgent, but is defined by its inability to be quenched: "in need I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other; in Desire there is no sinking one's teeth into being, no satiety, but an uncharted future before me."[52] Taken together with Mazis, we are presented with a material encounter with an Other that not only opens upon an endless depth of use and context, but an endless future of enjoyment. In a discussion of instrumentality and bongo-ness this makes the claim of solving musical problems or fulfilling musical needs sound somewhat strange. The nature of such a need must come from the performer's intention to appropriate the instrument into the self. The use of one interchangeable instrument over another serves the pragmatic function of handiness. However, it does not pay enough heed to the enjoyment and affective attachments that one might have to a specific instrument or kind of instrument, or whether that instrument may be somehow communally shared. This is perhaps why certain substitutions can feel almost sacrilegious, and why in some cases any drum simply won't do.

We are thus presented with a new perspective on bongo-ness and the instrumentality in percussion as it is theorized by contemporary practitioners. The flexible and mercurial nature of the art form has been emphasized and explored over the past few decades, leading to an understanding of percussion as something that migrates with the intentions of the performer, which aims at the construction of a totality of self and work. A phenomenology of percussion through the work of Levinas, however, shows the hazards of constructing such a totality. It

---

[52] Ibid., 117.

effaces the differences that make instruments distinct from each other. It relies on a certain assumption of technique and approach in order to keep the interchangeability functional. It denies attachment and depth in favor of convenience. Bongo-ness indirectly encourages what Rachel McCann calls a "rush to meaning" in the form of assimilating an instrument into the expectations of a performer vis-à-vis a certain work. Such hastening moves too quickly over the inter-corporeal and affective encounter that occurs between performer and instrument. Similar to what McCann claims in her own work, a slowing down is necessary, one that sediments "an awareness of carnality" in the act of percussion.[53]

This chapter has analyzed the ontology of percussion action that forms the bedrock of how of percussionists understand their instrumentality. In doing so I've identified a Heidegerrian current that flows through the percussion concept of bongo-ness, a combination of the material and sonic attributes of a percussion instrument that enables it to be substituted for other instruments of the same type or even other instruments altogether. Such a substitution relies on an ontology that is directed towards the human use of an instrument for the purpose of a desired practical or musical result. Bongo-ness trains a percussionist to identify similarity so that they can more effectively appropriate different materials into a totality of relevance centered on a work or tradition. This totality and the handiness that supports it usually goes unnoticed, but becomes apparent as soon as the technique needed to achieve its construction falls apart, as we see in the work of Greg Stuart. In Stuart's analysis of handedness, the linchpin technique of bongo-ness, we see that when such a cornerstone is removed we begin to see percussion instruments differently. We begin to see them *for* their differences.

---

[53] Rachel McCann, "A Sensuous Ethics of Difference," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (Ethics of Embodiment, Summer 2011): 511.

Difference is central to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who uses the encounter with alterity to construct an ethics that is rooted not in totality but in infinity. In rejecting totality, percussionists can acknowledge the difference and absolute alterity of an object while still recognizing how entangled and reciprocal one's relationship is with it. This line of thought is central to a carnal reciprocity that many feminist thinkers, themselves building on the phenomenological tradition, have explored in recent decades. This reciprocity is present not only in Stuart's non-percussion techniques, however, but is present in *all* percussion action. The impression that a drummer senselessly beats an instrument is not a fault of the action of drumming but of the drummer in question's attunement. Turning entirely away from the basic hitting of percussion in search of new territory avoids what is just as rich a site of analysis as the dropping of a grain of rice onto a wood-block. The body (both of performer and instrument) is a site of reciprocity, difference, and ethical responsibility whether the technique is normalized in a conservatory setting or not; whether the percussionist is consciously aware of it or not. Stuart thus makes a discovery not only about his own practice, but about percussion practice in general. Illustrating this reciprocity in greater detail will be the task of the following chapter as we continue to tease out the contradictions and assumptions of an ontology of action.

Chapter 2 – Episodes of Embodiment

In the previous chapter I explored the conceptual touchstones of percussion instrumental ontology as it is commonly understood among its practitioners. This ontology is one that is situated around the concepts of material interchangeability, technique, and desired musical action, which come together to form the concept of bongo-ness. While bongo-ness offers practitioners much in terms of creativity, flexibility, and convenience, we have seen that it does not offer a compelling treatment of difference, a paucity that contemporary problems of commodity consumption, environmental exploitation, and patriarchal masculinity are happy to prey upon. Filling out this gap in percussion's ontological structure requires a turning instead from action to access as a foundational signifier. Access connotates contact, and even use, but one that is leased rather than owned. An ontology of access must also be centered around the body itself, as the body, broadly understood, is both the site and condition for percussive contact. What follows in this chapter is what I have come to term episodes of embodiment: case studies from my own embodied practice as a percussionist that portray my own phenomenological investigations through my work within the repertoire. The central through line is the embodied concept of touch: touch of mallets, instruments, sound, and time. My aim is to demonstrate that, when taken as the starting point, touch and the things it accesses forms an ontological foundation that is rooted in the difference that action often attempts to efface.

"Touch" is a term with which any percussionist is familiar. John Wyre of famed percussion group Nexus goes so far as to describe percussion succinctly as "the art of touch."[54] It

[54] John Wyre, *Touched by Sound: A Drummer's Journey (Second Edition)* (St. John's, Newfoundland: Buka Music, 2007), 9.

is commonly understood as something that someone one can possess, often with a normative connotation. To have a "good touch" on an instrument is to be perceived to have a certain ease in eliciting pleasing sounds with little visible effort. On the contrary, examples of "bad touch" point towards a certain heaviness or lack of sensibility. "Watch your touch" is a common refrain in lessons with students who threaten to crack a marimba bar or woodblock. Developing a sense of touch is a kind of attunement to a material, and one that is always mediated at a distance. By this I mean that it is rare, in Western percussion, that one gets to lay their hands directly on an instrument. More often than not touch is felt through the tip of a stick or mallet. A percussionist experiences touch through the contact point of a mallet on an instrument, and this touch is similarly felt in the resulting sound.[55] Allen Otte of Percussion Group Cincinnati notes this when he writes that he "doesn't much separate touch and sound." Instead he senses both together in the sounding of the instruments around him, which he terms the instruments' "voice." Otte conceives of himself as "the intermediary in that voice speaking in just some way at just some instant," and wishes to learn of his own touch "from that sound source, believing that it will indeed tell me, and that, somehow, together, we are extensions of one another, each of us without a voice... unless we are truly together in that moment."[56] Otte's account has resonances with feminist philosopher Karen Barad's own account of touching, which is influenced by Levinas:

---

[55] Jonathan De Souza describes the synesthetic experience of feeling "a cowbell at the tip of a drumstick" as a form of Merleau-Pontian "'exchanges' between the visible, audible, and tangible," underlining the metaphorical and synesthetic reality of touch. Jonathan De Souza, *Music at Hand: Bodies, Instruments, and Cognition* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 46.

[56] Allen Otte, "Letter to a Young Percussionist (Preferences in Percussion, 2010)," in *The Modern Percussion Revolution,* ed. Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 289. Otte writes from the perspective of a practitioner, but a similar phenomenon is recounted by Salomé Voegelin in her watching of percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky perform: "The percussion sounds the visual material and her visual body through the invisibility of its sonic materiality, opening through the work a thing that is the reciprocity of their relationship as the primacy of production: corporeal, exploring each other's physicality bodily." Salomé Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound (Revised Edition)* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 90.

"*Touching is a matter of response. Each of 'us' is constituted in response-ability. Each of 'us' is constituted as responsible for the other, as being in touch with the other* [italics in original]."[57] I will return to Barad's metaphysics in more detail in Chapter 4. For now, it is enough to observe that both Otte and Barad note a process of self-becoming through the touching of an Other: in Otte's case the vibrating surface of an instrument. Through touch, percussionists learn not just about their instruments but about themselves and their limits. As philosopher Timothy Morton puts it, "To reach out into a shared world is not to transcend one's physicality but to become conscious of its determinacy."[58]

The reciprocity of touch in phenomenology and philosophy has been a topic of study since the early 20th century. Perhaps the most influential account is that found in the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible* by French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In this volume he begins to formulate a theory of what he terms "the flesh," a kind of element that situates all subject-object interactions. His illustration is that of one hand touching another, while that hand in turn touches something external to the body. At different moments the subject becomes toucher and touched; touched by themselves and by the world around them. This metaphor grounds Merleau-Ponty's ontology that all contact between consciousness and world occurs in a world of reciprocity. As one touches the world, so too is one touched by the world. In their treatment of Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler writes that "the flesh is not something one has, but, rather, the web in which one lives; it is not simply what I touch of the other, or of myself, but the condition of the possibility of touch, a tactility that exceeds any given touch, and that cannot be reducible to a unilateral action performed by a subject."[59] The

---

[57] Karen Barad, "On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am (v1.1)," *differences* 3, no. 3 (2012): 161.
[58] Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 107.
[59] Judith Butler, "Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty,* ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 181.

flesh is then the thing that makes touching possible. Touch cannot be touch with being reciprocal. This need for reciprocity is similarly argued by philosopher Richard Kearney. To Kearney, the reciprocity that the flesh engenders applies not only to the tactile sense but to *all* sensual encounters. A sight, smell, or sound becomes, at their most powerful, tactile in our experiences of them. He writes that "the carnal wisdom of tactility—what I call *tact*—functions not only in touch itself but in the other senses as well...Tact is synesthetic through and through"[60] To Kearney a sensual experience can only be tactful when it is reciprocal, that is, when the subject is aware of themselves both as toucher *and* touched. Otherwise, our sensual appropriation of the world becomes a one-sided and often violent affair.

Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh is built off of an earlier concept in his oeuvre, namely motor intentionality. Intentionality we remember is the conscious apprehension of an object as such. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty asserts that intentionality is not an idealist, transcendent faculty to be found in the mind, but is instead distributed throughout the body. Motor intentionality is illustrated through Merleau-Ponty's example of the organist who approaches an organ on which they have not yet performed. The organist acclimates himself to the familiar, but different, instrument not by representing the stops and keyboard to his mind before taking action, nor by merely letting the body automatically plug itself in to the interface as if it were part of the machine. Instead, the organist "sits on the bench, engages the pedals, and pulls out the stops, he sizes up the instrument with his body, he incorporates its directions and dimensions, and he settles into the organ as one settles into a house."[61] Through this process, the organist's intentionality, which forms what Merleau-Ponty terms the "habit body," resides

[60] Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 9-10.
[61] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 146.

"neither in thought nor in the objective body, but rather in the body as the mediator of a world."[62] As Amy Cimini puts it, performer and instrument "constitute a network of musical and expressive possibilities" that cannot be reduced to a single agency, human or nonhuman.[63] Merleau-Ponty's philosophy thus points to how percussionists are not executors of action within an idealist framework, but are constantly mediating a world through their body: one that presses in on them just as they extend their powers into it.

This chapter is structured along five episodes of embodiment that center the physical and metaphorical experience of touch. Each episode reveals touch in a different aspect: its ability to express and suppress subjectivity, its fragility and mediation, its punctuational relationship to resonance, its auto-palpative qualities, and its ability to warp time around the body. Each of these aspects constitutes phenomena that would typically be folded under the category of percussive action. However, as I will show, due to the reciprocal nature of touch, such percussive action bears within itself its own frustration and negation due to its contact with alterity and difference. Furthermore, these episodes center the embodied experience of percussion, demonstrating how the art form exists only on the grounds of bodies encountering difference. This encounter, as I will show in future chapters, can be shaped by normative power structures found within social milieux. Understanding and critiquing these structures is dependent on an epistemology of percussive embodiment, centered on the reciprocity of touch, that refutes the subordination of instruments, implements, and notation into idealist projections of musical action.

An Elemental Thing (2017

[62] Ibid.
[63] Amy Cimini, "Vibrating Colors and Silent Bodies: Sound and Silence in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Dualism," *Contemporary Music Review* 31, no. 5-6 (October-December 2012): 362.

The first work to be discussed in Liza Lim's 2017 piece for solo wood block, *An Elemental Thing*. From a practical standpoint, a piece for solo woodblock seems almost comically austere. Percussionists are used to having an array of different instruments around them. To then be so radically constrained immediately poses questions as to how one is to make this single sound source aesthetically compelling for the duration of the piece. The points of contrast must come from the ways in which the performer activates this single object. Lim calls for an array of beaters including a superball mallet, a yarn mallet, four different kinds of serrated and non-serrated knitting needles, bound grasses, a bow, various parts of the performer's hands (finger tips, finger nails, palm of the hand etc.), and a bullet vibrator. All of these accomplish an impressive assembly of sounds and timbres. In his phenomenology of listening, Don Ihde writes that anything that sounds is always the result of a duet: "I hear not only the sound shape-aspect of the billiard ball rolling on the table, I also hear the hardness of the table. The 'same' roundness is heard when I roll the billiard ball on its felt-covered table, but now I also hear the different texture of the billiard ball."[64] In hearing any sound, then, we hear a co-mingled interaction between two agents: in the case of Lim's piece one "shape-aspect," that is, an ingredient in how our consciousness constructs the perception of a sound, remains constant: the woodblock. The other shape-aspect, that of its mode of activation, changes. Each activation of the woodblock with a different beater changes the profile of the woodblock, but also that of the beater – neither exists in isolation as a sounded object. Until engaged in this duet they each remain mute, as Otte notes above. This complicates a common conception among percussionists that our instruments lack agency and remain inert and expressively mute until we, as master practitioners, activate

[64] Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound (Second Edition)* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 67.

them. While it's true that more often than not the percussionist is in fact the direct instigator of the duet, it's important to remember that percussionists don't go unacted upon as they perform. To Ihde, the essence of this "duet of things" is a mutual offering: learning "to hear what each offers in the presence of the other."[65] If we accept that a percussionist's implements act as prosthetic extensions of their bodies, and thus of their being-in-the-world, then it follows that each contact with an instrument through this duet is an encounter with a radical kind of other. I can claim proprietary ownership over the woodblock I perform on, but as I sound it in the context of Lim's work it has just as much control and power over my range of expressivity as I do over its.

This uncertain contact is something that contemporary percussionists know well. Nearly every new piece calls for some new as-yet-unheard-of duet between instrument and activator. Lim's work, with its radical reduction of the former and subsequent expansion of the latter casts this uncertainty into stark relief. Echoing Stuart from the previous chapter: there is no normative conception of what a vibrator on a woodblock is supposed to sound like. Usually these kinds of problems are discussed in terms of "exploration." One must explore the woodblock, to chart its contours topographically so that one can navigate it with ease. However, I don't believe we explore the woodblock the way an explorer does Mount Everest: to conquer it "because it's there." Instead we probe and listen, modifying our own being in response to the surfaces we touch and the depths we hear beneath them. With this in mind, I prefer the metaphors of palpation and auscultation over exploration, two similarly favored by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible* when he describes consciousness's apprehension of being in general.

[65] Ibid.

When considering the relationship between performer and instrument in the context of *An Elemental Thing*, a central concept is that of physiognomy. Physiognomy is defined in the *OED* as "a person's facial features or expression, especially when regarded as indicative of character or ethnic origin." It is, in other words, the way in which a person expresses themselves bodily in the world. It is the way in which an inner life is projected outward to be read and interpreted. Phenomenologists have further extrapolated this concept beyond mere facial features to include the bodily movements of a person. We do not just express with our faces, but with our entire body and its movements. Can it be said, however, that non-humans can have physiognomies? Certainly, this is true of animals, but what of inanimate objects? Glen Mazis writes that in the works of Merleau-Ponty, the term "physiognomy" is related to but not exhausted by the facial definition cited above: the face presents a surface, but the surface runs into the depths of expressive being. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mazis is invested in how Merleau-Ponty's philosophy restores faces to things, not just people. He writes that rather than understanding physiognomy strictly by the definitions of human facial and emotional expression, that "the physiognomic is more like a 'figure'...something that is suggestive, that motivates us to further attention." He continues, that these physiognomic characters act as horizons, in that they "open new aspects to the world as well as transform what was previously known as now standing within a new context."[66] For example, when one first sees a performance of *An Elemental Thing,* the woodblock itself will conjure a number of aspects from our previous experience: perhaps the color of the woodblock reminds us of an old piece of mahogany furniture from our grandparents' home, or its sound reminds us of the insistent woodpecker who hammers away outside our bedroom window in the early mornings. Perhaps these connections come together as the first

[66] Mazis, *Merleau-Ponty and The Face of the World*, 80.

passage begins, when the bow slides across the mouth of the woodblock, evoking a sound like breath; like wind in trees. All of a sudden, the woodblock has a world of expression behind it, and because of its depth we read its expression as a type of "face" that perceives us in the world. Our perception of objects -- our sense of their expression built around our prior experiences and the ensuing recontextualization that arises from fresh contact -- helps to palpate the depth of their being.

Reserving expression for the human, or even more narrowly to the vocal, misses out on the expressive depths of the nonhuman world. Ihde writes that "every material thing has a voice—which, however, is all too easy to miss...we may miss the voices of things because they are often, left by themselves, mute or *silent*."[67] Seemingly mute objects are seen as voiceless because they are, as noted earlier, dependent on a duet to give them voice. The woodblock struck in *An Elemental Thing* is not voiceless - its voice is revealed through the touch of my mallet. We hear both the sound of the woodblock *and* the sound of my body prosthetically mediated through the mallet's yarn, rubber, and rattan. We likewise hear the voice of the woodblock when I rub it with a superball mallet, but this time its voice shows a different aspect. We hear the woodblock's unchanging interior entangled with the respective activator it duets with, projecting a comingled polyphony of voices out into the world. The body-instrument continuum sounds itself through a blend of physiognomies – mine and other.

The concepts of physiognomy, voice, and the sounding objects come together at the site of Liza Lim's woodblock. To illustrate this, I turn in particular to a passage from *An Elemental Thing* that allows the physiognomies of performer and instrument to amplify and limit each other, spurred by improvisation based on a text from Eliot Weinberger. After a short

[67] Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 190.

introduction, the performer's heretofore precise and prescriptive notation gives way to a vague contour of lines and dynamics. (Figure 2.1).

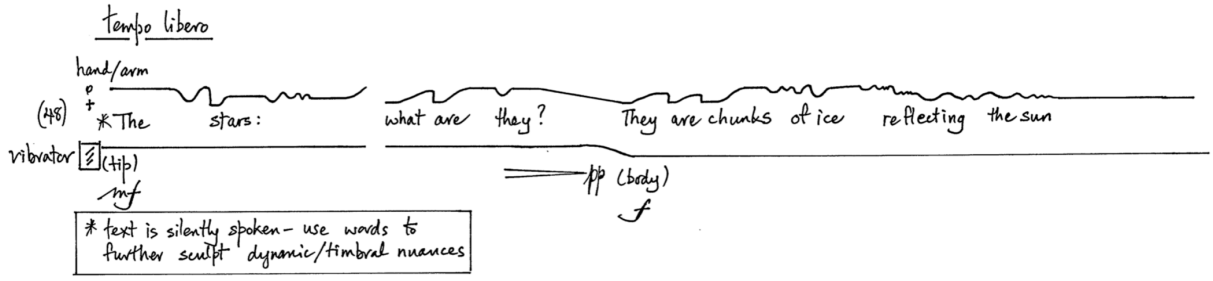


Figure 2.1: Liza Lim, *An Elemental Thing,* m. 48.

Lim presents the performer with four different dynamic vectors. At the top of the notation, is the relationship between the hand/arm of the performer and the "mouth" of the woodblock. Throughout the piece the performer is asked to cover the mouth to various degrees, simultaneously deepening and deadening the sound of the instrument. The top line from Figure 2.1 is the amount the mouth should be covered in this passage: the lower the line, the more covered the mouth. The next vector is Weinberger's text from "The Stars," a chapter from his book of poetic essays, *An Elemental Thing*, from which Lim's piece borrows its title. Lim, however, has excerpted and edited the text she borrows, omitting some lines and crossing out others. The text as it appears in the performance notes of Lim's work is thus:

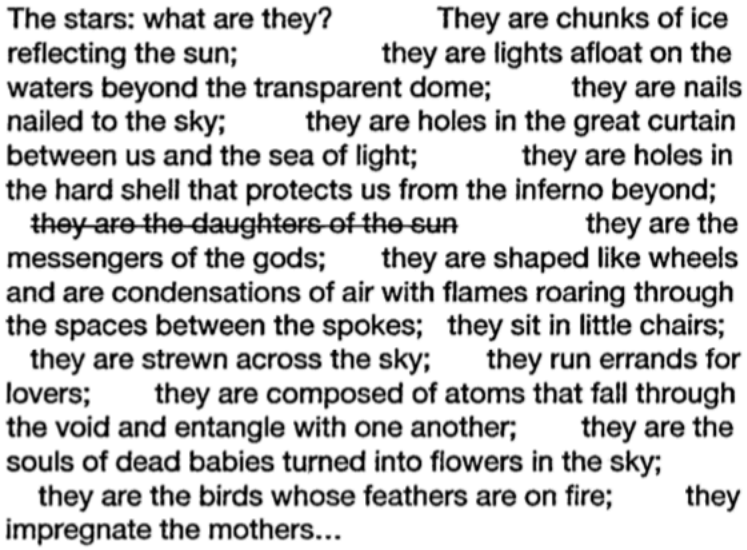


Figure 2.2: Liza Lim, *An Elemental Thing*, "Notes for Performance."

This text traverses the entire middle section of the work, and forms the basis of the performer's improvisation. Lim writes in the performance notes that the "text is silently spoken" and that the performer should "use [the] words to further sculpt dynamic/timbral nuances." Thus, the text is never spoken by the performer out loud for the audience to hear, but is indirectly rendered through the performer's interaction with the woodblock. Besides the manipulation of the mouth of the woodblock as mentioned above, the performer's other tool for sonic activation is a bullet vibrator, whose point of contact on the top of the woodblock constitutes the third dynamic vector. Lim prescribes specifically a bullet vibrator, and differentiates between the performer using the vibrator's tip, which strikes at a perpendicular angle to the woodblock and produces the thinnest sound, and the body, which strikes at a parallel angle and creates the fullest activation of the woodblock's resonant cavity. The higher the line, the more of the tip is used, the lower the line, the more of the body. The final vector is the actually-sounding dynamic of the

woodblock, rendered conventionally in *pp – fff* dynamic markings. To summarize, the performer is made responsible for managing four different, constantly changing and evolving factors: the mouth of the woodblock, the silent recitation of Weinberger's text, the part of the vibrator being used on the woodblock, and the overall dynamic of the sounding events that are a result of the previous factors. Each of these presents a different negotiation of respective performer and woodblock physiognomies that sometimes compliment and sometimes thwart each other.

Is there a voice to be heard in Lim's work? And if so, whose is it? Rather than say that there is some essential expressive aspect to Lim's piece, which would necessitate an ideal woodblock, player, and interpretation, we can instead understand the work, indeed any work for percussion, as ultimately synesthetic and polyphonic. My voice as interpreter dialogues with the physiognomic voice of the woodblock I engage with, which in turn dialogues with Lim's voice through her notation, itself in dialogue with Weinberger's text. These voices are all brought together through the touch of percussion performance, revealing that "voice" in percussion performance is not linguistic or even necessarily vocal, but tactile. Touch is the condition of percussive sounding and expression: the momentary, co-defining tension of subject, object, and their promiscuous referents (be it a text, a composer, a medium, etc.). Touch is the condition through which the voices of a work for percussion sound.

In Lim's work, the performer is brought into tactile contact, an experience of prolonged and dynamic touch, with a woodblock. From this contact a great deal can be learned. Firstly, that the process of performing with percussion instruments is not the activity of a rational actor acting over inert matter, but instead an entanglement of multiple physiognomies, each with their own distinct styles of being in the world. These styles further entangle in the context of the work – the voices of performer, instrument, composer, and notation all become sensible through the power

of touch. Secondly, we begin to understand the tools a percussionist uses as extensions of their body that enable them to be in the world *as* a percussionist. With both of these points it is important to remember that artistry, expression, and performance is never a one-way street; never an exercise of a sovereign percussionist performing themselves in the world without friction. Percussion performance is always highly mediated both sonically and physically – shaping the performer and forcing them to conform the surrounding physical materials just as much as the performer activates them to arrive at an interpretation of a piece.

Lullaby (2011)

As I have mentioned repeatedly, one of percussion's most distinguishing factors from other instrumental practices is the variety of heterogeneous materials percussionists engage with. Percussion training is largely a process of becoming attuned to the different ways that instruments respond. For instance, through practice and discipline we learn that certain beaters cause certain materials to respond a certain way: brass or plastic beaters are most likely to elicit a desirable tone from a piece of metal, while rubber beaters wrapped in yarn make up the anatomy of most marimba and vibraphone mallets. The very fact that a percussionist owns a large variety of mallets is itself an admission that the instruments percussionists perform on resist them – there is no "master key" beater that sounds ideal on every instrument. Indeed, what is considered "ideal" is itself a site of debate. The percussionist's art is, to an extent, about meeting our instruments as others that resist us in their material obstinacy. Various mallets and beaters open different embodiments of being towards the world in relation to an external instrument, because their use gives different kinds of knowledge through touch. The contact of a brass mallet on a

marimba bar gives a tactile, sensible context to concepts of fragility and brittleness. A heavily-wrapped gong mallet on a crotale brings to consciousness questions of weight and precision. Touch is a method of bodily self-knowledge through an other. The prosthetic use of various beaters on simultaneously accommodating and resistant instruments and their materials reveals aspects of the percussionist's subjectivity.

Liza Lim's woodblock is dynamic and expressive, but the woodblock itself, the wood that it is made of, is a fairly reliable material. Wood, as far as materials used in percussion go, is one of the more predictable and consistent. This is a claim arrived at through the considerations of a variety of wooden instruments touched in percussion practice – marimbas, xylophones, woodblocks, temple blocks, wooden slats, etc. Each of these instruments differ with regards to their sounds, usages, and activation methods, but there is something universally familiar in each of them that a percussionist learns to identify as a core, "wooden" physiognomy. Even between various woods like mahogany, ash, cherry, or purple heart, the experience of their wooden-ness remains fairly consistent.

One finds a much more elusive core physiognomy in a material like metal. Aluminum, bronze, iron, and steel all feel like "metal," but the particular lathe and alloy used can radically change the tactile experience that a percussionist has. It's this experience that I will explore in the context of Nicholas Deyoe's *Lullaby* (2011). *Lullaby* is written for a collection of drums, two woodblocks, two cymbals, and a glockenspiel. The opening music is soft and songlike, but is consistently interjected with fast, nimble polyrhythms that weave a sense of anxiety throughout the piece. Deyoe's sonic world is fragile and delicate, and yet there is an intense depth and warmth – partially supplied by the low tones of the drums and partially supplied by the nearly-diatonic music of the glockenspiel. This music itself is already a challenge in that it demands

arriving at a set of four beaters that both allow the drums to speak softly and warmly, but also let the glockenspiel notes sing. Favor the drums too much and the glockenspiel becomes dampened and "thuddy." Favor the glockenspiel, and the drums become acute and brittle. The moment most worth discussing comes about halfway through the piece, where Deyoe asks for what he calls a "cymbal cry" (Figure 2.3). As far as technique goes, a "cymbal cry" is essentially a singling out of a very high overtone of a cymbal. A cymbal's material (B20 Bronze) and lathe allows for slow, focused friction to bring out this overtone without a sounding fundamental. This is accomplished through an extremely localized pressure point that slowly rotates around the cymbal. Deyoe suggests the tip of a drum stick or chopstick. Finding these options to be too heavy and thick for the cymbal I used, I instead use a 0.5mm wooden knitting needle.

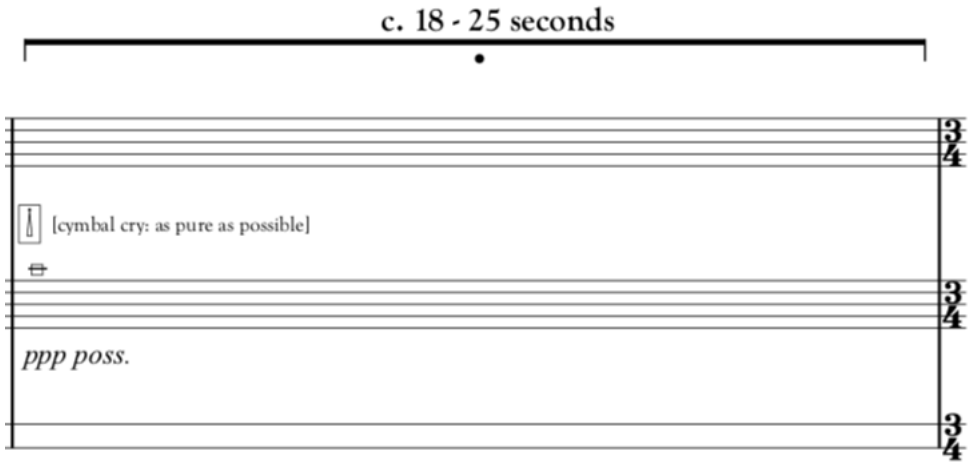


Figure 2.3: Nicholas Deyoe, *Lullaby* (2011), m. 88.

My first experiments at arriving at a "as pure as possible" cry were failures. I had originally chosen an un-lathed cymbal from my collection because I found its dark, complex

wash complimentary to the first half of the piece's polyphony. However, when I arrived at the cymbal cry moment, all efforts at isolating a pure tone were thwarted. The fact that the cymbal was un-lathed rendered the fundamental-to-overtone relationship so complex that when the high overtones sounded they appeared not as pure tones but as an almost violent distortion. After a period of trial and error, I instead decided to try a different, lathed cymbal to see if this material would help me arrive at Deyoe's desired sonic effect. In this case, my *a priori* decision about cymbal choice was thwarted by the reality of the materials at-hand. In Heideggerian terms, an instrument's objective, material presence disrupted its ability to withdraw from consciousness in its handiness. Its bongo-ness (or cymbal-ness) was incompatible with the moment of the piece. Despite the attraction of percussion set-ups as uncharted territory for one to conceptually express oneself, more often than not this freedom reveals itself as illusion. The materials dictate the ecology of a piece and its sounding just as much as any performer's choice.

The selection of a lathed cymbal proved a step in the right direction. Immediately, isolated high overtones revealed themselves, but they were always accompanied by a kind of buzzing that I struggled to diagnose. My breakthrough arrived in the realization that it was not, in fact, the cymbal itself that was buzzing, *but the needle*. As the friction of the point of the needle on the cymbal caused the cymbal to vibrate, the cymbal in turn caused the wooden needle to do the same, destabilizing the point of contact and thus complicating the cymbal's response. As Ihde and Merleau-Ponty both identify in their own way, through this sounding the needle and cymbal co-mingle. The player becomes their contact point. The cymbal is not inert and non-agential, the needle is not a mere tool I have ready-at-hand to do my bidding and amplify my intentions. They resist each other and these intentions. They demand negotiation to co-create the musical moment.

To realize Deyoe's notation and desired effect, the needle's sonic contribution needed to only come through the sounding of the cymbal. To accomplish this, I held as high up on the needle as possible, less than an inch from the contact point with the cymbal. Furthermore, I pinched the needle tighter so as to stifle its own vibration. These two strategies resulted in a smaller vibrational body; the needle was effectively shortened to where my fingers began. My tightened grip furthermore enabled me to exercise more direct control over the vibrations of the wood. However, holding the needle so high up and much tighter than before reduced the relaxation of the arm, wrist, and hand required to move the needle-holding arm smoothly. Instead the motion became jerky and tense, threatening the stillness the cymbal and musical moment require. The overtones of the cymbal not only must be activated but must be held for as long as forty-five seconds, requiring an almost imperceptibly small and slow movement – something a tense wrist and hand can't reliably accomplish. And yet, the needle point must traverse the cymbal for the overtone to sound. The solution comes from the *other* hand. As my right hand holds the needle tight, attempting to maintain as constant and unwavering a degree of pressure as possible, my left hand softly touches the bell of the cymbal, attempting to rotate it on its stand as slowly and as steadily as possible. The bell of the cymbal is a "safe" place to touch because it offers a nodal point for its vibration. By combining the tension of the right hand with the gentle steadiness of the left, the cymbal can be made to rotate while maintaining the conditions it needs to speak.

Deyoe's cymbal cry offers an intimate communion of touch compared to most percussive moments, even within other moments of the same piece. The conditions under which a percussionist typically touches their instruments is usually passing and transient: they strike the surface of the instrument, momentary contact is made, and before that instrument finishes

sounding the player has moved on to the next engagement. Deyoe's cymbal cry holds the player and makes them sit in this contact continuously. The sonic event requires a long duration of constant pressure and movement, both of which have extremely low thresholds for error. Nomi Epstein might term such a moment as "performative fragility," where the presence of a sound itself is fragile. Because of the complexity of the actions that must take place to make the cymbal cry happen, any teetering can cause the sound to cease. To Epstein, fragility manifests in music a number of ways, and has certain ethical connotations. She writes that rather than seeing fragility in a negative way, "something fragile may instead be viewed as unique and worthy of cherishing" and that "a fragile entity needs more care in one's dealings with it, where there arises a sort of compassion for and/or responsibility to treat it gingerly."[68] The difficult and fragility of the technique in Deyoe's piece attunes the performer to the fragility of the sounding process, and thus makes the performer more conscious of their own responsibility to said process. One false movement in the left hand or one moment of waning pressure in the right hand causes the sound to falter; the connection to the cymbal is undeniably and conspicuously broken in the ears of the listener.

Mani. Gonxha (2011)

The next case study turns to the relationship between body as self and body as instrument, perhaps the most intimate example of percussive touch. The body itself sounds: when our flesh is struck it makes a smack, as we breathe we can hear the hiss of our nose, throat, and lungs. In absolute silence we hear the hum of our blood flow and the whine of our nervous

[68] Nomi Epstein, "Musical Fragility: A Phenomenological Investigation," *Tempo* 71, No. 281 (2017): 52.

system. What happens when we refer to our body as *instrument,* and understand its sounds as musical? There is a risk of falling into Cartesian dualism if one is not careful – where an individual's mind serves as the subject: rational and at a distance, and the individual's body serves as the object, the machine within which this mind traverses the world and also the condition of its absolute separation from it.[69] This view would understand body percussion as the practice of a rational interpreter who struggles to make their body sound the way the mind wants it to sound, again "exploring" its sonic capacity so as to instrumentalize it. Merleau-Ponty reminds us however that we do not *have* a body, instead we *are* our body, and if the broad metaphor of the hand-touching-hand extends to being in general, and the practice of percussion in particular, then perhaps nowhere is this more pertinent than in repertoire that conspicuously includes the body as sounding object.

The most famous percussion piece that employs the body as an instrument is probably Vinko Globokar's 1975 *?Corporel*. Much has been written by Steven Schick and Aiyun Huang about the work and the way it calls into question certain ontological assumptions about the body, instruments, music, and theater. Over the course of the piece, the performer – shirtless and exposed— explores parts of their body to make sound, creating what Schick calls an "osmosis" between musical and theatrical sounds and gestures. Schick writes that Globokar places "one foot on either side of the Cartesian mind/body divide" to show that "bodily expression is inherent and constructed, natural and divined."[70] Huang, for her part, writes that *?Corporel* "becomes an

[69] This is often how percussion is understood, even when the body isn't the surface being struck. Russell Hartenberger remembers percussionist Alan Abel telling him that "'You need to discipline your hands so that they do what your mind and ear say should be done.'" Russell Hartenberger, "Learning to Feel the Time: Reflections of a Percussionist," in *Synchrony and Temporal Flow in Music and Dance,* ed. Clemens Wöllner and Justin London (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023), 349. This instrumental approach to the body is problematic from a phenomenological standpoint. It assumes that one's hands are exterior to the self, and thus an object that can be disciplined, rather than being an extension of subjectivity itself.

[70] Schick, *The Percussionist's Art*, 169.

interwoven musical experience between the present (sounds heard in the space) and the past (sound stored in the audience's memory)." She continues that "it is possible that the listener does not hear the performer scratching his/her skin from the back of the hall. However, when the listener sees the performer scratching, the memory of the sound of scratching is activated in the listener and a musical communication is established."[71] For both Huang and Schick, the power of *?Corporel* lies in the fact that everyone, performer and audience alike, has a body and are familiar with its sounds, now rendered musical through performance. The body takes on the theatrical valences of a stage prop, interwoven with meaning that the audience projects onto the body of the performer.

The climax of this piece arrives with the emergence of language. The performer freezes and recites a text that reads: "I recently read the following remark. The history of humankind is the long succession of synonyms for the same word. It is our duty to disprove this." The body's musical and theatrical capabilities culminate through their osmosis in language and speech – and a particular speech whose grandness is so universalizing that it sounds strange by our postmodern standards. *?Corporel* opens important ontological questions about the body, but still treats the body as a thing to be sublimated into a universalizing agent. This is echoed in Globokar's own conception of composing for percussion, one that situates itself as a masterful exploration and manipulation of a single, or at least reduced quantity of, sonic objects rather than a virtuosic movement between many different instruments.[72] The body, though universal in

[71] Aiyun Huang, "Percussion theater: the drama of performance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, ed. Russell Hartenberger (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 135.

[72] See Globokar, "Anti-Badabum." Greg Stuart's own interpretation of this text reveals that despite seeming liberational, Globokar's own stance is constrained by certain modernist biases and assumptions.

human experience, remains other and inert to the mind which manifests through it – a resource to be explored and manipulated.

