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Babelian Cosmopolitanism

Or Tuning in to “Sublime Frequencies”

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Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!

Not today is to justify me and answer what I am for . . .

—Walt Whitman

BEYOND THE PALACE OF MARVELS

Jacques Attali, in his critically acclaimed book, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, cites one of Leibniz’s little known but “extraordinary” texts, “Drôle de pensée touchant nouvelle sorte de représentation,” in which the philosopher describes the “Palace of Marvels.” The Palace of Marvels is Leibniz’s idealization of a perfect political organization, which is built in such a way that the master of the house is able to hear and see everything that is being said and done in the premises without himself being perceived by his subjects. Leibniz’s vision of disciplinary society not only predates

Bentham's or Foucault's subsequent versions of surveillance mechanism, the Panopticon, but it also conceptualizes a more effective and absolute form of power through eavesdropping, censorship, and recording, as well as surveillance through visual means. Listening in on, ordering, transmitting, and recording noise are at the heart of the modern State. The State, Attali warns, is slowly but steadily turning into "a gigantic, monopolizing noise emitter, and at the same time, a generalized eavesdropping device" (1985, 7). As a result, Attali argues, music today is "all too often only a disguise for the monologue of power" (9).

For Attali there are only two roads out of the Palace of Marvels—one that brings us back to where we began after taking us through three stages of music: music as ritual that makes "people *forget* the general violence"; music as representation that makes "people *believe* in the harmony of the world"; and music as repetition where "it serves to *silence* by mass-producing a deafening, syncretic kind of music, and censoring all other human noise" (1985, 19). The other road—which promises to take us away from these stages, all fraught with death and ranging from the ritualistic murder of the scapegoat to "the monstrous herald of death," like the orchestras at Dachau (1985, 125)—goes toward what Attali calls "composition" or "new noise," which is "a music produced elsewhere and otherwise" (1985, 133). Those "elsewhere and otherwise" than the Palace of Marvels are reached only when a new code of music is created out of the silence we all are condemned to in the Palace. "There is no communication possible between men any longer," remarks Attali, "now that the codes have been destroyed including even the code of exchange and repetition" (1985, 134). For him, then, silence, incomprehension, and incommensurability reign where music ought to be due to the pulverization of the codes effected by the political economy; but at the same time, no further work is required, for the old codes have already been destroyed. The need to create a new code as a way out of the Palace is emphasized, but that road, for Attali, should be constructed through improvisation out of sheer presence without repeating history, even in any constructive sense. The communication of the new code, for him, emerges only when we create our own relation with the world and try to tie other people into the meaning we thus create. This new form of socialization, or

what he calls “composition,” is “doing solely for the sake of doing,” neither for exchange nor for repetition. It is “playing for one’s own pleasure” or “pleasure in being instead of having” (1985, 134).

“Music as pleasure in being” not only rescues us from the Palace of Marvels, but it also saves us from the exchanges and repetitions of the political economy. What bothers Attali more is not the political economy of music as such—not even “property” or “the master of production,” for it is part of political economy’s ruse to make us believe that alienation results from property or its owners. The root of death lies in the exteriority of man from his labor, or alienation, which disappears only in the “composition in which the musician plays primarily for himself, outside any operationality, spectacle, or accumulation of value.” In other words, composition is music “as an activity that is an end in itself” (1985, 135).

The other road that promises an elsewhere, thus, is in fact the same one that eliminates all exteriority in order to imprison us to our subjective pleasures. This road undoubtedly liberates us from the Palace of Marvels and from the alienation of labor insofar as it promises musicians freedom from the deadly cycles of exchanges, repetitions, and stockpiling of music through new technology. However, this new noise “produced by each individual for himself, for pleasure outside of meaning, usage and exchange” (Attali 1985, 137) estranges him from all exteriority, from alterity itself, and hence from freedom. Since Attali’s new noise is limited in its production and consumption to a guild of musicians—or to the ghettos, shantytowns, and neighborhoods (1985, 140)—its appeal to a subject or a neighborhood without exteriority very much resembles the Palace of Marvels that produces only a monologue of power in the name of music. Thus, interestingly, Attali arrives back at the Palace from which he, at all costs, wanted to find an exit.

It is against these roguish ruses of the State or the circular sovereignty of the Palace to which Attali’s project of the new noises obviously falls prey, that in *Rogues*, Derrida posits the figure of the potter, who, on his wheel, makes his pottery rise up like a tower, “but without subjecting himself, or herself, to the automatic, rotating movement, by remaining as free as possible with regard to the rotation” (2005b, 13). Unlike Attali’s “composer,” Derrida’s

potter, however, is not untouched by the wheel; rather, he or she puts “his or her entire body, feet and hands alike, to work on the machine, cultivating the art of a sculptor but also of an architect and composer” (2005b, 3). By confiding his love for this multifaceted or “babelian” figure of the potter—who like a Whitmanian poet-to-come, is at once a sculptor, architect and musician—Derrida is not simply juxtaposing it to the classical figure of the sovereign in order to critique its ontotheological foundation. He also stresses the impossibility or even dangers of imagining a clear exteriority to the wheel. Against the circularity of the classical sovereignty, Derrida conjures up a musical sphericity, the “variations and rhythms, accelerations and decelerations [*allegro or presto, adagio or lento*]” of music (2005b, 13). While Attali’s notion of composition is located outside the Palace or the monologue of the State, Derrida, on the contrary, sets these two wheels—the palatial circularity and the musical cadences—against each other. His figure of the potter, who is at once a sculptor and architect, “in his turn is [also] by turns poet and musician, rhetorician and political orator, perhaps even a philosopher” (2005b, 13). These turns of the musical wheels set to “work” (not at composition, but at deconstruction and dissimulation—for no composition without deconstruction first) radically differ from Attali’s notion of “playing for one’s own pleasure,” which resembles what Derrida, in a number of his texts, would describe as “hearing-oneself-speak.”¹ Against this autotelic and roguish wheel of sovereignty that loves to hear itself speak, Derrida proposes a shared concept of sovereignty that seeks to turn sovereignty against itself. This nontotalizing and nonsaturating *work* at the wheel (as opposed to the subjective pleasures of an individual who exclusively belongs to a particular community or a ghetto) and the turns and twists (or the tours and detours of the wheel or of the potter at the wheel) constitute, for Derrida, what he calls cosmopolitanism.

