Skirmish at the Oasis: *On Sonic Disobedience*

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ABSTRACT

In this article the author theorizes how the idea of a sonic avant-garde resounds today. Focused on technics of noise and site specificity, the author describes the sounds and sites of the Idle No More round dance interventions of the winter of 2012–2013 and hears these protests via the dissonant transmission of the sonic practices and geographical-racial theories of the historical avant-garde.

> For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die.
> And for capitalism to die, we must actively participate
> in Indigenous alternatives to it [1].

At Regina, Saskatchewan's Cornwall Centre, the shopping mall's holiday season soundtrack undergoes a live edit, a remix. As Mariah Carey's vibrato climbs over the concluding choruses of "All I Want for Christmas Is You," the slow, steady frequency of a drum beat kicks in and gains in amplitude. Dozens of drummers, standing in a circle at the mall's central court, join in and sustain the rhythm. The sound intensifies, swells. A solo voice, sheer and strong, cries out, rising above the drums, and is then joined by a chorus of singers. Hundreds of voices sound out in a series of call-and-responses sung in Cree, as bodies joined hand in hand start the slow step of a round dance. The sounds of the singers and the drummers mask the mall's ambient Muzak, canceling it out. The architecture shakes. Impossible to ignore or avoid, the music's vibrations affectively claim the space, sonically consume it.

At another site—Bloomington, Minnesota's Mall of America—suspended from the ceiling of a grand central atrium, two enormous banners state: "The Next Big Thing/Is Here." They are ads for the latest smartphone on sale at Best Buy. Positioned above the Anishinaabe drummers and singers, and the hundreds of bodies encircled in a round dance, the

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Article Frontispiece. Idle No More protest round dance, Eaton Centre, Toronto, 30 December 2012. (© Kevin Konnyu)

signs' transmission seems repurposed. Their declaration of the newest new thing functions as if they were made to announce the demonstration taking place beneath them. Many Indigenous nations on the plains practice this traditional ceremonial dance—in some communities it is known as a healing dance; in others it is both memorial and celebratory. "People are adjusting right now to bringing back the foundation of those ancestral ceremonies," Sagkneeng First Nation Elder Dave Courchene Jr. remarked as the drum dances had become an effective mode of demonstration on behalf of the Idle No More protests. "Certainly today we see a much more contemporary type of expression in the Round Dances, but the foundation has not changed in terms of what it represents. The drum is still the key" [2]. The Mall of the America round dance, like that in Regina, occupies the aural-vibrational space of the shopping center. And in the production of these sounds, the bodies in demonstration form a physical barrier, one that halts consumers' movements to shop and stock up on holiday goods.

Round dance interventions like these two examples occurred throughout North America during the winter of 2012–2013 as Indigenous groups led demonstrations against the Canadian federal government's proposed Bill C-45. These demonstrations emerged out of a November 2012 teach-in at which four Saskatchewan women—Sylvia McAdam, Jess Gordon, Nina Wilson and Sheelah Mclean—held a meeting to educate communities on the numerous impacts of the omnibus bill. There, they rightly pointed out that Bill C-45 would erode treaty and Indigenous rights to their lands, and remove a number of longstanding protective measures for Canadian ecosystems undergoing rapid development due to the Harper government's enthusiastic support for the nation's petro-economy and resource-extraction industries. The four women took up the phrase "Idle No More," and the hashtag #idlenomore, as a call for action in their communities. As the Kino-nda-niimi Collective wrote,

> With the help of social media and grassroots Indigenous activists, this meeting inspired a continent-wide movement with hundreds of thousands of people from Indigenous

communities and urban centers participating in sharing sessions, protests, blockades and round dances in public spaces and on the land, in our homelands, and in our sacred spaces [3].

These activities functioned as spaces for people to make audible their rage and exasperation with Bill C-45, the policies of the Harper government and the ongoing colonialism within Canada and the United States. They also operated as meeting places for Elders, leaders, families, youth, activist groups and supporters to convene in solidarity and to shape what actions might follow.