While the exact meaning of ?*Corporel* remains cryptic and perhaps even in debate amongst percussionists, one thing that remains clear is that, whatever this meaning is, it is delivered by language and is dependent on it. Does a reliance on language and meaning overlook the nuances of the relationship between voice, language, and touch? Can the reciprocity identified between a performer's touching of an instrument be formed without the presence of a radical other, be it person or object? Perhaps a better question is whether or not one's own body can serve as this other. Karen Barad argues in the affirmative: "self-touching is an encounter with the infinite alterity of the self, matter is an enfolding, an involution, it cannot help touching itself, and in this self-touching it comes in contact with the infinite alterity that it is."[73] In other words, self-touch, the experience of self-as-other opens up an alterity just as authentic as an encounter with another person. One can come to know "oneself as another," as Paul Ricoeur famously coined, and this encounter can perhaps most intimately shape how one engages with other encounters with alterity.[74]

One such piece that captures this encountering of the self as instrumental other is Pierluigi Billone's *Mani. Gonxha* (2011). *Gonxha* is a member of a series of works for percussion by Billone, all filed under his heading of *Mani.*, Italian for "hands." Each work is dedicated to a different historical figure, from Giacometti, to Crazy Horse, to, in *Gonxha*'s case, Mother Theresa. Each piece, in different ways, is a slow, but intense ritual between a performer, a small collection of instruments, and their body. The body and instruments compound each

---

[73] Karen Barad, "On Touching," 158.
[74] See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

other to make sounds that they could not make by themselves. Of *Mani. De Leonardis,* the first of the series, Tim Rutherford-Johnson writes that

> Much of the pleasure of watching a percussionist play *Mani. De Leonardis* stems...from seeing the sonic inventiveness unfold. This is not something an orchestra or large ensemble can do; it is a function of the stripped-down nature of the piece. Rather like the unpredictable, radical mutation of a genetic code in response to its environment, the work is an expression of diversity over unity, of excess over containment.[75]

Gonxha shares the radical, evolutionary qualities of *De Leonardis*, and perhaps renders them in their most extreme version, due to the austerity of its instrumentation. *Gonxha* is scored for two Tibetan temple bowls, tuned slightly apart, and held in the hands. The performer is then asked to accomplish a multiple-page long lexicon of sounds and techniques, including tremolos, ringing bell-tones, pitch-changing claps, and rubbing that elicits only high overtones. Billone's notation for this is simultaneously complex and unique, but also surprisingly intuitive. For example, large circles in the notation correspond to the circles one makes with the hands as rubbing the bowls together, etc. Furthermore, the body is also implicated in the sounds' production. The bowls strike the chest and stomach. They tap on the fingers laid across the bottom of one bowl so that the other bowl produces a muted thud, and the stomach itself is used as a resonating chamber.

[75] Tim Rutherford-Johnson, *Music Since the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 199-200.

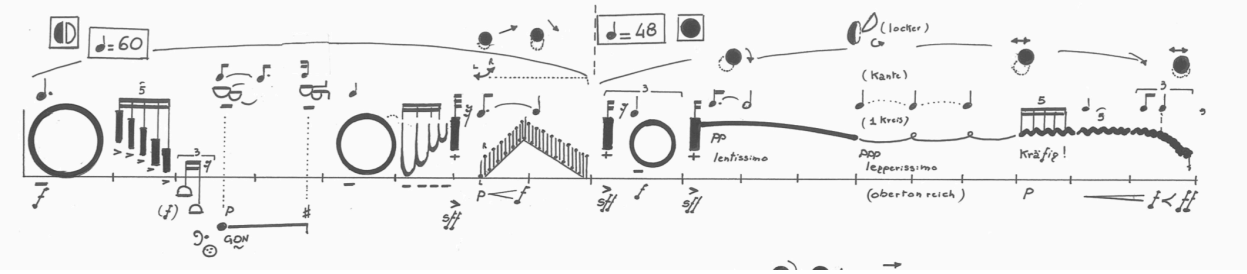


Figure 2.4: Pierluigi Billone, *Mani. Gonxha* (2011), opening line.

Unlike the rawness of Globokar's work, however, when hand and tongue are constantly and intimately self-exploring, the touch in Billone's work is always mediated by a nonhuman other. The body never actually touches itself flesh-to-flesh, but is always mediated by the bowls. We understand that these bowls serve as extensions of the human body from our discussions above, but never is this clearer than when our body can only become the instrument it must be for this piece through the external prosthetic of the Tibetan temple bowls. We come to a very interesting crossroads in *Gonxha* where Merleau-Pontian phenomenology can serve as an elucidating framework for the experience of the performer, and yet the work remains something distinctly Catholic, made explicit through its homage to Mother Theresa. Without delving too deeply into Catholic doctrine and theology, there is something strikingly Christian about the conception of the body – in this case primarily the sounding body – as one that only becomes sounding through the mediation of external instruments, and in this case the spiritual implications of the origins and physiognomies of the bowls themselves are not lost.[76] In the

[76] Considering his own work in a spiritual vein, Allen Otte notes that it is not insignificant that so many percussion instruments have their origins as religious objects. He thus situates himself and his practice in a similarly spiritual vein. Insisting that an axiom of his work is that he is not "trying to sell anything—not the piece and not myself." Instead he views himself as an intermediary between the audience and whatever aesthetic experience they may be having. See "Letter to a Young Percussionist (Preferences in Percussion, 2010)," 288.

Catholic New Testament, a body without the transubstantiation of Christ remains sinful. In Billone, a body without its bowls remains silenced. Billone seems to offer a religious refutation to the atheist modernism of Globokar, which seeks to claim knowledge of the body in itself.

As in Globokar, the voice plays a critical role in Billone's work. As one can see in Figure 2.4, for the most part, the voice itself only sounds when the bowls are struck – as if the body is sympathetically vibrating through the hands. This is generally how the voice is presented throughout the piece: an expression of resonance between the primary instruments (the bowls) and the secondary instrument (the body). However, this dynamic changes in a critical moment in the arc of the piece. After over ten minutes of performance, the bowls are rested on the stomach, and the performer utters a repetitive rhythm that resembles a type of prayer (Figure 2.5).

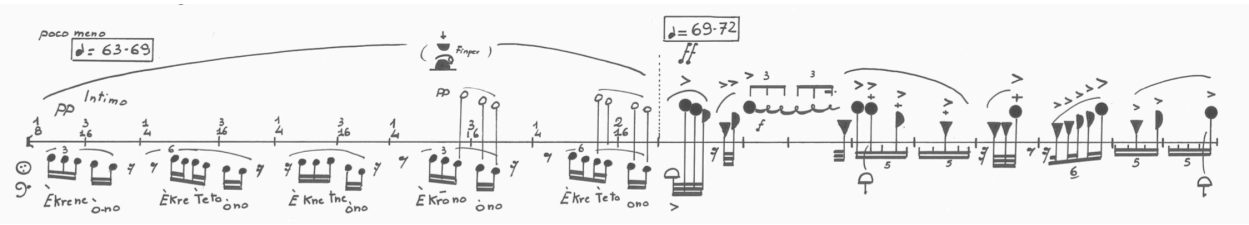


Figure 2.5: Pierluigi Billone, *Mani. Gonxha,* Page 8, second system.

The prayer recites just for a moment before it is again subsumed by the complex language of the bowl music. However, it insistently returns on the next page, but now unvoiced. This time the prayer is without syllables, and at first without voice, but the rhythm is unmistakably that of the prayer motif presented earlier. Then, finally, the voice is given its solo.

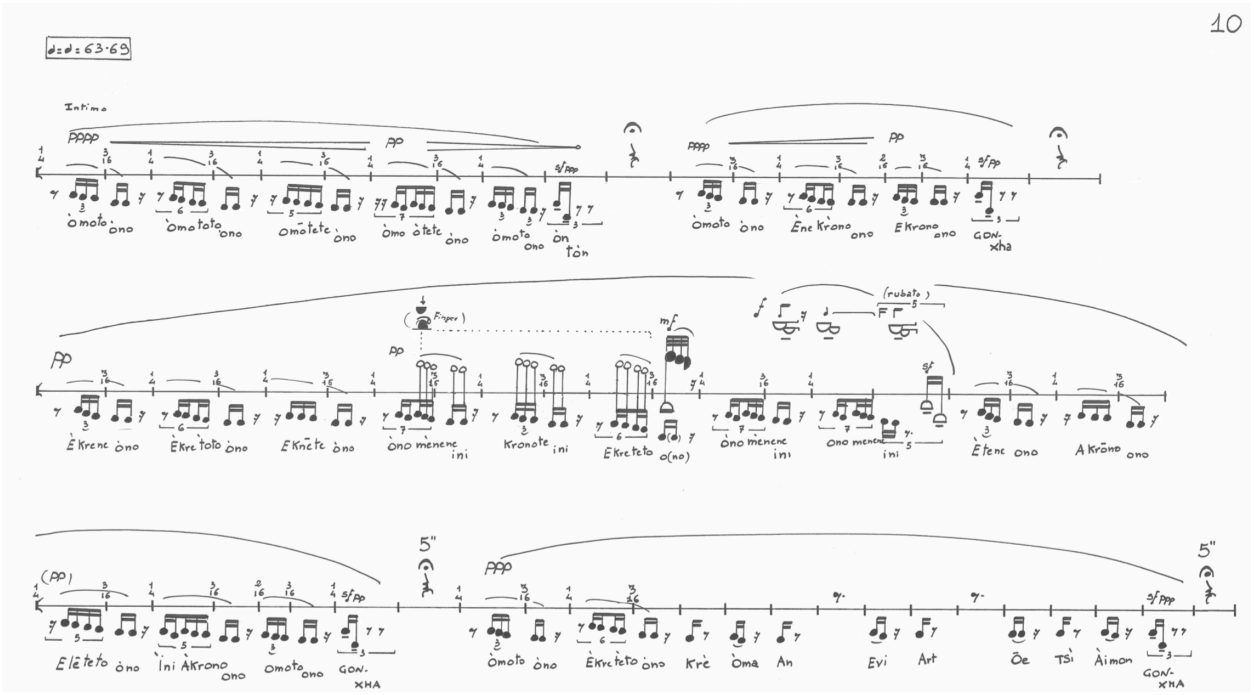


Figure 2.6: Pierluigi Billone, *Mani. Gonxha*, page 10, first three systems.

Unlike the well-voiced and articulate French or English heard in the climax of Globokar's *?Corporel,* the language in Billone's work is invented, its syllables don't actually have any semantic meaning to them. But while they do not communicate as Globokar's text does, they certainly *express*. The expression comes both from the dynamic cadences of each stanza, marked "Intimo" in Billone's score, but also from the sheer repetition of the rhythm. In the voice this rhythm is softly spoken. In my own interpretation I consciously aim to keep my voice soft enough so that audience members can tell that I am speaking, but are unable to tell what I am saying. In my version at least, the words belong between me and the text, and while the audience may see that I am doing something, they don't need the words, nor language in general, to feel and be affected by the musical moment.

The bowl rhythm reinforces this ambiguity – it is played with one bowl's mouth pressed against the stomach, that same hand extending a finger over its bottom. The second bowl is then played bottom-down on the finger, only making bowl-to-bowl contact at the punctuation marks of the stanzas. The resulting sound is nearly inaudible except for the soft thud that marks the *tenuto* marking at the beginning of each phrase. Again, audience members are given a glimpse into the musical happenings of the performer, but are only given an ambiguous impression of an intimate, yet intense moment. Billone's music, like all percussion music, is synesthetic for the performer. One comes to learn the rhythm not just through the sound of their voice in the air, the markings on the page, or the bowl-plus-finger in time, but through the feel of their throat, the movement of their lips and tongue, the repeated thuddy tap of the bowl on their finger, and the bruise-inducing *sforzandi* impacts of the bowl's mouth on their stomach.[77] In each of these is an instance of touch that endows both Billone's rhythm and text with voice and expression, a physiognomic, corporeal, and co-activating instrument. Language not only comes second to expression, as any instance of bodily or facial communication can show, but is not even needed to convey a sense of the intimate and spiritual found in Billone's piece. Phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty and Ihde argue that the voice, a depth-revealing and physiognomic element in its own right, is too often tied to language so that language itself seems like an inevitability that goes beyond expression. What Merleau-Ponty and Billone share with regards to the voice is an expression without direct meaning, and the touch of a percussionist in the case of *Gonxha* is what renders that meaning palpable.

slow, silent, singing (2018)

[77] During the preparation for my first performance of the piece my abdomen was decorated by a bruise that, because of the necessity of rehearsal, lasted months.

In my first lesson with Steven Schick, when I was auditioning for the graduate program at UC San Diego, I performed a very nervous version of Philippe Manoury's *Solo de vibraphone* from his *Le Livre des Claviers*. After my performance, Schick offered me only one bit of advice, which was to "listen to the ends of the notes, too." In my reflection on this comment, I realized that because of the nature of the normal percussion contact of beating and striking, percussionists' attention to the impact of their touch is somewhat front-heavy. That is to say, that percussionists pay much attention to the preparation and follow through that results in a beater coming into contact with an instrument, but less so on what follows. The ringing of an instrument after being struck is something that happens passively. Active touch can fit itself into this reverberation as a second strike, riding the resonance of the first, or as a negative gesture: one that extinguishes the ringing. Touch, then, bears a unique relationship to the *resonance* of percussion. Drummer Noah D. claims that all "Percussionists are always in pursuit of RESONANCE, building elaborate nests of string and felt and foam so our bells and blocks and cymbals, vibrate freely, without interference... and like Evelyn Glennie said, 'this body is a resonating chamber,' so I am constantly stripping away what dampens it."[78] D. casts their terms in a poetic light, expressing the emergence of an authentic self that is gradually uncovered or, in percussive terms, suspended so that it can ring freely.[79] I identify an important term in resonance, one that compliments the phenomenology of touch I've been exploring thus far. Resonance, in fact, is the term used by Kearney when describing the experience of sound that is reciprocal, and it is such a rich term that sociologist Hartmun Rosa has written a comprehensive sociology "of

[78] D., Noah, "Thirty Thoughts from a Different Drummer," *Queer Percussion Research Group Zine Collection,* ed. Bill Solomon, (January, 2023), 1.

[79] We will see in the next chapter that D's invocation of stripping the body has a critical valence in the next chapter.

our relationship to the world" through the concept.[80] To Rosa and Kearney both, resonance is a reciprocal process where two objects cause each other to vibrate and "speak," but do so in a way where one is not dominating or ventriloquizing the other. As Rosa writes, a resonant relationship is one of subjective transformation through the experience of alterity (and he illustrates examples in work, school, religion, art, and elsewhere), but one in which this alterity also resists the subject and insists on still speaking with its own voice. Touch, metaphorically understood, can be seen as an initial condition of resonance. A percussionist comes into contact with things (instruments, works, spaces, etc.) that cause us to resonate, but are irreducible to our own singularity. When the touch of resonance is one-sided, a resonant relationship is transformed into one that has, in Rosa's terms, fallen mute.

Percussionists encounter resonance most acutely in attending to the "ends" of notes, as Schick encouraged me to do in our first meeting. This means listening to how an instrument resounds in space, and to only intervene in its dampening for a good reason (or vice versa, to not let an instrument's sound overstay its welcome). Listening to the decay of an instrument illustrates not only a sound, but more broadly space and time that sits outside of our intentions. It situates us in our body as we listen to a vibration that gradually stills. The sound "touches" our ears just as reciprocally as our hand touches its source. Kearney writes that resonance is a kind of embodied attention.[81] In listening to the resonance of a thing we also listen to ourselves *through* that thing. Merleau-Ponty writes that the body is a "system of systems devoted to the inspection of a world and capable of leaping over great distances, piercing the perceptual future, and outlining hollows and reliefs, distances and deviations...in the inconceivable flatness of being."[82]

---

[80] See Hartmun Rosa, *Resonance*.
[81] Kearney, *Touch,* 30.

The body thus discovers the percussion instrument as never simply "on" or "off." It is never simply sounding or silent, but somewhere in-between, pregnant with sound and its resulting meaning that our body grasps in its activation, perception, and experience.

When a resonating object ceases to vibrate, it falls to silence. The experience of silence is dependent on time. To a percussionist, silence is usually the result of an inevitable, passive decay, not something that is actively caused, for example by the cessation of the bowing of a string or blowing into a mouthpiece. Percussionists strike an instrument, it vibrates in response, and over time its vibrations relax and quiet until their vibrations are no longer audible. Most sustained sounds in percussion, such as a drum roll, are themselves a sleight-of-hand: percussionists strike the instrument in question rapidly and repeatedly at a sufficient speed to create the impression of a sustained note. Smooth sounds are created through illusion. Percussion notation reflects this – to the mind of many percussionists, a snare drum stroke notated with a quarter note and a quarter rest vs. one notated with a regular half note will sound identical (Figure 2.7). Percussive decay is often taken-for-granted.

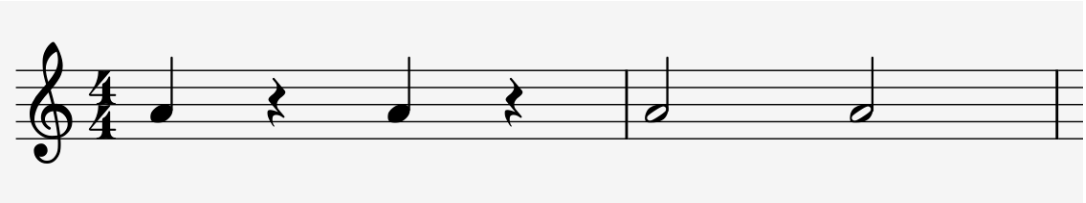


Figure 2.7: Basic rhythmic notation. When reading these rhythms on most percussion instruments, these bars would sound identical. This indicates that resting is a passive activity as opposed to an active one.

[82] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," *Signs,* trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 67.

Kevin Good's *slow, silent, singing* (2018) is a piece that explores these issues of resonance, decay, silence, perception, and notation. The work runs roughly seventy-five minutes, and is orchestrated for a single glockenspiel played by a single player. Humility is a central concept in Good's aesthetic, and the austere orchestration coupled with the suppressed dynamic range of the entire work places this front and center. The composition of the piece falls into three rough sections. The first material is a slow melody that reappears throughout the piece with various accompanying voices. The second is comprised of superimposed perfect intervals that ascend and descend over the range of the instrument. The third manifests as ever-widening chasms of silence that separate these the first two parts.

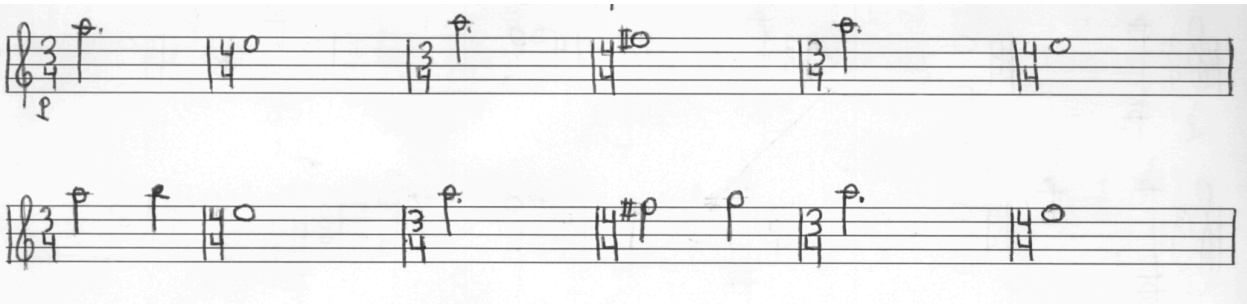


Fig 2.8. *slow, silent, singing,* page 1. The melodic, "A" material of the work.

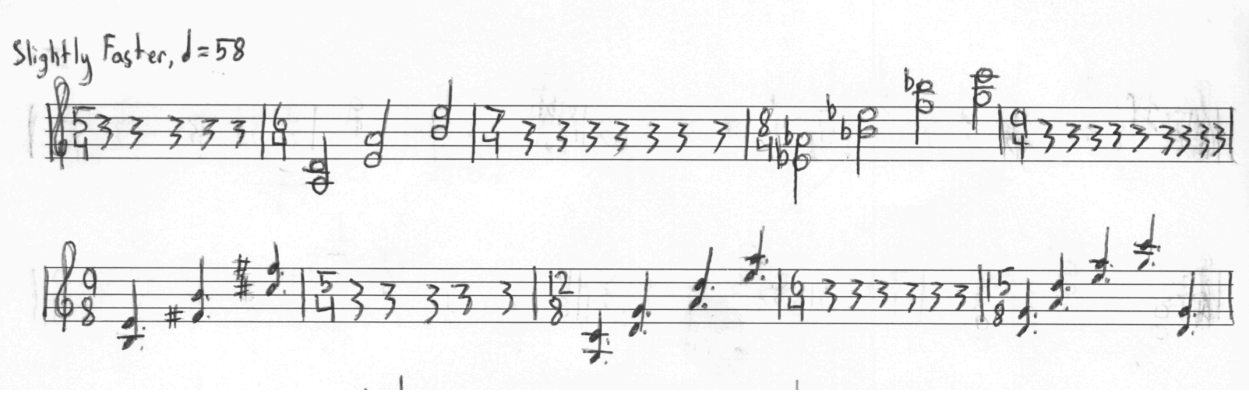


Figure 2.9. *slow, silent, singing*, page 3. The ascending Perfect intervals that make up the "B" material of the work.

The notation of the above passage of the "B" material is misleading. Though each bar alternates between slow dyads and bars of notated silence, Good's instructions are to let every pitch ring for its natural duration. Therefore, each bar of rest is filled with the composite harmony of the glockenspiel notes from the bar before. Each bar of rest is not a period of silence like the notation implies, but is simply a bar that doesn't prescribe any performer activity. I sit in silence during these bars of rest, but the glockenspiel bars certainly do not. They continue to sound themselves across these temporal distances of inactivity – their symbolic silence on the page becomes a space that these tones sonically traverse. The early success of these voyages (seven quarter notes, even at the slow tempo notated, is not a long distance to cross for these freely-ringing instruments) make their eventual failure all the more powerful. Over the course of the work, these distances expand from nine beats, to fourteen, to twenty, to a maximum of forty-two counts of inactivity. It is in these wider silences, rendered physically on the page through Good's insistence on never writing a rest larger than a quarter value, that the glockenspiel bars do fall silent before the next stroke.

To Don Ihde, silence serves as an element of the phenomenological horizon of sound. "The horizon," he writes, "is that most extreme and implicit fringe of experience that stands in constant ratio to the 'easy presence' of central focusing." It is experienced as "a *receding*, a *withdrawing,* that which is *beyond* what is in presence. The horizon is the limit where presence is 'limited' by absence."[83] Thanks to the work of the 20th century avant garde centered around John Cage, we understand that silence is not absence, the way that a visual horizon and the out-of-sight is an absence. It is instead a kind of latent presence – Ihde notes that the "the pen on my desk, the vase on the mantle, the tree now still in the absence of a breeze, lie before me in

[83] Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 108.

silence, until echo or contact awakens a sound."[84] Silence is thus a kind of infinite, but latent presence. Good, working very much in the tradition of post-Cageianism, is intimately aware of this characteristic of silence, and his piece is specially composed to bring attention to the specific materiality of the glockenspiel and how it sits foregrounded against a background of latent, all-encompassing presence.

Because of an invention by Good, the glockenspiel bars ring for what feels like a supernatural amount of time. Good has removed the bars of his glockenspiel from their case and, through the use of a student-model xylophone frame and some thin yarn, suspended the bars so that they rest freely, where normally they would be held in place by some combination of screws and felt. Their lack of constraints enables the bars to ring almost as if they were magically suspended in the air, but also makes their position precarious. Striking the bar too hard runs the risk of knocking it out of position.[85] Again gesturing towards humility, the performer must temper their own touch so that it does not disrupt the gentle contact between metal and string. Often during performances, I have found myself readjusting the bars to be straight so that they don't bounce against the rails that suspends the string. An extra degree of strategy is needed, as moving the bar with one's hand will extinguish any resonance that might still be sounding. Choosing when to readjust a pitch so as not to interrupt its "singing" presents a precarious encounter with the instrument. We see here that resonance and touch in the hand of a percussionist go hand-in-hand, and sometimes with a degree of anxiety.

Even with Good's intervention on the freedom of the bar's suspensions, the bars do inevitably fall silent when struck. The stacked chords of Good's "B" material hang in the air and

[84] Ibid., 110.

[85] This is another case of musical fragility that calls for gentleness, per Epstein.

slowly, almost imperceptibly fade to silence. Where that moment falls exactly in time is difficult to pinpoint – in my own experience I find myself listening to the notes almost as a static cloud that hangs, and, if I don't focus my listening, more often than not find myself sitting in an already-present silence rather than noticing the exact moment the pitch becomes inaudible. Even then, it's hard to be certain if what I hear is the actual, natural limits of my ear's ability to perceive, or if my mind and memory imagine a continuation of the note on the threshold of audibility. As Jennie Gottschalk accounts in her *Experimental Music Since 1970*, composers have long worked with what she calls the "aural imagination" – sounds that exist only in the listener's minds, never actually sounding inter-subjectively. She cites the work of Pauline Oliveros, Peter Ablinger, and others to create an account of the various ways they use the aural imagination as a "site for the work itself." These pieces are structured around imagined sounds, never actually heard through the ears, and more often than not encourage the creativity of the listener and invite them to collaborate. One such example that Gottschalk provides is Oliveros's *Any Piece of Music* (1980), which "invites a series of speculations, asking the question, 'If you could write any piece of music, what would you write?'" Gottschalk argues that for this imagined work "the activated aural imagination may be the ultimate venue, the site of limitless potential."[86] All hyperbole aside, the imagined sounds listeners create construct both these pieces and their subjectivities with them.

[86] Jennie Gottschalk, *Experimental Music Since 1970* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 127.

Figure 2.10: Kevin Good's glockenspiel bar suspension system for the premiere of *slow, silent, singing* at the Dogstar Orchestra Festival, California Institute of theArts, June 6, 2019. One can note the crooked angles of some of the bars, as they are fully untethered to the string they rest on.

Good's imagined sounds, obviously, are different than Oliveros's in that the imagined sounds are not created in the mind but are derived from a physically sounding instrument as it decays to silence. Good's resonating glockenspiel bars seem supernatural because they manage to blur the lines between sounding and silence, making it so the listener is unsure of where one ends and the other begins. They cast a spell in the mind of the listener that increases the duration of the note past its "real" duration. The listener constructs sound in their mind where there is none in space, based on sound that was once there but is no longer. The tapering sounds of a percussion instrument's resonance is something easily forgotten about after the striking of an

instrument is completed, but attuning oneself to the way a specific instrument decays opens up a certain impression of sonic plenitude.

How does imagination contribute to the account of touch and reciprocity that this chapter seeks to elucidate? In his discussion of Merleau-Ponty's work with the imaginal, Glen Mazis reads the passage from *Phenomenology of Perception* that discusses the organist adjusting to a new organ and performing a piece of music on it. In his discussion of the combination of the organist's body, the instrument, and the music flowing through both of them, he accounts for the way these ingredients combine to shape and connect perceptions in the audience. To Mazis, through a concept he calls "physiognomic imagination," each piece of music, through its combination of embodied performance, sound, instrument, material, and affect presents "a structure that is the face that this musical piece turns toward the world."[87] Physiognomic imagination, an expression or posturing of the world (in this case manifesting as a piece of music) sketches out possibilities and illuminates connections in the minds of those who come in contact with it. It calls on the imagination of the listener to expand the perceptive and affective depth of the piece. While we don't perceive these notes in our environment as a future tool, the way one perceives a stone, our ears do follow them through time, like passengers on a ferry. They build momentum and anticipation as they fade out. "When will the next note come in?" one asks. In the beginning of the piece this anticipation is always satisfied. The melodic "A" material is never bifurcated by silence – it always arrives at the next note of the melody before the resonance is swallowed. However, eventually this anticipation becomes frustrated: one waits until one is certain that they're no longer imagining a sound, but no sound comes. What then? One can either sit and wait, tapping one's foot, or stop waiting and simply *be* in the space with

[87] Mazis, *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World,* 193.

the other listeners. In *slow, silent, singing,* resonance and imagination, through the material of the glockenspiel, intertwine to arrive at a communal space where linearity and expectation is surrendered. Instead, the audience is carried by sound until they can no longer imagine it, and then sit side-by-side with the others until the next bell rings.

Fourth Illumination (2018) and *Between Time* (2021)

Through the act of reciprocal touch, percussionists come to know their prosthetics, instruments, and the resonances found between them. In discussing the decay of a resonant percussion instrument, we are directed to a consideration of how these things interact in time. This points to a broader question of the relation of percussionistic touch to the experience of phenomenal time more generally. It is the contention of this final section that percussionists experience time not dissimilarly to how they experience the physical objects they engage with or the sounds they hear. A percussionist moves in time, but is also shaped by it in their shaping of it through musical performance. Sonic, temporal events take the shape of the bodies (both human and otherwise) that they emerge from. My own conception of reciprocal time is admittedly one that is understood through my practice as an interpreter of musical works. Within this framework, the work itself is a temporally distinct event who manifestations have a beginning and an end. In conventional notation the music begins at the top left of the score and ends at the bottom right, and is structured by some kind of temporal schema, be it a metronomic marking, proportional, or graphic notation. Any performer can tell you, however, that though written notation looks absolute and prescriptive, the body reveals it as contingent and negotiable. Steven Schick, in his discussion of memory and the complexities of Brian Ferneyhough's *Bone Alphabet*

writes that "music slowly warps itself in our image."[88] That is to say that though notation can look absolute and ideal, it becomes vibrant and contingent once embodied by the performer. Percussionists, through their embodiment of musical notation in dialogue with their instruments and tools, find time as tactile and resonant as the vibrating sounds and surfaces they engage with. This final section takes two pieces by composer Matt Sargent, namely his *Fourth Illumination* (2018) and *Between Time* (2021) to explore how the body touches time and is touched in turn.

Matt Sargent's *Illuminations* series questions the prescriptive nature of notation, instead centering a performer within systems of repetition but never coercing them. The fourth movement in the series is composed for vibraphone, piano, seven pre-recorded vibraphones and crotales, and seven pre-recorded pianos performed with e-bows. Even before diving into the particulars of this work, the series itself presents interesting questions of rhythm. In my conversations with Sargent he speaks about how much of his compositional output is a process of "spillover" from previous projects. In the liner notes to the release of *Illuminations* on Sawyer Editions, Sargent writes:

> The initial idea for these pieces arrived as I was editing a recording of "Tide," my piece for ten violins and ten cellos, in 2016. The large consort of strings produced washes of overtones above the notated pitches. I built a software patch that isolated overtones on the recording and added new harmonies around them. At the time, I thought that this generator might become a third voice within "Tide," illuminating overtones within the texture at formal moments in the music. One afternoon, I listened to the overtone harmonizations of the Illumination patch on their own and realized that it was more beautiful as a separate composition. The upper air of Tide bloomed into the musical language of the Illuminations.[89]

[88] Schick, *The Percussionist's Art,* 97.

[89] Matt Sargent, "Liner Notes," *Illuminations,* Sawyer Editions (January 5, 2024). Accessed via Bandcamp. https://sawyereditions.bandcamp.com/album/matt-sargent-illuminations.

His first piece in the series, *Three Illuminations* (2016) was composed for a small ensemble of flute, clarinet, trombone, violin, bass, and accompanying electronics. Many ideas that he developed for that piece either did not work for that collection of instruments or would not fit within the overall trajectory of the piece. Those leftover ideas thus became the bedrock for *Second Illumination* for solo glockenspiel, with a similar recursive process generating the *Third, Fourth, Fifth,* and *Sixth Illumination(s)*. At the core of Sargent's philosophy is a rejection of a theory of a work of art, and thus the life of its artist, as a series of punctuating points. This theory holds that each work in an artist's oeuvre must be distinct from the others in their output, and implicitly exhaust whatever artistic ideas fed into that work. To Sargent, this modernist impulse of conceptual exhaustion and breaking from the past (even the past of one's own artistic life) fails to account for the organicism of music, its interplay with the daily life and thought of the composer.

We can understand this kind of artistic production through the metaphor of rhythm, which to Jessica Wiskus "promises an ongoing dynamic process that works by looking both forward and retrospectively, applying itself through the noncoincidence of each sound."[90] By replacing "sound" in the previous passage with "work", we highlight the dynamism of composition, a dynamism that resists idealist renderings of authorship and genius by admitting the backward-looking as well as forward-looking approaches to generating an oeuvre. This kind of openness and retrospectivity with regards to time extends into the actual compositional techniques in the *Illuminations*. Each *Illumination* is accompanied by multiple layers of pre-recorded tracks. *Fourth Illumination,* for example, is accompanied by seven layers of pre-

[90] Jessica Wiskus, *The Rhythm of Thought: Art, Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 9.

recorded percussion and seven-layers of pre-recorded piano. For the percussionist, this means that a version of the 21-minute accompaniment part must be performed and recorded seven times, totaling over three hours of performing before a foot is set in a concert hall. What is recorded in time linearly and rhythmically is then superimposed in post-production to build harmonies that ebb and flow like waves. The pianist does this same process to a smaller scale (only for the last seven minutes of the work) with e-bows. A live performance thus exists in many times and spaces at once – the live performers emerge to dance on top of a cloud of themselves, both here in real time and audibly past-tense. Rhythm in a broad, metaphorical sense can thus be understood as a way of placing the self in space and time. In *Fourth Illumination* the performers are here and now; audibly, visibly, and bodily onstage. But they are simultaneously there and then – invisible, disembodied, but nonetheless present and affective.

Media theorist Frances Dyson in her discussions of sound and technology argues that "No longer bound to the here and now of lived experience, able to be heard at any time, in any place, by any listener, recorded sound becomes a pseudo object, both phenomenal and epistemic—able to be collected and stored, transported, and transmitted great distances and infinitely repeated."[91] Dyson claims that articulating the difference between "reproducing" and "representing" an acoustic event through recording makes it difficult to discuss the relationship between acoustic sound and its recording. More often than not such discussion resorts to language that implies "an original, identifiable, and thus *singular* sonic event, an event that conforms to the visually based ontology that sound theory is attempting to escape."[92] Through the conception of rhythm that Wiskus offers and Sargent demonstrates, we can understand the

[91] Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 75.
[92] Ibid.

relationship between an acoustic event, its recording, and the work without resorting to a visually-based ontology. In Sargent's work, for instance, the work itself is constructed over multiple acoustic events, each discretely recorded and superimposed. Each layer constitutes its own 21-minute event. Even a studio recording, which often seeks the illusion of a 1:1 performance-to-recording ratio, is complicated by the fact that the performers can't perform the live part effectively without hearing the taped parts supporting them.

The score to *Fourth Illumination* also resists a concept of rhythm that is dependent on linear time demarcated by a regular, irreversible pulse. Through a Max/MSP patch, the score to the piece generates in real time over the course of 21 minutes: performers watch as digital note heads fade in and out of being on an unchanging stave. The instructions prior to starting the live part's patch read: "Use white space as silence. Neighboring notes may be formed into chords. Accidentals apply only to single notes. No courtesy accidentals. It is okay to not play everything." Upon pressing the spacebar, a timer begins in the top right corner of the window, a treble clef (or two in the case of the piano part) fades in, and right after the disembodied notes of the pre-recorded layers begin to sound, notes begin to populate the staff.

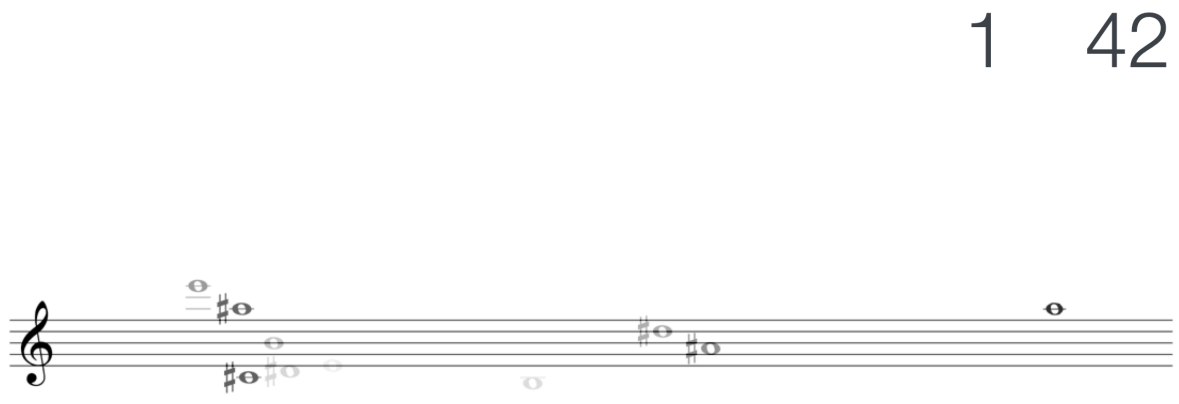


Figure 2.11: Matt Sargent, *Fourth Illumination,* Live vibraphone part. 1'42".

Sargent's notation calls into question several assumptions that are commonly made about rhythm. For example, when reading a conventional score, once a note is sounded the performer must move on to the next note, typically reading left to right. Going backwards and repeating a note, or reading right to left, for example, constitutes a violation of the score's intention. More often than not, performers train to continue on no matter what mistakes are made – I often tell my students when practicing performing to "don't stop no matter what." Sargent's notes, however, are not exhausted when they are performed. As an A5 emerges into vision, I play it softly, since it is only half-shaded. I go on to play a number of other notes before my eyes scan back to find that same A5 still there, this time a few shades darker than before. I play it again a little louder, and still it remains. The notes in *Fourth Illumination* are not exhausted by my iterations of them, and can therefore exist in multiple different harmonic and melodic contexts purely by their insistence on being there. I could read Sargent's work left-to-right and then start over as if there were a repeat sign installed, but the point is that there *is no repeat sign*. Repetition exists in this piece but does not rely on the conventions of typical Western notation.

The phenomenological questions of the work become even more interesting when I am presented with two identical pitches lying in different parts of the stave (Figure 2.12).