The music produced by Sublime Frequencies (a unique producer of “world music” that I examine in this essay in the light of Derrida’s concept of cosmopolitanism) is music only by turns. It is cosmopolitan in the Derridian sense of the term—that is, in the sense of the rupture or opening in the wheel of sovereignty that tends otherwise to freeze all spatialization and temporalization, and hence all movements and thoughts. Track

number 6 from Sublime Frequencies' album on Cambodia, *Radio Phnom Penh*, starts with a news clipping: "activists have been arrested since the President declared indefinite state of emergency." The clipping, however, almost imperceptibly transitions into a sonorous vocal solo accompanied by local musical instruments with a tune that sounds like a sappy Indian film song (as if to imply that music were the artists' general response to a history of an indefinite state of emergency in the country). Although the album is put together with sounds from post-Khmer Rouge era, it is haunted by the genocidal regime's crackdown on the artists in the mid 1970s. Track 12 also features a radio announcement: "genocide is often considered the most serious crime in international law." The announcement flows into a vocal performance, followed by a theatrical commercial for contraceptives. This sense of rupture, difference, and disjuncture is also evident in the turns and twists that compose *Radio Sumatra: The Indonesian FM Experience*, especially in track 10, which starts with the announcement, in English, that it is "heavy rotations." The announcement is followed by the first rotation, a somber beating of the drum, as if from a Buddhist monastery, which in turn gives way to another rotation, a call to prayer from a mosque.

These rotations are juxtaposed again to a couple of playful commercials and tunes set to dangdut style music, all of which eventually culminate in a hip-hop rap in Bahasa Indonesia. These rotations are not simply multiple (and hence nontotalizable), nor do they merely form a musical collage. Nor are they an unproblematic representation of history—a history of colonization, imperialism, and genocide—from which they are invariably indissociable. Through the surreal continuity and arrest that at once connect them and also distinguish them from one another, they reveal their finitude, or the way one rotation is ineluctably or unconditionally exposed to the other. Unlike "the rounding off" of sovereignty that pleases itself by listening to itself, these rotations not only form a sonic labyrinth, but by moving towards exteriority or by "being drawn out of oneself" (as Bill Martin says about the swirling of music in general, and the music of the rock band Yes in particular [1997, 116]), they open space or time itself, thereby making a "worlding" possible, which is different from the world of "world music" or globalization. Like Derrida's potter whose work is musical only by turns,

these heavy rotations work for the other sounds of music, which, with their unhomely resonance, give nothing less than the world itself—a cosmopolitan world. Sublime Frequencies’ music is cosmopolitan precisely because it opposes the Palace of Marvels, both in the form of the monolocality of the State and in the form of the exoticization of the non-Western music. It is a babelian music, as it seeks to deconstruct any towering, totalizing, or sovereign style of music or the world music. Sublime Frequencies not only helps us expose the nexus between world music, sovereignty of the self or ontology, and the hegemony of the State, but by turns it also represents the work for a world-to-come—not as a utopia, as in Attali’s community beyond the exchanges of political economy, but as the intense, impossible, and hauntological “exchange” and “politics” between the self and the other, or between different parts of the world.

Before we continue listening to these Frequencies with the help of Derrida’s concept of cosmopolitanism, a word of explanation is in order, perhaps, regarding the pertinence and usefulness of Derrida’s thinking in analyzing music in general, as well as so-called ethnic or third world music in particular. As we know, Derrida has not written anything directly on music, and less so on ethnic music, literatures, or arts. As he himself reveals, “music is the object of [his] strongest desire, and yet at the same time it remains completely forbidden” (Derrida 1994, 21). Music remains a “taboo” in deconstruction partly because of the impediments that Derrida’s critique of phonocentrism *seems* to create in appreciating music. Yet for Derrida, the question of the “voice” is more of an enigma or responsibility than an impediment. Deconstruction implies “a nondiscursive sonority” that engages “tone, timbre, [and] voice.” He continues on, arguing that “contrary to the nonsense that circulates in this regard [regarding the critique or even avoidance of the question of “voice” in deconstruction], nothing interests me more than the voice, more precisely the nondiscursive voice, but the voice all the same” (1994, 21). The nondiscursive voice here does not imply what, in *Music and the Ineffable*, Vladimir Jankélévitch calls the “immediate and ineffable communication” (2003, 9) or simply music as the plenitudinous silence that is “something other than Being” (154). Derrida would agree with Jankélévitch that the

nondiscursive voice is music as silence, which implies something other than Being, but he would still object to reducing the voice to ineffability or immediacy. Rather, for Derrida, the voice implies a call somewhat in the same sense Heidegger uses in *Being and Time*, where he defines a call as conscience that summons, or as discourse that discloses. “Conscience,” writes Heidegger, “gives us ‘something’ to understand, it *discloses*” (1996, 249). For him, that disclosure is not only a call, but the very constitution of being itself, or the very summoning of Dasein through calling, which, in turn, “is a mode of discourse” (249). Like Heidegger, Derrida evokes the voice or the call; unlike Heidegger (who argues that the call summons a being, which is “constituted by attunement, understanding, falling prey, and discourse” [249]), Derrida does not reduce the call to a “discourse,” to understanding or to ontology. Contrary to the Heideggerian “call” that discloses, Derrida’s notion of the “voice” belongs, to quote the latter’s *The Gift of Death*, to the order of “the absolutely non-visible that refers to whatever falls outside of the register of the sight, namely the sonorous, the musical, the vocal or phonic” (1995, 90). Thus the musical for Derrida lies outside the domain of the visible, or even the hidden, as it implies an absolutely dissymmetrical relation to the wholly other, who “looks into me in secret, but I don’t see him”; and since “I don’t see him looking at me, I can, and must, only hear him” (1995, 91). The other appears to me only when I listen to or attend to him [on doit me le donner à entendre]. At this point, Derrida introduces a subtle distinction between the wholly other and the “another other,” though listening to the other as the structure of responsibility, as opposed to listening to oneself, remains firmly in place. To respond to the other—to be responsible to the other—entails listening to the other, not, of course, in order to attune oneself to the other, or to “understand” him or her in the sense of reducing him or her to one’s discourse. Listening to the other is also to respect and reaffirm the other’s absolute singularity, his or her untranslatability, undisclosedness, or secrecy. In this absolute dissymmetry lies the sublimity of the other. By producing music that maintains this sublimity without reducing the other to the object of one’s attunement and understanding, *Sublime Frequencies* seems to evoke a voice or a call that resists the monologue of the Palace of Marvels. In this

sense, Sublime Frequencies' music resembles what Jean-Luc Nancy would call "the voice of community," or the music that interrupts itself (1991, 62). When a voice or music is suddenly interrupted, says Nancy, one hears just at that moment "a mixture of various silences and noises that had been covered over by the sound," in other words, at such instances "one hears again the voice or music that has become in a way the voice or music of its own interruption" (62). In *Echographies of Television*, Derrida and Stiegler argue that it is precisely these interruptions that the voice or music undergoes in order to make itself audible—albeit merely as a whisper—that make articulation an *event* (Derrida and Stiegler 2002, 101).