The round dance interventions were a means to disrupt the day-to-day activity of commercial spaces during the 2012–2013 winter holiday season. Initially planned to occur at shopping malls, they were then taken up to bottleneck the circulations of people and goods at cities' central intersections, key train corridors, border crossings, highways, bridges and places of governance. An abbreviated list of sites includes: Highway 401, London, Ontario (19 December); The Consulate General of Canada, Minneapolis, Minnesota (19 December); Rideau Centre, Ottawa (19 and 30 December); Trans-Canada Highway, Espanola, Ontario (22 December); Pioneer Place Mall, Portland, Oregon (23 December); Polo Park Mall, Winnipeg (23 December); Yonge and Dundas Square, Toronto (23 December and 1 January) (Article Frontispiece); Sault Saint Marie rail crossing, Ontario (27 December and 16 January); Portage and Main Streets, Winnipeg (31 December); Waterfront Station, Vancouver (2 January); Deh Cho Bridge, Northwest Territories (5 January); Marysville VIA Rail tracks, Ontario (5 January); Blue Water Bridge and international crossing, Sarnia, Ontario (5 January); the Manitoba Legislature (10 January); Ambassador Bridge and international crossing, Windsor, Ontario (11 January); Westmoreland Bridge, Fredericton, New Brunswick (16 January); and Portage La Prairie CN Rail Line, Manitoba (16 January). Each site marks a node in a network of resistance against settler-colonial resource grabs, against the territorial dispossession and ecological destruction they entail, against the greater political economy in which such imperial machinations are commonplace. These sonic-spatial acts of disobedience resonate out of several historical contexts of Indigenous resurgent activity and resistance—from the Red Power Movement (initiated in the late 1960s) to the standoff at Kanehstake (or, the Oka crisis) (1990)—as noted by the Kino-nda-niimi Collective and Glen Coulthard. In their utilizations of noise, rhythm, site-specificity and vibrational force, they also intone particular elements of the historical avant-garde. Yet what does it mean to consider the trajectory of the latter resonation while taking into account the former? How does such an endeavor necessarily alter a conception of the avant-garde?

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To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill [4].

The noise of the avant-garde is, as Steve Goodman notes, founded in alarm, in a call to arms. The Italian Futurists' ecstatic dream of annihilatory noise resonates out of a deep "frustration with the sonic present"—its "quiescence," its "lack of intensity," the "suave harmonics" and "soft and limpid purity" of its music [5]. As Luigi Russolo wrote in his *Art of Noises* manifesto (1913), "Our ear is not satisfied and calls for even greater acoustical events." Russolo, with F.T. Marinetti, sought to dramatically transform their soundscape by means of an accelerated military-industrial expansion, an amplification in all directions. While Marinetti's *parole in libertà* reveled in the war front's bombardment and machine gun fire—"such joy is yours o my people to sense see ear scent drink everything everything everything taratatatatata" ("Zang Tumb Tuum")—Russolo preached on the machinic ambient soundtrack to come: "In a few years, the engines of our industrial cities will be skillfully tuned so that every factory is turned into an intoxicating orchestra of noises" [6].

By recollecting these statements, I do not mean only to emphasize that the conception of an avant-garde, in etymology and in practice, is always already embedded within a militarist and colonialist framing. However, it is important to acknowledge that in a North American context, one of, if not the earliest, usage of the term "avant-garde" occurs in 1704 when Louis Lahontan described the bands of Indigenous soldiers he included in his French army detachment to fight the Iroquois. Lahontan considered these conscripts—"*des Sauvages*," he called them—to be at the lowest position in the military hierarchy and therefore the most expendable in combat. While French troops lingered behind, this avant-garde was sent to the front lines to wage battle on behalf of the colonial force [7]. Nor do I intend to travel the well-trodden path toward a discussion of Italian Futurism's cryptofascist politics, although, again, it is useful to recall at least one moment of Marinetti's initial Futurist manifesto: "We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women" [8]. Instead, I recollect this assemblage to ask, with Goodman: "What is left of the futurist thought of sonic invention in an age when the military-entertainment complex cuts to the micrological core and control operates flat with becoming?" [9]

The paramount descendants of this sonic tradition exist today in two distinct manifestations: Muzak and the Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), "law enforcement's go-to choice for crowd control scenarios" [10]. In the former, one has the ubiquitous music of our contemporary hovering just above audibility, the fulfillment of Russolo's dream for an "intoxicating orchestra of noises" piped into every place of labor and consumption; in the latter one has the cochlea-shattering pulse to enforce a paradigm of labor and consumption. Its military-industrial origins are well documented: Teams of doctors, musicians and marketing experts developed Muzak "to stimulate productivity and employee morale alongside

generating a pacifying glow of comfort in the consumer" [11]. Muzak's mood modulations were initially engineered to focus the attentions of laborers during extended shifts. They were then redesigned to fill the sensorium of every shopper's experience with good vibes.