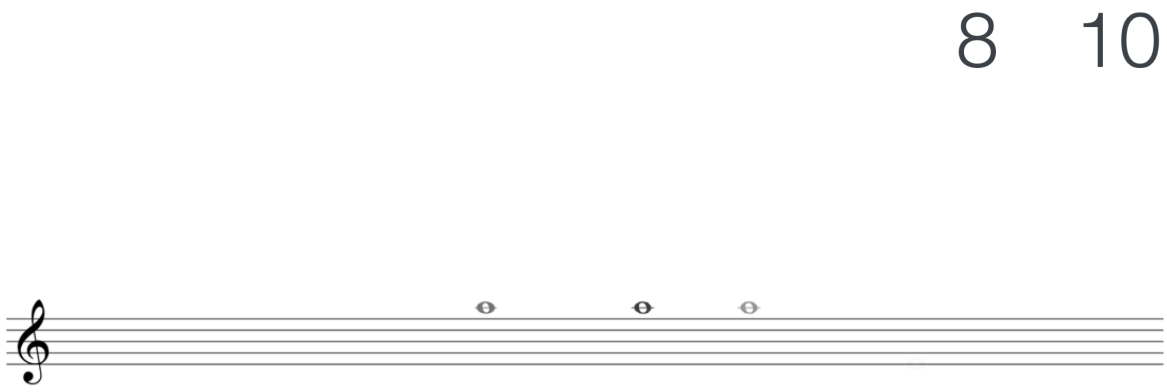


Figure 2.12: Matt Sargent, *Fourth Illumination,* Live vibraphone part. 8'10".

As seen in Figure 2.12, in this running of the patch (which generates itself differently every time) at 8'10" the vibraphone part presents three different A5s. As mentioned above, playing one of them does not exhaust it. The notes fade in and out of view regardless of whether I play them or not, which I don't have to. What then dictates the particular A that is played? Perhaps it is a matter of where my eyes fall: the note I happen to be looking at is the one I am playing, almost regardless of how I play it. However, if I look at a fully shaded note and play it as if it were half-shaded, which note am I then playing? Is this merely an error, or am I simply performing a part of the score that I don't happen to be looking at? Sargent calls into question both the linearity of rhythm as represented in a musical score as well as the accompanying moralism of a musical practice dominated by vision.

Fourth Illumination highlights what Wiskus refers to as the "noncoincidence" of musical rhythm. This is to say that the flow of time and its creation of silence between each rhythm frustrates any kind of direct, distanced ontological understanding that visualism has striven for. In other words, in the case of Sargent's work, the work is constructed within this flow of time, and even discrete elements that in the past have succumbed to visualist interpretation (score as text, the recording as portrait or landscape, etc.) are revealed as traveling both forward and backwards in time. The notes the performers play are not exhausted by their sounding and may be played again. The bow layers recorded step-by-step are not rendered intelligible as elements of *Fourth Illumination* until they are given life through the spontaneous interplay with the same live performers who meticulously recorded them prior to setting foot on stage. Wiskus refers to this back and forth movement that contextualizes in both directions as "institution," another concept borrowed from Merleau-Ponty. To Wiskus institution is "the process through which noncoincident hesitations, approaches, experiments, and productions cohere as a sense that

exceeds every individual instant; it is a movement—a radiance—the reverberation of a call."[93] *Fourth Illumination* invites all manner of hesitations, approaches and experiments, and thus uses rhythm and its institution to further call into question rhythm that is dependent on mastery and linearity.

Sargent's work lays bare truths about rhythm that a visualist understanding ignores or overlooks. This visualist perspective in some ways conditions performers to stand at a distance from the rhythms they embody, or to see it as a kind of recipe that must be followed for the piece to be successful. In percussion this is particularly prevalent due to the militaristic nature of the art form's origins, which will be discussed in the following chapter. Notation, though an invaluable technology of transmission and memory, encourages musicians to think of rhythm with their eyes rather than as a material and embodied practice, one Schick characterizes as "standing in relation to tone, form, and texture just as ice is a physical state of water related to vapor and liquid water."[94] Just as we embody tone, touch, and form, so do we too embody rhythm, and in a way that shapes us just as we shape it. The loss of an embodied sense of rhythm due to musical notation's visualist tendencies is in some ways similar to the changing relationship with language that David Abram ascribes to the emergence of the written word. In his *The Spell of the Sensuous,* he charts the way in which language and perception are entangled in the world. Abram uses as his philosophical grounding the same phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty that I've drawn on throughout this dissertation for the purposes of explaining what happens to the human conception of language in its transposition from the synesthetic, sensuous

[93] Wiskus, *The Rhythm of Thought*, 64.

[94] Steven Schick, "A Percussionist Understands Rhythm in Five Essays of Exactly 1,000 Words Not Including Titles and Subtitles," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rhythm,* ed. Russell Hartenberger and Ryan McClelland (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 69.

world into the abstract world of the silent, written word. He charts how in the beginning the written word had a direct sensuous relationship to the things it symbolized. The letters of ancient Hebrew resembled the things seen in the world. The words, when voiced, held sensuous reference to the things they spoke of. As written language passed from the Hebrew to the Greek to the Christian traditions, words became further and further separated from their previously quite direct sensuous analogues. Abram argues that as this abstraction and retreat from the sensible world has taken place in language, so it has taken place in Western epistemology. He writes that "we may be sure that the shapes of our consciousness *are* shifting in tandem with the technologies that engage our senses."[95] As written language becomes more abstract and distanced from the sensuous, so does our consciousness, a project that Abram recognizes phenomenology as trying to reverse. Along phenomenological lines, "Language...cannot be genuinely studied or understood in isolation from the sensuous reverberation and resonance of active speech."[96] The same can be said of notated rhythm, and thus of musical time itself.[97] It's important to note that I'm not arguing an outright rejection of conventional notation. Indeed, the tension between the ideal presentation of notated time and the way it actually lives in the mind and body is one of the most catalyzing forces in my practice. What I am advocating for is a type of hermeneutics or literacy that sees even the most strictly notated rhythms as contingent, alive, and vibrating: that we conceptualize our bodies as touching the rhythms rather than executing them.

---

[95] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 115.

[96] Ibid., 75.

[97] Mariusz Kozak underlines the contingent aspect of musical time, defining it as "the quality of our experience when we engage in musical behavior... That is, it is the quality of our turning of implicit sonic relationships into explicit ones within the norms endemic to our culture and society..." Thus, Sargent's notation and the embodied experience of realizing it points to the tensions between this embodied experience and certain normative assumptions of notation's prescriptive and idealist assumptions. Mariusz Kozak, "Varieties of Musical Time," in *Synchrony and Temporal Flow in Music and Dance, ed*. Clemens Wöllner and Justin London (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023), 42.

Sargent's *Between Time* (2021) for solo percussion and pre-recorded percussion captures this tension. *Between Time's* score is written with conventional notation, unlike his *Illuminations*. Indeed, one can start the live part of the piece and play it from beginning to end without any digital-technological involvement whatsoever. However, the pre-recorded fixed media again applies certain constraints to a free rhythmic interpretation. The notated material must match the changes of the harmony at certain points, demanding a correlation between the lived time of the performer and the fixed time of the playback. To help with this coordination, Sargent has included time markers in the performance score (see Figure 2.13).

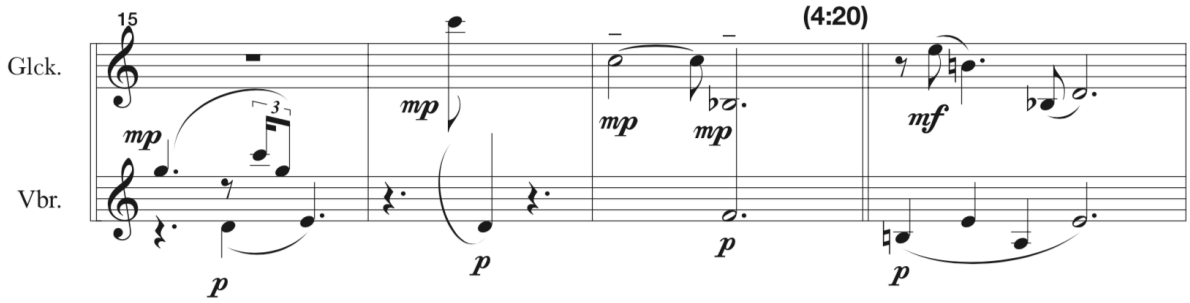


Figure 2.13: Matt Sargent, *Between Time,* pg. 2, system 3.

In the above figure, we see Sargent's conventional notation with an added timestamp above a double bar line, one of many throughout the 23-minute piece. In my first rehearsals, I quickly found that certain sections felt much slower or faster, despite the fact that I was attempting to more-or-less maintain a constant pulse (the tempo markings are fairly fixed in the 60-72 bpm range). Performing with the help of a stopwatch running next to my score, I found that in some cases I would arrive at the end of the composed material sometimes fifteen whole seconds before the next timestamp. Or, conversely, I would look up to find that the timestamp

had long-ago passed me by. Thus, even passages that were marked at the same metronomic tempo felt faster or slower depending on the composed material. This is because the rhythms were shaping themselves to match the movements of my body as it engaged with the interfaces of the instruments.[98] In my performance score I resorted to writing myself notes such as "take your time here" or "faster than you think!" in order to stay within the timestamps Sargent notates. Through this I came to realize that tempo markings when enacted by a body are less like clocks and more like thermometers, not dissimilar to Greg Stuart's non-handed practice of touch. Certain passages are "cooler" and must be consciously slowed down as to not barrel through them, while "hotter" passages demand a focused attention to push the speed of one's action. Just as Stuart found himself taking the temperatures of his instruments, I found myself taking the temperatures of the rhythmic passages in front of me. Percussionist Adam Sliwinski echoes this when he writes that "a written score can only go so far in conveying the character of rhythm, which lives in our bodies as we translate the ideas from the page."[99] Working in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty, Emily Lee similarly describes the self-generating nature of bodily time as a fountain: "time flows through a spout that constantly generates and renews itself at the present time,"[100] a poetic image that echoes Merleau-Ponty's invocation of a "swelling or bulb of time."[101]

---

[98] Jonathan DeSouza refers to the experience of relative difficulty of certain techniques or passages as "idiomaticity" and remarks that each instrument, in the hands of a performer, creates "instrumental space," the "correlate of a lived body, an affordance space, an enactive landscape." What I am after in my discussion of Sargent's work is similar, and perhaps best termed, after DeSouza, as "instrumental time." That is, we experience time differently depending on what we are asked to perform on a certain instrument with certain affordances and resistances. De Souza, *Music at Hand,* 81.

[99] Adam Sliwinski, "The Concept of Rhythm: Composers in Their Own Words," *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion,* ed. Russell Hartenberger and Ryan McClelland (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 149.

[100] Emily S. Lee, "Body Movement and Responsibility for a Situation," in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race,* ed. Emily S. Lee (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), 240.

[101] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 184.

Time itself touches us and demands to be touched in a certain way within an embodied, musical context.

In this chapter, I have shown that a percussion ontology of action is incomplete without a consideration of how all action is reciprocal. To illustrate this reciprocity, I have turned to the concept of touch, one that is often a touchstone in percussion practice. As percussionists touch things around them, either material things, such as implements and instruments, resonances and vibrations, or even seemingly abstract concepts, such as time and rhythm, so too are percussionists touched back. Non-reciprocal touch is possible, but this is dependent on a denial of the Other as such, and is thus a touch that is dominating. Ontology-as-action, because it is centered on human intention, sometimes accommodates such a touch as unproblematic, even heroic. Concepts such as mastery, expertise, and virtuosity as they are popularly conceptualized are dependent on this kind of control. The ontology offered in this chapter instead attempts to chart a course that accommodates discipline, intimacy, fidelity, and bodily familiarity while still honoring the metaphysical experience of being touched in return; of opening oneself up and remaining resonant to the things one acts upon. The following chapter will discuss how percussionists are culturally and socially oriented with regards to these resonances; how they are conditioned to hear some resonances and not others. It will seek to find within the interstices of percussion sociality the normative factors that continue to close percussionists off to the world they move through and are shaped by.

Chapter 3 – Orientation and the Negational Milieu

The relationship between percussionist, implement, and instrument is a complex relationship of embodiment. It is one that is by nature reciprocal and contingent, which I've argued an ontology of action elides or passes too quickly over. Percussion sensibility, centered around a type of expanded tactility, is one that develops through mediation and encounters with difference. This encounter disrupts percussion's broader instrumental orientation, which relies on interchangeability, genericism, and abstraction. If Chapter 1 showed how percussionists phenomenologically encounter instruments along the lines of action and handiness for the sake of totality, this chapter describes the socio-cultural orientations that direct and define such totalities. A percussionist's encounter with an instrument, after all, is never an isolated, one-on-one encounter. There are always other presences in the room, be it the authoritative figure of the teacher, the weight of tradition, or the projected expectation of mastery. The stake of this chapter is that contemporary percussion has a host of different orienting cultures: from the military, to the conservatory, to modernism, to queerness, and so forth. Each inflect and direct the tactility of percussion in different ways. They are not distinct from each other but instead are intimately overlapped and entangled. For example, any American percussionist who goes through traditional training will learn military rudiments, practice orchestral excerpts, and perform challenging modernist repertoire over the course of their studies. What each of these orientations share -- and this is the main observation of this chapter -- is a primary orientation of negation. By this I mean over its 200-year history in Western notated music, percussion's orientation has been characterized by cultural assumptions that it negates, which is often celebrated along the lines of liberation. As I will argue, even the most progressive iterations of the artform are conceptualized

as an escalation or escape from previous contexts and traditions, and are often framed through the language of exceptionalism. I will subsequently argue through the rest of this chapter that such an escalatory or escapist impulse in many ways does harm to how practitioners conceptualize and come to know the art form. Indeed, the stakes here are epistemological, as the logical structures of negation, exceptionalism, and escalation condition what can be said or known about the art form in general. Ultimately the struggles of percussion to conceptualize itself; its need for a cultural Other which it can situate itself against or in exception to, boils down to a current epistemological inability to reconcile the teeming sea of difference (historical, material, cultural, and social) that the art form constitutes itself upon with a desire for conceptual unity.

One of the main criticisms of phenomenology throughout the latter half of the 20th century is its investment in a transcendent consciousness. This is, to many post-structuralist critics, just another form of idealism which ignores questions of power, race, and gender. In light of these criticisms, a certain strain of phenomenology has emerged, termed "critical phenomenology." According to Elisa Magrì and Paddy McQueen, critical phenomenology "seeks to better identify the context-dependent character of first-person experience, refiguring taken-for-granted assumptions about what counts as 'ordinary' and 'marginal' in everyday life."[102] Critical phenomenology understands that subjectivity, and in our case percussionist subjectivity, is always shaped by norms and structures that surround it, as post-structural and feminist theorists have argued. However, critical phenomenologists maintain that subjectivity is not fully absorbed by its surrounding structures of power, nor does it enact this power unmediated. Thus, the critical phenomenological reduction is not a complete removal from one's context in order to apprehend

[102] Elisa Magrì and Paddy McQueen, *Critical Phenomenology: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2023), 3.

its essence, but instead "a continuous exercise in identifying the structures that *animate* experience across a domain of possible variations."[103]

It is the task of this chapter to begin to identify and shed light on these animative structures. In her own treatment of phenomenology, Sara Ahmed notes that any conception of Husserlian intentionality must consider the subject's orientations. To Ahmed, "orientations involve different ways of registering proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention towards."[104] She notes that consciousness is not neutral. It does not gather objects before itself equally and democratically. Because of a subject's orientation and history, one that is often inherited and built through discipline, different objects appear as more proximate and familiar than others. Ahmed emphasizes this point of inheritance, that "it is not automatic that we reproduce what we inherit, or that we always convert our inheritance into possessions. We must pay attention to *the pressure* to make such conversions."[105] Our phenomenological consciousness is shaped and orientated by what is inherited and how this inheritance is in some ways forced on us. If, for example, from a young age, percussionists are conditioned to understand their musical practice as disciplinarian and militaristic, then American percussion practice's violent strain seems like a logical conclusion. As Ahmed shows us, intentionality in percussion is open to just as many darker valences as the many beautiful ones I've charted over the previous chapters.

---

[103] Ibid., 29. David Clarke, writing about music and phenomenology, similarly charts that there is no such thing as a disinterred phenomenological reduction. Each act of bracketing experience carried with it affective and aesthetic valences that condition this bracketing. See David Clarke, "Music, Phenomenology, and the Natural Attitude: Analysing Sibelius, Thinking with Husserl, Reflecting on Dennett," in *Music and Consciousness 2,* ed. Ruth Herbert, David Clarke, and Eric Clarke (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 143-169.
[104] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, and Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.
[105] Ibid., 17.

This chapter proceeds with a brief historiography of percussion orientation, one that I will argue is characterized first and foremost but otherness and exceptionalism, often coated in the modernist language of progress and revolution. It will then turn to the structures of embodiment, with a particular turn towards feminist phenomenology. The aim of this section will be to show how percussionists are oriented on a bodily level to apprehend certain objects and not others, or are oriented to see these objects in a certain light. It will also demonstrate that certain bodies are excluded or phenomenologically inhibited based on normative structures of hetero-masculine power. I will then turn to an in-depth engagement with queer percussion, a recent (yet simultaneously quite old) turn in the art form's history. Queer percussion is a collection of orientations and practices that sits in adversity to the hetero-normative structures of percussion, instead emphasizing the mercurial and uncategorizable nature of its instrumentality. Though I remain sympathetic and aesthetically invested in queer percussion, I will argue that it runs the risk of exceptionalism and appropriation that has plagued percussion from its beginnings in early modernity. The final section seeks to offer the beginning of an alternative through a reading of the so-called New Materialism. Centering the concept/affect of enchantment, I ask whether this concept might provide the foundation for a positive orientation for percussion, one that is not centered on escape and negation but investment and stewardship.

From the Fields to the Halls: A Brief Historiography of Exceptionalism

Western percussion finds its roots in military discipline: from the clamorous sound of the Ottoman Janissary bands, to Colonial American Fife and Drum Corps, to the spectacle of Drum Corps International (DCI). Drums and percussion, perhaps because of their simplicity and

volume, or perhaps because of the shock value of their timbres, have been used as military technologies of coordination and intimidation for centuries. European and American fife and drum corps traditions still form the earliest encounters with instrumental training for many young drummers in America and Europe. Even if one does not engage directly with any of these traditions, many of institutionalized percussion's most canonical curricular texts such as George Stone's *Stick Control* (1935), Charley Wilcoxon's *The All-American Drummer* (1945), or John S. Pratt's *Fourteen Modern Contest Solos* (1999) stem directly from a snare drumming tradition birthed from military application.[106] These books encourage lightness, control, dexterity, and steady time, all things that percussionists must develop, but do so from the aesthetic of the military: groups of men in uniform, playing together with the utmost precision and coordination.

Concert percussion, in some ways, provides a relief from this. In many orchestral, chamber, and obviously solo percussion works there is an increased tolerance of individualism and interpretation. Never would you hear multiple triangle players playing in unison together during a performance of Liszt's *Piano Concerto No. 1,* for instance. However, rhythmic precision and accuracy is still maintained as percussion's top priority in many instances, and often the military uniforms of Stone, Wilcoxon, and Pratt translate, at least on an affective level, quite easily into the white shirts and black tuxedoes of the orchestra, or the similarly uniform apparel of the contemporary groups like The Percussion Collective or Sandbox Percussion.[107] In each of these contexts, rhythmic complexity and precision together serve as a kind of social

[106] This does not only appear to be an American phenomenon, despite its prevalence in the United States. Heinrich Knauer's *Praktische Schule für Kleine Trommel* similarly bears the image of a military drummer on the cover. See Heinrich Knauer, *Praktische Schule für Kleine Trommel* Ed. Gerhard Behsing (Leipzig Germany: Friedrich Hofmeister, 1954).

[107] The Percussion Collective, an ensemble consisting of students of percussionists and pedagogue Robert Van Sice, wears a uniform of black suits, white shirts, and no ties. Sandbox Percussion, also Van Sice students, though working in a more postmodern, post-minimal vein, often uniformize black pants and black t-shirts.

capital and status marker – a liquid value that is easily identifiable no matter what your own background might be.[108]

Adam Sliwinski writes that "a lot of percussion ensembles in modern culture emphasize the power and virtuosity of uniformity among massive forces: observe a drum corps line, with ten razor-sharp snare drummers executing in perfect unison, or the physical power of Japan's Kodo *taiko* drummers."[109] He goes on to juxtapose this power of uniformity with the chamber music-style percussion that he practices in his own ensemble of Sō Percussion. While these former examples are "an effective use of percussion," Sliwinski's own discipline of contemporary percussion chamber music "seeks to preserve the autonomy and quirky individuality of parts that can also be found in Haydn and Beethoven."[110] Sliwinski's use of "individuality" plays into a certain conception of liberal subjectivity, and touches on an age-old tension between Western modernity and its percussionist inhabitants. As Thomas Siwe and Timothy Taylor both chart in their own ways, the tension between military music and the orchestral paradigm is a historical one. Western composers' first encounter with percussion was in hearing the Ottoman Janissary *mehter* bands: large ensembles of (mostly) Turkish men playing a startling array of percussion instruments: triangles, cymbals, and drums. The earliest iterations of percussion in Western orchestral music, as Taylor demonstrates, are almost exclusively referential, and often parodic, of this Ottoman music. The purpose of this

---

[108] In her PhD dissertation which charts the development of the institutionalized academic percussion ensemble with regards to gender, Haley Nutt argues that, since the field of percussion is already masculine-encoded, to accrue social capital in percussion is in some part to "embody a masculine habitus, thus sustaining and reaffirming the gendered disposition of the percussion orchestra." It's this masculine habitus that Rebecca Lloyd-Jones seeks a feminine counterbalance to in her own dissertation. See Haley Nutt, "The Collegiate Percussion Ensemble: Institutional and Gendered Practices in the American Academy," (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2020), 12, and Rebecca Lloyd Jones, "In Search of a Sonic Democracy: Tracing Feminist Genealogies through the Percussion Works of Lucia Dlugoszewski, Maryanne Amacher, and Eleanor Hovda," (DMA diss., University of California, San Diego, 2024).

[109] Adam Sliwinski, "Lost and Found," *Cambridge Guide to Percussion,* 101.

[110] Ibid.

appropriation, and often-times bad faith impression, is a cementation of European superiority over its main Eastern rival. As Taylor writes in his discussion of Mozart's portrayal of Turkish music in Mozart and Beethoven, "the Others' music can become the music that celebrates its own defeat, or... reconciliation under the guise of Enlightenment universalism."[111] Still, military music, and no doubt because of the astounding success of Ottoman military expansion in the early modern period, was gradually adopted by European armies as well, most notably among mercenary groups in Basel, Switzerland. The above elementary snare drum texts still studied today are variously derived from this tradition. We should not move too quickly here over a very important point, however: percussion's use in Western music from its outset was a conveyor of difference: of center and periphery. Ottoman music was used in early modern European orchestral music exactly because it was *not* European.

The 19th century developed similarly and in an escalatory fashion: as European ears became more accustomed to Turkish instruments (due in part to physical alterations of the instruments themselves), additional percussion sounds were needed to be brought in to continue to provide the impression of difference. Gongs from East Asia, xylophones from Central and Eastern Europe, and bells from India gradually came to populate the European concert stage. Though the percussionist's collection and presence grew, it would be hasty to speak similarly of their status in the orchestra. Percussionists at this time were still Other to the tonal instruments of the orchestra, their discipline seen as less refined than their peers. Thomas Siwe goes so far as to say that one of the triumphs of the early modernist works of the 20th century, such as Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat, Les Noces,* or *The Rite of Spring,* was a kind of legitimation of the art form. He characterizes this percussion writing as important in "helping make the percussionist an equal

[111] Timothy Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 65.

partner with other instrumentalists."[112] Still, even though Stravinsky's parts are indeed more technical, complicated, and sophisticated compared to much percussion writing, I would argue that the role of percussion is still a presentation of Otherness, either primitive in the case of *The Rite* or explicitly infernal in the case of *L'Histoire*. Given this context, Sliwinski's desire to play percussion pieces while emulating Haydn and Beethoven seems to be an investiture in a classical Western tradition that will only ever accept it provisionally. Percussionists can and do work very hard to legitimize themselves. They orient themselves towards the goal of being accepted as equally sophisticated musician-members of the Euro-American community of liberal subjects rather than just another mindless "drummer."[113] This individuality, and its accompanying exceptionalism, is purchased with the negation of, though not the escape from, its military roots.

The early 20th century modernist examples of percussion writing such as Mahler and Stravinsky helped to demonstrate that percussionists had their own type of musical sophistication and depth. By including ever more complex and involved roles for these musicians and sounds who sat at the periphery or frontier of Western musical value, a greater argument for the autonomous value of these peripheral forces could be made that percussion composers such as Edgard Varèse, Henry Cowell, John Cage and others seized upon. To these composers, percussion, because of its distance from the center of Romantic, bourgeois European music, seemed like fertile territory to explore its rupturing potential. In the writings of these composers, percussion music is typically described as "revolution," "new," and "liberational."[114] These

---

[112] Thomas Siwe, *Artful Noise: Percussion Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 9.

[113] Here an etymological bias is seen that is common throughout modern English: the Latin-rooted word, "percussion," is understood to be more sophisticated than the German-rooted word, "drumming," despite them sharing the same meaning.

[114] See John Cage, *Silence,* and Edgard Varèse and Chou Wen-Chung, "The Liberation of Sound," *Perspectives of New Music* 5, no. 1 (1966): 11-19.

composers' early works such as Cage's *Constructions* or Varèse's *Ionisation* form the deepest bedrock of percussion literature. Steven Schick writes that because of percussion's historical position as "other" to European musical values, the "percussion revolutionaries" rejected the 19th century compositional paradigms they inherited and instead turned to "vital and unpolluted sounds."[115] Post-war modernist Vinko Globokar writes in his own percussion manifesto that "the [percussion] instrument is no longer an object of fetishism but something functional that the percussionist or the composer can explore or manipulate according to his needs."[116] To modernist composers and the percussionists who have adopted their orientation, tradition and its "fetishisms" present a backward, "blind" approach to instruments that must be liberated before they can be properly utilized.[117] Decades after modernism's institutional zenith, the assumptions and political motivations of modernist composers in many ways still set the terms of understanding percussion's ontology. The dominance of modernist ideology does not only specify what kinds of percussion works are composed and how they are performed, but shapes the very orientations of their performers.

Through their training percussionists are oriented by truisms which find their origins in modernist sensibility. Perhaps the most ubiquitous is that "percussion" itself is not really a material practice but more an attitude, as discussed in the introduction. Percussion's instrumentality is conceptualized as an open-mindedness to unconventional sounds and techniques that makes percussionists more akin to what Håkon Stene calls "nomadic gatherers" than to musicians rooted in a single instrumental idiom.[118] Percussionist Samuel Z. Solomon, in the very first sentence of his book *How to Write for Percussion,* similarly compares

[115] Steven Schick, *The Percussionist's Art,* 3.
[116] Vinko Globokar, "Anti-Badabum," 77.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Håkon Stene, "This is Not a Drum," 12.

percussionists and composers to "treasure hunters" who brought together "instruments from all corners of the globe to play together in a new, revolutionary music."[119] To this point Schick writes that "percussion is not even an instrument...the percussion family consists of thousands of instruments coming from dozens of world cultures. And, having a thousand instruments is very much like having no instrument at all."[120] By this logic, not only can conventional instruments such as drums, cymbals, and xylophones be considered "percussion" but so can any object that a percussionist turns their interest towards. This seemingly ontological fact paired with the political motivations of modernist composers condition a percussionist-subject to position themselves as cosmopolitan and explorative. Percussionists are called upon to be curious about the world and its sounds, but also indoctrinated to leverage these migratory capabilities towards the aesthetic-political aims of disrupting musical convention. The advantage of percussion's ubiquity to the modernist is not one of celebration of difference and intercultural dialogue, but the very possibility of effacing or circumventing the discrete characteristics of traditional practices. Percussion provides the basis for an "insurrectionary charge on inharmonic complexity and spectral plenitude," as Amy Cimini puts it, which tears down traditional aesthetic conventions.[121] The percussionist's practice and the embodied subjectivity that is shaped by it is thus conditioned to see traditional practices as somehow more myopic or short-sighted than their own.

It is within this orientation that we begin to see the proliferation of the logic of bongo-ness. One of the modernist traits of bongo-ness is that materials that were previously excluded

[119] Samuel Z. Solomon, *How to Write for Percussion (Second Edition)* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.
[120] Schick, *The Percussionist's Art*, 3.
[121] Amy Cimini, *Wild Sound: Maryanne Amacher and the Tenses of Audible Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 52-53.

from musical practice can now become included through a performer's consciousness and resulting musical action. As Schick notes in his analysis of bongo-ness, percussionists have done much work over the past century with regards to this, pulling the title of "instrument" down from the lofty pedestal held by classical instruments such as the piano, violin, and cello. Conceptualizing instruments as handy tools of human action leads percussionists to argue quite rightly that not only do non-Western instruments hold just as much beauty and potential as venerable European instruments, but that through a more radical understanding of the relationship between sound and music we can include the "junk" and "found" sounds of modernity: glass bottles, spring coils, tin cans, metal sheets, and pipes all make-up the percussionist's collection. These waste products of consumer society and their particular physiognomies make up the synesthetic experience of a work just as much as any violin might, depending on the work in question. Of these found sounds, Sliwinski writes that "junk...comes out of our own industrialized culture: it is uncomplicated by reference to anything outside of our own backyards. The tin can is both a miracle of modern engineering and a blight on Mother Nature. For better and for worse, it is our own sound. If we embrace it, we understand ourselves better."[122] Sliwinski argues that the percussionist use of "junk" thus creates a windfall against accusations of cultural appropriation, since no one would dispute these waste products being indigenous to anything but Western modernity. Sliwinski's claim that junk is "uncomplicated" must be refuted, but his point about embracing the sounds of post-industrial society that percussion has freely borrowed from is illustrative. Found sounds, for lack of a desperately needed better term, show the positive force of bongo-ness: objects can be recontextualized, rehabilitated, and made contextually transcendent. However, under modernism, this positive

[122] Adam Sliwinski, "Lost and Found," 106.

force is transmuted in an ammunition of negation. That is, within the modernist paradigm the elevation of junk is first and foremost commentary on the instruments that are *not* junk. Each found sound is a Janus-like encounter with presence and absence: a tin can is its present sound and appearance, but so is it also, by its presence on stage, *not* an instrument like a cello. There's thus a degree of what art critic Michael Fried might call "theatricality" involved in all found sounds when they are put on a musical stage, which I will term an instrument's "prophood."[123] We saw a similar phenomenon center around the body-as-instrument in my discussion of *?Corporel* in the previous chapter. The following chapter will take up this issue in more detail. For now, I wish to rest at the following point: within modernism, found sounds are not *only* their sounds, but are always also what they are *not* in terms of instrumental status. In this way, the line between "found sound" and "theatrical prop" is painfully thin, and, as I will show, ethically fraught.

To summarize so far, the historical engine of Western percussion has been negation. Early orchestral percussion was included exactly because of its facticity of not being European. These orchestral parts were adopted, cultivated, and expanded by their practitioners over a century of orchestral development because of a desire to *not* be just another drummer pulled off the military drill field. This energy cemented into an orchestral tradition that was then negated by the energy of 20th century modernism. Percussionists were, all of a sudden, ontologically and epistemologically defined by the very fact that they were *not* traditionally European. Percussionists energized their artform by *not* playing instruments but by playing junk; by *not* playing notated music but by playing unruly and unconventional scores; by *not* being instrumentalists at all but by being experimentalists and explorers. It is no surprise that a

[123] See Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1998.

contemporary percussionist who must somehow integrate all of these perspectives can become very confused, as evidenced by Sliwinski's claim that Cage's modernism sought an "anarchic yet loving break from the past"[124] or that modernist music can be played with the same sensibility as Haydn and Beethoven string quartets. I believe this kind of anachronistic narrative is not the result of historical ignorance, but more a conceptual struggle to make coherent an artform that is cobbled together by conflicting and antagonistic orientations, each characterized first and foremost by their powers of difference, negation, and exceptionalism.

How the Percussive Body is Shaped

The percussionist subject's relation with their instrument is thus situated within an ambivalent history, where powers of progress and tradition battle, co-mingle, and denounce each other. However, what each of these orientations share -- the militarist, the traditionalist, and the modernist -- are masculine hetero-normativities. Be it in uniform, tuxedo coat-tails, or a "new music" black t-shirt, the percussionist is one that is gendered as male. This chapter now turns to a discussion of how orientations are embodied, and how certain normativities become inscribed on the bodies of percussion practitioners. In phenomenological terminology, the experience of embodiment is often described as "corporeality," which seeks to denote the fact that the body is experienced both as subject (something that I am) and object (something that I have). Emphasizing the conditional nature of embodied subjectivity, Magrì and McQueen warn that a "body-object is... a body whose freedom of movement and kinesthetic expression are potentially

[124] Sliwinski, "Lost and Found," 105.

inhibited and limited."[125] This section seeks to explore how the body is conditioned by percussion pedagogy and practice, with a particular eye to the impact of gender on this conditioning. Central to the conditioning of the body, which I term its masculinization, is a certain conception of time, rhythm, and discipline.

As we saw in Chapter 2, rhythmic sensibility is based on an imperfect repetition, within which percussionists encounter the tactile experience of sound and time. This experience however, is culturally situated and produced. Though rhythm in the abstract offers a poetic reading of time, being, and the imaginal that lines the world of perception, in practice it can be just as much a form of domination of bodies and how they inhabit space. Writing from an observation of the rhythms of daily life, Henri Lefebvre classifies this kind of dominating rhythm as *dressage*, translated as "training." Lefebvre writes that "humans break themselves in [*se dressent*] like animals. They learn to hold themselves. Dressage can go a long way: as far as breathing, movements, sex. It bases itself on repetition." He continues that this repetition, "perhaps mechanical in animals, is ritualised in humans."[126] Whereas the repetition in animals is considered by Lefebvre to be a behavioral response, humans take this same repetition and ritualize it to create and affirm a certain society and culture. Percussionists more or less come to understand *dressage* in their early days of learning to play the instrument: as they perform the repetitive exercises of *Stick Control (*Figure 3.1) they think about the exact things Lefebvre notes: breathing, movement of the body, and rhythm.

[125] Magrì and McQueen, *Critical Phenomenology,* 54.
[126] Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. Trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004), 39.

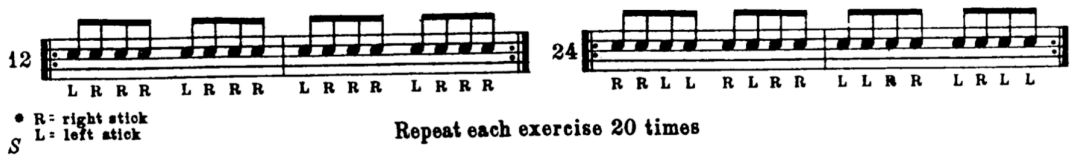


Figure 3.1*:* George Stone, *Stick Control* (1935), pg. 5, exercises 12 and 24.

As percussionists practice these exercises (and others) they don't just integrate rhythm and timing into their conscious understanding but constitute their bodies through their training, aiming to conform to the dominant, natural modes of embodiment that tradition dictates. Musical skills are produced through discipline, but so too is the general sensibility of the body. Percussionists develop their understanding of touch not only between themselves and an instrument, but within the context of the norms that act as orienting forces on them.

While "sensibility" may seem like an abstract principle, it is just as much a concept that is invoked for the purpose of discipline with very concrete consequences. As phenomenology has shown, consciousness begins in a state of already being in the world, and Merleau-Ponty in particular shows that that being is always an *embodied* being. Thus, the experience of rhythmic development in percussion is not just an act of learning to sharpen an internal pulse in the mind, but one that comes with moralizing, disciplinary interventions on the body, its perceptions, its movements, and thus its very being. As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish,* the development of discipline is the development of "the art of the human body... which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful..."[127] As percussionists enter the discipline of percussion, they are subjected to hours of practice that is

[127] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 138.

directly born from a masculine, militaristic tradition that then feeds directly into a masculine, liberal-individualist classical tradition, which then often feeds into a masculine, heroic, modernist tradition.[128] The more proficient one gets at executing normative musical values along these frameworks, the more obedient they become to it, as "disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination."[129] This coerced body becomes the recipient of the tradition until it is naturalized, where it then begins to pass on this same coercion.[130] I will use myself as an example: as I was trained with *Stick Control*, so I now use it with my own students, emphasizing the same rhythmic and technical control that my body has developed after years of training. How bodies are taught rhythm, how they perform it, the materials they perform them with, and the concepts their minds use to understand these phenomena in the language of time and tradition, are all related under what Lefebvre calls "(reciprocally influential) rhythms in interaction."[131]

As one tries to master sound, rhythm, and touch within the phenomenological field, the cultural field, centered around masculinity, in turn masters the body and its being. The practitioner becomes a resonant, pathologizing body for the coercion placed upon it. In her critical phenomenology of shame, Luna Dolezal charts how shame is an ambivalent affect. Shame, and in particular body shame, can both be an oppressive tool weaponized by structures of power, but also is a necessary affect in the process of skill acquisition. Dolezal writes that "feelings of failure and shame, in the presence of an imagined or actual audience motivate the

[128] Modernism itself is more complicated and multivalent than the "heroic" model presented here, as many queer and feminist thinkers have shown. Nonetheless, the masculinist modernism is the one that remains dominant within most American musical institutions.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Russell Hartenberger observes in his own pedagogical practice the efficacy of playing along with his students, so that they can follow his movements directly and feel his sense of time. Thus normative, embodied principles of percussion are passed via direct mimesis, genealogically from teacher to student. See Hartenberger, "Learning to Feel the Time: Reflections of a Percussionist," 349-359.
[131] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 43.

acquisition of skilled behavior and hence the formation of the body schema."[132] Percussion discipline constructs the body schema along lines of hetero-normative conception of touch and time, which grants the acquisition of skills but simultaneously shames those whose bodies do not conform to hetero-normative ideals. As Dolezal warns, "Treating the body as a commodity which can be improved and reworked, in the same manner that we may 'makeover' a house or car, presupposes some sort of Cartesian self, where the body is merely a container for and commodity of the true inner self."[133] Percussion discipline is often framed in language that echoes this kind of self-mastery, where failure to arrive at masculinist conceptions of power and control results in shame and ostracization.