Moreover, by reading Sublime Frequencies as the event of the voice as interruption, we are also taking Derrida somewhere other than his favorite haunt of European arts, literatures, and philosophies. In other words, reading Sublime Frequencies with Derrida also helps us critique Derrida in the most faithfully Derridian way, for the work of cosmopolitanism is underway not only in European or para-European traditions (as Derrida claims in *On Cosmopolitanism* [2001, 17]), but also in other arenas that might not belong to, or would not identify with, these traditions—at least not self-evidently. Nietzsche's *The Case of Wagner* opens with the philosopher's confession that, instead of Wagner, he has taken to listening to Bizet. "Wagner is not the only "redeemer," he writes, for Bizet's *Carmen* also redeems, not with the cultivated music of Europe, but with "another sensuality, another sensibility," another "cheerfulness [that] is African" as there hangs fate over Bizet's music, whose "happiness is brief, sudden, [and] without pardon" (Nietzsche 1967, 158).² Sublime Frequencies also redeems with its music, which is brief, sudden, and without pardon.

WHO ARE "SUBLIME FREQUENCIES"?

In his review of the CDs released under the label Sublime Frequencies, Bill Meyer calls Alan Bishop and his associates new Mustaphas in the world of music. He lampoons the trio—Alan Bishop, Richard Bishop, and Charlie Golcher—for shrouding themselves in the veil of mystery by not allowing

themselves to be photographed without masks.³ Besides reviews of the release and some interviews with the Bishops, there is hardly anything critical published about their music. Their official Web site introduces the group as the producer of CDs, DVDs, music, and film, as well as short wave, field, and radio recordings from various places in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. According to the Web introduction, the group collects “international world music” from various musical sites, including Java, Bali, Sumatra, Burma (Myanmar), Morocco, Thailand, India, Mali, Syria, Laos, Cambodia, Nepal, and Algeria, “with a focus on ethnic folk, pop, ceremony, animist, bizarre, ritual, and exotica as an alternative aesthetic of exploration and research of global sound and culture.”⁴

The introduction continues: this collective of explorers is dedicated to “acquiring and exposing obscure sights and sounds from modern and traditional urban and rural frontiers.” The collective is interested in “international folk and pop music, sound anomalies, and other forms of human and natural expression not documented sufficiently through all channels of academic research, the modern recording industry, media, or corporate foundations.” The collective reveals that the inspiration for these international projects came from the pioneering work done by recording labels like Ocora, Smithsonian Folkways, Lyricord, and Nonesuch Explorer.

This unique interest in the aesthetics of what they call “extra-geography”⁵ is hardly accidental because, from their early childhood, the Bishops grew up with an interesting *mélange* of music. Rick reminisces his childhood in Saginaw, Michigan, where he was constantly exposed to his grandfather’s oud and fiddle, as well as versions of Arabic songs and improvisations (through multiple sessions of *hookah*) before he got his own acoustic guitar. He also recalls his mother, who one day brought “little fake ivory busts of Chopin and Beethoven” and put one on each end of the piano for inspiration; he confesses with some relish that he eventually broke both of their heads off.⁶ In his article on *Sublime Frequencies*, “The *Other* World Music,” Dave Segal describes the main room of the Bishops’ Ballard compound, which features a papier-mâché icon of Kali, the black Hindu Goddess of death and destruction (2005). The Bishop brothers are not only “obsessed with Kali”—who is often sculpted as a terrifying figure dancing with a garland

of human skulls—their music, writes Segal, is equally “grotesque” (2005). “Grotesque,” however, would not fully describe Sublime Frequencies’ music, unless we qualify it with what Bhabha—in *Location of Culture*, following Derrida—calls a “babelian performance” (1994, 135). Bhabha recounts a scene in colonial India in which a missionary runs into the uncanny site, or the “abseit,” where the images of the Goddess (this time the white one) are being made. A million images of the Goddess affront the missionary’s eyes, “a million hammers beating brass and tin assault his ears; a million dismembered Durgas, eyes, arms, heads, some unpainted, others unformed, assail him” (135). Like the babelian performance of the Indian image makers, or the dismembered image of the Goddess herself—an image that resists its own formation—Sublime Frequencies’ music is unheimlich, and thus homeless. These iconoclastic, nonconformist, experimental, global, and “nomadic” impulses are evident both in their music and in their lives, as they keep moving—not only within the United States, from the Midwest to the Southwest and Seattle, but also abroad, from West Africa to the Middle East to Southeast Asia and South Asia.

The Bishop brothers moved to Arizona and, in the shadow of punk rock, formed a band called Sun City Girls, which debuted in 1984. For several years they disappeared (or “went underground,” as Rick puts), only to reappear recently with their albums collected from international radio “noises.” *Radio Morocco* is presumably one of the first albums they started working on in 1983, which they eventually brought out two decades later, in November 2003, along with other equally intriguing collections. Their international musical collages include *Princess Nicotine* from Burma; *Radio Java*, which came out in the August of 2003; *Radio Palestine*, one of the most creatively edited collections; and *Folk and Pop Sounds of Sumatra*, also released in 2003. *Isan: Folk and Pop Music of Northeast Thailand*, *Bush Taxi Mali: Field Recordings From Mali*, *I Remember Syria*, *Folk Music of the Sahara: Among the Tuareg of Libya*, and *Radio Algeria* offer a diverse soundspace from a number of places around the globe. But these are surpassed by the “organic” music of *Brokenhearted Dragonflies: Insect Electronica from Southeast Asia*, in which Tucker Martin succeeded in recording the live and unprocessed drones of cicadas and dragonflies in the lush settings of Laos, Burma, and Thailand.

Equally astounding are the liner notes for the album written by the infamous Hakim Bey, who raves about the “carnocentric” philosophy of the West that parsimoniously confines consciousness to human beings only.

Radio India: The Eternal Dream of Sound is a double disc venture the Bishops collected from various sites in India in 1989 and 1996. It comes wrapped in images of political, popular, and spiritual nature. One of these images features a map of India with all the states marked according to the presence of, or vulnerability to, the communal riots, where the slogan in the poster reads “Were we living United in Rajib’s India?” both in English and local vernaculars. There is a political event associated almost with every CD, as if to imply that “value-free procedure” (to adapt Susan McClary’s apt phrase) in music is impossible (McClary 1991, 19). *Radio Morocco* has in its notes references to Polisario guerillas operating in the southern Sahara. One of the photos included with *I Remember Syria* shows the crumbling and hole-ridden walls of “Colan Hospital.” In the notes for *Radio Palestine*, Alan Bishop narrates a story of a man named Mohammed, whose generous hospitality and remarkable knowledge of Palestinian music benefited him in exploring the dispersed soundscapes of the eastern Mediterranean. The story becomes mysterious and poignant when Bishop notes that Mohammed, who had responded to his letters for two years, suddenly stopped writing back, slipping into silence for reasons known only to Mohammed himself.

