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IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"SOUND IS A DIMENSION OF REALITY": ROBIN JAMES ON THEORIZING SOUND, RACE, AND GENDER

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Transcript

Caro Fowler
Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

This episode is part of a miniseries on sound, in which Caitlin Woolsey, our postdoctoral fellow and also an expert in histories of sound media and 20th-century art, speaks with scholars and artists whose work explores the intersections of sound, media, and art history.

Caitlin Woolsey
I am Caitlin Woolsey. In this episode, I speak with Robin James, an associate professor of philosophy at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, whose work explores the intersections of pop music, sound studies, feminism, and race. Throughout our conversation, Robin critiques theoretical approaches that idealized sound as neutral or reparative, but in so doing, reproduce hegemonic, neoliberal, and biopolitical projects.

Robin James
The way that we organize society also manifests in the way we organize sound, right? The relations among people become relations among sounds that are perceived in terms of analogous gendered and race relations.

Caitlin Woolsey
Well, thank you so much for joining me, Robin. It's a real pleasure to have you on the podcast, and to just have a chance to speak with you a little bit more about your work. We usually start by opening it up, just to ask to speak a little bit about how you might begin to describe your kind of intellectual or creative formation.

Robin James
Great, thanks. I'm delighted to be here. And thank you so much for the kind invitation to talk a little bit about my work. So I guess I just kind of started when I

was a kid, I was I was your typical band nerd and I became a music major in college. I thought I was going to be a conductor. But then I started taking music theory classes, and I realized, oh, this is what I like about music. I like analyzing it and breaking it down and interpreting it in that way. And around that time. I remember this is right when I was starting to take more advanced theory classes, I was also enrolled in deductive logic, and, you know, so it's same sorts of thinking and music theory and philosophy. So that's really where I got my start. And I did this undergraduate project. Because I noticed - I must have been a junior in college or something - I'm like, who atonality, the sort of abandonment of absolute rules and existentialism, they're happening around the same time, what's up with that? And so I wanted to just sort of explore the connections among philosophical ideas at a particular moment in history and the ideas that inform the music at the time. So I went to grad school in philosophy, because I couldn't decide did I want to go into music? Did I want to go into gender studies? And I was like, well, I can do all of that in philosophy, right? Philosophy is all encompassing. So I did that. And then I was really lucky. I was at DePaul University in Chicago at a time where the faculty were pretty much open to anything. So I came in just as Graham Harman, the object oriented ontology guy, was leaving. So the faculty were really open to new unusual stuff, and I was kind of the odd duck. I'm like, I'm kind of a music theorist, I'm kind of a gender studies scholar, I'm kind of a philosopher. But my mentor there, Tina Chanter, she works on feminism and film theory. And she's like, I don't get what you're doing with the music, but I can see that it's important, right? [Laughs]. I sort of get enough what's going on to support you in doing that. So I was really lucky to not have people who were trying to boundary police me as a student and really sort of discipline me and they just kind of let me figure out what I had to say, regardless of its legibility within predefined boxes. And I think that's an approach I've really valued and tried to keep doing in my own work, but also adopt with my own students.

Caitlin Woolsey
It's so interesting to me, too, that you sort of had the prescience as an undergrad or as a graduating undergrad, to see the capaciousness of philosophy to be a

space in which you can engage with these different traditionally distinct disciplinary categories. Because I feel like so often when people think philosophy, they see it as this sort of narrow bounded academic discipline or silo, and -

Robin James
Well, I think that typical perception is correct, because mainstream academic philosophy is very interested in boundary policing. But the program at my undergraduate institution at Miami in Ohio, it was really pluralistic. So it included a lot of the minor traditions in philosophy, right, so continental, applied philosophy, American philosophy, feminist philosophy. So I sort of got a too rosy picture of the field [laughing]. My undergraduate department was so great, unlike the rest of the field. But I was just lucky to be in the right kinds of places. And I was also lucky to end up as an assistant professor in an applied philosophy department, where they were similarly not interested in boundary policing in the way that many disciplines are, but especially philosophy can be. So I've just been very lucky to find places throughout my academic career that's let me be the best I can be regardless of those disciplinary boundaries.