It is this sub-textual but nonetheless prevalent assumption of the percussionistic body as masculine that has made women's and non-binary persons' place in the artform so hard-fought. Even during my own education as a young student, I remember the typical gender divisions in my high school concert band: the boys were relegated to playing drums and the girls to playing keyboard instruments such as xylophone and glockenspiel. Looking back, my own coming to mallet percussion was in some ways a gendered sleight-of-hand. I was able to surrender the safe, though sometimes ill-fitting boyhood of drumming and don a kind of femininity in mallet percussion, but only if I painted that femininity instead in the colors of masculine virtuosity. I was no longer a drummer (masculine), but nor was I a mallet player (feminine), I was a percussionist (masculine and mature). Such divisions predicated on gendered bodies holds dire consequences for the diversity of the artform. In her seminal essay "Throwing Like A Girl," Iris Marion Young argues that the seeming inability of young girls to throw a ball as successfully as

[132] Luna Dolezal, *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 71.
[133] Ibid., 124.

their boy counterparts is something that is a result of socialization, not innate physical ability. This is rooted in the way that female subjectivities are socialized to view themselves equal parts subject *and* object, whereas male subjectivities are socialized to exclusively view themselves as the former. The act of consciously objectifying one's own body in the process of action disrupts said action. Young writes that "We [women] often experience our bodies as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the medium for the enactment of our aims. We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our bodies to make sure they are doing what we wish them to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do *through* our bodies."[134] Young terms feminine bodily experience of perceiving oneself as an object while enacting subjective action as "inhibited intentionality," one which "simultaneously reaches toward a project end with an 'I can' and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed 'I cannot.'" [135] This, I argue, is one such phenomenon that shapes the orientation of percussionists, as women are socialized to steer away from drums, or are subjectively inhibited when they try anyway.[136] I note in my own teaching that my students who have been socialized as women often need additional encouragement and support to play loudly, even as late in their studies as the undergraduate level. Thus, gender is one such factor which shapes the orientation that inflects the experience of reciprocity discussed in the previous chapter.

---

[134] Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays"* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 34

[135] Ibid., 36.

[136] Ahmed adds to her theory of orientation the idea that subjects are often oriented objects associated with positive affects, which is what "sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects." She continues: "Objects that give us pleasure take up residence within our bodily horizon. We come to have our likes, which might even establish what we are like. The bodily horizon could be redescribed as a horizon of likes. To have our likes means certain things are gathered around us." This "horizon of likes" could explain the gender imbalance to be found in percussion. If women and girls are socialized to be inhibited as they play percussion, it's much less likely they associate positive affects with the art form, and therefore unlikely they continue the practice as they age. Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader,* ed. Melissa Greg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2010), 29 and 32.

Rhythm itself in percussion has long been thought along gendered lines. One such example is Layne Redmond's *When the Drummers Were Women*, which traces the practice of drumming and its relationship to various conceptions of divine femininity throughout ancient societies. Redmond advocates, through her own practice of frame drumming, a return of women to drumming to become better in touch with themselves and the rhythms of their communities. Redmond identifies an important distinction between the bodily "keeping together in time," a nod to William McNeill's work, and her own communal efforts. Redmond notes that drumming "is a tremendous power and in human history it has been used in two major ways: for spiritual transformation and for organizing for war."[137] Western percussionists, I wager, draw a distinction between their own work and the work of Redmond, music therapists, and other communal practices exactly because it is read as feminine. At the very least, it is invocative of a premodern tradition that Western modernity aims to discount.

Escape, Resistance, and Rehabilitation

The percussionist subject's relation with their instrument is thus situated within an ambivalent history, where powers of progress and tradition battle, co-mingle, and denounce each other. However, what each of these orientations share -- the militarist, the traditionalist, and the modernist -- are masculine hetero-normativities. This chapter now turns to a discussion of queer percussion practices that resist the hetero-normative march of modernity. While queer percussion has perhaps tapped into the restorative power of bongo-ness more than any other tradition, I will ultimately argue that, while the perspectives of these practices are invaluable, they are often,

[137] Layne Redmond, *When the Drummers Were Women*: *A Spiritual History of Rhythm* (Brattleboro, VT: Echo Point Book & Media, 1997), 11.

rhetorically if not necessarily practically, negatively oriented. Queer percussionists, in short, orient themselves by what they *are not* just as other orientations do, though for very different reasons. Percussion, even within a queer context and for better or worse, tends to orient its political ontology as a negative or critical one. Queer percussion is queer primarily because it is *not* hetero-normative. Though the positive signifiers of queer percussion remain somewhat obscured, I will show that they are being painstakingly theorized by its practitioners. Nonetheless, the object of negation in queer percussion is clear: at the heart of a percussionist's development of percussion sensibility is a highly visible but rarely voiced masculine bias, and one that is punitive to those who challenge it.

Far from being a neutral collection of sonic possibilities, percussion is inscribed with a set of values that condition the orientations of the embodied subjects practicing the artform. It also broadcasts these values for those looking in from the outside. Composer and percussionist Sarah Hennies writes of her experience growing up as a closeted trans woman in America: "I now can't think of any other reason for my asking for drums other than drums = boys, and being a good drummer means being a good boy. Repressed trans women do things like this all the time; we get married, have kids, join the army, along with other 'manly' things in an effort to cure ourselves of our womanhood. It never works."[138] This image of percussion from the outside as a "cure" to womanhood is echoed from within through the way percussionists are taught to orient themselves to their instruments, their bodies, and the bodies of others. Despite this, Hennies remains a percussionist, her own practice centered around "exposing the amazing and surprising world of percussion instruments that is revealed if we just listen to them."[139] The idea that simply

[138] Sarah Hennies, "Queer Percussion," *Sound American* 23, ed. Nate Wooley (February 2020), https://soundamerican.org/issues/alien/queer-percussion.
[139] Ibid.

listening to an instrument presents a form of radical departure from normal practice is a damning critique of the inheritances and legacies of American percussion. Such a history, as Hennies puts it, is a "depressingly consistent series of photos of groups of men wearing the same clothes and doing the same things."[140]

Hennies's account presents a complication to our study of a phenomenology of percussion as I've presented it so far. While percussion can be a poetic site of subject-object comingling through touch, resonance, and rhythm, these concepts are not normative enough in and of themselves to safeguard percussion from a violent instrumentalization based on dominant (and dominating) orientations. One cannot see percussion instruments and musical works as a kind of reciprocal being if one has been oriented to seeing them as extensions of the militarized, individualized self. Phenomenology must be wary of the way consciousness is oriented to perceive certain people and things over others, and take note of the pressures that shape these orientations. What Hennies and Ahmed both share is an investment of how queerness can intervene on these orientations. Ahmed emphasizes the moment of being "knocked off course" from a certain orientation, claiming that "such moments can be a gift, or they might be the site of trauma, anxiety, or stress about the loss of an imagined future."[141] What a queer phenomenology of percussion might look like is an attunement and critical rejection of certain heteronormative and masculine orientations that are handed down and encoded onto bodies through discipline. Furthermore, as Hennies writes, really *listening* to objects, within the context of a work or simply in the simple moment of isolated contact, might present opportunities for being knocked off course.

---

[140] Ibid.
[141] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 19.

Bill Solomon, proceeding both from Hennies's and Ahmed's work, presents a compelling queer phenomenology of a snare drum, the military percussion instrument par excellence. The snare drum has a long history of being used as a piece of military technology: drummers in early modernity would be used to coordinate moving armies at long distances, as well as to increase the pace of marches through metered cadences. Today the snare drum similarly serves as a disciplining instrument where students first encounter the embodiment of percussion. In an unpublished paper presented at the Music and Erotics Conference held at the University of Pittsburgh in 2019, Solomon asks "What does healing look like for the snare drum?"[142] Drawing on the queer theory of Ahmed and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Solomon analyses what he calls the of Hennies's "queer erotics" of *Psalm 2*, a work for solo snare drum. In this piece the instrument is activated not through the beating of the head through sticks, but instead through the (often gentle) touching of the head directly by the player's hands.[143] Through Hennies's composition and the touch of the player, the snare drum has its military identity suspended, and is instead seen as a reciprocal conveyor of a kind of queer eroticism.

A corner of American percussion has taken a decidedly queer turn in response to the mainstream culture that is so marked by dominant masculinity. To Solomon, both Schick's ontology-as-action and Stene and Devenish's post-instrumentality create an avenue for queer percussionists to carve out a life within this otherwise heteronormative artform. He writes that because these theories decouple object from a normative activation, "one can begin to see the inherent queerness in percussion performance, since percussion lacks clear definition and

[142] Bill Solomon and Jerry Pergolesi, "Pushing Against Homonormativity: Percussion as a queer tool of resistance," in *Queer Percussion Research Group Zine Collection,* ed. Bill Solomon (January, 2023), 7.
[143] Bill Solomon, "Touching, Rubbing, and Stroking: Rehabilitation of the snare drum through queer erotics." Presented at the Music and Erotics Conference. University of Pittsburgh, 2019.

constantly eludes a tidy summation, and prefers messiness and mayhem."[144] Indeed, it is this queer nature of percussion that enabled Greg Stuart, himself a close collaborator with Sarah Hennies, to realize the constructed nature of percussion handedness. This new wave of queer American percussion, which I situate much of my own work within, takes an explicit approach to the issues of power and rehabilitation that course through every percussion instrument. This rehabilitation, as we begin to see in Sarah Hennies, is just as much about the "trash" of modernity's waste as it is about the viewing of queer identities and lives. In discussing their relationship to the work of composer-percussionist Nebojsa Zivkovič, Myles McClean charts how performing Zivkovič's *To The Gods of Rhythm,* over the span of years, both before and after their gender-affirming transition, revealed aspects of the politics of the piece that were previously felt but not theorized. Zivkovic is a famously hyper-masculine, homophobic, and misogynistic personality in the world of percussion. A social media scandal in 2019, wherein he posted about the dangers of feminism on university campuses, all but "cancelled" his career in the United States. *To the Gods of Rhythm* drips hypermasculinity, as the percussionist must shout and growl while virtuosically striking a djembe hung between the legs. McClean charts how when they first learned the piece, they attempted to mirror the work's hyper-masculine aesthetics, no matter how wrong it felt. Over time, their interpretation of the piece, which they continued to perform all the way up to 2020, became gradually slower and gentler. McClean writes that "this composition will always be part of my transition history, but in many ways, I wanted this performance to subvert the composer's intentions as much as possible. I aimed to reclaim the piece for myself."[145] Queer percussion then is not just about instruments and

[144] Solomon and Pergolesi, "Pushing Against Homonormativity," 3.
[145] Myles McClean, "Reflections on the Nature of Transition: Drumming, Gender Expression, and Reclamation," in *Queer Percussion Research Group Zine Collection,* ed. Bill Solomon (January, 2023), 4.

normative power structures, but also about musical works and performers' changing bodily relationships to them.

Matt LeVeque casts his own queer percussion work directly in terms of power, or, more specifically, in the refusal of it. Citing Suzanne Cusick's "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music," LeVeque describes a type of performative passivity that Cusick encounters in her experience playing Bach. Cusick:

> She is non-power: to be in love with her is to be in love with, to be fascinated by, to be drawn to that which is non-power. With her, a self who is also non-power, that is, a relationship in which a porous boundary exists at all moments between the she who seems to have the power and the she who doesn't, allowing for a flow of power in both directions. No one in the relationship has been formed to be the power figure, although all can play at it.[146]

LeVeque, via Cusick, identifies in his own queer practice via what he terms a "state of non-power... wherein the interiorities of both parties are revealed and transformed by one another."[147] LeVeque's characterization is important, as I believe it reveals a break between queer percussion as an identity and queer percussion as a methodology. By the former, I mean artistic practices that are centered around queerness as something that someone is, whereby the latter I mean queerness as something that someone *does*. Queer identity, no doubt something to be affirmed, celebrated, and protected, draws distinct boundaries between people, behaviors, and institutions that are queer and those that are not. Queer identity politics succeed in establishing a space for queer people to navigate and experiment with what it means to be queer without fear of violence from heteronormative systems. On the other hand, sequestering queerness and all its

---

[146] Suzanne Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight (1996)," in *Music and Identity Politics,* ed. Ian Biddle (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 72.
[147] Matt LeVeque, "To Hold Non-Power: Relational Potentiality in Singular Percussion Instruments," in *The Queer Percussion Research Group Zine Collection,* ed. Bill Solomon (January, 2023), 6.

liberational insights to a specific identarian community in some ways curtails the political efficacy of these insights. If queer percussionists speak only to each other about queerness, or maintain queer percussion sensibility as something that can only be accessed through avenues of identity, then those percussion traditions, such as the militaristic and modernistic ones discussed above, are doomed to remain trapped in their own heteronormative and hyper-masculine systems. With LeVeque, I argue for a queer percussion that is able to account for something such as military drumming inclusively, even if it requires a radical re-orientation. LeVeque's invocation of non-power is one such methodology that can be carried over to ostensibly non-queer spaces.

These non-queer percussion spaces are often already in search of an antidote to masculine modernity. I find one such example in the music of American composer Peter Garland. Garland is considered a post-minimalist, but one who has been working in his style since the 70s, when minimalism proper was in full swing. A student of James Tenney and Harold Budd, he situates himself within what is called the American Experimental Tradition,[148] but remains highly critical of what "American" might mean. To Garland, the conceptual sound of America must be rooted in both the physical landscape of the continent, as well as the pre-Columbian cultures that have inhabited it for centuries. Dissatisfied with the world of American classical music that seemed dominated by European aesthetic investments, in the 80s he lived among indigenous people in Oaxaca, and has published much of his studies and observations on Oaxacan musical culture in his collection of essays, *Gone Walkabout*. His own style of composition rejects European musical values and hegemony, but continues to seek a rejuvenating use of consonance and

[148] A term that, as Benjamin Piekut shows, is largely ambiguous and contested, despite its claim to a traditional lineage. See Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limit*s (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

tonality – in contrast with alienating, ivory tower modernist atonality - to invoke resonance between American peoples (both indigenous and settler), their acts of daily living, and the land. Tim Rutherford-Johnson writes of Garland that he succeeds "in approaching tonal materials with an experimentalist's ear, outside of all ideological attachments that drove the use of tonality elsewhere."[149] Garland's is a music of refutation, of an insistence to stay where one is.

His vibraphone work, *The Basketweave Elegies* (2018), for example, is austerely pentatonic at times, and opens with a single repeating C#5 (Figure 3.2).

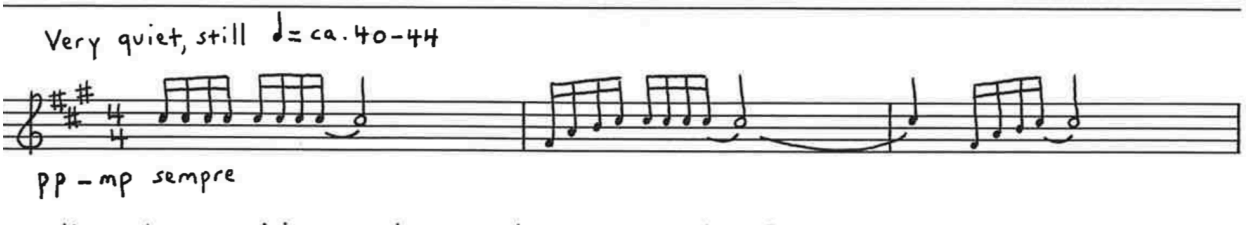


Figure 3.2: Peter Garland, *The Basketweave Elegies,* Movement 1: very quiet, still. m. 1-3.

This music at first glance looks almost too simple, but I've found that this first movement of the nine-movement work, despite being the sparsest, is the most difficult to perform. Nearly the entire movement can be played with a single hand. However, the music is *so* exposed, and *so* precarious that these opening bars are some of the most difficult in the piece. Too heavy of a stroke, or one placed at the wrong place on the bar will extinguish the bar rather than allow it to continue to ring. The experience of performing these opening lines is one of carefully nudging

[149] Rutherford-Johnson, *Music Since the Fall,* 64.

the bar while it rings, rather than continuing to hammer the 16th notes into being. Playing this movement is about simultaneously activating the bar, while trying to avoid breaking the stillness of the instrument's resonance. Percussionist John Lane writes that "Garland's music requires a new virtuosity: transparency and consciousness—not the ability to play thousands of notes from memory or move one's hands across an instrument at immense speeds. What appears to be simplicity proves to be a unique vessel for a most profound or moving musical experience for a sympathetic performer."[150] While I would steer away from his use of the term "virtuosity" because of its historically gendered coding, I agree with Lane in that the difficulty of Garland's music is not an athletic one, and therefore a different kind of embodied ethic and practice is needed. The opening of *The Basketweave Elegies* demands technical execution that's instead draped in a phenomenological experience of vulnerability. The ringing vibraphone notes are not objects that exist simply to be struck and forgotten about, but objects to be struck with the intention of impeding them as little as possible. When one oversteps and imposes their stroke on the already ringing bar, this is immediately evident to the listener.

Neither Garland nor Lane to my knowledge, identify in any way as queer. And yet, there is something resonant between the reduced, focused, and humble qualities that Lane and I find in Garland's work and the non-dominating and anti-mastery orientations that many queer percussionists situate their work around. There is something in Garland's music that is akin to the queerness found in the work of Walter Pater, per Heather Love. Love writes:

> Pater's break with the future and with the hard and fast revolutionism of the modernists has made him the cause of some embarrassment. He has been closely linked to the ills of aestheticism: political quietism, withdrawal from the world, hermeticism, nostalgia, a slack relativism, and the elevation of beauty above justice. I want to suggest that what has been seen as a lack of political

[150] John Lane, "Abstracted Resonance: The Percussion Music of Peter Garland," in *The Modern Percussion Revolution,* ed. Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 72.

> commitment might be better understood as Pater's failure to approximate the norms of modernist political subjectivity. I read withdrawal in Pater not as a refusal of politics but rather as a politics of refusal; I propose that we understand his shrinking politics as a specifically queer response to the experience of social exclusion.[151]

Though not queer in terms of identity, Garland's own withdrawal from the revolutionary demands of modernism can similarly be termed a "politics of refusal." There are important differences to make. Garland's social exclusion is not rooted in his identity, per se, but in his relation to the mainstream edicts of contemporary music at the time. It is important not to conflate the ostracization experienced by queer people and ostracization by a technocratic zeitgeist. Nonetheless, Garland terms his own career as one of "self-imposed exile," and its quietism is partially the result of experiencing cruelty at the hands of modernism's acolytes in the 1980s. As he tells it, he travelled to Darmstadt only to be humiliated and publicly ridiculed by a prevalent modernist composer and his students at the time.[152] Aesthetic virtue at the time was marked by heightening levels of complexity, to which Garland's own work by comparison seemed backwards and facile. Queer percussion, at least as it manifests in America through the work of Hennies, LeVeque, and others, is often allied with a politics of refusal and quietism, and thus finds resonance in ostensibly non-queer work that holds similar investments.

A "politics of refusal" begs the question: what is being refused? In the context of queer percussion, the answer at first glance seems clear: the hyper-masculine world of "drummers" and the late capitalist ethos of constant acceleration and escalation. However, to conclude that all queer percussion music is centered around a queer body playing soft, beautiful sounds, would be

---

[151] Heather Love, "Forced Exile: Walter Pater's Queer Modernism," in *Bad Modernisms,* ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 27.
[152] Peter Garland, Personal Correspondence with M. Jones, 2018.

a mistake. As much as queer percussion looks like the post-Cageian minimalism of Hennies, so too does it look like the raucous and theatrical work of Jennifer Torrence, whose own navigation of her queer identity manifests in a more European style: merging theatre, post-instrumental sensibility, and neo-conceptualism to create multifaceted and often expansive projects. To Torrence, the future of queer percussion is one that is of the particular body; one that develops "work concepts away from the fully notated score."[153] Where the queerness of Hennies and LeVeque seems centered around intimacy and reduction, Torrence's is about a preservation of the fluidity of queer identity and relation. Torrence and Solomon both agree that there is something inherently queer about percussion in its fluidity, and that the heteronormative institutionalization of military and classical music is something that stifles this fluidity. Solomon writes that the problem of percussion heteronormativity is that "it's trying to impose this thing saying that queer should not be the queer [sic], the normative is pushing against actual lived experience: it's not natural."[154] To Solomon, then, percussion is by nature queer through its instrumentality: *bongo-ness is queer*. The same mechanism that we saw in Chapter 1 enable masculine instantiations of genius is the one that engines the queer projects of escape and resistance.

I believe it's this common wellspring of the best and worst of percussion action that makes queerness an ally, though perhaps an unwilling one, in the process of what sociologist Hartmun Rosa terms "dynamic stabilization." To Rosa, dynamic stabilization is the concept at the root of modernity throughout its iterations, and one that has led to what he terms a "crisis of resonance." "Modern societies," he writes, "can only stabilize and reproduce their subdivisions

[153] Jennifer Torrence, quoted in "It is as messy as you feared: two conversations about queer percussion between Jen Torrence and Bill Solomon," in *The Queer Percussion Research Group Zine Collection,* ed. Bill Solomon (January, 2023), 6.
[154] Bill Solomon, quoted in ibid., 12.

and their social structure dynamically; they achieve stability in a way *in and through movement*, or, more specifically, through *escalatory movement.*"[155] In other words, life under modernity is one that is constantly driven towards growth and change, but always in a movement of acceleration. We have seen this ethos in percussion from its earliest days. The revolutions of the early modernists are still carried on in some form by the constantly expanding post-instrumental practice and a compulsive search for the "new." Drawing from Boris Groys, Hartmun writes that "the specific characteristic of modern art is that it is concerned not with mimetically reproducing a given natural or social reality, nor with passing down formal artistic laws or conforming to the standards of the 'old masters,' but with innovativeness, originality, and surpassing what came before."[156] Queer percussion's ethical role then, becomes messy. The movement of queer life and art, in the effort to escape heteronormativity, is easily reabsorbed into the logic of dynamic stabilization. In fact, the entire history of percussion could be seen as a tangled, messy movement of queer escape that is reinterpreted and reabsorbed in order to reinforce a perpetually escalating modernity centered on newness. Solomon charts such a trend in his study of the queer origins of the percussion ensemble, and how this mode of queer escape goes hand-in-hand with instances of colonialism and appropriation in early percussion works. Identifying the nuance of such an entanglement he writes that the "West Coast group's [John Cage, Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison, and others] failure to understand the impact of their appropriation needs to be registered along with their legitimate experiences of discrimination, not as a way of excusing the latter but by complicating a legacy of queer white artists whose understanding of structural oppression ends at their own experiences."[157] This historical cycle that Solomon identifies leaves me ambivalent

[155] Hartmun Rosa, *Resonance*, 405.
[156] Ibid., 412.
[157] Bill Solomon, "Queering Musical Chrononormativity: Percussion Works of the West Coast Group," in *Queer Ear: Remaking Music Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023), 218.

about a queer practice that becomes increasingly singular and particular for the sake of negation. I do not underestimate heteronormative culture's ability to integrate and misinterpret even the most radical aesthetic representation of queer lived experience for the sake of novelty and growth, nor do those representations come without their own baggage. Queer percussion has transgressional precedent, but also an obligation to confront its legacies even as it continues to experience ostracization. I understand this compromising position as yet another instance of the heightened vulnerability of queer life.

Orienting Towards Enchantment

Percussionists are thus oriented towards negation, but the affective content of that orientation differs. For the orchestral musician it is an affect of sophistication and aristocracy, for the modernist it is one of political revolution, and for the queer percussionist it is one of escape and survival. Because of the stickiness of affect, as Ahmed tells us, each of these orientations can shape how percussionists engage with the same object in very different ways. Each, however, is oriented towards the use of percussive objects as sonic tools to articulate subjectivity, revealing bongo-ness and handedness as ontological substrata that support numerous and varied lived experiences. This final section asks if it's possible to have an affective orientation towards percussive objects that resists their subsuming into political and social utility; that is oriented towards the objects themselves just as much as their potential use.

In recent years, a number of theoretical efforts have been grouped under the term "New Materialism." While varying in focus, discipline, and scope, the so-called new materialists share in common a reevaluation of humanity's relationship to matter and the non-human world,

particularly in the context of late capitalism and the Anthropocene. "This means", to quote Samantha Frost and Diana Coole, "returning to the most fundamental question about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world; it means taking heed of developments in the natural sciences as well as attending to transformations in the ways we currently produce, reproduce, and consume our material environment."[158] Though varying widely in focus and methodology, the new materialists share a commitment to reevaluate human relationship to matter along three main axes. The first is the theorization of human agency as among and mediated by non-human matter rather than standing apart and simply instrumentalizing it. Secondly, given the findings of the first, new materialists consider a more critical reevaluation of "life" and the human along the lines of biopolitical and bioethical lines. Last is a broader consideration of the impact and assumptions that such a reevaluation of matter has on global political economy at-large.

One notable new materialist thinker is Sara Ahmed, whose queer phenomenology we've discussed at length already. Ahmed's own corner of new materialism is a consideration of political economy and agency as it is filtered through human subjectivity. Namely, how heteronormativity affirms certain approaches to objects through recognition and affirmation and excludes others. Ahmed's work is not only about objects as they appear to us, but about what she terms an object's "conditions of emergence," which can only be found in the conscious apprehension of the *background* of an object.[159] For instance, if we return to Solomon's queer phenomenology of the snare drum, we don't only see the material thing of wood, metal, and animal hide/plastic, but we also see how it came to be in front of us. We see its history of

[158] Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.
[159] Sara Ahmed, "Orientations Matter," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 240.

military usage. We see the processes of metallurgy or deforestation that yielded the shell of the drum, and the processes of agriculture or petrol-industry that yields the head of the drum. The conditions of emergence of a snare drum, for example, take account both the political economy of its construction (its material components and the lives and labor that go into its construction) but also its cultural and historical situation. This is what makes Hennies's *Psalm 2*, among others, so compelling: by disrupting the normative instrumental orientation of a snare drum, a performer begins to realize how not only their practice, but an entire system of production, had been previously taken for granted. Ahmed's new materialism thus attunes a percussionist to the material realities that lie *behind* the instrument one plays.

Another prominent new materialist thinker is literary theorist Jane Bennett. Bennett characterizes her own work as "vital materialism," one that seeks to reconsider vitality and life through a distributed agency extended to material things. A central concept of this vital materialism is what she terms "thing power," or, "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."[160] Percussionists, and any instrumentalist for that matter, experience thing power when the objects around us seem to have a life of their own, or reveal previously unperceived qualities to us. Thing power is not only about how objects surprise us or lay out of reach, however, but is also about how as bodily things ourselves, humans are dependent on things to assert any agency in the first place. A Bennett writes, "a material body always resides within some assemblage or other, and its thing-power is a functioning of that grouping. A thing has power by virtue of its operating in conjunction with other things."[161] Thing-power materialism attends to things in their unique capacities and

[160] Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter," *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (June 2004): 351.
[161] Ibid., 353-354.

abilities not only to affect us but to act and to amplify action. In this way, Bennett argues that the common sense understanding of materialism, that is, a materialist being someone who is oriented towards consumption and commodity fetishism, is in fact an anti-materialism. As Bennett terms it, "too much stuff in too quick succession equals the fast ride from object to trash."[162] Bennett's thing power may help percussionists to think through their massive consumption of the objects of the world with a renewed, interacting vitality.

Bennett's thing power relies on a certain affect of enchantment towards the world. The challenge of modernity is that because of its escalatory and accelerative movement, per Rosa, the material world must become systematically disenchanted so that it can be appropriated for economic and political use. As mentioned above, Rosa terms the antidote to the alienation of human from world this process causes as "resonance," or a successful mutual relationship with the world. Attuning oneself to the resonant relationships (to people, jobs, religions, institutions, etc.) in one's life can additionally attune oneself to the relationships that are alienating or "mute." Bennett takes a similar stance in her *The Enchantment of Modern Life,* which further argues that the affect of enchantment, one that has been so fervently discredited by modernity, can orient us towards a new ethics. As Bennett puts it, "to some but irreducible extent, one must be enamored with the existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one's scarce mortal resources to the service of others."[163] Invocation of terms like "enchantment" and "resonance" to me take a very different tenor than those of "discovery", "liberation", and "revolution" that are often invoked by percussionists. In the percussion world we find these former terms most commonly connected with a kind of New Age

[162] Ibid., 351.
[163] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2001), 4.

mysticism that by modern standards we are conditioned to find dubious. For example, Redmond's insights about divine, feminine rhythm are built along terminology of resonance, empowerment, and joy. As are Bernhard Wulff's observations when he writes that "A sounding touch is always a magical moment at which skin, wood and metal but also water or paper transform into a living sound creation. Material is dematerialized, and sings."[164] Redmond, Wulff, and even Otte's observations of vibrating surfaces, all speak of a certain mysticism and enchantment of percussion matter. Such observations are often characterized as esoteric or feminine in normative percussion culture, whose own political and aesthetic economy of escalation and newness do not allow for the time and space to cultivate such resonant, enchanting relationships. A new materialism like Bennett's can provide much needed contextualization and afford the overdue legitimacy owed to this kind of percussive mysticism.

Given the history of percussion as a modernist tool discussed above, it's perhaps no surprise that mysticism is seen as a fuzzy or archaic vestige of pre-modern times. Even Schick casts his own understanding of percussion in Hegelian terms. To Schick, mallets and sticks present a "Hegelian dilemma." He writes that "every proposition [mallet choice] contains its own antithesis. The embedded 'either/or' scenarios – connected/disconnected; grand/intimate; diverse/homogeneous – make the percussionist's habitual use of the stick our most important point of contact with the dialectic of modern thought."[165] Though he does not cast his ontology of action in explicitly Hegelian terms in his *Percussionist's Art*, we see how Hegel may form a

[164] Bernhard Wulff, "Mallets and Beaters," in *The Techniques of Percussion Playing: Mallets, Implements and Applications*, ed. Christian Dierstein, Michel Roth, and Jens Ruland (Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 2018), 31.

[165] Steven Schick, "(Exactly) One Thousand Words Toward Understanding Sticks and Mallets," in *The Techniques of Percussion Playing: Mallets, Implements and Applications*, ed. Christian Dierstein, Michel Roth, and Jens Ruland (Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 2018), 75.

philosophical grounding to Schick's philosophy. A performer must navigate these dialectics, synthesizing and re-synthesizing until they arrive at some form of absolute knowledge. Percussion presents this kind of historical dialectic to classical music in the 20th century, presenting the fixity of harmony and instrumentation with the negation of timbre and indeterminacy. Bongo-ness could then be understood along Hegelian lines as a conceptual schema that maintains a certain voracity: percussion welcomes challenges to its instrumentality as each challenge presents an opportunity to synthesize and assimilate new criteria. It comes as no surprise coming from Hegel, one of the major figures of German Idealism, that such a dialectic is dependent on a subject posited as distanced and free from the world, to whom the only absolute object of knowledge is oneself. In the same essay Schick himself notes the cracking of the modern veneer in his noting of Greg Stuart's non-handed analysis of Pisaro-Liu's *ricefall*. The dialectics of modern thought, which percussion has borne along and which mallets provide access to, breakdown when the mechanism of synthesis no longer sits naturally in the hand.

The Hegelian dialectic that Schick notes has served as a conceptual model for over a century of composers, philosophers, and artists. It is often cited as the model of historical, scientific, and historical progress that characterizes modernity *par excellence.* Hegelianism affords a certain kind of technocracy, and one that sets its home in the mind. However, the handedness and bongo-ness that form the core concepts of percussion ontology, are situated just as much if not more so in the body, and thus require a different orientation to the world and its "things-in-themselves." One philosopher who notes this need is Karen Barad, whom I've discussed to some extent in the previous chapter. Barad's own background is equal parts in feminist philosophy and theoretical physics. Drawing on the work of Niels Bohr, Barad cites as

their starting point the core tenet of quantum physics: that humanity is a component part of the "nature" that it seeks to stand at a distance from and reflexively understand. In quantum physics, when an object of scientific study, be it a particle or some other kind of matter, is experimented upon or otherwise measured, that nature of that particle *changes.* As Barad explains, "our ability to understand the physical world hinges on our recognizing that our knowledge-making practices...are material enactments that contribute to, and are a part of, phenomena we describe."[166] Objectivity, then, is at its core relational – our subjective encounters transform the objects we encounter, and vice versa. The Hegelian dialectic, which requires an idealist distance from the concepts it considers, is revealed to be an all-too-clean and orderly model of scientific practice. Barad's analysis brings them to coin what they term "agential realism," a metaphysical ontology that is rooted in what they call the "post-human performative." Barad explains:

> Posthumanism does not presume that man is the measure of all things. It is not held captive to the distance scale of the human but rather is attentive to the practices by which scale is produced. Posthumanism has no patience for principled claims presuming the banishment or death of metaphysics, especially when such a haughty assertion turns out to be decoys for the covert resurrection of Man as the unspoken measure of what is and isn't observable and intelligible.[167]

In short, humans do things, but things *also* do things, and they can only do things when in relation to each other. This ontology de-centers the human in its relation to the world, but also elevates the agency of non-human beings, down to the level of particles. Natureculture, one of the many neologisms Barad employs, is thus measured by its phenomena, or the observable results of intra-action between various agents ("intra" over "inter" because the agency itself can

[166] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 32.
[167] Ibid., 136.

only manifest within these phenomena, not prior to or separate from them). Barad's ontology is thus what is termed a "relational" ontology, one that understands the being of things as found in their relations with other beings, not in something immanent to their material or objectivity that can be isolated and held in a conceptual vacuum. This vacuum, after all, would cease to be a vacuum once a human mind accessed it. Idealism, which much of modernity has built itself upon, is thus dependent on renouncing things-in-themselves in favor of using their appearances and representations. The boundary of knowledge, then, is the extent of the human mind and its thought: the only thing under idealism that can be known absolutely. Barad rejects this, as do I. I will show in the next chapter that a return to realism, as impossible as it might seem, is needed to craft an ethics of percussion; perhaps of instrumentality more generally.

To summarize, this chapter has sought to culturally and historically situate the phenomenology of percussion developed in the two previous chapters. Bongo-ness and touch, the two main concepts of my phenomenology of percussion, find themselves inflected and embodied in certain ways depending on a given historical period and its aesthetic investments. It is further inflected along lines of gender, sexuality, and, admittedly absent in this dissertation, race. Bongo-ness and touch are thus politically and ethically ambiguous. They are equal parts domination and liberation, capture and escape, intimacy and violence. What I have attempted to show is that despite the bivalence of these concepts, they are nearly always deployed as tools of negation, and efforts to build a coherent tradition out of the resulting conflicting narratives remains elusive. I have hinted that a new kind of materialism or realism may help percussionists to build a home in the discipline without feeling an imperative to close oneself off to certain instantiations of the art form along political lines. Sketching out this realist metaphysics will be the task of the next chapter.

Chapter 4 – Metaphysics for an Ensemble of Things

As we began to do at the end of the previous chapter, in this chapter we return in earnest to metaphysics. As we recall from Chapter 1, percussion's metaphysical self-understanding is primarily rooted in the concept of bongo-ness and human action. That is, how percussionists understand their being and relation oiis oriented around intention and, to a lesser extent, material activation. This action is mediated and compounded by the objects of percussion, be they conventional or nonconventional instruments, but percussion's current understanding of these objects is that they are, because of their bongo-ness, fundamentally interchangeable and generic (with a notable exception made for sentimental attachment). As Steven Schick writes, percussion is a philosophy of "no instrument, only sticks."[168] As I have attempted to show, embodied contact with these instruments, however, radically calls their interchangeability into question. The objects themselves are, through percussionists' literal and figurative touching of them, the medium through which percussionists come to know metaphysical concepts. After Merleau-Ponty, there is no concept that exists prior to a body's perception of something in the world that inspires its consideration. Instead, perception brings rationality "down to earth."[169] Thus the metaphysics of human action is, to some extent, incomplete until proper consideration and analysis is given to the nonhuman world against which human action casts itself and thus comes to know itself.

[168] Steven Schick, *The Percussionist's Art,* 33.
[169] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences," in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, trans. and ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 13.

This chapter begins to outline a metaphysics which favors not the human action of percussion, but the objects which are the mediators of this action. To ground this metaphysics, I turn to two contemporary philosophical trends, namely the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour and the object-oriented ontology of Graham Harman, who takes many of his ideas from the former. The aim is not to radically negate the current metaphysics of percussion, but to instead delve very deeply into its inverse to see what new worlds become visible. This chapter closes with a consideration of Rebecca Saunders's *dust,* which, from a practical standpoint, served as a personal catalyst for my own consideration of how objects interact with each other outside of my intervention.