SOUNDS COSMOPOLITAN

Sublime Frequencies’ music is cosmopolitan not only because it is overtly political. Likewise, it is political not because it tries to make what lies beyond the nation heard, or because it relates to what is normally labeled as “world music” or “globalization.” The phenomenon of music without borders, or border crossing of “sounds,” has often taken place either through salvage ethnomusicology that collects and explores non-Western musical traditions, supposing that they are on the verge of extinction, or through “world music” that often includes multiple music genres, such as world beat, world fusion, ethnopop, “tribal, technotribal and cybertribal, as well

as ambient, trance, and new age” (Taylor 1997, 1). Despite the fact that world music thrives in various landscapes (which result from global flows, such as ethnoscapings, mediascapings, technoscapings, etc. [Appadurai 1996, 33]), the idea of world music remains “a flight from the Euro-self at the very moment of that self’s suffocating hegemony” (Brennan 2001, 46). Even at its best, world music remains an echo of the sounds from a few powerful states that control the media. Brennan argues that what is considered “world music” is already infected with or “dictated by a world music concept, which is to say a joining in sound of already established American popular and commercial forms” (Brennan 2001, 41). He is absolutely right in pointing out the contradictions in texts like *World Music: A Rough Guide* by Simon Broughton, Mark Ellingham, David Muddyman, and Richard Tillo, where the writers place the Qawwalis of Pakistan alongside the Benin rock of Angelique Kidjo. This results in “a false sense of both,” because one “is a form of devotional music that has no desire to become *of* the world,” while the other is a music based on American models grafted into local rhythms and instrumentation (Brennan 2001, 47). What is less convincing, however, is his description of the Qawwalis (and other similar music from the non-West) as “regional music that either does not travel well, or has no ambition to travel” (47). On the one hand, Brennan keeps the regional musics intact from world history by identifying—or more precisely by *assuming*—authentic traditions untouched by what he calls the “American model music.” On the other hand, he does not take into account the global voyages of artists like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (a reputed Qawwal from Pakistan), Ravi Shankar, George Harrison, and Youssou N’Dour, which testify to the fact that regional music does travel.

The argument here is not that Khan, Shankar, N’Dour, or Harrison exemplify world music. The very term *world music* is problematic because of its ethnomusicological tendencies—a tendency mostly based on salvage ethnology, or on the West’s search for authentic, endangered cultures and sounds—or because of its associations with concepts like world literature or world parliament that, by imagining the whole world as one state, bring us back to the monoglossality of the State. What is equally problematic is to propose an unhistorical other of the world music. Seen from this

perspective, then, world music is just another instance of the monologue of a few states from the West. These states not only succeed in globally marketing their music, they are also capable of co-opting sounds produced to resist—or at least to escape—the grip of their monologue.

Sublime Frequencies' music is cosmopolitan because it seeks to interrupt the monologue of the State, not by imagining an absolute exterior or by pretending, as does Attali, to produce new noises or composition. Its cosmopolitics lies in its "babelian performance"; or, as the term babel suggests, its cosmopolitics depends upon its being a tower in ruin, or a house that stands on the impossibility of being a house. Instead of being a Palace of Marvels, it is a haunted house in which every sound echoes the specter of difference and otherness. As in Derrida's analysis of the "deconstruction of the tower" of Babel (which, for him, ruptures the rational transparency and interrupts "the colonial violence or the linguistic imperialism" of the Semites [1985a, 174]), Sublime Frequencies signifies the impossibility of a single or monolithic tower of world music. Not unlike Derrida's concept of the split "polis" in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, which makes a distinction between two forms of the polis—the City and the State (2001, 3), its music seeks to rupture the monologue of the State that invariably indulges in "hearing itself-speak." As long as there are states, there is the monologue or the possibility of the roguish rounding off. The split polis implies that the monologic or circular sovereignty of the State is turned against itself; as a result, a differential space is created in order for the other to speak or to be heard. It is through this space that detours from the monologue—and not through the notion of the "world government" or "world citizenship" that continues the same circular tradition of the State—that Derrida conceptualizes a cosmopolitan world.

The turns and detours and the rotations and repetitions of such a cosmopolitan world are audible, for instance, in *Radio India*. The album starts with an angry "yahoo," followed by an instrumental score from an Indian film, which in turn gives way to a classical musical performance with Sahanai that interrupts to provide room for a devotional in the beginning of track 2. Disc 2 of *Radio India* begins at HMV FM in Calcutta. We hear the hostess of the program taking off by leaving the audience

with a question for the week; she challenges listeners to name the singer of the song that succeeds to top the popular list. The parting note of the hostess, in her broken Hindi and more easeful English, is succeeded by two announcements in local vernacular, which again are followed by two classical musical performances. On one hand, the reeling rotation of the musical and the nonmusical sounds creates an extremely surreal effect; on the other hand, not allowing one sound to saturate the whole track at once keeps the track infinitely open-ended and opens the possibility of the arrival of the other sounds or the sounds of the other. It is this event of the other's unconditional arrival that lies at the heart of the Derridian concept of cosmopolitan hospitality.

Sublime Frequencies' hospitality to other sounds can be understood better if we compare it with other musical collections.⁷ For instance, in YaZoo's *The Secret Museum of Mankind*, India is represented by one ethnic and two classical raga performances. The ragas are put under "India"; the ethnic music, on the other hand, is classified under the region to which it belongs, as if to imply that ragas were India's national music. Alan Lomax's series—again tellingly entitled *World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*—has a collection on India that starts with a performance in Sahanai, but unlike Sublime Frequencies, it is presented uninterrupted. While the Lomax collection is varied in terms of its coverage—which ranges from northern Kajli and Thumri, southern Kathakali to eastern Baul—these traditions are presented as if there were no other sounds in the region aside from the ones collected by Lomax. Nonesuch Explorer's *Indian Street Music: The Bauls of Bengal* focuses on the Bauls, the wandering minstrels of Bengal. But their collection also suffers from their predilection for rounding off and harmony, both in terms of the content and the form. The well-orchestrated songs included in the Explorer collection, for which "street music" is simply a misnomer, seem only to extend the tradition of the Hindu devotionals, despite Baul's reputation for a more heterodox and cosmopolitan performance that attracted cosmopolitanists like Tagore. In *Radio India*, Sublime Frequencies also takes us to the streets in Calcutta, but instead of fixating on one musical tradition (as does Nonesuch Explorer), they take us to the streets, both literally and figuratively. Track 5 of disc 2 in *Radio India*,