Caitlin Woolsey
And just to step back to something you said a few minutes ago, I'm curious to like, what was that experience of navigating-, you know, being in a graduate program where you had support, but maybe not faculty or interlocutors who are particularly steeped in the kind of work that you were trying to do? You had the space to pursue those questions or interests, but how did you kind of navigate that?

Robin James
I did a lot of reading own my own. [Laughs]. Um, there was one faculty member in the department who did-, he wasn't really involved in popular music studies the subfield, but he wrote liner notes for the Yes box set, and wrote a book on rock aesthetics within the philosophical tradition. So I had some guidance, but I really just did a lot of reading. I was in grad school in the early 2000s, and that's

right when the sort of first wave of feminist popular music studies scholarship by people like Norma Coates and Gayle Wald was really starting to come out. So I just devoured that and did a lot of reading outside of class. I tried going to various, you know, like the American Society for Aesthetics or, you know, tried to figure out where I fit in, and I learned a lot of places that I didn't fit in. But once I had travel money as an assistant professor and I could go to other conferences and things like that, I found that a really good home for me was popular music studies, and I asked him us. And right around that time, too - so I started on the tenure track in 2006 - that's when "Sounding Out," the sound studies publication, started to be published around then. And I read that I'm like, oh, here's people working on sound and gender and race. Like, these are my people. I had to just kind of explore on my own. But fortunately, there were other people out there. I might have felt alone in philosophy or alone in my department, but there were people that wanted to ask the same kind of questions that I wanted to ask.

Caitlin Woolsey
No, I was just curious, because I feel like there's a way in which someone could enter into sound studies knowing almost nothing about music and continue to work in a way that more or less sort of cordons off music and especially popular music as a whole different kind of category. And so one thing that's interesting to me about your work and your scholarship is the way in which the implications and the theoretical stakes are much broader about sound writ large, but that you like that you do close reading of songs and music in a very object specific way that I think is akin to how art historians approach their work. So I'm just interested in the interaction between the two sort of spheres, such as you say are intertwined.

Robin James
Yeah, and that might just come from my methodological orientation as a theorist. And I got to think about that a lot last year, when I was teaching in the music department. In music studies, you're either a historian, an analyst, or an ethnographer. And all the classes and the curricula sort of assume those are the

three dominant methods, but as a theorist, I'm like, but the questions I'm asking are conceptual. And so I think that that layer of the conceptual is the driving layer in all my work because I'm an [inaudible] philosopher [laughing]. But yeah, I think one of the bad habits of academic philosophy is we often-, or, it is not always looked down upon to sort of theorize without an archive and just sort of on the basis of thought experiments and things like this. But I see popular music as an archive or a text that I can closely read to have actual evidence to argue with, right? Like, I don't have to think about a trolley problem and make hypotheses based on my own very narrow experience of the world that assists white women in the US. I can analyze songs that draw on experiences that reflect my own, but that are also very unreflective of my own, and have a kind of hard evidence that I can bring to philosophical thinking that isn't always there. One of the things that gets me really frustrated about the way people talk about music and sound is they seem to romanticize it. Oftentimes, lately it's been treated by white Western theorists as inherently reparative. And I think that just covers over the way that sound and music also carry with them, and are perceived through the same oppressive and limited epistemic and aesthetic frameworks as any of the other arts are. Yeah.

Caitlin Woolsey
Yeah. I mean, that critique that you've articulated in different writings is something that's drawn me to your work. It does seem like there's been - and maybe not so much now, but in the past - been a kind of move to see sound as somehow this privileged site. Like, oh, it's long overlooked, and now it's this kind of privileged space to think anew in a way that doesn't seem to take into account the kind of historical reality and sort of contingencies of music and sound.