Latour and the Irreducible

Latour's metaphysics first presents itself in *The Pasteurization of France*, a 1988 text that would lay the foundation of his future forays in Science and Technology studies. Of particular importance is the second part of the book, itself almost a book-within-a-book, titled "Irreductions." In "Irreductions" Latour lays out a philosophical treatise structured as a logical progression. Over the course of this progression he arrives at a number of manifesto-like claims such as "Nothing is, by itself, the same as or different from anything else. That is, there are no equivalents, only translations."[170] Latour's insight is that the things of the world, be they a life form, institution, discipline, or whatever else, are distinct from each other and can only win their reality through antagonistic relationships with both their neighbors *and* their internal components. As Latour puts it, "the real is not one thing among others but rather gradients of

[170] Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 162.

resistance."[171] There sits within Latour's philosophy a central tension. On one hand, things are not reducible to each other. That is, "context" is something that is only accomplished by a certain amount of friction. The basis for something being real, in Latour's mind, is its ability to resist its neighbors. At the same time, however, the ordering of these agonistic things of the world is what gives them their substance. Friction is both what keeps the things, disciplines, and instruments of the world distinct, but also what makes them ultimately real. Through their unique, distinct forces, things gradually build networks and can then be organized and contextualized, but this order is only established in retrospect – or, "harmony is *post*established through tinkering."[172]

With this metaphysical framework assembled, Latour later launches an assault against modernity in his polemic *We Have Never Been Modern*. To Latour, the logic of modernity, of the "moderns," is one of purification. Objects of knowledge under modernity are, to Latour, separated into a devastating bifurcation: on one side is human knowledge and culture and on the other is the natural or otherwise nonhuman world. There are different ways of conceptualizing this divide, as Latour shows. For example, the natural world can be seen as either a transcendent, sublime, and overpowering force or as inert matter to be appropriated for human use. What is more important than the nature of the distinction is the presence of the distinction itself. However, Latour shows that this is a modern fantasy, and instead brings attention to the networks of human/nonhuman hybrids that combat and escape modernity's process of purification. This "purification" is often the same "postestablishment" of harmony cited above. In short, a messy, entangled world is, under modernity's paradigm, simplified, universalized, and turned into a historical narrative of progress. Modern culture, its temporalities and epistemologies, is purchased only through the bracketing off of nature at key strategic junctures,

[171] Ibid., 159.
[172] Ibid., 164.

and through the disqualification of the most stubborn hybrids as illegitimate knowledge structures.

The ideas laid out in *The Pasteurization of France* and *We Have Never Been Modern* would eventually solidify into Latour's sociological methodology, known as actor-network theory, or ANT. As Latour introduces it, ANT provides a sociology where the "social" is something that can only be ascribed to something in retrospect. The "social" is not a substantive signifier which sociology seeks to disclose, but something that is ascribed after the phenomenon has taken shape, be it a group formation, an energy transference, or the building of a library. Rather than broad categories, often made distinct from each other, the ontology of the world is flattened: associations are made only by travelling distances by various "actants," Latour's word for anything that exerts or resists force in the world. Central to this "symmetrical ontology" is equal attention to the nonhuman actants of the world. In an ANT framework nonhuman objects are not seamless conveyors of human agency, but instead always translate, mediate, and betray this agency. "Action is not done under the full control of consciousness," but "should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disengtangled."[173] Similar to Bennett's concept of "thing-power," itself heavily influenced by Latour's work, nonhuman things not only exert their own power but become translators of human action. For example, "percussion" to Latour is not so useful a signifier as is an analysis of the interactions between a human, the human's non-human neighbors, and how these actants come together to form a network that in retrospect comes to be understood as the art form itself.

In his "Where Are the Missing Masses?" Latour writes a humorous and probing analysis of a hydraulic groom that automatically closes a heavy cooper door at the front of his apartment

[173] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 44.

complex. Through an analysis of how the groom works, Latour identifies how certain human traits such as discrimination (against those unable to physically open the door or need it held open) or work ethic (when the door breaks is it said to "be on strike" or "no longer work"), are inscribed in the workings of the door itself, which in turn accounts for much of the moral structure of society. Latour's point is that humans anthropomorphize the objects around them and in doing so ascribe and cement certain values into the material world. "We have been able to delegate to nonhumans not only force as we have known it for centuries but also values, duties, ethics. It is because of this morality that we, humans, behave so ethically, no matter how weak and wicked we feel we are."[174] Similarly inscribed in the tools of percussion are anthropomorphic conceptions and values ("good touch," for example), which an ANT-driven analysis reveals as materially, socially, and culturally entangled.

Latour's ideas have had a wide-ranging impact on fields even outside of science and technology, including art, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. ANT is also beginning to make its way into music studies. Benjamin Piekut for example, charts how an ANT approach to music history can help us to better understand musical constructions such as genre, context, and influence. Rather than drawing strict generic borders between certain oeuvres, Piekut argues that "it is the stability of genre formations that needs to be explained rather than their transgressions or destabilization."[175] Traditional music history, as Piekut presents it, reduces the movements of actors within musical worlds to their contexts or altogether excludes them because their presence does not serve a certain historical narrative. Piekut argues that ANT "resists any such normative

[174] "Bruno Latour, "Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a few mundane artifacts," in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. W.E Bijker and J. Law (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 232.
[175] Benjamin Piekut, "Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques," *Twentieth Century Music* 11, no. 2 (2014): 204.

presumptions."[176] Working in a similar vein, Christopher Haworth argues that ANT can provide a new understanding of not only genres and contexts, as Piekut argues, but also of conceptual constructions like the musical work or even the mythological personae of their composers. Such an approach necessitates chronicling unforeseen interventions and failures that contribute to a work or oeuvre's formation. As Haworth writes: "Rather than see them as contaminants of a simple self-identity that can be defined by reference to a set of stable descriptive features, the task is to account for the multiple mediations that the object or concept undergoes as it makes contact with the world, is picked up, selectively interpreted, mistaken, and inflected with other influences that the original did not foresee."[177] In other words, a musical work, oeuvre, or as I will argue, an instrumentality such as percussion, is composed just as much by its failures and contingencies as by its successes, and that even these successes are not secure in their historical position. New actors, revelations, and mediations will always come along to further inflect and transform their understanding. What ANT offers is an almost obsessive bookkeeping of these factors, and pays equal attention to the human and nonhuman elements within them.

There is already a kind of intuitive knowledge existing in some percussion scholarship regarding the incompleteness of the art form's historiography. Thomas Kernan notes that a traditional historiography of percussion, one that is centered on composers, their works, innovations, and breaks with tradition, are incomplete without proper consideration of the performers who commissioned and developed the works in question. Through a study of Percussion Group Cincinnati and a few key pieces of their repertoire, Kernan argues that "restricting studies to these composers and compositions, without accounting for the role of the

[176] Ibid., 205.
[177] Christopher Haworth, "Protentions and Retentions of Xenakis and Cage: Nonhuman Actors, Genre and Time in Microsound," *Contemporary Music Review* 37, no. 5 (2018): 612-613.

performers in the creative process, provides an incomplete understanding of the resulting musical works."[178] Interestingly, Kernan speculates that the disappointing historiography in question is partly due to percussion's need to legitimize itself as a classical art form: the same process of self-negation I identified in the previous chapter. He writes that "that the scholarly contemplation of percussion topics remains all too often oriented toward mere justification of the repertoire's existence and the merits of the composers and works in question may owe to the relative youth of the discipline,"[179] and goes on in a footnote to catalogue a number of dissertations on percussion that focus "solely on composer's lives and works in attempts to justify that well-known composers were interested in writing for these performance forces."[180] The adoption of the typical composer-centric Western music historiography is, I argue, the same kind of "purifying" historiography that Latour and ANT-influenced scholars rail against. Performers are just as much actors within the networks of musical works, and, as I will argue, so are the instruments, the beaters, and even the very component materials they are assembled from.

The turn towards instruments as equal actors in percussion history and indeed epistemology and ontology can feel like a turn towards mysticism or even fetishism. And yet, this mystic impulse, one that historically is excluded from Western rational epistemology, is impossible to ignore when one confronts the vibrating surfaces of percussion instruments themselves. During my time at UCSD the percussion department inherited the vast percussion collection of the eminent Chinese-American composer, Chou Wen-Chung. Chou was himself a protégé of modernist icon Edgard Varèse, and there is reasonable suspicion that some of the

[178] Thomas Kernan, "What of the Performers? The Case of the Percussion Group Cincinnati and the Need to Reconsider Percussion Chamber Music Historiography," in *The Modern Percussion Revolution,* ed. Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis (New York: Routledge, 2014): 19.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid., 35.

instruments in the collection may go all the way back to Varèse and his early (and by some accounts the earliest) percussion works. These instruments, which include drums, gongs, bells, and cymbals, are now part of a "living collection," where they are used (carefully, reverently) throughout the department's normal activities. Despite an ontology of action and the history of rational distancing and negation that percussion has developed over itself for the last century, there is something undeniable about the presence of these instruments. I myself have had first-hand encounters with them during my time performing and recording Chou's percussion quartet *Echoes from the Gorge* (1989). In an unpublished essay on this piece and its history, Steven Schick describes how his theory of bongo-ness, in performing on the instruments that this piece was explicitly composed for, breaks down. He writes that "with the instruments from the Chou Collection we had in our hands specific and personal instruments that were not interchangeable... We were faced with the conundrum of legacy, in which we 21st century percussionists both craved a connection to the past and feared the weight of tradition that came with it."[181] Schick puts his thumb on the anxiety of the percussionist subject in the modernist paradigm: a desire for resonance and connection but an aesthetic mandate to negate and rupture.

I differ from Schick, in that I wonder if the weight of tradition is really something to be feared. This fear of tradition; of fetishism or mysticism, seems to me a much more 20th century impulse than a 21st. This is not to say that I endorse the normative, disciplinary structures that accompany conservative traditions. Music school life is awash of stories of the often-traumatizing relationships between teacher and student, the mandated auditions repertoire lists, or the myopic pedagogical curricula. These are of course institutional manifestations of tradition that need reappraisal and reform. However, I find that in the 21st century, the problems facing

[181] Steven Schick, "An Echo is a Sound with Wings: Reflections on Chou Wen-Chung's *Echoes from the Gorge* and its deep connection to Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation,"* Unpublished. Provided courtesy of author (2022), 18-19.

percussionists are not one of how to *escape* from disciplinary practices but instead how to *find a home* in one. This home is to be found, I argue, in a realist approach to the art of percussion. This move once again echoes one made by Latour in his "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" Latour argues that modern epistemologies are centered around what he calls "matters of fact:" an Enlightenment-era model of knowledge whereby one legitimizes knowledge of an object by gaining a degree of critical distance from it. This manifests most often as an analysis of the conditions of an object's emergence; the realization that knowledge of the world is constructed rather than gleaned from the real world. The target of matters of fact are often those things that are described as fetishisms. Fetishes are so-called because they stand in for some other power or drive, and while a matter of fact would debunk the connection between, say, an idol and the God it represents, it would look down on the nonetheless very real impact an idol has upon the world around it (through ritual, material impact, cosmological understanding, etc.). Thus, matters of fact are "a poor *proxy* of experience and of experimentation and... a confusing bundle of polemics, of epistemology, of modernist politics that can in no way claim to represent what is requested by a realist attitude."[182] In other words, matters of fact, claiming epistemological superiority by claiming critical distance, render only a partial, biased, and idealistic version of the messy object they outline. In modern percussion, as discussed in the previous chapter, encounters with the real; of material presence and its epiphanic qualities, are often relegated to the derogatory title of "fetishism." And yet, with Latour, I argue that a realist attitude is what is needed to return to instruments, to objects, and thus to find resonance in them. Relegating certain percussion knowledge and practices as "fetishistic" on the one hand, and others as enlightened or modern, on the other, recreates the impasse Schick identifies in his encounter with the Chou

[182] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 245.

instruments. The epistemological demand to be migratory and to stand at a distance is pressed upon by the enchanting qualities of the undeniably present things of the world. My argument is not that we should toss aside the lessons we have learned from modernity, even if we could, but only that the objects and practices labelled traditionally as fetishistic be given more credit and attention. As Latour writes elsewhere, "any artifact is a form of assembling, of gathering, of 'thinging' entities together," and that it is "absurd to forget the mortals and the gods when describing a piece of hardware, even the most hypermodern ones."[183] Invoking Heidegger, Latour here pushes for a conception of objects that is inclusive of the anti-modern entanglements that constitute the reality of an object. Modern percussionists, in their anxiety, have epistemological, ontological, and, I will show in the next chapter, ethical stakes in this realist reorientation.

Furthermore, what percussionists might fear in a signifier like "tradition" is a constriction of the subject's own freedom: the ability of the percussionist to continue to "keep culture moving," as Clement Greenberg puts it in describing the avant garde artist.[184] Turning to tradition, which itself is dependent on objects that act as a tradition's signifiers, is thus understood as a renunciation of the linear temporality that modernity requires. However, modernity's relationship to the object is not a simple one. As Bill Brown shows, objects in modernism are complicated and bivalent. On one hand, modernism as a cultural mode of aesthetic production is partially invested in rescuing objects from commodity-fetishism. Brown writes that "the modernist's fetishized thing... is meant to be saved from the fate of the mass-produced object. It is saved from the humiliation of homogeneity; and it is saved from the tyranny of use, from the

[183] Bruno Latour, "Can We Get Our Materialism Back, Please?," *Isis* 98 (2007): 140.
[184] See Clement Greenberg, "The Avant Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

instrumental, utilitarian reason that has come to seem modernity's greatest threat to mankind."[185] Modernist art forms, and percussion among them, have a power to reconsider the objects of modernity outside of the paradigm of commodity and exchange value. However, the catch is that this interest in the object is almost always a route to get closer to the *subject*. In taking very seriously the presence of a drum before me, in its sounds, materials, and textures, I ultimately find I am more searching for myself than anything else, be that *my* stroke, *my* touch, or *my* sound. "What first reads like the effort to accept things in their physical quiddity becomes the effort to penetrate them, to see through and to find... within an object... the subject." This is perhaps the ultimate goal of phenomenology, to render consciousness's structure through contact with the things of the world. The modernist, then, gets us halfway there. They are correct in seeing in objects more than just their exchange value, but fail to see the object in its own right. The lesson to learn is that fetishism is not something that backwards or primitive peoples fall into, but something that occurs anytime a person endows an object with power in some way. In this sense, to fetishize something is not derogatory, but to see it as more than inert matter. Modernity discourages this kind of behavior, and in so doing earns the ire of Latour, who writes that to accuse something of "being a fetish is the ultimate gratuitous, disrespectful, insane, and barbarous gesture."[186] Latour writes this because he sees all objects as resisting human action, so it is impossible for them to be blank slates that humans meaninglessly attribute certain powers and qualities to. I'd add to this that it makes no sense to use fetishism as a derogatory term because all objects, in various ways, act as fetishes, from the coffee cup on my desk that acts as a relic of focus and comfort to the pair of bongos that act as my gateway into much of the

[185] Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 8.
[186] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," 243.

percussion repertoire. An object is thus in some ways always a fetish for human projection, but never *only* a fetish.

Latour's philosophy, as well as the methodology of ANT that comes from his thought, offers a rich opportunity for percussionists to reconsider how their artform comes into being. The narrative of modern percussion: of progress, negation, interchangeability, and absolute human action covers up more than it discloses. Left by the wayside are the stories of performers struggling to suspend or mount objects; of performers agonizing over which mallet to use for a performance or recording; of objects breaking and being tossed in the trash. Percussion, then, as a natureculture (one of the many contemporary neologisms used to articulate the fact that the nature/culture binary is obsolete), is dependent on political and aesthetic economies that go beyond the music department or percussion studio. It is dependent on global trade and neo-capitalist exploitation, but also on humble beginnings, favorite sounds, and enchanted encounters with vibrating surfaces. The goal of ANT is not cynicism – just the opposite. Latour's work opens up a way of working slowly, step-by-step, through the world so that one can, as best one can, authentically describe what occurs.

Toward an Object-Oriented Ontology of Percussion

ANT offers a methodology for accounting for the messiness of the modern world without glossing over the pivotal hybridities and complexities that make this world what it is. With this established, I would like to return to metaphysics, which we began this essay with in Chapter 1. Latour's influence extends beyond sociology, science and technology studies, and feminist theory. It also holds a large amount of influence over contemporary currents of philosophy

dealing with the metaphysical concerns of 20th century phenomenology. Foremost among these is the object-oriented ontology (fashionably abbreviated OOO or "triple-O") of Graham Harman, among others. I will briefly go over Harman and his OOO peers' ontology and metaphysics before returning to his treatment of Latour and the philosophy's broader implications for percussion ontology. OOO is one strain of contemporary continental philosophy among several that work under the umbrella term of "speculative realism." While the various thinkers of speculative realism, such as Harman, Quentin Meillasoux, and Ray Brassier, have more differences than similarities with regards to their philosophies, they share one common enemy: correlationism. Originally coined by Meillasoux, "correlationism" describes the philosophical trend, since Kant, to cordon off philosophy only to what correlates to human thought. Phenomenology is perhaps, despite its best efforts to bring us "to the things themselves," the paradigmatic example of correlationist thought. The phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, in particular, present what Harman calls a "philosophy of access," since phenomenology is "concerned only with our access to the world and never with the world in its own right."[187] Tom Sparrow, another speculative realist, argues that "what phenomenology actually delivers is a subtler version of the Kantian world-for-us, not the world of real or material things as they are in themselves."[188] To the phenomenologist, including myself up to this point, each encounter with an object in the world is already a correlate between that object and the human that apprehends it or reflects upon it. To philosophize the world beyond thought is unfeasible, as thought is always already in the world. Speculative realism seeks to rekindle philosophical interest in the real

[187] Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018), 4.
[188] Tom Sparrow, *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 1.

world outside of human thought, even if, as a human must be the one philosophizing it, this philosophy is speculative.

Harman's own brand of speculative realism begins in a familiar place to us: Heidegger's tool-analysis found in *Being and Time*. As we recall, Heidegger's analysis of the tool presents us with two modalities of being for an object such as a hammer: there is its objective presence (*Vorhandenheit*) and its handiness (*Zuhandenheit*). The former describes the object's being as it presents itself through its material construction. In the case of the hammer, this is the facticity of it being a wooden shaft connected to a blunt, metal head. The latter describes the object's being as it comes forth through broader context, that is, how a hammer appears *as a hammer* through human usage of it. The bottom line of Heidegger's analysis as it is commonly understood is that the true being of an object lies in its orientation and position within a totality of relevance to *Dasein* (human existence) and its activities. Without *Dasein*, a hammer remains simply a piece of metal and wood. Harman takes this analysis and radically extends it. He argues that Heidegger privileges *Dasein* as the only form of being which experiences anything like objective presence and handiness, and thus creates a kind of "ontotheology:" an ontology where certain modes of being are subsumed for the purpose of achieving a singular, highest form of Being. Rather than disavowing Heidegger's philosophy as anthropocentric and thus limited, Harman sees the problem in the fact that Heidegger's philosophy doesn't go *far enough*. Heidegger's philosophy is hindered by its clinging to *Dasein*, when the findings of the tool analysis can, in reality, be extended to *any* object. This extension is possible if one understands handiness, as Harman does, as describing not the *appearance* of an object, but its withdrawal. "Contrary to the usual view, tool-being does not describe objects insofar as they are handy implements employed for human purposes. Quite the contrary: readiness-at-hand [handiness] (*Zuhandenheit*) refers to objects

insofar as they withdraw from human view into a dark subterranean reality that never becomes present to practical action any more than it does to theoretical awareness."[189] In other words, while human appropriation of a hammer brings it into a certain totality of relevance, this appropriation is incomplete. It uses some aspects of the hammer (its durability, its weight) but ignores others, such as the hammer's scent or the oxidizing process rusting the iron head. To Harman, handiness refers to this *withdrawn* aspect, and it is within this withdrawn realm that *Dasein's* primacy comes apart. For, while humans have no direct stake in the oxidization of the head of the hammer (until the hammer is no longer able to function in *Dasein*'s totality of relevance), the same certainly cannot be said of the iron itself or the water molecules acting upon it. "As we all know," Harman writes in a very Latourian passage, "the inanimate world does *not* rest in static equilibrium, as it would have to if it were only a unified totality without parts. Instead, it is made of pieces that resist one another, that forever caress each other or wage war with one another."[190] Thus, every interaction between any and all objects, not just humans and the things that surround them, is characterized by this experience of partial contact and withdrawal.

Because humans only ever have a partial access to an object, Harman argues that it is aesthetics that plays a key metaphysical role in how the objects of the world (humans included) interact. In his "Aesthetics as First Philosophy," Harman attacks two tenets of phenomenology. The first is familiar: the integration of all objects into a totality of relevance, à la Heidegger. The second is the idea, found in Levinas but also Merleau-Ponty, that objects mutually, and exhaustively, codetermine each other. Objects, even in their interaction, must be able to withdraw from each other even as they comingle, lest they themselves become a part of a

[189] Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 1.

[190] Ibid., 34.

different kind of totalizing system. To solve this problem, Harman performs a similar maneuver with Levinas's concept of proximity that he did to Heidegger's handiness: he extends it to all objects, not only humans. The result is a world of *indirect* contact, characterized by what Harman terms "sincerity," or, "to be different from something even while taking it seriously. It is to touch a thing without fusing into it."[191] To take a thing seriously means to acknowledge its existence as a real object whose metaphysical reality supersedes one's intentional apprehension of it. It is to touch it even if it doesn't touch you back in the same way. In this way, metaphysics finds a newfound reliance on aesthetics. Sincerity, in admitting it does not touch the object as it is but only as it appears, is a form of aesthetic interpretation, and, furthermore, aesthetic interpretation becomes something that happens not only between humans but between *all* objects.

Indirect, non-exhaustive contact requires a reconsideration of the aesthetic as not only a faculty of judgment that humans have, but something that occurs between all objects at all levels of reality. Timothy Morton, another OOO and ecological philosopher argues that this requires a reconsideration of the hazards of anthropomorphism. Again, to project human qualities onto a non-human entity is understood under modern epistemology as somehow backwards or irrational. Morton pushes against this on the basis of Harman's sincerity. The fact that any phenomenological intentionality cannot help but apprehend a thing as it presents itself means that the only way a human can intend towards the world is by anthropomorphizing it. "It's not that I anthropomorphize in some situations and not in others," Morton writes. "It's that, because of phenomenological *sincerity*, I can't help anthropomorphizing everything I handle."[192] To

[191] Graham Harman, "Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Nonhuman," *Naked Punch* 9 (Summer/Fall 2007): 24.
[192] Timothy Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring, 2012): 207.

Morton, human consciousness's compulsion to anthropomorphize is not so different from what a tree does to wind when it blows through its leaves, or what a bed of snare wires does to a drumhead as it vibrates against it. The point is that anthropomorphizing is an aesthetic process that humans can't help but enact on everything that they come into contact with, and that, in various, speculative ways, the rest of the objects of reality are doing the same thing to each other.

This claim pushes against some of the maxims that maintain percussion instrumentality and its ensuing exceptionalism. Schick puts his understandings of anthropomorphism into terms of internal and external systems of organization of the body. An internal system can be understood as the phenomenological encounter with objects and their intermingling with the body. Schick writes that "successful players so thoroughly anthropomorphize their instruments that there seems to be no difference between them... In the hands of the best performers, the instrument becomes not just an extension of the body, but the body itself."[193] To Schick, percussionists are "internalists" on a limited basis, wholly dependent on whether the instrument is a traditional one or ostensibly singular, such as marimba, vibraphone, or timpani. However, he does not extend this same status to the so-called "junk" objects of percussion, asking if whether or not it is "actually possible to anthropomorphize a foam-mounted railroad spike."[194] Instead, these objects are organized along an "external" organization of the body, where the body in turn becomes an extension of the object, not vice versa. "In short," he writes, "when I play a percussion piece with non-instrumental sound objects (read, 'pieces of junk'), I become the junk; the junk does not become me."[195] Schick illustrates this in practical term by describing his movements when performing on junk as assuming the industrial, spiky physical and mental

[193] Steven Schick, "Three convergences," 145.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.

models that these objects connotate. The eagle-eyed reader will beat me to my point here: even though the non-organic impressions the junk gives Schick feel somehow distinct from those a "proper" instrument gives, these objects are nonetheless being anthropomorphized by Schick. What Schick seems to miss in his analysis is that while the internal mode of bodily organization; the extension of the body by the instrument, is a form of anthropomorphizing, *so too is the external system*. We have here not a binary choice between internal vs. external, but, again, a reciprocal process that incorporates both. Percussionist Lucas Helker identifies a similar "elitist division" between instruments and "junk objects," instead advocating for the equal potential of both categories within a musical context. He further goes on to argue that the former division promotes a "colonial tendency" to appropriate and collect objects from elsewhere.[196]

It's here that I stake, with Helker, what percussionists might find to be one of the more radical claims of this essay: *there is no ontological distinction between "found sounds" and traditional instruments*. What difference there is lies in the realm of historiography, and is wrapped up in the same narrative of Otherness and negation that characterizes the rest of percussion's modern history. It is true that history has made certain objects more appealing to the use of music-making than others – glockenspiel bars become more in-tune and ring longer, drum heads become more durable, etc. However, this is provisional: some of these very same instruments lose their instrumental status with age and lack of maintenance and repair. Found sounds on the other hands, be they pipes, frying pans, or flower pots, are held back not by some ontological fact, but by their own novelty. Their association with non-musical activities is what keeps them from graduating to the status of fully-formed instrument, not some lacking in their musical presence when activated. Furthermore, instrumental status is partially allocated based on

[196] Lucas Helker, "Materials that Matter: Cultivating a Musical Tradition with Found Objects," (DMA diss., University of Kansas, 2023), 32.

cultural experience. An instrument only becomes an instrument within a tradition, otherwise it may as well be a found sound to those who do not take the time to familiarize themselves with its qualities and techniques. Lastly, junk and found sounds can indeed *become* the basis of tradition. I think here of the case of Lou Harrison's brake drums. Prior to World War II, automobile brake drums were made of an extremely resonant steel alloy which became requisitioned for the war effort. Subsequently, brake drums since are made out of cast iron, and their sound is much duller.[197] Pre-war brake drums then, are more instrument than found sound due to their scarcity and historical context. Performing works of Harrison's that employ these instruments necessitates a knowledge of this history and a degree of effort in finding suitable substitutes if such instruments are not available.

The point here is not an anarchic declaration that "everything is an instrument" or "everything is junk." Nor is it a cynical observation that the concepts of instrumentality that are so central to percussionists' orientation within their musical life are historically contingent and thus mutable. I am arguing for quite the opposite. Dissolving the binary between instrument and found sound, I argue, allows percussionists to actually perceive objects in their phenomenal presence. Whether it's a pipe, a transducer, or a bass drum, percussionists go through a similar process of "tuning" to the instrument, as Morton puts it. "One object – say an oud, a lute – can be attended to, attuned to, in different ways that bring out strange hidden properties of that object. In this sense playing an oud is like doing phenomenology. You are attending to the inner structure of the object, allowing yourself to be taken over by it."[198] True as this observation is for the lute, so too is this true for Schick's railroad spike. While it's true that certain objects may

[197] See Bob Becker, "Bowls, Bells, Brake Drums and Lou Harrison," *Nexuspercussion.com,* September 10, 2021. https://www.nexuspercussion.com/2021/09/bowls-bells-brake-drums-and-lou-harrison/.
[198] Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2013), 23.

present more complex, varied, or rich phenomena as one engages with them, this is a difference in scale, not in kind. This small modification to percussion's instrumental logic does the much-needed work of robbing it of its exceptionalism. Percussion's bongo-ness is predicated on striking any and all objects, but so too can any and all objects be blown into, bowed, or be otherwise made to sound. Thus, a violinist or trumpet player may find objects with the same phenomenological richness that a percussionist carries out with a mallet in a hardware store.[199] And, in the case of certain objects, such as bowing a crystal wine glass, I would speculate that a violinist's phenomenological experience would be much richer than a percussionist's. OOO thus offers two very important opportunities to percussionists. First, an excuse to see the objects around them without the chauvinism of instrumental *or* non-instrumental tradition. And second, a theoretical framing which de-centers the human and extends the hard-won concepts of percussion's instrumentality to the non-human objects that co-constitute the art form.

"Found sounds" present a very complicated knot to untangle. A place to begin might be to ask: who is doing the finding? In certain instances, such as Hennies's invocation of "queer trash" or Sliwinski's "junk," we find a rehabilitative quality that is laudatory. Objects that would otherwise be destined for the landfill can instead find new life in a percussionist's collection. However, we are too hasty if we leave it at that. Many non-instrumental objects which are appropriated for their sounds by percussionists still have the capacity to serve their original purpose. I think here of one of my student's set-ups for David Lang's *The Anvil Chorus*, a piece

[199] I stumbled upon a Facebook post by Lithuanian violinist Gierdrė Žarėnaitė-Molenaar about an upcoming performance for which she had to perform on an "demophone," an instrument invented by instrument builder and percussionist Domenico Melchiorre. In this post she remarks that at first she "thought it will be cool to join the percussionists and make sounds from everything you can find around you." She continues that her experience revelaed just how contrainted her own practice as a violinist can be, but that her experience as a "desmophonist" inspired her to think through the sounds around with a violinist's appreciation. See Appendix 1 for the Facebook post and the accompanying images of Zarėnaitė-Molenaar performing on the desmophone.

for a wide array of junk metal sounds. My student has selected, for example, a thin frying pan and a metal mixing bowl for two of his instruments, to be activated using a kick drum pedal. These objects, prior to their appropriation, were perfectly good kitchen items, but after months of practice they are dented and unusable. Even their acoustic properties have begun to suffer from their deterioration. In time, it is reasonable to believe that they will no longer be usable kitchen items *or* percussion instruments. What then? The narrative of percussionists "finding" sounds is then a complicated one. On one hand percussionists can rescue objects from the landfill. On the other, they just as often doom them to it. This becomes increasingly complicated when we consider how myopic the idea of "finding" a sound is. Latour and ANT are paramount in reminding us that objects have histories and only come to us through a vast and knotty network of actors, human and nonhuman. Sara Ahmed further reminds us that, using her own example of the philosopher's table, that a vast amount of history has had to happen for the table to arrive before her in the first place. Her argument is that phenomenology must attend to the "conditions of emergence" of an object, "which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness."[200] We do not hear the history of a frying pan, a frying pan, or a Thai gong, for that matter, when we attend only to its sonic properties and their appearance to consciousness, and thus we do not fully apprehend the object in its objecthood.

The situation becomes especially troublesome when bongo-ness gives allowance for cultural instruments to be employed as found sounds (you'll remember from Chapter 1 that *almglocken* and Thai gongs are from vastly different cultures even if they share certain sonic characteristics). This is perhaps the greatest holdover of 20th century modernism – the idea that instruments can, almost alchemically, lose their cultural signification through the power of the

[200] Sara Ahmed, "Orientations Matter," 240.

musical work.[201] To the ear of someone who has grown up in these cultures, however, it is not so idealist as that. Composer Anthony Tan writes, in considering the Chinese opera gong, that:

> Composers writing for percussion flock to these studios searching for ways to utilize and transform these sounds. For example, the Chinese opera gong projects a distinctive sound, representing a musical tradition within Chinese culture. Even though my knowledge of Chinese opera is very limited, I have strong cultural associations with this instrument. Should I abandon my own cultural baggage when listening to this instrument within contemporary music? Instruments and their timbres represent artifacts of cultural memory and contribute to the search for meaning in music. We must respect this aspect of all instruments, acknowledging that timbres are signifiers that lead to specific cultural implications and associations.[202]

Tan's observations, I would argue, go beyond nativism. I am in no ways Chinese by heritage, but the Chinese opera gong that Tan describes is similarly inextricable from Beijing Opera to my ear. Thus, when such an instrument is heard in the context of, say, Iannis Xenakis's *Psappha,* we are not only hearing Xenakis and European modernism, but also Chinese opera. Examples of this abound: *tabla* strokes in Feldman's *The King of Denmark*, performances of Georges Aperghis's *Le corps à corps* on the Persian *tombak,* the list goes on.

---

[201] This is one of the great myths of Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation*. For example, Michael Rosen, emeritus professor of percussion at the Oberlin Conservatory, writes that, despite contemporary efforts to historically and culturally situate Varèse's work, that he hears the instruments of the work "without cultural reference," an astounding claim made even more striking by his argument on a previous page, where he writes that the piece can be "viewed as a return to a very ancient Eastern tradition of percussion music, particularly in the aspect of timbre. Eastern concepts of sound and 19th Century Western formal concepts of structure and logic that merge in this piece, result [sic] in a musical expression that is universal." Such Orientalizing constructions of percussion music, where non-Euro-western musical traditions and sublimated and "made universal" by Western logic is unfortunately common in much percussion writing. Michael Rosen, "Terms Used in Percussion: 'Ionisation,'" *Percussive Notes* (July, 2015): 62 and 60.

[202] Anthony Tan, "Out of Context #5: Appreciation vs. Appropriation of Cultural Musical Objects," *I Care If You Listen,* May 27, 2020, https://icareifyoulisten.com/2020/05/out-of-context-5-appreciation-appropriation-cultural-musical-objects/.

This brings me to another seemingly radical inversion that OOO offers: wholes are not greater than the sum of their parts, but always lesser. Morton considers the work of art as its own form of ecology: "A work of art is a whole, and this whole contains many parts – the materials out of which it's made being just one of them. We could include the interpretive horizons of the art's consumers...and the contexts in which the art materials were assembled. In this way it's obvious that there are so many more parts than there is a whole."[203] A percussion work is no different. For all modernist revolutions of the 20th century, percussion works maintain the same Hegelian structure found throughout Romanticism: the belief in a spirit of the work that comes forth through the amalgamation of its parts, itself an analogy based off of conceptions of the human body. Under this conception, the human body, composed of cells, organs, and other tissue, lead to a culmination in the mind (*Geist*) of a person, which to Hegel and German idealism is the one true basis of reality. Musical works are often considered to follow a similar metaphysics: the instruments, notes, harmonies, and other ingredients in traditional formalism add up to a greater spirit (again, *Geist*) of the work. If this sublimating metaphysical goal is removed, however, we are left with a collection of objects (material and otherwise, human and otherwise) that all contribute to the aesthetic experience of the work, but are not exhausted by it. As Morton evocatively puts it: "a work of art is like a transparent bag full of eyes, and each eye is also a transparent bag full of eyes."[204] That is to say that, each component of a larger object like a musical work is itself an aesthetic object that in turn also interprets its surroundings. This Russian nesting-doll-esque movement continues downwards *and* upwards, without objects at various levels ever being totally subsumed (or reduced) to each other's meaning.

[203] Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (London: Penguin Random House, UK. 2018), 49.
[204] Ibid.

A Thin Layer of Everything

Proceeding from the above philosophical and theoretical legwork, we are now primed to return to practical considerations. In doing so, I stake out two conceptual case studies. First is the point of contact between a beater and an instrument. Under an ontology of action this moment is a means to an end, a pragmatic usage of tools to render a sound that is referential both to the player who activates it and to the broader musical context it occurs within. Within an object-oriented metaphysics, however, this moment is much more complicated and fraught – even the reciprocity discussed in chapter two takes on a complex, weird (to borrow a word from Harman) quality. An analysis of this moment flows quite naturally into the second site of analysis: the notated musical work itself. The musical work concept, since Lydia Goehr first analyzed it in her seminal *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works,* has taken a backseat in recent decades. This is because of a theoretical turn that prioritizes performative action, cultural processes, and lived experience over autonomous works that appeal to some higher abstract existence. In reapproaching the musical work, I have no desire to revivify Romantic conventions that blend quasi-religious aesthetic theory with individual, authorial genius. Nonetheless, I feel that a return to realism with fresh eyes is to some extent now needed in musical theory. The goal of this effort is to situate the artform in what is more-than-human, and in this way the ineffable nature of a musical work is an inviting site of analysis. My analysis will ultimately advocate for a partial return to the benefits of formalism, though, again, a weird formalism.

I take as my case study Rebecca Saunders's large-scale percussion solo, *dust* (2017-18). The work, which runs nearly thirty minutes long, is divided up into nine modules. Some of these modules, such as "Melody," "Metal," or "Bass Drum" are fully notated, while others, such as

"Cadenza" and "Crystal" are left up to a performer's sensibility and a degree of improvisation. The modules can be performed in any order, and it is permissible to present the piece in partiality, omitting entire modules or sections thereof. This last observation, that the work is malleable down to even sections of the work itself, plays a formal structure. Saunders chooses the word "module" intentionally: these are not discrete movements of a larger work meant to be heard sequentially, but are instead intended to interrupt and juxtapose each other. Thus, an interpretation of the piece is not only a matter of practicing the material, solving its practical considerations, and then ultimately deciding on a path through the piece, as one might do with other pieces whose movements can be played in any order. Instead, the piece, from beginning to end, is an entanglement of juxtapositions that can be returned to at any moment. My own version of the piece follows a serpentine path:

Melody → Bass Drum → Resonance → Melody → Bass Drum → Resonance → Melody → Cadenza → Metal → Resonance → Metal → Resonance → Metal → Resonance → Metal → Melody → Triangles → Crystal → Dry → Triangles → Dry → Triangles → Dry

In this version the entirety of the notation is played, but none of it (with the admitted exception of a couple triangle strikes at the end) is repeated.

Saunders strikes an interesting balance in her work with regards to percussion repertoire's determinant aspects. On one hand, indeterminacy is nothing new. From the very first composed percussion solo, Cage's *27'10.554" For a Percussionist,* performers have been making decisions about how to inflect the form of works for percussion through their own choices. On the other, however, Saunders's instrumentation is *extremely* specific, taken straight from the percussion

studios of German percussionists Christian Dierstein and Dirk Rothbrust, for whom the piece was written. These hyper-specific instruments include aluminum flower pots tuned micro-tonally, massive aluminum triangles, half an octave of chromatic Tibetan temple bowls, and long strips of aluminum suspended in the air and struck on their edge with a metal beater. Of all these, however, most specific is Saunders's employment of a nicophone, an instrument invented by percussionists and instrument builder Domenico Melchiorre, built specifically to Saunders's specifications.[205] In my own preparation I found myself making varied choices with regards to the bongo-ness of these instruments. The flower pots were substituted for aluminum pipes, but the micro-tonal pitch material was preserved. The aluminum strips were acquired, but the pitches Saunders specifies were unattainable for my instruments, and so while the timbre remained, the pitch material was altered. In some cases, my attempt at bongo-ness failed. When my colleague Rebecca Lloyd-Jones, who would give the American co-premiere with me, first bought metal rods with which to craft Saunders's massive triangles, they were made of iron, as that was the material available from the local hardware store. After fashioning them into triangles we found that the specific alloy we had purchased was low-volume and non-resonant. Not any triangle would do for the sonic moment Saunders had composed for. The solution was a special-ordering of aluminum rods from a construction materials wholesale retailer. These rods, once bent into shape, were much louder, and their sound much richer.