for example, begins with a film song in which we hear a beggar, who calls himself an “international fakir,” singing in the street and asking people for alms in the name of all religions of the world. The scene changes and we find ourselves in a crowded street where an English-speaking reporter is heard interviewing a bunch of international tourists regarding their experience in Calcutta during the festival devoted to the Hindu Goddess Durga. Ironically, despite the song of the beggar in the first half of the street, one of the tourists replies that Calcutta is “too beautiful” during the festival. The soundscape of the street changes and we are taken inside a movie theatre; after listening to a short dialogue and a song clip from a Bengali movie, a reporter solicits the moviegoers’ response again, this time to the movie. Thus, on the one hand, the track interrupts itself by constantly exposing itself to new soundscapes. On the other hand, by splitting the street into a number of sonic experiences, often contradictory in nature, it frustrates all easy and readymade anthropological (poverty, homeless beggars, casteism) or nationalist (Hindu fundamentalism) judgments about India.

In *Streets of Lhasa*, Sublime Frequencies walks us through the streets in Tibet, where, unlike its predecessors like UNESCO Collection, Smithsonian Folkways, and Nonesuch Explorer that recorded only sacred and ritualistic music from the monasteries, it brings sounds from both inside and outside of the Buddhist monasteries. UNESCO’s album, *Tibetan Ritual*, Smithsonian Folkways’ *Song and Music of Tibet*, and Nonesuch Explorer’s *Tibetan Buddhism* were in reality recorded at the monasteries in exile at Dehradun, India; Kathmandu, Nepal; and Himanchal Pradesh, India respectively; in contrast, Frequencies’ recording was done in the streets of Lhasa. Even though the Smithsonian recording is more varied in nature (it includes some nonmonastic genres like “Two Flute Solos” [track 7] and “Two Shepherd Songs” [track 16]), the majority of the tracks in all these collections are limited to sacred music, prayers, and rituals performed with traditional Tibetan musical instruments like drums, gongs, cymbals, and trumpets (*rag dung*). *Streets of Lhasa*, on the contrary, opens with a solo vocal by a three-year-old boy, whose father at times prompts him with the lyrics. The boy’s song reminds us of what Gilles Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* call the becoming-child of music. As they rightly observe, music is “pervaded

by childhood blocks, by blocks of femininity”—to be more precise, it is “pervaded by every minority” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 300). The first track of *Streets of Lhasa* is pervaded by more than one block. It is sung by a minor from a troupe of wandering singers, called “mai chang,” who sell songs for their livelihood; the minor’s block is inextricably related to the block of minority—that is, Tibet’s position as a minority society in China. Contrary, however, to Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization of music as a wall with “sonic bricks in it” (311), or to their characterization of the child’s singing as a refrain that attempts to establish a point of stability in chaos, the minor singer interrupts the extremely “regimented” soundscape of Tibet—not by creating a musical wall or a point of stability in chaos, but by keeping the song forever open to new sounds. This performance is followed by another vocal, this time by a woman who hesitantly starts her spellbinding but “worldly” song, completely different from the “perfect” rhythmic chanting of the monks that one usually hears in albums on Tibet. The doubling of the street singers’ solos in turn opens onto sounds from the parks, workplaces, and monasteries of Lhasa; the result is a babelian soundscape that resists both the hegemonic sound of the State and the monologic sound of the monasteries.

This, however, does not mean that the State has no relevance in Derrida’s thinking. Even though he knows that “there is something of a rouge state in every state” (2005b, 156)—the reason why he has already “given up hope” on the State (2001, 6)—he also knows that only the State can save the world from being reduced to a marketplace by the capitalist forces of globalization (2005b, 158). Derrida’s critique of the State, therefore, is much more complex than that of Attali’s; positing the State against the forces that attempt to reduce the world to a marketplace brings Derrida’s thinking close to Adorno’s critique of the “culture industry.” For Adorno, the culture industry is suspect not simply for its profit motive; it also has its specific “ontology, a scaffolding of rigidly conservative categories” in which what parades as progress or as “the incessantly new” only “remains the disguise for an eternal sameness,” as everywhere the “changes mask a skeleton as little as the profit motive itself since the time it gained predominance over culture” (Adorno 1991, 100). For Derrida,

too, culture industry, like the classical notion of sovereignty, presupposes ontology, or even ontotheology, but unlike Adorno, Derrida locates forces that undo its totality and profit motive by evoking the principle of the incalculable. Unlike Deleuze, (who thinks that “there has only ever been one ontology,” one voice or univocality from Parmenides to Heidegger [Deleuze 1993, 35] that culminates in “a single clamour of Being for all beings” [304]), Derrida’s babelian cosmopolitics seeks not only to interrupt the universal clamor of Being or to ghost it through the haunting of the other, but also to open—like the “open city of refuge” that Derrida evokes in *On Cosmopolitanism*—a space of hospitality for the arrival of the other as an incalculable event.

Whether it is a nonrepetitive presence of Attali’s composition, or the ontology of the eternal sameness of Adorno’s culture industry, or Deleuzian univocal clamor of being, a monologic current connects one thinker to the other as if to imply that, in spite of their distinctly singular philosophical genealogies and diverse critical projects, nothing has radically changed since Leibniz’s monadology through the Deleuzian century of radical philosophy. Edward Said is right in identifying in the philosophical projects of thinkers like Adorno and Foucault a “cumulative and apocalyptic force” that reveals the essentialist and universalist aspects of their theories. “To call these theories therefore Eurocentric or imperial,” he continues in his *Musical Elaborations*, is not an exaggeration, as “they resemble each other in projecting no escape from, and no real alternative to, those patterns” (Said 1991, 51).