Robin James
Yeah. Yeah, and one of the things I've talked about in my own work is how there's-, you can sort of see a historical parallel between popular feminist approaches to feminism. So at one point in the last 20 years, feminism became broadly socially acceptable, right? And this gives us you know, like girl boss, Lehman sort of stuff, right? This is the same moment when people like new

materialist theorists are saying vibration, vibration can repair what text and visual representation have damaged, both politically and ontologically in Western philosophy. You can see that parallel because sound has been feminized in European philosophy. I mean, you definitely see this in Deleuze, for example, where he and Guattari talk about becoming music and becoming woman. But they get that from Nietzsche. So there's this long tradition of feminizing sound. So it's interesting to me that right at the moment we sort of see this neoliberal recuperation of white femininity and white feminism, we also see this academic recuperation of sound as Other.

Caitlin Woolsey
Mhm.

Robin James
And I talk about that in "The Sonic Episteme." But that was actually one of the things that first led me to kind of suspect or question the effects of that approach. It wasn't till I started reading stuff by Elizabeth Grosz and Christoph Cox that I really saw people arguing that theorizing on the basis of sound or resonance or whatever, was both recuperative and reparative. So it's restored something that was lost to philosophy or theory, and it also repaired an injustice. And I think the sort of "A-ha" moment when I was reading, "Chaos, Territory, Art," and I was like, the musical terms are all wrong here [laughing]. So, something else is going on. What's motivating this? Because it's not-, this is a sort of stereotype about music or resonance that she's appealing to, so what's motivating the massaging of resonance to mean this? So it was definitely my background in music that led me to read these texts in this way, but the idea really didn't emerge until, probably I'm gonna say early 2010s, I think. Yeah, because I was reading Attali's "Noise," and he makes this claim that the techniques used by mid-century avant garde composers, like Cage, follow the same laws as the laws of acoustics. They follow the same laws as the laws of acoustics, which are also analogous to the market mechanisms of neoliberalism. So I was like, hmm, the laws of acoustics are analogous to neoliberal markets...

okay. Right? So I was like, that claim seems odd. But I was also interested in exploring the extent to which that claim could be true.

And it is, to the extent that statistics are measurements of frequencies. You're measuring rates and things like that. So there's some analogy there. And I think that's one of the things that leads people to sonic concepts and metaphors, because in this very mathematically structured and governed world, those sonic metaphors provide us qualitative understandings of very, very abstract naff. In pop culture and in the corporate sphere, there's a lot of this trafficking in sonic metaphors to talk about data analytics, and things like that.

Caitlin Woolsey
Just to take a little bit of a step back—so, in "The Sonic Episteme" and in another writing, you level this critique of sonic materialism, or what sometimes been referred to, and I think you've referred to as what's seen as an ontological turn within sound studies or people who are writing about sound. So for listeners who may not be familiar with these debates, or these different approaches, I think it might be helpful if you're willing to just share a little bit about sort of what you see as the stance that you're critiquing. And then how your critique emerges from that in in terms of resisting a reading of sound as matter, or as a kind of truth, or as a kind of way of knowing in some sort of privileged form.

Robin James
Sure. So over the last 20 or so years, in various fields in the humanities, there's been a move to say, you could either frame it in terms of something like European modernity or the 90s, you know, theory in the 90s - take your object of choice, usually it's Judith Butler [both laugh] - privileges visual and textual representation as an epistemic and ontological approach to theorizing. And supposedly, vision and text are de materializing, they're forms of abstraction that are purely sort of cultural or metaphysical or however you want to frame it. So there's this idea that theory has somehow distanced dust from stuff, and we need to get back to the stuff. And one of the ways it has been proposed that we get back to the stuff is through things like sound or vibration - or Karen Barad