The LRAD, then, is there to be employed in those instances when this surround sound's deliverables are impeded—say, by workers demanding better conditions or by protestors bringing to a halt the circulation of goods and individuals. Originally designed to fill a "critical gap between bullhorns and bullets" [12] in the fight against Somali pirates, the LRAD has been primarily utilized by militarized police forces during "crowd control" scenarios—an upgrade on flashbang stun grenades, more effective over greater distances. The LRAD's first documented use was by the city of Pittsburgh's Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) unit during the 2009 G-20 protests in Pittsburgh, where the weapon's pain-inducing sounds caused numerous bystanders to suffer permanent hearing damage [13]. It was then used regularly thereafter at sites of protest such as the forced closure of the Zuccotti Park encampment during Occupy Wall Street in 2011, and more recently against those demonstrating against the police murders of Michael Brown in Ferguson and Eric Garner in 2014 and 2015. The aim of this weapon is to disperse assembled bodies with its deafening tones.

> The idea of the avant-garde is embedded in a theory of history. This is to say that a particular geographical ideology, a geographical-racial or racist unconscious, marks and is problematic out of which or against the backdrop of which the idea of the avant-garde emerges [14].

To consider, then, the sonic techniques and spatial practices of the Idle No More protestors as having an affinity or resonance with this iteration of the avant-garde is to map a genealogy of sonic disruption and the shock of those sounds' reception but also to refigure the contexts and intentions of their reverberations. In grafting these practices onto one another, one can begin to recover particular fragments in the theory of the avant-garde that belie the historical avant-garde's political attachments and trajectories. Again: What does it mean to assert that the protestors' interventions form a counter-avant-garde?

To make this assertion is, first of all, to echo Adorno on the sonic avant-garde when he states: "Today the only works that really count are those which are no longer works at all" [15]. It is to assert further that these interventions grate critically against the progressive detachment of art from real-life contexts, and the correlative crystallization of a distinctive sphere of experience, i.e. the aesthetic. It is to agree, here, with Peter Bürger that "the intention of the historical avant-garde movements was defined as the destruction of art as an institution set off from the praxis of life," that "avant-gardistes profoundly modified the category of the work of art," and that, consequently, it is "from the standpoint of the avant-garde that the preceding phases in the development of art as a phenomenon in bourgeois society can be understood"

[16]. Yet it is to move away from Bürger's assumption, via Buchloh, that "the criteria for aesthetic judgment would have to be linked at all times, if not to models of an outright instrumentalized political efficacy, then at least to a compulsory mode of critical negativity." After all, "*one* among the infinite multiplicity of functions intrinsic to aesthetic structures is in fact to provide at least an immediate concrete illusion, if not actual instantiation, of a universally accessible suspension of power" [17].

It is to insist, with Edoardo Sanguinetti and Tyrone Williams, that "the avant-garde rises up against aesthetic commodification," even as it "ultimately unfolds within it" [18]. It is to echo Fred Moten that "this avant-garde disrupts the phantasmically solipsistic space of bourgeois aesthetic production and reception with some brought noise, voices/forces, mobilizing through enforced hermeticisms" [19]. It is to agree—with one slight edit—with Joshua Clover's four orientations for a genealogical avant-garde in our present moment:

> One: it will not be identifiable via format similarities to previous avant-gardes.
>
> Two: it will take as its basic provocations a set of propositions about immediate social antagonism.
>
> Three: it will draw its relation to race class gender from contemporary rifts.
>
> Four: it will align itself first with the negation of the current social arrangement including the negation of culture both as a medium for transmission and as such [20].

It is to argue that any conception of an avant-garde that antagonizes *only* the institution of art, *only* aesthetic praxis—stopping short of the structures that circumscribe that institution and its praxes—will not suffice. (One includes, here, the historical avant-garde and the conceptualizations of the historical avant-gardes as one of the structures included in that circumscription.) An avant-garde that, as Cathy Park Hong writes, "has become petrified, enamored by its own past, and therefore forever insular and forever looking backwards" [21], one that asserts aesthetic radicality while protecting the cultural politics of the petro-capitalist settler-colonial state, is no avant-garde for our contemporary.

At this juncture I return to the Idle No More demonstrations, to the sites where several generations convened to make their dissent audible—against the quotidian circulations of capital, against land grabs and short-term profits, against the commodity of tones, against the pulse that polices audition. In the space of the protestors' manifestation, appropriated from the appropriators, this avant-garde fosters an ecology of engineered vibration toward a threshold of sonic rupture. The collective noise of these demonstrations cancels out the modernizing impulses, the fetishization of the new, the alienation and Eurocentrism of the former avant-gardes. It breaks open the parameters of the controlled soundscape. The term itself—*avant-garde*—accrues a more minor consequence.

References and Notes

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