Said’s call to “elaborate” on the moves and countermoves between the West and the rest of the world is indeed compelling. He cites works like Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*, which “chronicles the fabrication of a new ‘Aryan’ classical antiquity at the end of the eighteenth century” (despite multiple allusions in Greek texts themselves about Greece as “an Egyptian-African colony”) in order to argue that the reconstitution and idealization of the new Attic Greece purge it of its mixed non-European heritage and produce Western humanism as a universal value (Said 1991, 53). As if to demystify the monologicality of music, Said recounts music’s invasion into the “nonmusical realms” like “the family, school, class and sexual relations,

nationalism, and even large public issues” (56); he also suggests a parallel between this invasion and the displacement of the authoritative, linear, and rigorous sonata form of the nineteenth century composition by the nonlinear, contrapuntal, and nondevelopmental themes one comes across, for instance, in Glenn Gould. The criss-crossing of world history—music’s invasion of both private and public spheres of society—constitute what Said calls “musical elaboration.” What makes music beautiful, for Said, is not harmony, or authority, or ecstasy. Radically beautiful and elaborative music and its pleasures and discoveries are premised upon letting go, upon not asserting a central authorizing identity and upon enlarging the community of hearers and players beyond the musical time, or beyond the extremely concentrated duration of the performance. In other words, elaborative music enlarged beyond the community of players and listeners is what makes music “worldly, possible, attainable [and] knowable” (Said 1991, 105).

Despite the worldly nature or even culturally-determined experience of the elaborative music, however, Said’s alternative musical formation, which unsurprisingly remains Eurocentric, does not differ radically from the thinkers he criticized as imperial. On the one hand Said advocates for worldly music, as opposed to an “authorially” controlled or mastered music; on the other, for him it is a contemplative moment that induces solitude. Thus Said’s musical elaborations, placed unambiguously in history or in the public sphere to disenchant the “musical time” of control and mastery, only lead to a solitary and contemplative mind where music becomes or induces self-reflection. Said’s elaboration is, ironically, not radically different from the Hegelian notion of “the independent music.” For Hegel, this notion implicated a “completely living presence of art” in which all “external conditions are forgotten—place, occasion, specific context” for what he calls “the act of divine service” or the “universal note of feeling” (Hegel 1998, 957).

Even if these music theories by Hegel, Adorno, Deleuze, Attali, and Said are far from being homologous, one hardly misses a common thread of monologicality, which itself is predicated (in varying degree and kind) upon universalism, anthropologism, humanism, and ontologism. Of course,

Hegel's notion of the independent music as "the act of divine service" differs from Attali's advocacy for the celebration of the musician's body in music; Attali's notion of repetition and compilation as the harbinger of death only finds its opponent in Deleuze's idea of the eternal return as the clamor of Being itself. If for Hegel Africa figures only as a historical or aesthetic void, for Said, the contrary is true—Africa is already a significant interlocutor in the discourse on world history. In many of his works, Said repeatedly reminds us of Black Athena, thereby exposing the central fiction behind the construction of the pristine Europe after the Greek model. However, he never develops the past of "imperial" or elite Africa into a politics of responsibility to the other, or to the subaltern Africa. Instead he sounds complacent with his notion of historical connectedness or hybridity. As a result, he fails to "respond" to or imagine anything "other" than his all-pervasive, homogenizing, and imperial patterns. In other words, his examination of cultures and empires remains elite, Eurocentric, humanistic, and therefore parochial in its very endorsement of the public and the universal.

A simple binary of the European and the non-European perspective, therefore, is not very useful in responding to or listening to the other so long as the condition in which the other is heard remains festured with totalizing and rationalizing narratives of ipseity and universality. Even though Said's musical elaborations resemble a differential space of reflection that complicates the enclosure of the musical wheel, by humanizing that space and by restricting it to human knowability he converts it into the wheel of sovereignty whose monologicality leaves no room for any elaboration or reflection. That is the reason why Derrida, in *Rogues*, critiques democracy's "publicness" of "citizens, brothers and compeers" that excludes all others, including women, "bad citizens, rogues, noncitizens, and all sorts of unlike and unrecognizable others" (2005b, 63). Democracy, like Said's notion of worldly and public music, "cannot be a clandestine community" (Derrida 2005b, 65). Further, its emphasis on publicness—which, ironically, resembles Heidegger's obsession with the disclosedness, despite the philosopher's avowed antidemocratic stance—stops it from being hospitable to sounds that are not familiarly public, intelligible, or knowable, hence democracy's resistance to all secret otherness, foreignness, or illegality. Sublime Frequencies'

music is a clandestine community of sounds that not only resists being public and intelligible through and through, it also resists being worldly in the sense of being either the universal clamor of Being, or the easily translatable and classifiable performance of the ethnic other. Frequencies' music is not cosmopolitan in the sense that it is world music, but that it resists the idea of the world music that is predicated on the wheel of sovereignty of the individual State, or of its citizens, or of Being. It walks the streets like the homeless clandestine immigrants who speak in foreign tongues, or like a band of rogues that roam the street to threaten the very notion of the public sphere. Although, as Derrida writes, there is no etymological relationship between *rue* (street) and *roué* (rogue), the word "voyou" (rogue) is essentially related to *voie* (or the way), to "the urban roadways [*voirie*], the roadways of the city or the *polis*," thus to "the street [*rue*], the waywardness [*devoisement*] of the voyou consisting in making ill use of the street" (65).

As we heard in *Streets of Lhasa* and *Radio India*, street sounds constitute the dominant aspect of Sublime Frequencies' music production. In fact, its musical journey across the world can be called an "ill use of the street." Thus when *Night Recordings from Bali* opens with footsteps followed by a gamelan, we are already walking through the streets of Bali at night, chasing or being chased by the sounds and spirits that roam the streets. Unlike Nonesuch Explorer's *Bali: Gamelan and Kecak* (in which David Lewiston records parades at the Bali Arts Festival from a static point by which the parades pass so that the audience hears the drums, flutes, and cymbals either approaching or moving away from the recorder), Frequencies' recording by Alan Bishop and Manford Cain walks with the gamelan troupe or runs us suddenly into a troupe in the middle of their performance. In track 3, for example ("Monkey Forest Night"), we follow footfalls that are interrupted by threatening screeches from the monkeys before we reach Legian Minstrels in track 4. Track 8 begins again with loud footfalls that taper into a village barong.

Harmika Yab Yum: Folk Sounds from Nepal is another example of Frequencies' "ill use of the streets." The album opens with a short commercial, succeeded by nothing other than a street sermon, which in turn is interrupted by footfalls, whistles, and giggles from passersby. The third track of

the album starts with sounds from the pony trails in the mountains. That experience from the tourist world of the trekking gives way to a festival song called *bhailo*, which is usually performed by youngsters who sing to mark the arrival of the Hindu festival of lights. The *bhailo*, accompanied by sarangi, is led by a gaine artist (reminiscent of Smithsonian's *Gaines of Nepal* devoted to the music of the famous itinerant minstrels of the "streets" in Nepal). That part of the street converges with the psychedelic flute and drum of a snake charmer in another place in the streets, which in turn makes room for a wedding band, marching and playing a popular number to entertain the procession, which again is interrupted by an apothecary from a nearby street in Kathmandu. Track 8 is perhaps the climax of Frequencies' trekking in the Nepalese streets in which it takes us to a temple where animals are slaughtered, quickly interrupted by the beggars' appeal for alms and by other ambience from the streets.