calls it diffraction, but that's also just a form of vibration. So supposedly, sound and vibration is, or Elizabeth Grosz calls it resonance, will get us back to the material stuff, it will put us back in contact and back in touch with the things that whatever theory of the past has distanced us from. So that's the view that that I'm critiquing. What I argue is that sound here is a figure for the excluded Other, and that what all of these vibrational or resonant theoretical approaches are trying to do is something that actually goes all the way back to people like Rousseau and Kant. There's this idea that the practice of theory - i.e. the practice of white masculinity - requires us to distance ourselves from embodied receptivity and feeling. So in order to get that back, but yet still be a white dude and not be a woman or a Black person, I have to kind of appropriate some feminized or non-white attributes. So Rousseau talks about this in terms of the passion driven languages of East Asia. Nietzsche talks about this in terms of the feminine. There's this long standing tradition among white Western thinkers of saying, oh, the practice of theorizing is disembodying and dispassionate. How do I get those things back? And I think here, in the vibrational resonant turn in theory, sound is just the sort of figure for that thing, and sound is operating in place of more more explicitly raced and gendered things, like femininity, like East Asianness or languages, like Blackness, right? So it's an old problematic move, just made in terms that sounds slightly less problematic. And another part of the problem is that these sonic theories do depart from, they are different from sort of more traditional modernisms - in terms of theory, theoretical modernisms. But in the same way that neoliberalism generally upgrades classical liberalism for terms and techniques that are more compatible with 21st-century realities, that's what this sonic turn is also doing. So, one of the things that's happening is theorists are using - they're not necessarily doing this intentionally, but the effect is the theories people develop of sort of resonant ontology or vibrational ontology produce the same relations among theory and theorists, that neoliberalism and biopolitics and these quantitative modes of governance produce among people. So for example, many people, including Sara Ahmed and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, have talked about how a lot of these sort of materialist theories completely overlook work by scholars of color. So there's the same kind of marginalization of scholarship from non-white, non-Western traditions that

you had in maternity. It's just sort of this sonic theory's claimed to be more inclusive, because we're breaking down barriers between human and non-human and getting to matter itself.

Caitlin Woolsey
Right.

Robin James
While at the same time saying, well, Black studies isn't quite good enough to do that. So that's the other kind of level of the critique, is that the effect of these sonic or resonant or vibrational theories is they're sort of reproducing, in new terms, the same old relations of privilege and inequality that have plagued Western theory since its inception.

Caitlin Woolsey
And is your understanding of the replication of these relations related to-, I know you've written on sonic, cyber feminist practice in about patriarchy as being not just among relations of people, but patriarchy as also being a relation among sounds. Could you speak a little bit about that? I mean I know that's some of your earlier work, sort of pre "Sonic Episteme," but...

Robin James
Yeah. So one thing I'm always interested in my work is how our perception and valuing of sounds happens through racialized and gendered terms. So Jenny Stover talks about this in terms of having like a listening ear instead of like a gaze. And I think-, so for example, one of the things I've talked about in past work, in the "Resilience & Melancholy" book, is how gender norms about women's resilient overcoming or leaning in, get depicted in compositional structures and musical gestures. So basically, the way that we organize society also manifests in the way we organize sound. The relations among people become relations among sounds that are perceived in terms of analogous gendered and raced relations.

Caitlin Woolsey
What does that look like within objects or within reception or within the circulation of sounds beyond the kind of the sort of scholarly academic replication of certain kinds of theorizing and relations?

Robin James
Yeah, so one of the things I've been working on recently is the current phenomenon of LoFi study beats or chill music. So like, Taylor Swift's "Cardigan" single would be her take on this the genre, right? So there's numerous YouTube channels devoted to what are called LoFi study beats, it's usually LoFi hip hop study beats. And the "Chilled Cow" one with the image of the girl with a ponytail studying, that's kind of the most famous one. But a couple weeks ago, Pepsi released its own YouTube LoFi beats streaming channel. [Both laugh]. And, and in the last UK election, the Tory party posted to their official YouTube channel, "LoFi Boris wave" to get Brexit done, too. So there's this broad cultural phenomenon of these LoFi - and LoFi usually means like sparse, sort of snare and rimshot percussion over some kind of very low key music. So in the in the "Chilled Cow," it's usually that sort of sparse percussion over what you might otherwise think of as smooth jazz. And it's explicitly billed for productivity, to study-relax to. And the Pepsi channel is great, because the lyrics to the songs say things like, Pepsi will help you get work done because it has caffeine. [Both laugh].