I spend so much time discussing these instruments and the pains taken to acquire them because they play a formal structure, and thus are part of the object of Saunders's work. Indeed, most of the modules themselves are named after the instruments they primarily feature. Even a module such as "Melody" can be understood as referring to a certain constituent object, where

[205] One can visit the product page at Lunason's website: https://www.lunason.com/en/product-page/bassnicophone-large-edition-rebecca-saunders.

the object in question is the motion between five aluminum pipes tuned very close together. We might pause here, as we're beginning to run counter to much contemporary musicology which has leaned towards an understanding of music explicitly *not* as a fixed object, but instead as a socio-cultural network and performative *process*. Paul Théberge writes that musical instruments act as an "assemblage," where instruments should not be considered as "singular objects, but as components within a network of other instruments, technical devices, social settings and educational, institutional and discursive contexts."[206] Similarly, Nina Eidsheim, argues that music should be considered as a broader, "vibrational" practice, rather than as a fixed entity or even a process reliant purely on traditional conceptions of aurality. She writes that "music's ontological status can be changed from an external, knowable object to an unfolding phenomenon that arises through complex material interactions."[207] In the realm of organology, John Tresch and Emily I. Dolan write that a "New Organology" views instruments "as actors and tools with variable ranges of activity"[208] and must account for "changing forms of agency and visibility."[209] Lastly, Felix Ò Murchadha asserts that "what music tells us in... living performance is that the object of aural perception is not a thing but an event, not an entity but the (audible) expression of that entity or plurality of entities."[210] These positions, and others like them in contemporary music and performance, and sound studies, advocate for relational ontologies that cede agency to the nonhuman. Their theoretical target are epistemologies that claim music as something that is

---

[206] Paul Théberge, "Musical Instruments as Assemblage," in *Musical Instruments in the 21st Century: Identities, Configurations, Practices,* ed. Till Bovermann, Alberto de Campo, Hauke Egermann, Sarah-Indriyati Hardjowirogo, and Stefan Weinzerl (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 65-66.
[207] Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham: NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 2.
[208] Emily Dolan and John Tresch. "Towards a New Organology," *Osiris* 28, no. 1, Music Sound and the Laboratory from 1750-1980 (Jan. 2013): 281.
[209] Ibid. 289.
[210] Felix Ó Murchadha, "Listening to Others: Music and the Phenomenology of Hearing," in *Empathy, Intersubjectivity, and the Social World: The Continued Relevance of Phenomenology,* ed. Anna Bortolan and Elisa Magrì (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022), 246.

purely carried out by humans upon the inert matter of the world, and thus can be aligned with some of the aims and goals of the New Materialism discussed in the previous chapter.

Saunders's work, however, though it certainly contains the events, relations, and processes mentioned by the scholars above, is reliant on specific material objects to effectively take shape. How do we square an ontology that is oriented towards objects, which must to some extent be fixed entities, with contemporary trends that privilege relation and process? OOO is often lumped together with new materialism, even though scholars on both sides have painstakingly argued the nuance of the two positions. Both OOO and new materialism, broadly understood, share similarities in their argument for some form of flat ontology. The basic argument flows thusly: for something to be an ontology in the first place it must be able to account for *everything* that exists, and cannot be selective. In a defense of New Materialism in the face of criticism along the lines of race, Harman writes that "flat ontologies are not about 'effacing' race or anything else, but simply about casting the widest possible net on the question of what exists."[211] To an object-oriented philosopher and a new materialist both, a table, pile of trash, or a xylophone are things worthy of equal consideration when compared to the traditional subjects of philosophy like the human mind or body. The similarities end, however, in how to account for these things' ontological disposition.

Much of New Materialism, like that of Barad and Bennett, describes ontology as relational. This means that in understanding things, be they human or nonhuman, we can only come to describe their being through their relations. A drumstick does not become a drumstick until it is striking a drum, or, perhaps becomes something else when it is used as, say, a doorstopper while one runs out to the restroom. Thus, to borrow Bennett's language, things are

[211] Graham Harman, "Moral Superiority as First Philosophy: In Response to Andrew J. Chung," *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2022): 209.

caught up in systems that enact their own agencies and wield influence over others, much like Latour's mechanical door did. OOO takes an opposite stance, arguing that objects can only be understood as what they are because they are *non-relational*. For a drumstick to hit a drum, there must be a discrete drum or stick present to begin with. Furthermore, Harman, Morton, and Latour each reject the existence of matter as an existential category to begin with, arguing that from an ontological level, humans encounter the things of the world *as* objects, not only their relations, floating qualities, or molecular building blocks. To reduce an object only to its relations is what Harman calls "overmining:" a view where "objects are important only insofar as they are manifested to the mind, or are part of some concrete event that affects other objects as well."[212] Such a view of objects only lends them consideration when they are directly impacting something else. In the other direction, objects can similarly be undermined, which is when discrete phenomenal objects are viewed instead as a temporary manifestation of some great processual flux. With this critique Harman situates his philosophy against philosophies of difference and becoming, which many new materialists adopt, arguing that "the philosophy of difference may give us blurry entities laced with negation and relationality, but they are entities nonetheless."[213] OOO thus stubbornly situates its ontology at the level of objects, irreducible neither to their relations nor to their molecules, but in part withdrawing from both.[214] As Bennett sees it, the main critique of new materialism such as hers that OOO offers is the question of causation. As Bennett presents it, "Harman argues that a philosophy such as mine, which

[212] Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Alresford, UK: Zero Books. 2011), 11.
[213] Ibid., 10.
[214] Jonathan De Souza touches on a similar intuition in the realm of sound, writing that "A sound is never absolutely free of its source, yet never totally bound to it, because audition is never absolutely free of other corporeal powers, yet never reducible to them." Harman's ontology would extend the human experience of audition, which touches upon the withdrawal of objects and their sounds, to not only other human levels of access but *any* access from *any* other object, illuminating what might be a fecund alliance between sound studies and OOO. De Souza, *Music at Hand,* 167.

connects hiding-and-seeking objects to assemblages, can have no account of change. This is because... there must be an unactualized surplus for something to happen differently." Bennett goes on to make the counter-argument that "systems as well as things" can hold untapped potential that are not exhausted by relations, and maintains that assemblage theories can account for novelty "without also rendering the trajectory, impetus, drive, or energetic push of any existing body epiphenomenal to its relations."[215] The main philosophical difference between new materialism and OOO, then, is a question of the ontological importance of relation. The main *practical* question stands regarding how new things happen. Barad and Bennett, in their own ways, argue for a kind of becoming-through-relation, be it as intra-acting agents or as members of a socio-bio-political assemblage. We become what we are through contact with what we are not, and this includes nonhuman Others. OOO on the other hand, maintains that relation is always indirect, and is only possible because there is a "core" of an object which withdraws from *all* relation, and this includes relation to itself. New materialism must prove how new objects come about, or how all matter is not subsumed by process or becoming. OOO must prove how things interact at all. A percussion ontology that is not rooted in human handedness and action must somehow account for both of these tensions: to what extent is percussion about relation and to what extent is it about withdrawal?

Resolution, or at least armistice, might be found in aesthetic causality. As discussed in the previous chapter, new materialists such as Bennett and Barad place much stock in the aesthetic encounter with alterity and things, creating beautiful, poetic concepts such as enchanted or "vibrant" matter and co-constitution. To OOO philosophers, the role of aesthetics is a causal one, and specifically a causality that happens vicariously. Harman argues that "two entities influence

[215] Jane Bennett, "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton," *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 231.

each other only by meeting on the interior of a third, where they exist side-by-side until something happens that allows them to interact."[216] This "something" that must happen is aesthetic and sensual: objects and their "sensual" qualities interact with each other while their inner cores withdraw. Thus, each object is bifurcated into two halves: sensual and real. An example may help here. In *dust,* the performer is asked to strike a bell plate with three different kinds of beaters (soft, wooden, and metal) and in three different playing spots (in the center, towards the edge, and directly on the side). Each attack in each zone gives a wildly different sonic effect, accentuating certain fundamentals or overtones, while ignoring others. According to OOO, at an ontological level, the sensual qualities of the mallet are engaging with the sensual qualities of the bell plate, without either of the real objects (their withdrawn cores) ever interacting. In fact, it is the very fact that there *is* a withdrawn core that enables the sheet to respond in such distinct ways to different beaters. The sound of each respective beater/bell plate interaction, to Harman, forms its own unique object, created and joined together by the phenomenological intention of the performer or audience. Harman thus sets a kind of new definition for artists with regards to their objects and works. Artists can, through their combination of sensual objects, create *new* sensual objects. They cannot however, ever fully access each sensual object's *real* counterpart.

Harman extends this aesthetic interaction; these two objects interpreting each other's sensual qualities and creating a third object through the intention of a third-party to his theory of art. Harman argues for an autonomy of art, but not a Romantic kind that laid its claims in some kind of spiritual ineffability. To Harman, every artwork is a compound of both the human and the external object taken to be the work of art. As he writes: "the autonomy of artworks does not mean that they would remain artworks even if all humans were exterminated, any more than hydrogen

[216] Graham Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," *Collapse Volume II* (2007): 190.

alone would still count as water if all oxygen were sucked from the cosmos. What it does mean is that, despite being a necessary ingredient of every artwork, the human beholder cannot exhaustively grasp the artwork of which he or she is the ingredient."[217] This theory of art seems to draw a strange middle line between the two most recent theories of the musical work. The first being the Romantic belief in an ineffable work that points towards an authentic, higher truth, and the second being a postmodern understanding of the musical work as dependent on both live performance and linguistic interpretation, and thus socially contingent on human bodies and material conditions. To Harman, a musical work is possible only through human intention of the object that is the work, but this object contains a reserve that is not accessed. This is not to say that there remains an ideal, Platonic form of the work that can never be materially realized, as early-mid 20th century understanding would have it, but only that there is an endless reserve of potential in any given work that allows it to manifest any number of ways. In this way, the "ineffable" quality of music; its inherent resistance to epistemologies that would attempt to nail it down, is a property of the object itself, not the human knower. Morton writes that this experience is best described as "melancholia," which is understood as the "default mode of subjectivity: a mode of object-like coexistence with other objects and the otherness of objects—touching them, touching the untouchable, dwelling on the dark side one can never know, living in endless twilight shadows."[218] Morton's account here is not so dissimilar from philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch's account of music's Charm. Charm is that elusive and meaning-defying quality of music; what makes it feel as though it can never be grasped in its entirety. It "has something nostalgic and precarious about it, some unknowable something having to do with insufficiency and

[217] Graham Harman, *Art and Objects* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020), 45.
[218] Timothy Morton, "Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2011): 176.

incompleteness, which heightens itself through the effect of time."[219] Charm is the feeling of being carried along by music, feeling as though it is shaping you even as it escapes your grasping to know it.

The ontological move to be made, then, is to simply extend the same understanding of the ineffability of musical works to their constituent objects, be they instruments, their components or resulting sounds, or how they contribute to formal structures of a work itself. The modules of *dust* are parts of a greater whole, but themselves not reducible to that whole. The same can be said of the instruments involved. Musical objects, be they works, movements, modules, or instruments, hold some reserve of potential that informs their interactions but remains out of reach. Philosopher Levi R. Bryant, whose work threads between the process philosophy of Manuel DeLanda and the phenomenology of Harman, describes this as an object's "virtual proper being," which denotes one half of a split object. Its virtual proper being is an object's powers and potentials, which stand at a difference from its sensual qualities, or, in Bryant's words, its "local manifestations." Thus, we can understand the bell plates of *dust* to be *two* objects, one that is the bell plate as it is encountered sensually in the world (by us or any other object), and one that powers these different manifestations: its "difference engine." Bryant cosigns the OOO idea of objects interpreting objects in a simplified way, writing that "in relating to other objects, there's a way in which our body reduces objects, simplifies them, as a target of its own aims, needs, and desires."[220] If there is an object-related error in percussion, then it is this simplification: the desire to hear an object only as we need it to be heard. The other half of this sin, however, could be the hubristic taking of credit for sounds and moments that we are only

[219] Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable,* trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 96.
[220] Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 92.

indirectly responsible for. Take for instance, a moment from the module of *dust* entitled "Resonance." In the set-up of the piece, the bell plates are hung over the two timpani in the main set-up. On these timpani are positioned two snare drums on their sides, with their resonant heads (the ones which the metal snares are laid over) facing the plates (see Figure 4.1). When the plates are struck by the percussionist, their reverberations excite the drum heads facing them, which in turn cause the snares to vibrate. These sympathetic vibrations are a sound that any drummer knows well, and one in fact that many go out of their way to eliminate through various tunings or dampening strategies. In Saunders's work, however, they become an aesthetic object in their own right. The buzzing of the snares is further modulated by how the bell plates are activated. When one bell plate rings, the snares buzz in a more-or-less continuous sound. When both plates are activated, the frequencies of the plates (which in my set-up are only a half-step apart) interfere with one another, the beating of which is heard in a regular pulse in the snares. Furthermore, Saunders also calls for the activation of a large Japanese *rin* tuned an octave higher than the plates. When all three resonant objects, both plates and the *rin*, the rhythm of the buzzing re mains regular but becomes asymmetrical.

Lastly, Saunders encourages the occasional picking up of one of the drums in order to hold it in closer proximity to the plate, which increases the volume and intensity of that drum's snares' vibrations. Critically, none of these sounds are caused directly by the percussionist, besides the initial striking of the plates or *rin*. What is heard instead are the objects of Saunders's set-up interpreting each other through their materials, frequencies, and timbral qualities. The way the snares buzz, finally, is not a sound that can be created by human touch: there is no beater or technique that would be able to harness the vibrations of the air that these snare heads require to

sound as they do in “Resonance.” The experience of this moment as a performer is first one of wonder, but then one of humility.

Figure 4.1 – The author’s set-up for Rebecca Saunders’s *dust for Solo Percussion* (2017-18).

The beater accesses the bell plate in a way that only the beater can, just as the vibration of the plate accesses the air, the air accesses the snare drum head, and the snare drum head accesses the metal wires themselves. An object-oriented ontology is built around these interactions, which are not subsumed under conceptual frameworks such as action or reduced to these relations entirely. Things access each other as only they can, from the buzzing of wires against a vibrating snare head to a percussionist whose intending of Saunders’s work brings these disparate elements together in a new aesthetic object. Drawing from the phenomenology of Alphonso

Lingis, Harman accounts for a "carpentry of things" that is built on an understanding of the world of objects existing at certain sensual levels. Lingis:

> A level is the sensory content of a figure that does not cease to hold the movement of perception when the movement lets go of the contours of that figure; it is a visible that extends unobserved, a sonority that is no longer listened to but that prolongs itself along with the sounds and the silences, a substantiality no longer palpated but that subtends the reliefs and contours felt—an objective before us that becomes a directive weighing on us.[221]

To Lingis, we move sensuously through the world encountering alterity, but this encounter is not one of rational organization, nor one of free intermingling. The things of the world that we encounter on a sensuous level, because we cannot exhaust them with our touch, direct us towards encountering them certain ways and not others. Furthermore, we can *only* access them in certain ways and not others by merit of our humanity. Interpreting Lingis, Harman writes that "what is most characteristic of Lingis's levels is that they are *not* a feature of human perception that follows us around wherever we go, but a feature of reality itself... the level defined by Paris is different for a scientist, a child, and a seagull, yet all of them explore the contours of the same city..."[222] As Harman notes with the inclusion of his seagull example, accessing certain levels of objects is something that extends to the nonhuman and even to the nonliving.

An object-oriented percussion ontology, one that takes equal stock of the interactions between nonhuman and human agents, is constructed and explored along these levels. In the final module of *dust* (in my version, at least), "Dry," the performer is asked to rub various grasses and brushes over the head of a timpano, itself covered in small, melodic-sounding pieces of stone

---

[221] Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 31.
[222] Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 67.

tile. Each brush encounters the same head, but differently, their resulting sounds being the evidence of this difference. The weight of mallet and stone on the tiles directs the timpano to respond in different ways: with a mallet one hears only the surface of the tile, with a stone one hears the depth of the drum begin to resonate in response. I close this chapter with the observation that percussion has long prided itself as having a seemingly endless access to all possible objects and sounds. This has, historically, been a claim that percussionists have used to set themselves apart from other instrumentalists. An object-oriented ontology of instrumentality, however, shows that there is nothing metaphysically unique that a percussionist does that a violinist does not similarly do in their own practice. If there is a difference, it is a difference in scale, not in kind, and this is evidenced by the increasing post-instrumental practices where non-percussionists too explore sonic objects and make them part of their own tradition. If there is a metaphysical, ontological difference between percussionists and other instrumentalists, it lies in percussion's ethical orientation to itself and its objects, not in the fact of these orientations in-and-of themselves. Latour, Harman, and Morton offer a fascinating line of thought that might help percussionists to conceive of themselves in a different metaphysical light. Within this framework percussionists are no longer heroic, iconoclastic, and liberating agents. Instead, they point towards what Eunjung Kim calls an "ethics of queer inhumanism" which emphasizes "proximity and copresence,"[223] or what Yves Citton terms "*to become-medium* [italics in original],"[224] a polysemic invocation that points to both our role within a milieu, our channeling of spiritual presence into reality, and our attendance to media forms. In both cases, the human

[223] Eunjung Kim, "Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2015): 302.
[224] Yves Citton, "Fictional Attachments and Literary Weavings in the Anthropocene," in *Latour and the Humanities*, ed. Rita Felski and Stephen Muecke (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2020), 217.

becomes a single object which plays a very specific role within a milieu of other objects. In the final chapter I will turn to the ethical implications and responsibilities this position presents.

Chapter 5 – Violence and the Ambiguity of Ontology

Despite the various turns and diversions taken, this dissertation has been primarily about ontology: on Being and human understanding of it. It has specifically been working towards an ontology of objects, and more specifically an ontology of objects as employed in percussion performance. Ontology, however, is a philosophical term that has fallen out of favor in the last half-century, and one that I assume some risk in picking back up again. Levinas, for example, whose thought has been so generative for many of the ideas in this dissertation, famously wrote that "Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power."[225] That, in other words, the ontological impulse is always an imperialistic effort to reduce an otherwise irreducible Other to the Same. Derrida, picking up Levinas's thought and developing it further, similarly writes that phenomenology and ontology are "philosophies of violence," incapable of "respecting the Being and meaning of the other." Thus, Derrida, continues, "the entire philosophical tradition... would make common cause with oppression and the totalitarianism of the same."[226] Ontology and the phenomenological tradition that seems to disclose it thus always reduce otherness to the egoistical subjectivity that constructs it, conforms it to its pre-developed systems, and ignores its difference in favor of its commonalities.

In his study of musical modernism, Edmund Mendelssohn traces this same ontological impulse; this working of power and violence, throughout the history of the 20th century, which he finds cemented in the oeuvres of composers such as Satie, Varèse, Boulez, and Cage. To Mendelssohn, as Derrida before him, ontology is the great imperializing thrust of Western

[225] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 46.
[226] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 91.

philosophy writ large. Ontology is founded upon, since Hegel, the "white will to dominate-dialecticize-master-*relever*..."[227] Because of its inherent motion to sublimate and reduce otherness to sameness, ontology to Mendelssohn is *always* Eurocentric, and thus cannot be successfully decolonized: "it is colonial, always already."[228] This is a major claim, and one that presents difficulties to the present dissertation, which holds as one of its aims exactly a kind of decolonization-through-reformed ontology. Still, despite the seeming difference between myself and Mendelssohn, I would say that we have more in common than difference. We both agree that the main thrust of modernism was this effacement of difference for the purpose of Euro-American-centrism, predicated along the lines of an abstract, "pure" Being. Percussion is one such vehicle of the imperializing, ontologizing mechanism Mendelssohn identifies. Though percussion is never discussed in depth in the context of his book, the percussive sounds of Varèse, Boulez, and Cage make frequent appearances as examples of sonic Otherness. This is the kind of mythology that I have sought to deconstruct: one in which difference and alterity is reduced to sameness along the lines of human action.

My insistence on remaining "ontological," so to speak, is not a philosophical stance but rather a practical one. Percussionists every day encounter the objects of their artform. The way that they approach, encounter, and engage with them is partially threaded along the lines of how they understand what the instrument *is*, and, more abstractly, what their *artform is* in relation to them. Just as humans encounter the objects of the world *as objects* rather than floating qualities or amorphous signifiers, so too do humans ontologize each time their thought encounters difference. It is true, that such ontologizing *can* be a power play, or *can* be violence, as Levinas

[227] Edmund Mendelssohn, *White Musical Mythologies: Sonic Presence in Modernism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023), 34.
[228] Ibid., 28.

and Derrida insist, but even with these warnings it is not something that consciousness can refrain from entirely. Rather than effacing ontology altogether, which I argue is an impossible ask from a performer-practitioner's perspective, I join the choir of "recent scholarship that attempts to reconceive ontology beyond Euro-western centeredness."[229] Not because I hold any fidelity to a concept like "the West" or its philosophical heritage, but because as a percussionist who inhabits the world and its things every day, I cannot conceive of how to do so without attempting to understand their being.

Ontology-as-violence, then, is ambiguous. It is something that to a certain extent human consciousness does implicitly, and cannot necessarily be refrained from in practical life, but nonetheless carries with it risks of imperialism and effacement. Critiquing Derrida and other philosophers who rely heavily on themes and imagery of violence in their work, Ann Murphy argues that violence itself cannot stand a single, unified ideology, but instead carries with it an ambivalent motion. Furthermore, language invoking violence further normalizes violence as an "unavoidable destiny rather than a historically contingent one."[230] To Murphy, the site of ethics and ontology is not *écriture*, as Mendelssohn argues, but the body. "If the body marks an ambiguous intertwining of ethics and ontology," she writes, "it is not in spite of this ambiguity that we respond to the provocation of the other, but because of it."[231] Ethics and ontology are thus intertwined: we respond to the other based on what we understand them to be and how we understand ourselves to be. My ontology then, contra the totalizing ontology that Mendelssohn

[229] Ibid., 27-28.
[230] Ann V. Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 22.
[231] Ibid., 98-99.

and I both share as a target, is a kind of "ethical ontology," where within such an ontology lies a "provocation to ethics."[232]

This chapter is organized into three parts. The first two identify two modes of violence which percussion seems inextricable from: the physical violence of percussive action, famously identified by John Mowitt as "drumming, beating, striking," and the violence of material appropriation. The first section contends that the act of drumming itself is inscribed with violence: the body itself becomes more violent in its drumming. The second section considers the act of appropriating objects and how, just as Mendelssohn contends, percussion tends to elide difference in preference for the same. The third section makes another ontological turn, but this time a feminist one, towards the social ontology of the body, and extends feminist ontologies of the body and human life to the nonhuman and inanimate. I argue that, rather than abjuring against ontology altogether, feminist ontologies may help percussionists move more ethically through the violence that the nature of their artform relies on.

The Catachresis of the Skin

At first glance, elevating violence to a metaphysical grounding might seem like an adventurous leap. When discussing the idea of this chapter with a colleague and fellow percussionist, they brought up the helpful observation that violence, popularly understood, is employed for the sake of harm; if not pre-meditated then at least intentional. Outside the bounds of theater, perhaps, no percussionist has ever sought out to break a drum head or stick on purpose in practice or performance. An additional criticism against violence as ontological concept, again

[232] Ibid., 99.

hedged by the same colleague, might be that, even when a percussive object *does* break, is it really so different from an E string snapping on a violin? The difference, I will show, lies not only in the accident and the tragedy of an object breaking, be it drum head or violin string, but by an instrumentalist's orientation to this breaking. I will gambit that there is something, metaphysically speaking, about a drum head, pipe, or other percussion instrument that obfuscates their breakability; that invites violence and harm in a way that a violin string does not. On a practical level, this is something percussionists have accounted for over the decades of the practice's material development. Perhaps a paradigmatic example is the fact that DCI (Drum Corps International) snare drum heads are made of Kevlar, the same synthetic fiber used in the production of bullet-proof vests. The marching arts require drum heads that are not only weather-resistant, but also ones that can absorb the greatest amount of punishment found anywhere in the percussive arts. This is, in a novel way, a re-inscription of military history on the art form: one that simultaneously invites more violence but minimizes its effects.

However, technological innovation which makes materials more durable does not address the act of violence itself, and perhaps in some ways encourages it. For, in creating materials that can absorb more punishment, we further encourage the human actor to indulge in this punishing. Playing on materials that sacrifice sonic complexity for durability conditions percussionists to touch the world and experience it as more resistant to their violence than most of it really is, making it all the more tragic when something finally breaks. Perhaps the most tragic account is the death of Robert Champion, a Florida A&M University drum major who was beaten to death by his colleagues as a part of a marching band hazing ritual. As Steven Schick tells the story:

> On 19 November 2011, Florida A&M University drum major Robert Champion was beaten to death. As a part of an initiation process, Cham- pion boarded the band's infamous "Bus C," where he was forced to sit in the "hot seat." Champion leaned forward and wrapped himself in a blanket while members of the band's drum line played cadences on his back. He then walked the gauntlet from the front to the back of the bus—a process referred to as "crossing over." Along the way, he was again beaten repeatedly with sticks and bass drum mallets. Once done with the ritual, he asked for a glass of water, promptly vomited, and died.[233]

Schick poses the question: to what extent is the art of percussion responsible for Champion's death? Most percussionists, Schick says, would say "not at all." Schick's counterpoint to his hypothetical colleagues is that "if Champion had walked into a bus of college-age violists instead of percussionists, he'd be alive today."[234] Schick then closes his essay with a titillating litany of directions an understanding of Champion's death might take the percussion community, from cultural appropriation to hyper-masculine virtuosity to intellectual and cultural conformism. Bill Solomon recasts this wide net when he writes that

> To consider Champion's death at the hands of drummers, who beat his body with drum sticks—both at once musical instruments and blunt objects—one must come to understand how several strands are interrelated: the violent history of drumming as a technology of warfare; the relationship between the body (in this instance, a black, queer, and male body) and the drum as an instrument; and violent performativity constantly reenacted through the musical embodiment of violent gestures.[235]

To Solomon, the phenomenology of a snare drum is rooted in violence not only because of its former military application, but because the instrument itself calls to be performed via

---

[233] Steven Schick, "Meandering," *The Modern Percussion Revolution: Journeys of a Progressive Artist,* ed. Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 211.
[234] Ibid., 212.
[235] Bill Solomon, "Touching, Rubbing, and Stroking: Rehabilitation of the snare drum through queer erotics," Presented at the Music and Erotics Conference, University of Pittsburgh (2019), 2.

violent embodiment. The performance of a snare drum, as discussed in Chapter 3, is often a percussionist's first contact with percussion. Pedagogically speaking, it is the instrument which gives the greatest variety of response and feedback when learning to control the motion and balancing of a drum stroke. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, it is one of the most ubiquitous percussion instruments, and thus the easiest to acquire for students. However, I agree with Schick and Solomon in understanding the modality of playing the snare drum as itself often aggressive. It is characterized as "beating" and "striking," and this orientation of aggression becomes the point of origin for many young percussionists. As discussed in Chapter 3, Solomon's antidote to this is a queer phenomenology of a snare drum, one in which the percussionist encounters the object not on the grounds of its military origin. Rather than "beating" and "striking," the snare drum can become more intimately known through more erotic techniques, such as "rubbing" and "stroking." Queer erotics can thus be a rehabilitative methodology. At the very least, it restores a sense of tactility to a percussion instrument that military tradition has in some ways reduced to a signifier of warfare. Solomon's erotics seems to restore a sense of the drum not only as an object but as a body in-and-of itself.

John Mowitt stakes a similar claim, arguing that the encounter of a drum skin bears some unconscious recognition that one also has skin, and thus the drum becomes more body-like. Striking one's own skin, be it in applause or in the reflexive swatting of a mosquito, casts a violent light on the reciprocity of touch. As Mowitt puts it, "the reflexivity that positions the body as both the subject and object of beating suggests... that percussion comes to the body neither from outside nor from afar."[236] To Mowitt, something of this reflexivity is maintained when the skin is no longer one's own, but is instead an animal's, stretched over a resonating

[236] John Mowitt, *Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 16.

cavity and now struck with sticks. However, something is also lost in this transformation, where the dead skin of an animal seems to invite violence where living skin abjures it. As Dipesh Chakrabarty states, human cruelty is always accompanied by a "certain lack of recognition," and it was this lack which allowed the body of Robert Champion to achieve the same phenomenal status as a drum head.[237]

Queer erotics and the queer percussion practices that have emerged in the past decade or so are often centered around rejection of the hyper-masculine concepts of violence and virtuosity in favor of alternatives. There is something to be said for the understanding such a practice gives percussionists: the encounter of an instrument is always conditioned by a certain orientation one has assumed, consciously or not. However, a bifurcation between violence/masculinity/virtuosity/normativity and queerness/sensitivity/reciprocity/care on one side is at the very least, an unnecessary ceding of territory by percussionists who would like to see a more compassionate and thoughtful art form, and at most a philosophical discrimination that institutes a different form of intellectual hierarchy, and one that remains anthropocentric. In other words, whether or not we encounter a snare drum as a military tool or an object of queer erotics, it remains a mere vessel for human intention rather than an agent in its own right. Excluding traditional manifestations of percussion (read: masculine and virtuosic) conflates aesthetic experience with ethical norms. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht argues precisely against this conflation, asserting that the insistence on excluding violence from aesthetic consideration disqualifies from serious analysis not only violent tragedies such as warfare and traffic accidents but also most sporting events. "Allowing the association of aesthetic experience with violence," he writes, "helps us understand why certain phenomena and events turn out to be so irresistibly

[237] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 141.

fascinating for us—although we know that, at least in some of these cases, such 'beauty' accompanies the destruction of lives."[238] To cordon off certain percussion practices as valorizing and others as wholesale problematic prevents the assembling of an ontology that is inclusive of the bodily euphoria of playing fast, loud, and with precision, as well as the aesthetic pleasure experienced in watching someone do so.

A percussion ontology centered on its objects points towards such an inclusive grounding. This is not to say that cultural orientation bears no meaning or significance on how the practice defines itself. Subjectivity, as we have shown in the previous chapter, cannot help but encounter objects based on its own anthropomorphism, and the style of this anthropomorphism cannot help but be centered in and conditioned by the culture that the interpreting subject constituted itself through. Previous ontological systems, such as those developed by 20th century phenomenology, would see culture as an unfortunate hindrance to arriving at a true understanding of Being. In Heidegger's case the relationship to culture is even more unfortunate, as one culture's apprehension of Being (namely German) came to stand in for the universal. We make a similar mistake, I think, when percussionists conflate aesthetic or political difference with ontological difference. By this, I refer to modernist percussionists' tendency in particular to dismiss practices that don't share their political or aesthetic investments as being "of no interest" or "politically, a waste of time."[239] This is ontology masquerading as aesthetics and politics. Contra this modernist conflation, I argue that any ontological system must be inclusive of objects that the philosopher themselves might find distasteful or problematic.

---

[238] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 115.

[239] Stuart Saunders Smith, quoted in Bill Sallak, "On the Nature of Percussion Masterworks," in *The Modern Percussion Revolution,* ed. Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 194.

In his "The Metaphysical in Man," Merleau-Ponty writes that human exploration of the metaphysical world is similar to a musician beginning to explore an unfamiliar work. It is an embodied practice; "the taking up by each, *as best he can,* of the acts of others, reactivating from ambiguous signs an experience which is not his own, appropriating a structure... of which he forms no distinct concept but which he puts together as an experienced pianist deciphers an unknown piece of music..."[240] Merleau-Ponty's apt metaphor can be inverted: rather than metaphysics being like music we can understand music *as* metaphysics. Merleau-Ponty's example of the musical work is a classic one, but can just as easily be transferred to a different musical object, for example, an instrument such as the marimba. We encounter the marimba *as best we can* based on our previous experiences and significations. The modernist encounters the marimba as an abstracted assemblage of rosewood and metal. The neo-Romanticist encounters it as a percussionist's entryway to a certain Western tradition. A Mexican folkloric marimbist may encounter the instrument as heritage and connection to indigenous land. None of these approaches exhaust the concept of the marimba, nor even a particular marimba. It is exactly this fact that each approach is an interpretation of the same, withdrawn object; that each approach accesses certain levels of a thing but fails to access others, that can decenter percussionists from their own practice.

Cultural Levels: Instrumentality vs. Prophood

Violence is not reducible only to physical harm. Violence can also manifest in the form of appropriation, dispossession, or misuse. In our own *episteme* we identify these forms of

[240] Merleau Ponty, *Sense and Non-sense,* trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, IL. Northwestern University Press, 1971), 93.

violence as occurring within a colonial and often racialized framework. As noted in Anthony Tan's article on cultural objects, percussion is a musical practice that is perhaps uniquely incriminated in colonial history: instruments from all over the world are gathered, mass-produced, stripped of cultural context, and employed by Western percussionists in abstract musical works. This narrative, it goes without saying, is paradigmatically colonial. On the other hand, however, there is truth content to percussionists' narratives about global connection. Many percussionists, especially older ones, recount how encounter with global cultures that produce the percussion instruments they use in some ways helped to rescue them from what felt like a crushingly Euro-centric paradigm. The percussion group Nexus is perhaps the foremost example of this, whose members are famous for having eclectic multi-cultural percussion practices.[241]

The philosophical difficulty facing percussion with regards to cultural violence is engaging with both sides of this problem sincerely. Engaging with instruments outside of one's own culture, as any percussionist must inevitably do, will include both a legacy of effacement and a form of cross-cultural dialogue. The positions on both side of the current discourse, I feel, are unsatisfying. On one hand, there is the dated, modernist sentiment that instruments are merely sonic objects to be manipulated by the composer or performer, and that rejecting tradition is an essential part of that process. On the same side of the argument, there is the updated (often American) argument that the instruments are instances of true cultural exchange and dialogue: a meeting of "East and West" that transcends such divisions while keeping their identities intact. On the other hand, is the valid critique that *both* of these narratives are often told by the Western practitioners, and thus carry with them Euro-western centrism (we remember Roger Turner's "world music held together by Western glue"). More concerning to me, however, is that

[241] Nexus members Bob Becker is famed and Russell Hartenberger in particular are famous for their experiences with North Indian *tabla* playing and the music of the Ewe people of West African respectively.

percussionists seem to be trying to solve these debates internally. What comes to mind is a discussion of Xenakis's *Okho* (1989) during a presentation at the 2022 Transplanted Roots Percussion Research Symposium (which coincided with Xenakis's centennial, which was celebrated that same weekend). Xenakis's work is scored for three *djembes*, and was commissioned to celebrate the bicentennial of the French Revolution. The case of *Okho* remains a rich site of analysis, and Western percussionists are rightly apprehensive about programming the work due to its overt, though ambiguous, colonial undertones.[242] At Transplanted Roots I recall a room full of almost entirely white, North and Central American percussionists anxiously arguing over whether the piece is an asset or liability to the repertoire. Nowhere present was any West African voice to comment. However, the presentation included two performances, via YouTube, that could not be denied: one performance of *Okho* by a trio of Euro-American percussionists and one performance of West African *djembe* music by master drummer Mamady Keïta. The difference in the richness and quality of the sounds between these performances was striking, and I remember remarking that to my ear they did not even sound like the same instrument. Keïta's performance indeed made me feel as though perhaps we were arguing and hand-wringing over the wrong thing. Perhaps the violence inherent in percussion's cultural appropriation is not a matter of identity or ownership, but rather a broader question of how a percussionist is oriented towards the object in question, and what levels of the object are accessed.

An object-oriented ontology of percussion re-centers the discussion of appropriation around access and depth rather than identity. The construction of this theory feels somewhat like

[242] Much of the debate of the piece is whether Xenakis intends to treat the djembe as a mere sonic object, which much of his modernist practice would endorse, or whether the composition is itself a critique of French colonial practice in West Africa, which his political activism would also support.

walking a conceptual tightrope. On one hand, defining a practice's ontology based solely on culture runs the risk of essentializing or even Orientalizing a cultural Other. Many ethnomusicologists today are struggling with a historical practice that has, to certain extents, profited off of a kind of epistemological colonization of non-European musical traditions. On the other hand, taking a sonic, cultural object and treating it as mere material exercises a different but no less harmful kind of colonial dispossession. Percussionists find themselves in the uncomfortable position of fighting this war on two fronts. One useful example might be Steve Reich's *Drumming*. That this work sits within the percussion repertoire both as a referent to an *idea* of West African drumming (note: nothing in its form references West African drumming proper) and as a minimalist abstraction and distillation of this idea shows the complexity of the situation. The difficulty of understanding the object we hold in our hands, be it one of *Drumming*'s pairs of bongos or the work itself lies in a Latourian insistence that nothing can be disqualified from considering the object in question. Cultural apprehension of an object is something that is carried out by an acculturated subject. However, in percussion we find that the objects (be they works, instruments, or mallets) are shared across cultures, and even across orientations within cultures. Working from an object-oriented standpoint, it is my contention that subjective apprehension, being always a type of interpretation, cannot be the basis of determining the entirety of an object's ontology, and thus its ethical usage. The modernist does not get to claim that their abstract appropriation of the instrument frees it from its cultural bindings to better disclose its truth content. Nor, however, is this appropriation fully disqualified from validity and reality: the object is still being accessed and resisting in turn, and thus is real. Extending ontological validity to colonial appropriation is an uncomfortable step, but one that I believe brings us to a more nuanced epistemological ground once we have taken it. The

alternative appears to be the re-inscription of an ontological hierarchy where the indigenous culture, by nature of its indigeneity, defines what the instrument can and cannot be, or vice versa, where the colonizing culture sets the terms by disenchanting and abstracting said instrument. The trap in this line of thinking is that in order for this hierarchy to exist a vast amount of simplification is done with regards to both the indigenous and colonial cultures in question. Non-Euro-American traditions, themselves vibrant, non-monolithic, and often in conflict with themselves, are orientalized as an alterity that presents wholeness in contrast with Western music's complexity and nuance.[243] Thus, acknowledging colonial appropriation's imperfect and non-exhaustive access of an object might help to extend that same position of dynamism and contingency to lived indigenous and diasporic practices.