The variety of sounds from the cities, streets, mountain treks, and temples and monasteries in Nepal help Frequencies to demonstrate not only the plurality of voices, but also the impossibility of any exhaustive or even fairly representative recording of sounds from the country. By resisting the urge to concentrate on some exotic sounds of one ethnic minority or place (as do other recordings on Nepal that are motivated by anthropological and salvage ethnomusicological interests for preserving primitive sounds), Frequencies not only juxtaposes and interrupts sonic experiences—thereby invoking their incompleteness—but also keeps their collages forever open in order for the other sounds to be heard.

In order to further problematize the question of salvage ethnomusicology, Frequencies frequently uses radio broadcasts instead of the sounds of the locatable subjects or informants of ethnographic explorations. In other words, the act of "roaming the street" and its roguish otherness is the constitutive principle of their recording, in which field work around the world resembles "taking to the streets," in all senses of the terms. In keeping with the tradition that Allen Weiss calls the "phantasmatic radio"—which Weiss traces to F. T. Marinetti's "wireless imagination, or futurist radio"; Leon Trotsky's "revolutionary radio"; Brecht's "interactive radio and public communication"; and a number of experimental and pirate radios, such as

Amsterdam's *Radio Romantique Urbain*, which connects live to different cities around the world and changes cities every four hours, and *Radio Privacy*, which broadcasts "stolen private and intimate documents such as diaries, letters, tape-recordings, and video soundtracks" (Weiss 1995, 2)—Sublime Frequencies records radio broadcasts from stations around the world and creates collages of those sounds.

Radio Algeria can be cited as one of the examples of such a phantasmatic radio because it features, to quote from the liner notes, "raw Berber folk, modern Arabic pop, sacred Islamic traditional, Andalusian orchestral, Guseba, classical early Rai, Khabyle, Tuareg, Saharai, and hybrid music styles influenced by Europeans." Tracks such as "Disco Maghreb" (which features a modern Arabic disco), "Evaporating Borders" (which includes folk sounds from the Mediterranean and the Sahara), and "Radio International" (which juxtaposes Arabic pop, the French numbers, and commercials) are some of the examples of the Algerian radio phantasms. A number of tracks from *Radio India* present daring sound anomalies that juxtapose different styles of singing and music with nonmusical sounds, to the point of making it impossible to distinguish them. A brilliant example of this impossibility is found on track 3 from disc 2—instead of music, we hear the whizzing produced by the radio when a listener moves from one station to the other. In between the whizzes and screeches, radio Pakistan can be heard; the news is announced in Urdu—vaguely but unmistakably audible. On the one hand, the intertwining of the vocal and the instrumental, the ethnic and the classical, and the popular Bollywood and the undaunted classical all give the impression of interdependence rather than hegemony or autonomy. On the other hand, the frequent interruption of the musical by nonmusical sounds makes listening to the radio a conscious act by foregrounding the radio not as a conveyor of truth, but as a "musical" instrument or as a "sonic text."

Perhaps the best example of the phantasmatic radio is *Radio Palestine*, which offers a confluence of different radios, including the BBC, the Voice of America, Radio Israel, and the French and Spanish stations. The album opens with the on-air tune of an Arabic radio station, followed by a Tunisian sounding score, which is interrupted by short news clips from the BBC and

the Voice of America. A tune on the *quanun* tapers at the end of track 1 to give way to the news hour signal from an Israeli radio station that opens track 2, which soon merges with a slew of song clips from different Arabic stations interspersed with Western guitar music. Before the track ends with a piece on the flute, an announcer is heard saying, in English, “if a man could be two places at one time.” Track 4 again returns with the usual kaleidoscope of sounds that includes a short announcement in the Hebrew—perhaps again from a station based in Israel. An impatient listener seems to be searching for a particular program, taking us through a number of stations playing Spanish or even East Asian songs before finally settling on Voice of America, where we hear cold war-era news about US and USSR negotiations. The babel continues in track 5 with western rock, electric guitar on the beach or in the clubs, and wedding music perhaps from Gaza; the station called the Voice of Peace is juxtaposed against the patriotic song heard in track 7 in which a Lebanese singer praises his beloved home.

These sonic anomalies that seek a cosmopolitan ground to create a space for others to be heard are impossibilities rather than some utopic dreams because the latter, as Derrida clarifies, are closely associated with “demobilization, or an impossible that is more of an urge to give up than an urge to action,” whereas “the impossible” in the Derridian sense is a “movement to desire, action, and decision: it is the very figure of the real” (Derrida 2005a, 131). *Sublime Frequencies* mobilizes to produce the figure of the real as an event in which the other—whom one cannot see but only hear—who belongs to the realm of the absolute invisibility is heard, albeit only as a whisper. When the wandering singers (*mai chang*)—who are invisible both in the hypervisibility of the Tibetan sacred music and in the hegemonic suppression of the Tibetans by the Chinese—are heard, or when the Israeli “Voice of Peace” emerges in *Radio Palestine*, these impossible soundscapes are thresholds of hospitality in which the real figure of the other takes refuge. *Sublime Frequencies* articulates the other not only through technologically disembodied voices of the radios, as in Weiss’s analysis of the separation of the voice from the body in radiophony (Weiss 1995, 3), but also through the figures of the real, like the *mai chang* of Tibet, the *Gaines* of Nepal, or the transvestites *Nats* and the *Kadaws* of Burma. The articulation of the other

takes place as the overwhelming event of the arrival of the other, even at the moment when the host, as in the case of Tibet/China, Palestine/Israel, or India/Pakistan, is not at all ready to receive the other as the guest. This radical opening to the other is what Derrida, in *The Ear of the Other*, characterizes as the signature or the sovereignty of the other. There is no event without the other, writes Derrida, no proper name or authority without the signature of the other, for “it is the ear of the other that signs,” or more significantly, the “ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography” (1985b, 51).