Caitlin Woolsey
Really, really subtle [laughing].

Robin James
So what I'm interested in about this is, so why is this very particular idea of productivity as being focused and calm something that we start to see even before the 2016 election, right? We start to see it, you know, so back in the early 2010s, pop music was very maximalist, if you remember, YOLO, You Only Live Once, right? That sort of thing. So there was a big bubble of maximalism early in the decade, but even 2014/2015 there's this turn toward chill. And I'm

interested in like, so why is this very low key, basically updated, smooth jazz, being seen as something to aspire to, and to use for productivity. And this is also the kind of music that Spotify really pushes, and Liz Pelly's work has talked about this. So what I'm hypothesizing is that in a world - we see this even with more clarity today - we're all supposed to just sort of be left to ourselves to overcome whatever challenges we face. The status of being able to merely just remain productive and not have to spectacularly overcome huge obstacles - it's actually a status claim of having high status. I'm a high status person, because I don't have these enormous challenges in my life, enormous challenges usually caused by things like gender, race, and disability. So I have already been so well vested, and so privileged that I can just remain productive and just make sure that my human capital retains the value that's already been invested in it. I don't have to sort of pull myself up from my bootstraps to do that sort of spectacular achievement, right? So I think this music aesthetic is indicative of how status relationships are negotiated among sort raced and gendered groups, if that makes sense. So that's a kind of example of how I'm using sound and music to think about more pervasive and underlying political structures or political discourses.

Caitlin Woolsey
To kind of circle back a little bit to the sonic, your recounting of some of what's at stake for you, and the argument you're making or the critiques you're making in the sonic episteme and much of your other work. What are the avenues of possibility within thinking about music and sound, that would allow us to not just continue to replicate these same kinds of relations? Or what would be alternative models or alternative approaches or ways of thinking and listening?

Robin James
Yeah, yeah, that's a good question. Because part of what I do in the book is say, okay, so like, here's some ways of theorizing within and through sound that I find not very helpful. In large part I find them not very helpful, because they reproduce the same relations of inequality they claim to solve. And some of those relations include things like academic disciplinarity, or the privileging of

hard sciences over arts and humanities. So I think the kinds of ways that sound can be used theoretically and artistically that would be productive, would be in ways that don't support or aren't easily legible to things like disciplinary logics or policing. So, in ways that wouldn't reaffirm the project's value in the terms that the neoliberal academy recognizes. So it's about sort of creating other systems of value and ways of relating that aren't just reproductions of the patriarchal racial capitalist idea that theorizing or philosophizing is about laboring over the natural or illegible thing, and thus making it legible and enclosable as a kind of private property, or value, or wealth, or something like that. So it's finding new ways of practicing theory or scholarship or creative practice. Yeah, and that can look a lot of different ways. And I talk about some of the ways scholars in Black sound studies have proposed this. But I think there are plenty of other ways.

Caitlin Woolsey
I'm thinking about this those of different ways of working with these kind of disciplinary boundaries or machinations. I mean, how do you think about the archive in relation to sound and music and these new possibilities? In art history, I feel like the archive is often a sort of conceptual and methodological and practical consideration, but also a kind of space for intervention or for reflection. I'm just curious if that's something that you've thought about at all?

Robin James
Maybe I guess my first response would be thinking about how some things are seen as more legitimate objects of study than others. And the kinds of things that - you know, kind of building off of some of what Christina Sharpe talks about - the kinds of things that have been preserved as archives and what's missing? We only have archives of certain kinds of things. So how do we try to grapple with the implications of things for which we don't have either archives of any sort or "proper archives?" And I think 30 years ago, popular music was one of those things, when popular music studies was barely a discipline. You still get musicologists who don't see popular music as a proper object of study. But I think those are the battle lines, actually. Like, what is seen as a legitimate archive and what is not seen as a legitimate archive.