Cultural orientation shapes the interpretation of an object, but does not exhaust or define this object. What then is actually being interpreted? Harman argues that every object is bifurcated into two distinct parts: a real object, which withdraws from all contact, and a sensual object, which is constantly awash in connections with, interpretations of, and appropriations by other objects. If we return to the *djembe* of *Okho*, we encounter not a single object but instead an entangled nest of them. The goat-skin head, mahogany body, and taught rope are all objects in their own rights, and, similarly to the musical work discussed in the last chapter, are not exhausted by their coming together to constitute the djembe. At this point the *djembe* is still not an instrument. It could just as easily serve as a nightstand, or, if inverted, a pot for a large plant.

[243] The view of non-Western musical practices as somehow less nuanced or more homogenous is a myth that continues into the present day of percussion practice. One such example is Spanish percussionist Miquel Bernat's remark that he often chooses more homogenous mallets when he plays music "in an 'afro' style," or when "it is more ethnic and continuous without much need for nuance." Miquel Bernat, quoted in "Roundtable: Mallets on the Marimba and Vibraphone: Christian Dierstein in conversation with Miquel Bernat, Pedro Carneiro, Jean Geoffroy and Emmanuel Séjourné," in *The Techniques of Percussion Playing: Mallets, Implements and Applications*, ed. Christian Dierstein, Michel Roth, and Jens Ruland (Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 2018), 208. The point is not that continuous music does not benefit from homogeneous mallets, but that the "lack of nuance" is attributed to a racialized and ethnic understanding of the music.

It becomes an instrument only through the sonic activation of its elements. The question then seems to be: what is gained when an instrument is used as-intended versus when it is not? Boris Groys writes convincingly that much of the modern concept of the "new" is about this dividing line between what he terms "cultural valorization" and the "profane."[244] The former describes a practice or aesthetic that a culture deems valuable, and the latter describes that which sits outside of this value system. The "new," then, is when elements of the profane are able to cross the boundary and inscribe themselves instead as valorization. With our example of the *djembe*, playing the instrument as intended would serve as an example of valorization, while using it as a nightstand would be, by most accounts, profane. The history of Western percussion in modernity could very well be analyzed along this framework. The nightstand vs. instrument example, however, does not account for a similar divide: that is, that instruments can be played in different ways that might themselves sit on opposite sides of the valorized/profane divide. Taking the same *djembe* and executing traditional West African techniques or dance patterns is a distinctly different experience than striking the same object with a medium-hard vibraphone mallet. For that matter, as we see in the example of Transplanted Roots, the sound of a djembe in the hands of Euro-American percussionists versus those of Mamady Keïta presents expertise as yet another divide. Against modernist abstraction or an extension of the metaphysics of the "found sound" to all sonic objects, I argue that we gain more from treating the sonic objects of the world as instruments; as objects, not sounds, and objects that can be known with more or less intimacy and depth. Nothing is lost, I think, from admitting that the levels of a djembe in the hands of a West African master drummer are interpreted better than in the hands of a student parsing through the notation of Xenakis. To return to Morton's concept of tuning: "some interpretations

[244] See Boris Groys, *On the New*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2014).

are better than others, since there are real objects. Like in jazz, a better solo would reveal something about the metal and curvature and the size and the spittle of the trumpet; a good solo is when the instrument takes you over."[245] Cultures share objects, but these cultures somehow seem to access different objects by nature of the quality of their interpretations. The quality of these interpretations is dependent on the levels of the object that are accessed. Mamady Keïta accesses levels of the djembe that only a small number of musicians in the world can. The sharpness of his slaps, the depth of his bass notes, and the richness of his tones demonstrate this. Furthermore, West African, and specifically Malian culture, is one that has developed in tandem with the instrument. Centuries of history has rendered an understanding of what material levels are accessed by using certain woods, certain skins, certain dimensions. Additional levels are accessed by understanding when the djembe is used in African culture: for what rituals, in which seasons, and by whom is it played. Levels are not only material, but cultural, and the same way Morton's trumpet solo is best interpreted in a way that brings to life as many levels of the instrument as possible, the same can be said of cultural usage.

I am a middling *djembe* player, and so in the interest of not speculating about a culture I am only passingly familiar with, I would like to turn to a non-Western musical practice that I have developed a certain intimacy with over the last four years, namely Persian classical music. I've documented my encounter with the Persian *tombak*, or *zarb*, elsewhere.[246] The purpose of that essay was to highlight that single works or practitioners cannot stand in as cultural ambassadors between Western and non-Western practices. One cannot learn *tombak* in a year in order to play Georges Aperghis's *Le corps à corps* and pass that off as an experience that is

[245] Morton, *Realist Magic*, 22-23.
[246] See Michael Jones, "Universalism and Fragmentation in Percussion Practice," (MA Thesis, University of California San Diego, 2020).

anything but superficially Persian. Similar to my experience at Transplanted Roots, watching a Euro-American performer perform the Aperghis versus watching a performer like Pejman Hadadi improvise on the *tombak* illustrates how these two performances access different levels of the drum. Since then I have gone on to similarly study the *santour,* a Persian hammered dulcimer. This has opened a number of additional doors into Persian classical music that were closed to me as exclusively a *tombak* player: microtonal tunings, new modes and *dastgahs,* extensive *mezrabi* (*santour* hammers) technique, and a wealth of notated repertoire and improvisation based thereon. What has surprised me the most, however, is how developing a practice on the *santour* has impacted my understanding of the *tombak*. I've now sat on the other side of the accompaniment, and have gained a sensibility for what accompaniment patterns and techniques offer supplemental energy, and conversely, which get in the way. Learning *santour* has helped me to access new levels of the *tombak* that were previously unavailable to me.

Beyond this, parsing the notation of Persian music's *Radif* has bled into my interpretation of notation in general. The *Radif* is notated in conventional Western notation (with Persian supplemental elements where needed). My first attempt was a faithful execution of the rhythms I saw on the page. After a gentle admonishment, my instructor, Keyavash Nourai, played the same page to wildly different effect. It is safe to say that, though looking at the same notation, certain rhythmic fragments simply signified different rhythmic figures than what I was used to. We can quickly take inventory of the objects present in this tableau. There is my *santour,* the *Radif* notation, the *Radif* as sounded, and then conventional Western notation more broadly. Each of these objects rub against each other and interpret each other without exhausting each other.

Based on one's cultural orientations, then, certain levels of an object are available more readily to some users than others. In the hands of a Persian musician, a *tombak* is a site of

tradition but also one of innovation. The walnut of the body and the camel skin of the membrane have developed in tandem with the rhythms and melodies of the *Radif,* but have also been developed further by each subsequent generation of musicians. To a Western musician, most often the *tombak* is gathered under the generic heading of "hand drum," or, a level deeper, is a vague reference to Persian music, though more often the subject's *idea* of Persian music rather than Persian music proper. This divide contributes to the separation between instrumentality and what I term "prophood." When an instrument can be activated so that the performer and audience become lost in the allure of its qualities, then that object can be said to be instrumentalized. This is true both for the *tombak* as for the railroad spike, bird call, drum stick, Thai gong, or tin can. An object becomes an instrument when, through a reciprocal process with its method of activation, its sounding action brings attention to the materiality of the object. Instrumentality is thus an experience of presence: an almost mystical experience of being held by an object's allure without direct recourse to meaning. On the other hand, an object becomes a prop when it is used exactly for the purpose of theatrical context and meaning: where the drum really isn't a drum anymore, as Stene's dissertation title alludes to. Andrew Sofer writes that an object doesn't become a prop until an actor (or performer more broadly) does something with it to ascribe it additional levels of signification. An object's prophood is thus "mediated both by the gestures of the of the individual actor who handles the object," but also "the horizon of interpretation available to historically situated spectators at a given time."[247] A drum thus can symbolize any number of meanings: violence, ethnic otherness, or irony, depending on the continuum of signification between the performer, object, and audience. The difference between

[247] Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 61.

instrumentality and prophood is not a binary but a spectrum: every use of an object in performance has some undertone of theatricality. However, navigating this spectrum is at the heart of issues of cultural appropriation facing percussionists today. The critical difference between an instrument and a prop is one of orientation. When hearing an instrument, we are first and foremost drawn to the sound of the instrument, its timbre, intonation, volume, etc. Only then do we begin to hear how this object's presence might fit within the greater context of a musical work. We hear the tone of a violin before we are able to recognize a "Chaconne," even if we have been primed to expect one. With a prop, the object's sonic presence is circumscribed in order to point towards a greater contextual or conceptual meaning.

The difference can be subtle. I think most recently to a performance I saw by Matt LeVeque. In the course of performing Jack Herscowitz's *we bound our skin and suspended the frame* (2023), LeVeque was required him to rub various implements on a small frame drum. A critical moment was when LeVeque activated the drum with a small *rute*, or a bundle of dried grass often used as a brush. Slowly, LeVeque changed his hand position on the brush so that, rather than holding it with a conventional grip, with thumb and forefinger pointing towards the tip, he held it with his forefinger and thumb pointing towards the butt of the mallet, the rubbing thus became a kind of stirring motion. At this moment the co-activation of brush and mallet was reduced, as only the very tips of the brush touched the instrument. The brush had become something else: not a sonic activator but some kind of referent to the body or of sonic activation itself. The musical moment became no longer about the presence of the sound of the drum and brush but about LeVeque's usage of them, and provided a compelling aesthetic and theatrical experience. Props and instruments are thus bivalent: an object can be both at the same time. To recall Bill Solomon's queer erotics of the snare drum in Sarah Hennies *Psalm 2,* the snare drum

is an instrument in its sonic activation and material reciprocity, but it is also a prop: a deconstruction of the militaristic context we most often find snare drums in. Every object within the world of percussion bears this duality. On one side is the sonic presence of an instrument, developed within the contexts of a culture, and on the other is the theatrical transposition of this presence (or its conspicuous absence) into a different context, and often into a non-sonic paradigm.

The danger of prophood comes when it is a product of ignorance rather than intention. One example of such ignorance might be when one employs an object for the use of a percussion performance, but does not have the technical expertise or cultural knowledge to access the deeper levels of an object. This is a behavior that modernist ideology has largely encouraged: to apprehend an object not based on its culture or history but instead as a tool to create the new. This effect has yielded many beautiful aesthetic moments of the 20th century, but so too has it diminished a depth of understanding not only of objects but of the cultures they come from. Once one knows how an object is used indigenously, it becomes more difficult (but by no means impossible) to use the object as a prop, because the experience of it as an instrument is often more aesthetically compelling; is more inviting of future engagement. When an object cannot be activated in such a way as to produce itself as an instrument, then it remains a prop. In its prophood, however, we experience a different kind of presence, one that foregrounds the context it is in, be that the *mise-en-scène* or the specific performer-character that uses it. I would certainly not go so far as to say that the relationship with a prop is not reciprocal – certainly any actor in the world would disprove that theory with a wave of the hand. However, I maintain a sense that percussionists lose something critical to their practice; that they lose some ethical

connection when the instruments in their hands are no longer instruments bathed in sonic presence, but are only vessels of irony, subversion, novelty, innovation, and iconoclasm.[248]

This divide holds consequences for percussionists who describe their work as inter or multi-disciplinary. Historically, percussionists have seen affairs with other disciplines as something to be celebrated. At the Percussive Art Society International Convention, the new music concerts are often centered around themes of "Percussion and....": percussion and voice, percussion and movement, percussion and theater, etc. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of percussionistic exceptionalism is that percussionists can walk more freely into other disciplines than other instruments, an idea happily co-signed by modernist composers like Georges Aperghis or Vinko Globokar in Europe, or Stuart Saunders Smith in the United States. The conflation of these disciplines, I argue, is a result of the inherent tension within the objects of percussion between their instrumentality and their prophood. As a result, entire subdisciplines have congealed around the idea of the "actor-percussionist" or the "theatrical percussionist." What is lost by appending these hyphenated words to the practice of being *just* a percussionist? Certainly nothing *a priori,* but in practice it seems the ethical, intersubjective grounding of touch is often lost in favor of superficial prophood. A drum is always more than a drum, it's true, but if certain levels of the drum are not activated, or are not even known to exist, then it seems to me that the relationship between the performer and object is fundamentally extractive rather than reciprocal. Bernhard Wulff notes this when he writes that "an instrument enters into a dialogue with the performing musician; every instrument has an essence, a personality and a dignity ..."[249] Wulff

[248] Roger Turner feels the tension between sonic presence and theatrical prophood when he discusses the chains in his instrument collection. He writes that though they sound beautiful, they were "just not something to deploy with Black American jazz artists" due to the unavoidable reference to the history of slavery and racism in the US. Roger Turner, *Junk Percussion,* 56.

[249] Bernhard Wulff, "Mallets and Beaters," 30.

continues that no composer, no work, has the right to violate this dignity. This is particularly prescient when considering that many instruments of percussion are from colonized cultures. Taking care with an instrument, learning its levels, and entering into reciprocity with it, is thus not just about an individual instrument's dignity but about an ethical orientation towards decolonization. Too often the "percussion and..." structure leaps over this process of connection for the sake of a theatrical motion. Thus, I would argue that in many cases voice, theater, movement, etc., often, but not always, get in the way of meaningful percussive contact with an object.

In the past I have termed this process of coming to engage with an object and the depths of its levels as beginning with the aesthetic experience of interest, as theorized by Sianne Ngai.[250] I maintain that interest is an important affect when it comes to engaging with an instrument for the first time, but interest is always a judgment that is deferred, and that judgment must eventually be made. In recent days, I've begun to reframe this same experience along the lines of Hartmun Rosa's concept of resonance, discussed previously. Rosa himself does not explore resonances between cultures in his own book, but this work is taken up by Bareez Majid and Mathijs Peters. Majid and Peters argue that resonance theory, because of its emphasis on uncontrolled relational experience with the things of the world, can contribute to building what they term "intercultural resonance."[251] They use as an example the work of Iranian-Kurdish *kamancheh* (a Persian string instrument) player Kayhan Kalhor and specifically his album *Silent City,* performed with American string quartet Brooklyn Rider.[252] The album is laden with socio-

[250] See Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
[251] Majid and Peters, *Exploring Hartmut Rosa's Concept of Resonance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 151.
[252] The album also features musicians Jeff Beecher (double bass), Mark Suter (percussion), and Siamak Aghaei (*tombak* and *santur*).

political layers, composed in commemoration of the chemical bombardment of the Kurdish city of Halabja in 1988. Majid and Peters argue that the work resonates outward across cultures, but nonetheless, and importantly, "does not completely transcend cultural and traditional boundaries."[253] The music itself, laden with Kurdish melodies, is able to hold a specifically powerful force in the ears of Kurdistani listeners, but the effect of the music is not exclusive to them. Majid and Peters make the point that much of the album is written in the Iranian-Kurdish mode *dastgah-e-shur*, which is a mode shared by a number of musical cultures that border traditional Kurdish territory. The presence of this mode, they argue, ensures that "the album's resonating dimensions are therefore able to affectively transmit a sense of the 1988 tragedy to various international audiences."[254] In other words, Kalhor's work is accessed along various resonant levels: Kurdistani listeners hear the music in one way, other Middle Eastern ethnicities hear it in another through their recognition of *shur*, and non-Middle Eastern listeners hear it another way still.

Percussion instruments, I argue, operate very similarly along this spectrum of resonance. The sonic presence of an instrument holds a certain place in the ears of its indigenous culture, but can nonetheless be experienced along the lines of resonance by listeners from different backgrounds. The question, then, is what is done with this experience of resonance, or as Majid and Peters put it, the experience of something "clicking."[255] No single culture can exhaust the potential of a cultural object, but one can develop a closer sense of resonance and intimacy with an object the more levels they can activate. Violence ensues when the subject dictates this relationship on their own terms; when they approach the object with an instrumental logic and *a*

[253] Majid and Peters, *Exploring*, 152.
[254] Ibid.
[255] Ibid., 3.

priori set the terms of their engagement. Violence also ensues when, as a result of this ignorance, physical harm is done to the object in question. Too often an instrument is reduced to a prophood that centers the theatrical action of violence in itself: in the world of percussion it is very easy to do so; the theater of violence is present in every drum stroke one makes.

Thus, to summarize, the use of an instrument from an indigenous culture is not in-and-of-itself a violent act. Furthermore, each instrument offers a depth of resonance that is not exhausted by nor defined by its indigenous culture. What indigenous practices do offer is a deeper or alternative understanding of an instrument's levels; levels that are situated within a cultural framework and that have material consequences in the creation of and performance with these instruments. Practitioners from colonial cultures, however, can similarly access levels of resonance – indeed the need for decolonization demands that they do so. When they do not, the instrumentality of the object, its levels of culture and resonance, are reduced to prophood. The instruments, each with their own history, become mere theatrical props on a Western stage, and, often, the theatrical effect in question is the catharsis of violence. So it is in the struggle between the body and the *tombak* in *Le corps à corps,* and so it is with the body itself in Globokar's *?Corporel.* Violence and its resulting theater, indeed the aesthetic enjoyment of this kind of theater (which we see in athletics all the time), is endemic to percussion. It is present at every drum stroke. Seeking resonance with and renouncing total mastery of an object mitigates this violence through a development of reciprocity: both with the instrument itself, but also with the material it is made of, the culture it has developed within, and the music it has been made to perform.

On Breaking a Drum Head

Percussionists spend every day of their lives striking objects. For the most part this activity doesn't require a second thought: it's simply what one does as a member of the occupation. The instruments, like Heidegger's hammer, recede into the intentionality of the percussionist, who feels them, through touch, as extensions of the body and artistic self. The striking of these objects is what makes them vibrate, what makes them sing. Furthermore, in order to access the fullness of an object, such as a drum, it must be struck with a certain amount of force. A percussion instrument is said to sound its best when the beating it takes is forceful enough to excite the full material body of the instrument. It should come as no surprise, then, that these objects which are the targets of percussive force inevitably break. And yet, no percussionist prior to a performance would say that they *expected* a drum head to break or a marimba bar to crack. Despite the fact of its inevitability, the shattering of a percussion instrument is always a surprise. The breaking's inevitability is only recognized in retrospect. Heidegger tells us that when a hammer breaks we finally see it in its objective presence. In the spirit of reciprocity, however, we can say that the subject sees themselves, too, or at least their activity, in a similar light. When a drumhead breaks we don't just learn about the fibers of the drum head or the anatomy of the drum, but also perceive the drum stroke itself in this same presence: force, contact, and in this light, damage.

The phenomenon of a percussion instrument breaking falls under what phenomenologist Max Scheler calls "the tragic." To experience the tragic is to bear witness not just to some misfortune, but to see how the world is constructed. That is to say, to Scheler, the tragic is not a function of interpretation but rather a seeming property of the objects themselves. The tragic is given by happenings "like a heavy breath, or seems like an obscure glimmering that surrounds

them. In it a specific feature of the world's makeup appears before us, and not a condition of our own ego, nor its experience of compassion and fear."[256] Interestingly, then, the tragic to Scheler is an experience of realism, not an idealist projection onto the things and events of the world. The tragic, cannot be fully understood as the feelings of compassion and grief that accompany it. Instead, the tragic then tells us about more than just the single event, but opens onto a field of interactions. In Scheler's words: "In every genuine tragedy we see more than just the tragic event. We see over and above it the permanent factors, associations, and powers which are in the very makeup of the world. It is these which make such a thing possible."[257] In every broken drumhead we don't just see the event of its breaking, but, if we look more closely, we see the powers that make such a thing possible: the material construction of the implements, the demands of the musical moment in conflict with these materials, and the force directed by the percussionist. A hallmark of the tragic is that it is not an issue of fault or moral failure. Nobody has ever blamed a percussionist for breaking an instrument in the course of normal use.[258] The breaking of an instrument is in some ways a part of the natural order of percussion.

Percussionists miss an opportunity when they treat these moments of tragedy as a mere inconvenience or momentary setback. Contemporary economic production in the world of percussion, one of brand endorsements, exposition halls, and an endless variety of instruments and implements conditions percussionists to experience the loss of an instrument along economic terms, as Jane Bennett pointed to in the previous chapter. If a drum head breaks, it can be

---

[256] Max Scheler, ""On the Tragic," trans. Bernard Stambler, *CrossCurrents* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1954): 178.
[257] Ibd., 182.
[258] Nonetheless, percussion instruments do serve as seemingly-readymade receptacles of aggression. I think in particular of one of my middle school-aged students, who I have had to repeatedly counsel not to strike the keyboard in frustration when he messes up during lessons. I hope that my counseling not only intervenes on the longevity of the life of the instrument, but also encourages the student to consider their frustration and its link to aggression more critically. Percussion objects and implements invite violence, and thus can become sites of intervention thereon.

replaced – the same can be true of woodblocks, drum sticks or just about anything. Indeed, this is perhaps the dark, transactional side of bongo-ness: items can be economically interchanged just as much as they can be musically interchanged. Importantly, this bongo-ness breaks down in the writing of Schick not only in his treatment of the legacy instruments of Chou Wen-Chung discussed in the previous chapter, but also in his own discussion of the instruments he would tour with: his specific metal pipes and frying pans were the absolute must-haves, while the drums and woodblocks were less strict, less personal. "I travel with certain essential, irreplaceable instruments," writes Schick: "a small set of pipes I use for *Psappha,* a special cowbell and opera gong I need for Brian Ferneyhough's *Bone Alphabet,* a very well-travelled whisky bottle for Roger Reynolds's *Watershed."* Schick continues with a sense of irony to observe that "these unique bits of junk are the real instruments...specific and personal," as opposed to more ubiquitous instruments like keyboards and drums which are "tools of the trade: generic, interchangeable, and nonspecific."[259] Again, there is a practical element to this philosophical approach, and I'm not advocating that percussionists play with the same instruments for the rest of their lives. One of the more beautiful, metaphysical attributes of the art form is a percussionist's capacity to generate, through touch, reciprocity with any number of instruments. However, in a somewhat pragmatist turn, we find that such convenience and philosophical fluidity conditions and orients percussionists towards their objects in ways that can veer into the transactional and consumptive. What would happen if percussionists were to take the grace and singularity extended to their curated, specific instruments, and extended this aura of singularity to any instrument they encounter, regardless of its categorical ubiquity?

[259] Steven Schick, *The Percussionist's Art*, 7.

This change of framework requires seeing instruments in their precariousness. I borrow this term from Judith Butler, who has used it to describe a fundamental condition of human life, namely that this life is suspended and maintained along lines of power and recognition, and that the recognition of precarity is often a political line upon which marginalization and disenfranchisement are drawn. To Butler, precariousness extends from what they term a "social ontology of the body," which is built upon the "fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other."[260] Life is precarious by nature of its reliance on others to preserve itself. Is it possible to stretch Butler's concept over the inorganic objects of percussion? I see two ways such a modulation might be made, both different but equally useful. The first is to reconsider the inorganicity of percussion instruments by nature of the fact that they come from organic materials. Many drum heads, and often the best sounding ones, are still made from the skins of calves, goats, or camels. Similarly, the best sounding marimbas and xylophones are made out of now-endangered South American rosewood, and even less expensive instruments and sticks are made from formerly living trees of persimmon, padauk, ash, maple, mahogany, hickory, and others. Thus, the first application of Butler's concept of precarity in percussion can be drawn along the lines of the pre-percussive: the lives that must end for percussion to even begin.[261] Synthetic materials help to alleviate this direct burden on the natural world, but then contribute further to the equally urgent issue of inorganic waste, which in turn affects the possibility of a habitable world.

---

[260] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?,* (New York: Verso, 2009), 14.

[261] For this reason, we begin to see instrument manufacturers moving towards more sustainable practices, such as Marimba One's newly patented synthetic keyboard which claims to achieve the sound of traditional rosewood, but avoids deforestation. See "Marimba One patents tree-saving tonewood alternative," *Mad River Union*. December 20, 2022. https://www.madriverunion.com/articles/marimba-one-patents-tree-saving-tonewood-alternative/.

The second way precarity might be applied to the world of percussion is by re-centering the concept not around biological or political life, as Butler does, but instead around the identity of an *artistic* life. As Butler reminds us, we are "social beings from the start, dependent on what is outside ourselves, on others, on institutions, and on sustained and sustainable environments, and so are, in this sense, precarious."[262] Understood artistically, the capacity and ability of a person to perform the actions of artistry that constitute such an identity are dependent on factors outside of the self; are reliant on the assistance of others. One cannot be an artist unless one can do art. The question begs: how is one able to do art when the art in question involves the gradual (or sometimes very sudden) destruction of one's own materials?

The first application of precariousness returns us to the world of networks that stems from the thought of Bruno Latour. Networks, we are reminded, are the result of hard-won effort on the part of the actants who constitute them. However, networks can go dark when actants cease to exist. When I say networks are precarious, I understand this as meaning that they involve multiple actants working in unison to make them possible. The breaking of or loss of one actant will leave that network forever changed. Humans are just one actant among this network, and I argue that understanding our relationship to the networks that constitute the art of percussion (networks of production, aesthetic judgment, institutional support, global trade, etc.) as being one part of a whole – a whole that is just as nonhuman as it is human – better situates the percussionist ethically within their art form. Latour argues that in the Anthropocene, "the task, the crucial political task is... to distribute agency as far and in as differential a way as possible..."[263] Latour situates this conception of agency as standing in opposition to what he terms

[262] Judith Butler, *Frames of War,* 23.
[263] Bruno Latour, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene," *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 15.

"dreams of mastery"[264] and full naturalization. Latour's argument is that the subject itself is something that is entangled and defined by human and non-human actors. One of the first steps in such a process of de-centering the subject is moving from, again to borrow Latour's language, "the infinite universe to the closed cosmos."[265] This phrase is part of a larger metaphor Latour draws between humanity's conception of itself in relation to the universe at large. The larger point is that in the age of the Anthropocene there is a call to renounce infinite possibility, growth, expansion, and sovereignty. Percussion, again because of its seemingly infinite source of instrumentality, is particularly susceptible to these anthropocentric values. The epistemological shift must be one of resituating the nonhuman elements of a percussionist's life not as merely exchangeable or replaceable, but to understand them as fundamentally enmeshed and adhesive. To replace a Thai gong with an *almglocken* is not just a sonic substitution but one that activates different production cycles, different techniques, and different cultural references. These changes are things that will become more notable and prescient as percussionists find themselves in an increasingly finite world. As Jane Bennett argues, "such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of inextricability enmeshed in a denser network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself."[266] Bennett touches on an important point: percussionists are only shielded from the effects of their violence when they have a seemingly infinite, global-capitalist supply to fall back on. How would a percussionist's approach change were they to understand themselves as a single actor in a network, and an actor who is perhaps disproportionately responsible for the health and

[264] Ibid., 5.
[265] Ibid., 4.
[266] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13.

sustainability of that network? More specifically, how would a drum stroke change if the precariousness of the network that makes such a stroke possible was made explicit? How would a percussionist treat a snare drum if it was the last snare head they would ever have?

A precarious network, which all networks are but which percussion may be especially, requires care to maintain. In dialogue with Latour's work, María Puig de la Bellacasa builds upon his concept of "matters of concern" discussed in the previous chapter. In her words, Latour's work was to show that centering "facts" in the field of science and technology studies (STS) glossed over the messy entanglements that make such seemingly clear facts possible. Puig de la Bellacasa writes that Latour's "purpose of exposing how things are assembled, constructed, is not to debunk and dismantle them, nor is it to undermine the reality of matters of fact with critical suspicion about the powerful (human) interests they might reflect and convey."[267] Indeed, Latour writes against the cynical use of deconstruction at play in far-right politics and propaganda.[268] "Instead," Puig de la Bellacasa continues, "to exhibit the concerns that attach and hold together matters of fact is to enrich and affirm reality by contributing further articulations."[269] In other words, facts involve the attachment and investment of certain actors to be understood as facts in the first place. Puig de la Bellacasa, writing from the point-of-view of a theorist, argues that engaging in matters of concern demands a sense of touch and care; that to turn a matter of concern into a matter of care requires a certain ethical and vulnerable attachment. Care is the ingredient that turns a matter of concern into something that is life-sustaining rather than merely interesting: "for interdependent beings in more than human entanglements, there has to be some form of care going on somewhere in the substrate of their

[267] María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 39.
[268] See Latour, "Agency in the Anthropocene."
[269] Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care,* 39.

world for living to be possible."[270] Percussion is one such more-than-human entanglement where care is at work in sustaining the art form. We make a mistake, however, if we consider care to be exclusively soft, gentle, or otherwise traditionally feminized. It may be true that soft playing does more explicitly open itself up to a phenomenology of touch, and one that is not situated in mastery or dominance. Forceful playing, however, can be just as much a site of care: to a certain extent drums were made to be beaten. An animal that is slaughtered to make a drum head that is never fully excited in its vibrational potential itself feels like an ethical trespass. Care in percussion, then could be said to be a matter of respecting an object's history, both culturally and materially, and to prolong the tragedy of an object's deterioration as long as possible. It means to see the loss of such objects as grievable, to borrow another term from Butler. At the risk of veering into animism (which perhaps is not the worst thing in the world), care in percussion could mean stewarding objects so that their deaths feel as "natural" as possible.

Care can also demonstrate the power of percussion's rehabilitative instrumentality. Harman writes very little on the death of objects, but it is true that objects must die; that even the withdrawn, real object that does not come into contact with reality must dissolve enough so that no it can no longer maintain sensual contact with the world. What he does write, also in dialogue with Latour, is that "death shatters the bond between a creature's component objects to such an extreme that its essence is shattered, as opposed to internal survivable changes such as the death of component cells."[271] In maintaining the flat-ish ontology that Harman espouses, we can fairly easily transpose "creature" into "object" into "drum," a move that Mowitt also makes through his analysis of skin. Just as a person can survive the deaths of individual cells, a drum can survive the breakdown of its parts: drum heads can be replaced, shells can be mended, strainers and other

[270] Ibid., 5.
[271] Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 214.

hardware can be de-rusted or upgraded. However, the organic body of a living creature sheds off its weight to become a different kind of player in the ecosystem: waste becomes fertilizer. Even when a creature fully dies, meaning it is no longer able to make relations, this is really just the transformation from one object (a living thing) to another (a reservoir of unused nutrients), the latter of which feeds its ecosystem. A drumhead that breaks can no longer make relations as a drum head: it will no longer have the material construction needed to activate the resonant cavity of a drum. It becomes waste, and, in the case of synthetic heads, waste that is inassimilable into any kind of organic ecosystem. It becomes another piece of "junk" tossed into a landfill. Care, then, could mean prolonging the life of this consumer product that is destined for destruction and pollution. It could also mean finding alternative uses for broken things. In Western percussion, outside of a select number of military museums, there exist no rituals for the retiring of instruments or their component parts. There exists no afterlife for exhausted percussion objects, even organic ones, other than waste. Percussion as a more-than-human entanglement held together by care rather than mastery or industry calls for such rituals if it is going to temper the tragedy of its violent ontology.

In their own treatment of the Schelerian tragic, Judith Butler emphasizes the feeling of guilt that one feels in the wake of tragedy as not one that can be ascribed to a single person or actor. "It is, rather," they write, "a sense of responsibility that emerges, it seems, from the structure of the world itself, from the fact that we are responsible for one another even though we cannot hold ourselves personally responsible for creating the conditions and instruments of harm."[272] Situating violence as a central aspect of the art of percussion is a simple task, and perhaps one that is too easily naturalized. A more difficult task is analyzing the structures of

[272] Judith Butler, *What World is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 27.

power and normativity that frame this violence and thus make it easy to dismiss as beneath comment. These same powers, I argue, may also contribute to the difficulty of viewing violence and its results as anything other than workplace hazards. Still, and I continue to follow Bill Solomon on this, the forces of capital, patriarchy, hetero-normativity, and whiteness -- which came together in the culture of percussion to disastrous effect on the life of Robert Champion – are not external entities working on percussionists like a puppeteer pulling strings. These structures of power instead tap into something inherently ontological about percussion's relationship to the world. And it is for this reason that I find that drawing disciplinary boundaries around percussion; to be forced to sit within a discipline and to work through its problems as a practice of immanent critique, is more compelling than postmodern philosophies of escape and hybridity. Percussion can learn much from its encounters with interdisciplinarity, but we take a theoretical misstep if we understand percussion as pure, endless sonic potential without consequence.

Ethical Embodiment in a World of Things

At the close of this dissertation, I'd like to offer a final review of the metaphysical arguments made so far. Percussion ontology, as commonly understood, is centered around the concept of "bongo-ness," a term that denotes an object's sonic, timbral, and instrumentality-affording qualities. A percussionist-subject encounters various percussion through their sensuous qualities: what does it sound like, what does it feel like to play? These qualifying judgments are already instructed by an embodied, disciplined, and sometimes theoretical conditioning. Bongo-ness is indeed a migratory philosophy that encourages percussionists to examine the sonic

qualities of seemingly any and all objects. The percussionist-subject then takes the particular bongo-ness of the instruments at-hand and employs them to musical effect within the context of a work, improvisation, or other performance/musical moment. Bongo-ness seems like the grounding of percussion ontology, and has contributed to certain mythologies and exceptionalisms within percussion's self-narrative. What I have attempted to show is that bongo-ness is itself something that is established through conditioning, reciprocal processes of touch. Bongo-ness's seams show when it can no longer function as a smooth ontological façade, as the work of Greg Stuart has shown. Instead, our encounter with instruments is not migratory but frictional: the things of percussion resist and push back on us, they seem to tell us when they can be used and when they cannot. Percussionists access their instruments, implements, and works in very specific and limited ways.

This step is largely in line with the classical phenomenology of the 20th century. Where it breaks from this tradition is a renewed commitment to realism, to a world outside of human subjectivity, that makes percussion the rich artistic site that it is. The metaphysical move is to extend the phenomenological experience of bongo-ness that the human finds in percussion instruments to all the objects of percussion, at every level: from the large bass drum to the single strand of yarn wrapped on the exterior of a mallet. This is by nature a speculative move: we obviously can't speak for the yarn's experience of the mallet's core. But, at the same time, it is not *entirely* speculative. We hear these interactions in the moments of percussion, even if we subsume them under human intention. To hear percussion as it is in a realist sense is to hear its soundings not only as a result of human touch, but of touch extrapolated to anthropomorphize *all* of the contact points of the sensual objects involved. The aim of this shift is exactly to de-emphasize the human's agency and to situate it as one among many; one that plays a very

specific part in the aesthetic process: namely the creation of new objects and relations in consciousness. This is not so different from the aesthetic-political formulation percussion has inherited from 20th century modernism, namely the search of new sounds and new ways of making art. What is different, however, is the human's position *within* this novelty: the human is one object among many, exercising its powers as best it can, and fundamentally limited by the non-human objects alongside it who exercise their own forms of interpretation in the novel object of a performance. This conception of percussion rejects the narratives of endless possibility in favor of fidelity and care to what is local. It is ecological more than it is modern.

Decentering the human is an act of humility which affords critical energy to combat the issues facing percussion: consumption, appropriation, and waste. Each of these have a unique relationship to violence, the ambiguity of which I argue constitutes the ethical center of percussion. Knowing that violence is not something that can be entirely avoided, either in the appropriation of materials or the subsequent drumming upon them, forces the percussionist subject to reconcile their subjectivity and ethical position with the objects of the world they stand in ambiguous relation to. This is why percussion practices that orient themselves towards negation in some ways abdicate the responsibility of inhabiting an ethical stance. Simone de Beauvoir writes in her *Ethics of Ambiguity* exactly that ethics is only possible when *a priori* divisions between right and wrong are erased, as each agonistic position contains a mixture of right and wrong.[273] To Beauvoir, an ethics is only possible when one assumes the problems of the historical condition and makes them their own through choice. The question then, in

[273] Beauvoir writes that "There is an ethics only if there is a problem to solve. And it can be said, by inverting the preceding line of argument, that the ethics which have given solutions by effacing the fact of the separation of men are not valid precisely because there *is* separation. An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all." Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Open Road, 1947), 17.

understanding a percussionist's ethical connection to violence, is under what conditions is it necessary, and at what points can it be refused? Judith Butler writes convincingly that both violence and its opposite, nonviolence, must be seen as coexisting within a given relation. That is, every relationship has the power to be both destructive and sustaining. As such, "relationality is not by itself a good thing, a sign of connectedness, an ethical norm to be posited over and against destruction. Rather, relationality is a vexed and ambivalent field in which the question of ethical obligation has to be worked out in light of a persistent and constitutive destructive potential."[274] This observation, when applied to percussion, rejects the "infinite" model of percussion instrumentality as inherently a positive. Rather, each time a new instrument or object is entered into relation with the percussionist, the potential of that object's destruction at the hand of the percussionist is activated. As both Bill Solomon and John Mowitt observed earlier, percussion's bodily conditioning, itself best understood within complex mechanisms of masculine individuality, conditions the body and thus the subject to lose itself in the euphoria of beating and striking. This bodily schema is maintained only through capitalist consumption: when something breaks under the weight of a percussionist's violence, the thing is simply replaced. The tragic death of Robert Champion illustrates what happens when the reciprocity of violence is lost. To a much lesser extent, the same metaphysical process occurs when a drum head breaks or a woodblock cracks. What happens when there are no new drumheads to buy, no more woodblocks to carve?