Caitlin Woolsey
We're in fall of 2020, and we're recording this interview. I'm curious, sort of what are you listening to that is engaging or interesting or giving you hope or pause for thought? Are there certain - or reading, it doesn't have to just be listening, reading. [Both laugh].

Robin James
So I guess there's two kinds of things. I always listen to a lot techno, but I've just been listening to a lot of dance music just because I need energy and I need to feel like we're going to be together in music venues again at some point [laughing]. So, music that's very physical. Kind of the opposite of that chill…. Yeah, just music that's physical and makes me move. So for example, I actually think even right as the pandemic was hitting, the pop charts were really taking a dance pop turn. So there's The Weekend and Lady Gaga, Doja Cat. So I've been really happy about that, dance music is kind of back. I've also been listening to-, I'm working on this project about the philosophy of this old modern rock radio station, WOXY. And so I've been digging into their year-end charts from 1984 to 2009. So I've just been listening to a lot of old stuff. Both old stuff that I remember because I listened to it. But some of the like, early 80s charts I was, I was in like second grade when some of these, you know, in '85. Learning about how new wave or modern rock was experienced by the people at the time and how it's so very different from what you hear on the 80s nights in clubs, or what's on the new wave Apple Music list. So sort of seeing how the orthodox narrative of modern rock or new wave got shaped has been has been really interesting. So listening to old stuff, both that I remember and not remember.

Caitlin Woolsey
I think when I sent you my questions earlier, I had included a question about if there are things that you think art history or philosophy, but art history or the arts sort of get wrong about music or sound. But, I also feel like maybe it's not fair to ask you to comment on a kind of disciplinary framework that you're not necessarily within. But I didn't know if you had any thoughts about that.

Robin James

Um, I mean, I guess a couple things. Because you had talked about how do I understand differences among sound and music and whatever? And I think those are purely institutional, right? So in philosophical aesthetics, there's this term called the institutional definition of art - so art is whatever art institutions say it is. And I think, from my own perspective, I think that's the only actual true definition of what art is [laughing]. It's the only one that captures everything that one might want to include under that term. And I think that's true with sound and music. Like, there is no objective difference between sound and music. It's a purely institutional one. And the way sound or music or the difference between the two functions, it tells you really more about the institutions than it does anything about the work, or the practice, or the tradition. So something in philosophy that's interesting - and this is probably why I'm uncomfortably within the field as someone who does sound - so if you look at the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which is the well-respected, open access philosophy resource, it's like Artstor, but for philosophy. The entry on sound treats it purely as a matter of philosophy of mind and perception. So the sort of idea of sound that one would have in sound studies, sound as a dimension of reality that you can use to talk about many different things, right? It's not just something we perceive, but sound is organized and organizes people. Philosophers don't think about sound in that way. So there's this huge gulf between what goes on in mainstream philosophy with respect to sound and what happens in sound studies generally, which, to me, is frustrating because I think there's a lot of overlap. Work that is seen as centrally sound studies is philosophical, like they're talking about Deleuze. [Both laugh]. But philosophers don't engage that work from our own disciplinary perspective, to our loss.

Caitlin Woolsey

It feels like, with the kind of upswell of interest in sound and sound studies over the last two decades, it's sort of surprising that it hasn't been accounted for within philosophy even though it's...

Robin James
Yeah. And I think that's reflected though, that mainstream academic philosophy has always tried to ally itself with the hard sciences over the other humanities. And this is in part like, oh, the other humanities are getting less white and less male. [Laughs]. So rather than go in that direction, we will try to double down an ally on ourselves with the disciplines that are still largely weighted male. Thus, the more sort of scientistic understanding of sound as cognitive rather than social or cultural.

Caitlin Woolsey
Well, thank you so much for talking to me today.

Robin James
Well, thank you so much. It's been a delight.

Caitlin Woolsey
Thanks, Robin.

Caro Fowler
Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information on this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult clark.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Jessie Sentivan and Alice Matthews.