To balance the nature of violence in percussion, it must be balanced by a concept of nonviolence. Butler argues that "if nonviolence is to make sense as an ethical and political position, it cannot simply repress aggression or do away with its reality; rather, nonviolence

[274] Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (New York: Verso, 2020), 11.

emerges as a meaningful concept precisely when destruction is most likely or seems most certain."[275] Decentering the human agent in the art of percussion helps the percussionist to see themselves not as a sovereign individual but instead as an instigator of relational structures between otherwise discrete objects. Each of these relations, furthermore, have the potential to be destructive, destruction being understood in metaphysical terms as an object's loss of ability to maintain previously possible relations. Thus, each new relation, be it a stick on a drum head, the employment of a cultural item from a colonized culture in a work of Western art music, or the employment of "junk" objects comes with it an ethical responsibility to *choose* nonviolence when one could instead exhaust the objects and replace them. This is essentially an aim at a sustainable practice, whereby we see that the art of percussion, indeed its whole metaphysics, is wrapped up in a fictional account of endless plenitude, one encouraged by consumer capitalism.

To choose nonviolence means to fundamentally see the objects of percussion as non-interchangeable, even if their sonic characteristics make them substitutable. It is to see the precarity of the objects that enable the lives of percussionists to be possible, and thus refrain from pushing them beyond their limits. It is also to formulate rituals that maintain their value after their metaphysical, if not organic, deaths. Choosing nonviolence means to be gentle, and to be as gentle as possible, even when seemingly impossible. As Anne Dufourmantelle writes, "being gentle with objects and beings mean understanding them in their insufficiency, their precariousness... It means not wanting to add to suffering... and inventing space for a sensitive humanity, for a relation to the other that accepts his weakness or how he could disappoint us."[276] In percussion this means limiting one's own acts of percussive beating and appropriation so as

[275] Ibid., 39.
[276] Anne Dufourmantelle, *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living,* trans. Katherine Payne and Vincent Sallé (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 15.

not to add to a world mired in waste and violence. Butler makes a similar point when they write that when "any of us commit acts of violence, we are, in and through those acts, building a more violent world."[277] The task of percussion in the 21st century, then, is not one of aesthetic, political, and instrumental expansion, but instead to reconcile with the ambiguous metaphysical position the art form occupies. The task it to identify ways in which percussion's relation to the world is one that breeds violence that spills over into other forms of life, and to create cultures, communities, and institutions that combats and corrects these impulses.

[277] Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 19.

Conclusion - Hitting a Drum without it Sounding *Like We're Hitting a Drum*

Since 2021 I have spent my Saturdays teaching students of all ages at a community music school in San Diego. The students are usually around middle-school age, and are often total beginners. The first months of lessons are centered around the deceiving, awkward difficulty of holding a drumstick. The trouble is that the conception of drumming is often one of *hitting*, when in reality the technique is much more about letting the drum stick *fall*. The force comes from the weight of the arm activated by an extremely small rotational movement in the shoulder. The challenge of beginner technique is first activating this energy and then getting it to travel all the way to the tip of the stick without the muscles in the arm, wrist, or hand robbing the stroke of its power through tension. I was working with one particularly bright middle school student and explained this process to him, emphasizing the fact that the best tone quality that one can get out of an instrument is by letting the stick do as much of the work as possible. Oftentimes when players put additional force, either through a tense arm or a tense wrist, the tone quality suffers. My student paused, took in what I said, and replied "Okay, so, we want to hit the thing without it *sounding* like we're hitting the thing." This much more concise summary of what was no doubt a lengthy preamble on my part has been an object of reflection for me since.[278] As my student so intuitively deduced, when in the act of the drumming we hear not only the object in the question but the act of violence, questions arise surrounding the ethics of the action taking place.

Percussion is a rhizomatic art form. It reaches out into other disciplines, across genres and cultures, and finds in its travels a magnetic ability to appropriate non-percussive and non-musical attributes to its practice. This has bred an *episteme* that understands the art form's

[278] I remain indebted to Ben Clarke for this observation, and the many more he has given me in our lessons since.

metaphysics as mercurial and centered around individual action and curation rather than a central tradition. However, with the distance contemporary percussion now has from its ostensible origin point in the early 20th century, cracks in the veneer have become visible. The symptoms of these epistemic cracks: toxic masculinity, consumerism, colonization, and compulsive self-negation, reveal the ways in which perhaps percussion's ontology has been historically misunderstood. This essay has attempted to offer an alternative ontology from which new *epistemes* might grow: one rooted in human entanglement with the non-human, sincere and faithful encounters with difference, and an ambiguous ethical relationship to the world-transforming violence that lies at the heart of the art form. This violence has historically been understood in percussion as political revolution and rupture. Adorno paints this perspective and its conundrum in the closing passages of his *Philosophy of New Music*: "No artwork can flourish in a society based on violence without insisting on its own violence, but it thus finds itself in conflict with its own truth as the plenipotentiary of a coming society that no longer knows violence and has no need of it."[279] At first glance, Cage's "all-sound music of the future," through its shock and rupture with European bourgeois culture, opened upon a sonic world free of normative tradition and constraint.[280] This philosophy has contributed to a rich modernist canon of works that, in their time in history, seemed to promise a coming utopia. Percussion was one such tool, and in many ways still styles itself as thus. Still, I argue that as we progress in the 21st century, percussion requires an updated conception of the relationship between a work and its constituent objects. If we hold that the work of art is *not* greater than the sum of its parts but only wrangles these parts with great difficulty, then percussion must turn away from self-negation and progress. Amy Allen writes

[279] Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*. Trans. and Ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006., 158.
[280] John Cage, *Silence* 5.

that narratives of progress are too often "the language of oppression and domination for two-thirds of the world's people."[281] Instead, it must turn towards a world of objects that offer reciprocity and connection, but also make ethical demands on us: to treat them with reverence, to understand them deeply, to lay hands on them with care and curiosity instead of mere expectation. The final gambit of this dissertation is that a return to objects and our relationships to them will serve as a philosophical bedrock of the artform for a new era in its history. Percussion as an instrumental practice is distinct but not exceptional; revelatory but not revolutionary.

Now in the final pages, this essay has the unenviable obligation to turn from matters of philosophy to matters of practice. In lieu of prescribing a new normativity, which I have neither the ability nor desire to do, I'd like to offer instead areas in which a philosophical return to objects and our reciprocity to them might fuel new ways of thinking, teaching, learning, and making. The first, as the above anecdote of my student demonstrates, is pedagogy. Percussion is typically taught along the lines of a traditional master-apprentice model, where a less-experienced student works on a regular basis with a more experienced professional until they are technically and musically equipped to develop their own career. Percussion pedagogy itself is centered around traditional concepts of instrumental mastery: virtuosity, precision, control, as well as meta-practical techniques such as how one learns to practice, and how one structures their day around practicing. This pedagogical model naturally favors a certain kind of percussion playing, namely the masculinized versions we see in drum corps, orchestras, and much of contemporary music. What if we were to reframe issues of control and precision along the lines of embodiment, with the express purpose of centering the body's contingency? I argue that this

[281] Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, 3.

would open the artform up to a wider variety of bodies who in turn would highlight aspects of the artform in unique ways. Furthermore, this may decenter the expectation of mastery that sits at the heart of instrumental practice, while still celebrating the benefits of discipline. What if instead percussion turned towards the contingent and fallible objects of percussion and saw in them not limitations on an absolute idea of one's artistic self, but as beautiful particulars that call upon one to revise oneself? Elaine Scarry writes that the "willingness continually to revise one's own location in order to place oneself in the path of beauty is the basic impulse underlying education."[282] Could percussion pedagogy flourish in its scope, diversity, and impact if it were to turn towards aesthetic experience -- and the bodymind's attachment to this experience -- instead of an *a priori*, circumscribed idea of what percussion is, or, more often, is not?

Furthermore, we can perhaps think with Rita Felski in her concept of the "work-net," a concept highly influenced by the actor-network theory of Latour. To Felski a work-net is an understanding of a musical work as a network that is constituted not only by work of an author, but also the interpretations of the audience and the non-human actors that contribute to the work's being: its printing on paper, its language, its connection to globalized labor dynamics, etc. The work-net is an understanding of a work as something that facilitates interaction; that cements, even if temporarily, a community around a shared object. To Felski, one of the paradigmatic examples of a work-net is the seminar class: "*People are bound together by a work;* it is the rationale for students and teacher coming together and the conduit through which their words are channeled." She continues that a seminar centered on a work creates a "fragile collective" that addresses itself through a work of art.[283] Percussionists sometimes do a similar thing when conservatory studios perform works that multiple students have played, but this view

[282] Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999, 7.
[283] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020, 156.

is often framed as professional development -- ticking a repertory box -- or worse: outright competition. Such standardization runs opposite to Felski's work-net in a number of ways. First is the emphasis on the individual's development rather than the collective's sharing of an object. Second is the conversation surrounding these pieces itself: questions or criticisms about the interpretation itself (i.e. "why did you use those mallets?", "Have you thought about using another wood block?", etc.) are rerouted within the context of the pedagogical system as discussions of the *performer*, not the *work*. The result is a standardization of practices and approaches that have been "proven to work," even with pieces whose composition seem to resist standardization.[284] The work-net concept can aid percussionists in understanding not only their repertoire as shared objects within a collective, but in further understanding these works themselves as complex networks/objects that are composed of many other actors/objects. Understanding works themselves as contingent on unstable alliances of human and nonhuman agencies may galvanize discussions of the work itself, seen through the eyes of *all* of its interpreters, not just the one occupying the studio class in the moment. Lastly, this inevitable recentering of the nonhuman, be it the work itself or the objects that constitute it, will cast in a more conspicuous light the moments when percussion becomes too zealous in its anthropogenic leaning and loses the reins of its own violent attributes. Centering the objects in a work helps percussionists to see the *effects* of their art, not only the *inspirations* behind it. The latter is necessary if percussionists are to account for themselves to a colonized, consumerist, and otherwise violent world.

---

[284] In a podcast episode with John Lane, Allen Otte mentions a conversation with Steven Schick where Schick expressed regret that certain choices he had made in the preparation of his repertory had come to be standard practice and "the right way to do it." This argument from Schick would similarly appear in his "Meandering" cited above. See John Lane, "Conversations with Allen Otte: Herbert Brün, Part 1", *YouTube.com*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ps8-Ivjbuq8&ab_channel=JohnLane. Retrieved February 22, 2024. Timestamp 38:38

Another area in which a philosophical turn towards objects may help ethically orient percussionists is in the area of making, manufacturing, and instrument production. Percussion instruments are made of both organic and artificial materials from all over the world. These pre-percussion objects are often made of the wood of endangered forests that become continue to become increasingly scarce.[285] The industries of agriculture and deforestation that the mass-produced percussion industry relies on have, in the face of global climate change, demonstrated their lack of sustainability. Contemporary percussionists have in many ways begun to see this: anyone who has played on a marimba from the early 20th century compared to marimbas made today will be able to note a degradation in quality, as old-growth rosewood becomes harder and harder to source. The world of percussion, usually conceptualized along the lines of expansion, must begin to imagine itself along the lines of conservation and refusal, again, choosing nonviolence even when it is inconvenient. Judith Butler writes:

> Perhaps it sounds simplistic to say, but there are better and worse ways for humans to inhabit the world. And now the earth can survive – and regenerate – only if limits are set on the reach and disruption of human habitation. Humans impose limits on themselves to make for a habitable world under conditions of climate change. Parts of the world must remain uninhabitable for habitation to become possible.[286]

To percussionists, making the artform inhabitable in this century of climate change will require the renunciation of an entitlement to new objects and new sounds as traditionally understood. Instead, it may require a stewardship of the objects one has around them, regardless of their rarity or status: is a frying pan worthy of abuse merely because of its ubiquity? What

[285] Rebecca Dirksen writes of how deforestation in Haiti has gravely impacted drum makers in the country, who rely on high quality mahogany to make their artisanal instruments. See Rebecca Dirksen, "Haiti's Drums and Trees: Facing Loss of the Sacred", *Ethnomusicology,* Vol. 63, No. 1 (Winter 2019), 43-77.
[286] Judith Butler, *What World is This?,* 32.

does this say about our orientation towards the common, in general? Thus, the effacement of the divide between "found sounds" and instruments that I performed earlier in this essay bears not only an aesthetic and metaphysical valence, but an ethical one. What if we were to treat the "junk" of percussion no longer as "junk," but were instead to afford them the status they deserve for the life-affirmation they give their performers? Philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek theorizes various ways in which the production of objects may help to steer contemporary consumers away from the waste culture that is endemic to late capitalism. One critique is his concept of cultural sustainability, where an object remains used within a culture even when it *could* be replaced. "Culturally sustainable product development should not aim at 'devotion' to products, but at attachment."[287] Working to find a sustainable middle ground between museum artifacts, which should never be touched, and the typical consumer product which is often wasted long before its actual functional life has ended, Verbeek aims at a product that is valued because "they are *used* rather than *cherished*."[288] Steven Schick seems to be working through a similar dialectic in his discussion of the Chou Wen-Chung instrument collection: the instruments each year are used, but carefully and intentionally – ritually, one could say.

Another point of intervention could be in the realm of production. Verbeek touches on the important concept of what he calls "transparent artifacts": objects that are designed so that their operations are clear, able to be deduced, and thus able to be repaired *by* the consumer. Verbeek writes that "Transparency makes attachment between people and products possible in two ways. First, it allows people to maintain a relation with products even when they break down. Second, and more important, it makes possible for people to become involved with

[287] Verbeek, *What Things Do: Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*. Trans. Robert P. Crease. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, 224.
[288] Ibid.

products as material entities."[289] Any percussionist who has ever had to change a drum head or re-wrap a mallet has experienced a certain degree of transparency in the object at-hand. Percussion industry, however, suffers in many ways from the incentives of late capitalism: privatization and hoarding of recipes, warranty-based refusal of repair, and the general privileging of profit over collective interest. What if each percussion instrument or mallet came with a detailed description of its design? What if, as a part of every percussion curriculum, percussionists had to rehabilitate a mallet or instrument for further use? Even if such efforts did not yield a Carnegie Hall-quality musical artifact, the percussionist in question would emerge with a deeper understanding of the object in question, and thus, as Verbeek argues, a deeper attachment. Attachment, while at first seeming somewhat saccharine, is often the only thing standing between a damaged percussion instrument and the landfill.

The last modality in which an ontological turn towards objects may change the world of percussion is, at the risk of sounding obvious, the way in which it is done. Percussion is performed, composed, and theorized along the lines of its ubiquity and expansiveness. It is commonly driven by an understanding that its objects are tools to help the sonic self manifest in the world. This, as I have argued, is largely a result of *a priori* assumptions about percussion's instrumentality, which is diffuse and action-centered. Turning towards objects, however, shows that this "self" that the percussionist fashions through their artform is always mediated, resisted, and qualified by the alterity that their objects and instruments present. Seeing objects not as ready-at-hand tools meant to withdraw from consciousness but instead as collaborators with their own agencies may help percussionists to curtail their most appropriative and exploitative instincts, even as those instincts are encouraged by 21st century aesthetic and economic trends.

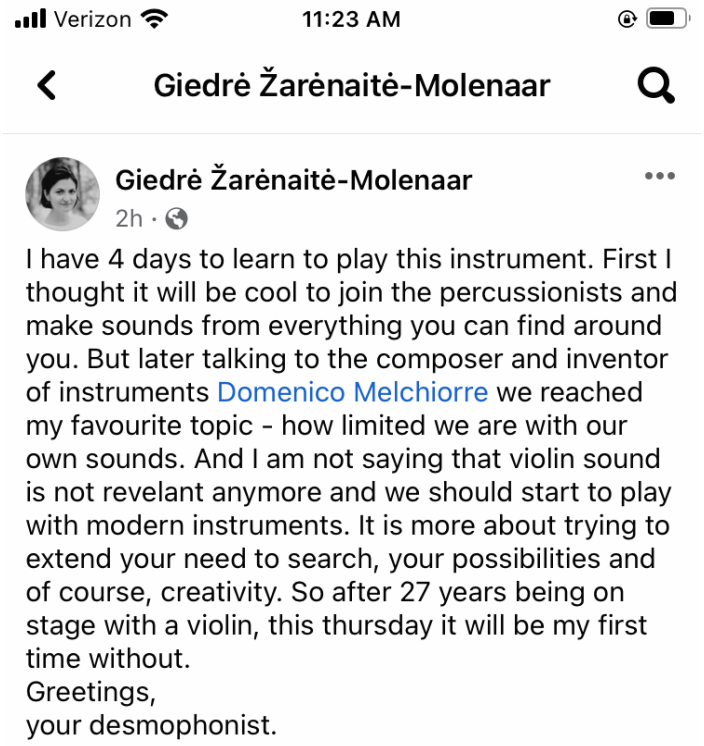
[289] Ibid., 227.

This will necessitate asking practical questions as one goes: Will this mallet harm this instrument? Does this composer have the right to demand such an object or technique be used? How might I mitigate the possible harm in this aesthetic moment? Richard Sennett, writing from a pragmatist perspective, asserts that pragmatism as a philosophy of craft "wants to emphasize the value of asking ethical questions during the work process; it contests after-the-fact ethics, ethical enquiry beginning only after the facts on the ground are fixed."[290] Sennett emphasizes the need of the craftsman to be able to "pause in the work and reflect on what he or she is doing," which ultimately makes the work itself more "ethically satisfying."[291] Heather Love, in dialogue with Latour, similarly emphasizes "arts of noticing," which provide "concrete techniques" to engage with art and texts, underlining the fact that "ethics and politics must be instantiated through practice."[292] The ethical work of a percussionist as one object among many, one agency among many, is to ask the ethical questions that lay claim to one's work, and at times make refusals and abstentions that an ontology of action would see as unnecessary or fetishistic. An ontology of objects instead turns towards the fetishistic impulse that lies latent in percussion, engaging it not as a mystic or consumer, but instead as a human searching to make truth of itself -- to ethically reposition itself -- within a more-than-human world.

[290] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008, 295-96.
[291] Ibid., 296.
[292] Heather Love, "Care, Concern, and the Ethics of Description", *Latour and the Humanities,* Ed. Rita Felski and Stephen Muecke, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2020, 107-131, 130.

APPENDIX

Facebook post by Giedrė Žarėnaitė-Molenaar reflecting on her experience performing on a desmophone. Retrieved May 23, 2023.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

Adorno, Theodor W. *Philosophy of New Music*. Translated and edited by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Aguilar, Gustavo. "Not Knowing, the Cart Got in Front." In *The Modern Percussion Revolution: Journeys of a Progressive Artist,* edited by Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis, 3-17. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, and Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2006.

----------. "Orientations Matter." In *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, 235-257. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

----------. "Happy Objects." In *The Affect Theory Reader,* edited by Melissa Greg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 29-51. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2010.

Allen, Amy. *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2007.

----------. "On Touching: The Inhuman That Therefore I Am (v1.1)." *differences* 3, no. 3 (2012): 206-223.

"Bass Nicophone: Edition Rebecca Saunders." *Lunason.com*. Accessed February 5, 2024. https://www.lunason.com/en/bassnicophone-1.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. New York: Open Road, 1947.

Becker, Bob. "Bowls, Bells, Brake Drums and Lou Harrison." *Nexuspercussion.com*. September 10, 2021. https://www.nexuspercussion.com/2021/09/bowls-bells-brake-drums-and-lou-harrison/.

----------. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2001.

----------. "The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter." *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (June 2004): 347-372.

----------. "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton." *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 225-233.

----------. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2010.

----------. *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*. New York: Verso, 2020.

----------. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* New York: Verso, 2009.

----------. "Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche." In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty,* edited by Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen, 181-205. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

----------. *What World is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.

Brown, Bill. *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003.

----------. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1, Things (Autumn, 2001): 1-22.

Bryant, Levi R. *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011.

Cage, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings (50th Anniversary Edition)*. Middletown, CT Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Chou Wen-Chung, "The Liberation of Sound." *Perspectives of New Music* 5, no. 1 (1966): 11-19.

Cimini, Amy. "Vibrating Colors and Sounding Bodies. Music, Sound and Silence in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Dualism." *Contemporary Music Review* 31, nos. 5-6 (October-December 2012): 353-370.

----------. *Wild Sound: Maryanne Amacher and the Tenses of Audible Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Cimini, Amy and Jairo Moreno. "Inexhaustible Sound and Fiduciary Aurality." *boundary 2* 43, no. 1 (February 1 2016): 5-41.

Citton, Yves. “Fictional Attachments and Literary Weavings in the Anthropocene.” In *Latour and the Humanities*, edited by Rita Felski and Stephen Muecke, 200-224. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2020.

Clarke, David. “Music, Phenomenology, and the Natural Attitude: Analysing Sibelius, Thinking with Husserl, Reflecting on Dennett.” In *Music and Consciousness 2,* edited by Ruth Herbert, David Clarke, and Eric Clarke, 143-169. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Coole, Diana and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms.” In *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, 1-43. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Cumming, Naomi. *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000.

Cusick, Suzanne. “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight (1996).” In *Music and Identity Politics,* edited by Ian Biddle, 19-36. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2012.

D., Noah. “Thirty Thoughts from a Different Drummer.” *Queer Percussion Research Group Zine Collection,* edited by Bill Solomon (January, 2023).

De Souza, Jonathan. *Music at Hand: Bodies, Instruments, and Cognition*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas.” In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Devenish, Louise. *Global Percussion Innovations: The Australian Perspective*. New York: Routledge, 2020.

----------. “Instrumental Infrastructure, Instrumental sculpture and instrumental scores: a post-instrumental practice.” *Music and Practice* 9 (2021).

Dierstein, Christian, Michel Roth, and Jens Ruland. *The Techniques of Percussion Playing: Mallets, Implements and Applications*. Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 2018.

Dirksen, Rebecca. “Haiti’s Drums and Trees: Facing Loss of the Sacred.” *Ethnomusicology* 63, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 43-77.

Dolan, Emily and John Tresch. “Towards a New Organology.” *Osiris* 28, no. 1, Music Sound and the Laboratory from 1750-1980 (January 2013): 278-298.

Dolezal, Luna. *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015.

Dufourmantelle, Anne. *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*. Trans. Katherine Payne and Vincent Sallé. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018.

Dyson, Frances. *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009.

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*. Durham: NC: Duke University Press, 2015.

Epstein, Nomi. "Musical Fragility: A Phenomenological Investigation." *Tempo* 71, no. 281 (2017): 39-52.

Felski, Rita. *Hooked: Art and Attachment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Globokar, Vinko. "Anti-Badabum." Translated by Nancy Francois. *Percussive Notes* (October 1992): 77-82.

Gottschalk, Jennie. *Experimental Music Since 1970*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Greenberg, Clement. "The Avant Garde and Kitsch." In *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1961.

Groys, Boris. *On the New*. Trans. G.M. Goshgarian. Brooklyn, NY: Verso. 2014.

Harman, Graham. "Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Nonhuman." *Naked Punch* 9. (Summer/Fall 2007): 21-30.

----------. *Art and Objects*. Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020.

----------. *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Chicago: Open Court, 2002.

----------. *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago: Open Court, 2005.

----------. "Moral Superiority as First Philosophy: In Response to Andrew J. Chung." *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2022): 194-213.

----------. "On Vicarious Causation". *Collapse* II (2007): 187-221.

----------. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Melbourne: re.press, 2009.

----------. *The Quadruple Object*. Alresford, UK: Zero Books. 2011.

----------. *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*. Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018.

Hartenberger, Russell. "Learning to Feel the Time: Reflections of a Percussionist." In *Synchrony and Temporal Flow in Music and Dance,* edited by Clemens Wöllner and Justin London, 349-59. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023.

Haworth, Christopher. "Protentions and Retentions of Xenakis and Cage: Nonhuman Actors, Genre and Time in Microsound." *Contemporary Music Review* 37, no. 5 (2018): 606-625.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010.

----------. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper Perennial, 2013.

Helker, Lucas. "Materials that Matter: Cultivating a Musical Tradition with Found Objects." DMA diss., University of Kansas. 2023.

Hennies, Sarah. "Queer Percussion." *Sound American* 23, edited by Nate Wooley (February 2020). https://soundamerican.org/issues/alien/queer-percussion.

Høffding, Simon. "Performative Passivity: Lessons on phenomenology and the extended musical mind with the Danish String Quartet." In *Music and Consciousness 2: Worlds, Practices, Modalities,* edited by Ruth Herbert, David Clarke, and Eric Clarke, 127-142. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Huang, Aiyun. "Percussion theater: the drama of performance." In *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, edited by Russell Hartenberger, 128-142. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 2016.

Ihde, Don. *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound (Second Edition)*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007.

Indriyati-Hardjowirogo, Sarah. "Instrumentality: On the Construction of Instrumental Identity." In *Musical Instruments in the 21st Century: Identities, Configurations, Practices,* edited by Till Boverman, Alberto de Campo, Hauke Egermann, Sarah-Indriyati Hardjowirogo, and Stefan Weinzerl, 9-24. Singapore: Springer Nature, 2017.

Ingold, Tim. *Perception and the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *Music and the Ineffable*. Trans. Carolyn Abbate. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Jones, Michael. "Universalism and Fragmentation in Percussion Practice." MA Thesis., University of California San Diego, 2020.

Kearney, Richard. *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021.

Kernan, Thomas J. "What of the Performers? The Case of the Percussion Group Cincinnati and the Need to Reconsider Percussion Chamber Music Historiography." *The Modern Percussion Revolution,* edited by Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis, 18-37. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Kim, Eunjung. "Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2015).

Knauer, Heinrich. *Praktische Schule für Kleine Trommel*. Ed. Gerhard Behsing. Leipzig Germany: Friedrich Hofmeister Musikverlag, 1954.

Kozak, Mariusz. "Varieties of Musical Time." In *Synchrony and Temporal Flow in Music and Dance,* edited by Clemens Wöllner and Justin London, 33-47. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023.

Lane, John. "Abstracted Resonance: The Percussion Music of Peter Garland." In *The Modern Percussion Revolution,* edited by Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis, 61-83. New York: Routledge, 2014.

----------. "Conversations with Allen Otte: Herbert Brün, Part 1." *YouTube.com*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ps8-Ivjbuq8&ab_channel=JohnLane. Retrieved February 22, 2024.

Latour, Bruno. "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene." *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 1-18.

----------. "Can We Get Our Materialism Back, Please?" *Isis* 98 (2007): 138-142.

----------. *The Pasteurization of France*. Translated by Alan Sheridan and John Law. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

----------. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

----------. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

----------. "Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a few mundane artifacts." In *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, edited by W.E Bijker and J. Law, 225-58. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.

----------. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30, (Winter 2004): 225-248.

Lee, Emily S. "Body Movement and Responsibility for a Situation." In *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race,* edited by Emily S. Lee, 233-54. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. Translated by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore. London: Continuum, 2004.

LeVeque, Matt. "To Hold Non-Power: Relational Potentiality in Singular Percussion Instruments." In *Queer Percussion Research Group Zine Collection,* edited by Bill Solomon (January, 2023).

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

Lingis, Alphonso. *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994.

----------. *The Imperative*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Lloyd-Jones, Rebecca. "In Search of a Sonic Democracy: Tracing Feminist Genealogies through the Percussion Works of Lucia Dlugoszewski, Maryanne Amacher, and Eleanor Hovda." DMA diss., University of California, San Diego, 2024.

Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Toronto: Crossing Press, 1984.

Love, Heather. "Care, Concern, and the Ethics of Description." In *Latour and the Humanities*. edited by Rita Felski and Stephen Muecke, 107-131. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2020.

----------. "Forced Exile: Walter Pater's Queer Modernism." In *Bad Modernisms,* edited by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 19-43. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2006.

Magrì, Elisa and Paddy McQueen. *Critical Phenomenology: An Introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2023.

Majid, Bareez and Mathijs Peters. *Exploring Hartmut Rosa's Concept of Resonance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2022.

"Marimba One patents tree-saving tonewood alternative." *Mad River Union*. December 20, 2022. https://www.madriverunion.com/articles/marimba-one-patents-tree-saving-tonewood-alternative/.

McCann, Rachel. "A Sensuous Ethics of Difference." *Hypatia* 26, no. 3, Ethics of Embodiment (Summer 2011): 497-517.

McCosh, Liza. "The Sublime: Process and Mediation." In *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' Through the Arts,* edited by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, 127-138. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013.

McLean, Myles. "Reflections on the Nature of Transition: Drumming, Gender Expression, and Reclamation." *Queer Percussion Research Group Zine Collection,* edited by Bill Solomon (January, 2023).

Mazis, Glen. *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World: Silence, Ethics, Imagination, and Poetic Ontology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016.

Mendelssohn, Edmund. *White Musical Mythologies: Sonic Presence in Modernism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 2023.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Sense and Non-sense*. Translated by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus. Evanston, IL. Northwestern University Press, 1971.

----------. "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence". In *Signs*. Translated by Richard McCleary, 39-83. Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

----------. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. New York: Routledge, 2012.

----------. "The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences." Translated by James M. Edie. In *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, edited by James M. Edie, 12-42. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

----------. *The Visible and the Invisible,* edited by Claude Lefort. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

Morton, Timothy. *All Art is Ecological*. London: Penguin Random House, UK. 2018.

----------. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2007.

----------. "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry." *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring, 2012): 205-224.

----------. *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2013.

----------. "Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology." *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2011): 160-190.

Mowitt, John. *Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.

Murphy, Ann V. *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012.

Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Press, 2015.

Nutt, Haley. "The Collegiate Percussion Ensemble: Institutional and Gendered Practices in the American Academy." PhD diss., Florida State University. 2020.

Ó Murchadha, Felix. "Listening to Others: Music and the Phenomenology of Hearing." In *Empathy, Intersubjectivity, and the Social World: The Continued Relevance of Phenomenology,* edited by Anna Bortolan and Elisa Magrì, 243-260. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022.

Österjö, Stefan. *Listening to the Other*. Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2020.

Otte, Allen. "Letter to a Young Percussionist (Preferences in Percussion, 2010)." In *The Modern Percussion Revolution,* edited by Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis, 284-293. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Pergolesi, Jerry and Bill Solomon. "Pushing Against Homonormativity: Percussion as a queer tool of resistance." In *Queer Percussion Research Group Zine Collection,* edited by Bill Solomon (January, 2023).

Piekut, Benjamin. "Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques." *Twentieth Century Music* 11, no. 2 (2014): 191-215.

----------. Experimentalism Otherwise. *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limit*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011.

Puig de la Bellacasa, María. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Pratt, John S. *Fourteen Modern Contest Solos for Snare Drum*. Los Angeles: Alfred Music, 1985.

Redmond, Layne. *When the Drummers Were Women*: *A Spiritual History of Rhythm*. Brattleboro, VT: Echo Point Book & Media, 1997.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Rosa, Hartmun. *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 2019.

Rosen, Michael. "Terms Used in Percussion: 'Ionisation.'" *Percussive Notes* (July, 2015).

"Roundtable: Mallets on the Marimba and Vibraphone: Christian Dierstein in conversation with Miquel Bernat, Pedro Carneiro, Jean Geoffroy and Emmanuel Séjourné." In *The Techniques of Percussion Playing: Mallets, Implements and Applications*, edited by Christian Dierstein, Michel Roth, and Jens Ruland, 206-211. Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 2018.

Rutherford-Johnson, Tim. *Music Since the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 2017.

Sallak, Bill. "On the Nature of Percussion Masterworks," In *The Modern Percussion Revolution: Journeys of a Progressive Artist,* edited by Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis, 181-198. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Sargent, Matt., "Liner Notes." In *Illuminations,* Sawyer Editions. January 5, 2024. Accessed via Bandcamp. https://sawyereditions.bandcamp.com/album/matt-sargent-illuminations.

Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Scheler, Max. "On the Tragic". Translated by Bernard Stambler. *CrossCurrents* 4., no. 2 (Winter 1954): 178-191.

Steven Schick. "An Echo is a Sound with Wings: Reflections on Chou Wen-Chung's *Echoes from the Gorge* and its deep connection to Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation*." Unpublished. Provided courtesy of author, 2022.

----------. "(Exactly) One Thousand Words Toward Understanding Sticks and Mallets." In *The Techniques of Percussion Playing: Mallets, Implements and Applications,* edited by Christian Dierstein, Michel Roth, and Jens Ruland, 75-76. Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 2018.

----------. "Meandering." *The Modern Percussion Revolution: Journeys of a Progressive Artist,* edited by Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis, 201-214. New York: Routledge, 2014.

----------. *The Percussionist's Art: Same Bed Different Dreams*. Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2006.

----------. "A Percussionist Understands Rhythm in Five Essays of Exactly 1,000 Words Not Including Titles and Subtitles." In *The Cambridge Companion to Rhythm,* edited by Russell Hartenberger and Ryan McClelland, 61-74. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

----------. "Three convergences: a percussionist learns to conduct." *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*. Ed. Russell Hartenberger, 143-159. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Seigworth, Gregory and Melissa Gregg. "An Inventory of Shimmers." *The Affect Theory Reader,* edited by Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 1-28. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Sennett, Richard. *The Craftsman*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.

Siwe, Thomas. *Artful Noise*: Percussion Literature in the Twentieth Century. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020.

Sliwinski, Adam. The Concept of Rhythm: Composers in Their Own Words." In *The Cambridge Companion to Rhythm,* edited by Russell Hartenberger and Ryan McClelland, 146-164. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

----------. "Lost and found: percussion chamber music and the modern age." In *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, edited by Russell Hartenberger, 97-115. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Sparrow, Tom. *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Sofer, Andrew. *The Stage Life of Props*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003.

Solomon, Bill. "Queering Musical Chrononormativity: Percussion Works of the West Coast Group." In *Queer Ear: Remaking Music Theory*, edited by Gavin S. K. Lee, 205-229. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

----------. "Touching, Rubbing, and Stroking: Rehabilitation of the snare drum through queer erotics." Presented at the Music and Erotics Conference. University of Pittsburgh, 2019.

Solomon, Bill and Jennifer Torrence. "It is as messy as you feared: two conversations about queer percussion between Jen Torrence and Bill Solomon." In *Queer Percussion Research Group Zine Collection,* edited by Bill Solomon (January, 2023).

Solomon, Samuel Z. *How to Write for Percussion: A Comprehensive Guide to Percussion Composition (Second Edition)*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Stene, Håkon. "This is Not a Drum: Towards a Post-Instrumental Practice." PhD diss., The Norwegian Academy of Music. 2014.

Stone, George. *Stick Control for the Snare Drummer*. Los Angeles: Alfred Music, 1935.

Stuart, Gregory. "A Percussionist's Practice." DMA diss., University of California, San Diego. 2009.

Tan, Anthony. "Out of Context #5: Appreciation vs. Appropriation of Cultural Musical Objects." In *I Care If You Listen*. May 27, 2020. https://icareifyoulisten.com/2020/05/out-of-context-5-appreciation-appropriation-cultural-musical-objects/.

Théberge, Paul. "Musical Instruments as Assemblage." In *Musical Instruments in the 21st Century: Identities, Configurations, Practices,* edited by Till Bovermann, Alberto de Campo, Hauke Egermann, Sarah-Indriyati Hardjowirogo, and Stefan Weinzerl, 59-66. Singapore: Springer, 2017.

Turner, Roger, and Mari Kamada. *Junk Percussion: Notes for the Future*. Cold Spring, NY: Terra Nova Press, 2022.

Verbeek, Peter-Paul. *What Things Do: Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*. Translated by Robert P. Crease. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005.

Voegelin, Salomé. *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound (Revised Edition),* New York: Bloomsbury, 2021.

Weinberger, Eliot. *An Elemental Thing*. New York: New Directions, 2007.

Wilcoxon, Charley. *The All-American Drummer: 150 Rudimental Solos*. Saint Louis, MO: Ludwig Masters, 1945.

Wiskus, Jessica. *The Rhythm of Thought: Art, Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Woolfe, Zachary. "The 'Philosopher King' of Percussion Starts His Next Chapter." In *The New York Times*. May 23, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/23/arts/music/steven-schick-percussion-music.html.

Wulff, Bernhard. "Mallets and Beaters." In *The Techniques of Percussion Playing: Mallets, Implements and Applications*. Edited by Christian Dierstein, Michel Roth, and Jens Ruland, 29-33. Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 2018.

Wyre, John. *Touched by Sound: A Drummer's Journey (Second Edition)*. St. John's, Newfoundland: Buka Music, 2007.

Young, Iris Marion. *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Musical Scores Referenced

Chou Wen-Chung, *Echoes from the Gorge*. New York: C.F. Peters, 1989.

Billone, Pierluigi. *Mani. Gonxha*. Vienna: Eigenverlag-Wien. 2010.

Deyoe, Nicholas. *Lullaby*. Self-published by composer. 2011.

Garland, Peter. *The Basketweave Elegies*. Self-published by composer. 2018.

Globokar, Vinko. *? Corporel*. Frankfurt: Henry Litolff's Verlag / C.F. Peters, 1989.

Good, Kevin. *slow, silent, singing*. Self-published by composer. 2017.

Hennies, Sarah. *Psalm 2*. Self-published by composer. 2009.

Lim, Liza. *An Elemental Thing*. Berlin: Ricordi. 2017.

Pisaro-Liu, Michael. *ricefall*. Self-published by composer. 2004.

Matt Sargent. *Between Time*. Self-published by composer. 2021.

----------. *Fourth Illumination*. Self-published by composer. 2018.

Saunders, Rebecca. *dust for Percussion Solo*. Leipzig: Edition Peters, 2018.