SINGING TO DEATH AND HAUNTING

Sublime Frequencies infinitizes the other by listening to the multiple sites of “otherness,” and also by musically thinking the other infinitely. It keeps the rotations of music open and free from the wheel of sovereign ipseity, or from the monologic clamor of sameness of the One or the Being without, however, stopping to stay close and work at the wheel. Derrida’s concept of the ear of the other as the signature or the event applies to Frequencies, both because no one can claim an expertise in analyzing, calculating, and translating their musical free wheeling, and because alterity in Frequencies’ music is evoked, not as much by its foreignness as by what Maurice Blanchot—speaking of Orpheus’s music that shuttles back and forth between the invisible or nondiscursive sonority (the specter of Eurydice as a *revenant*) and the visible (descent of Eurydice after the gaze)—would call “ruining the work,” or “eternal worklessness” of the work (Blanchot 1981, 101–2). The incalculable in Sublime Frequencies is evoked through this eternal worklessness of the work, which we have been calling the babelian cosmopolitanism. Frequencies’ music is cosmopolitan neither from above nor from below, because even the discourses that apotheosize or elevate cosmopolitanism from below (as, for instance, in Mingolo 2002, 157) may not be very helpful if they limit, in the act of determining its location, the incalculable arrival of the other as an absolute gift. The moment the domain of the visible interferes and the Work is produced, the sonorous disappears

and so does the gift or the revenant. In order for the revenant to arrive or be welcome—in order to imagine a world in which the ghost is not sent back to the grave unmourned—free-wheeling, detouring, and detowering of the sovereign palace are a must.

On the inside of the cover of Frequencies' album on Iraq, *Choubi Choubi!*, we see a picture of a broken Oud lying on the ground outside of a ransacked music school. In the liner notes, Mark Gergis remarks that writing contemporary Iraqi music is "impossible" because no one knows "which anecdotes and attributes are already part of a disappeared past." Since the wholesale disassembly of the country since 2003, he continues, there is a lot of dust to settle, yet he wonders, "when the Iraqi's *do* have a chance to start gluing their musical instruments back together piece by piece, what will the orchestra sound like . . . ?" Not surprisingly therefore the album on Iraq opens with a folk-rock piece from Ja'afar Hassan's 1970s "Let's Sing Together," as if to suggest that the orchestra has already begun with the spectral voices of the broken Oud. Haunting belongs as much to the structure of hegemony as Derrida claims in *Specters of Marx* (1994, 37) as it does to the sites repressed by that structure of hegemony. Paul Virilio in *City of Panic* describes the spectral reappearance of the Tower of Babel and notes that the bombers in 2003 bombed the ramparts of Ninevah and Karbala, "a stone's throw from Babylon and the ruins of the 'tower to end all towers,' the tower of Babel" (2005, 88). Frequencies' "absents" (or uncanny sites) from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—including places that are either out of the radar in the US, like Burma, Java, Bali, or Nepal, or places that are very much in the American media because of American interests and involvement in those places, like Vietnam and the Middle East, especially Iraq and Palestine⁸—are all haunted places. Frequencies engages critically with what, in the liners to *Radio Morocco*, Alan Bishop calls the American entertainment industry's grinding of "Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' into the world consciousness as US export culture supreme." At the same time the polyphony of its radio phantasms and sound anomalies critiques the masterly or nationalist tendencies of music.⁹

Sublime Frequencies' music reminds that all Palaces of Marvels are haunted by the ruins of the tower of Babel. Its musical phantasms are

ghosted by the other of music itself: commercials, news snippets, animal sounds, and other ambience, which create a musical surreality in order to rupture and critique dominant modes of creating and appreciating music. It tends towards these babelian soundscapes where the haunting of other voices, other sounds, and other forms of hearing is possible. Not unlike the songs of the Sirens, which Blanchot calls “the imperfect songs” of what is “foreign to man” (1981, 105), Frequencies foreignizes, rather than domesticates, foreign sounds. It “ruins” the music in which man-hears-himself-speak or in which man builds structures of homo-hegemonies, homo- and ontotheologies. These reversals do not occur simply with the invocation of *the Animal*, as if to imply an uncomplicated binary between man and *the Animal*. If there are man’s Palaces of Marvels or museums where primitive sounds are preserved as if in a zoo, packaging, fetishizing, and exoticizing the sounds of nature and the animals constitute no less of a favorite pursuit. In other words, far from being the first to collect sounds of the animals, Frequencies again only follows the footprints of its giant predecessors, such as Smithsonian Folkways and Nonesuch Explorers. Especially prominent precursors are BBC collections produced for the Humanities and Sciences’ lab work, such as *Africa, the Natural World*, which includes sounds made by species like lions, cheetahs, leopards, elephants, baboons, and wildebeest, and its human counterpart, tellingly entitled *Africa, the Human World*, in which we hear sounds ranging from Morocco’s food market and the streets of Marrakesh to cafés in Rabat and the meat markets in Nairobi. Nonesuch Explorer’s *Animals of Africa* features the exotica of the animal world: the famous leopards, hippos, hyenas, and hyraxes of Africa. As the album opens with the roaring of the leopard, the audience cannot miss the echoes of Western fantasies about the dark and wild Africa.

Sublime Frequencies does not listen to the sounds of the animals to reach some scientific or anthropological truth, nor to satisfy their hunger for the exotic; rather, it strategically uses these sounds to intensify the sonic anomalies it produces with radio sounds, street ambience, and ceremonial sounds. Thus, when we hear the bells of the ponies and their hoofs in track 3 of *Harmika Yab Yum*, or the repetition of animal sounds in the concluding track, which features ferocious dogs barking incessantly

through the night in a tourist town, we immediately realize that the snarls of the dogs are interrupting nothing less than the mythical Shangri-la in the Himalaya.

These interruptions of the other are also audible in *Night Recordings from Bali*, which in itself is an interruption in Sublime Frequencies' series of collections from Indonesia. While other recordings from Java, Sumatra, or Indonesia are generally comprised of mostly radio noises, this one is exclusively a field recording. It records the nightlife of a culturally unique Bali—"a tiny enclave of Hinduism within a massive nation of Islam," as the liner notes point out. The album opens with a night walk towards a place where there are gamelan rehearsals, which are interrupted by noises of the cicadas or grasshoppers. The same sort of interruption repeats in track 6, in which animals' noises intrude upon a sentimental moment in a soap opera on TV. When we "walk" up to track 9, after passing by a number of gamelan bands on our way, we run into a cremation procession with jovial gamelan bands, only to be interrupted by the croaking of the toads in track 10, as if the dead had come back in animal spirits to haunt the living. In track 13 we hear the crematorium itself, the fire burning and crackling, the crowd playing a goodbye gamelan to the dead, when they are interrupted suddenly by the terrifying snarl and roar of a pack of fiery demon dogs.

Brokenhearted Dragonflies is yet another site of haunting in which the animals return as specter. In this album, Tucker Martin succeeds in recording live drones of cicadas and dragonflies from the forests of Laos, Thailand, and Burma. As the liner points out, the album is a tribute to the Burmese legend of dragonflies that join in the choruses of high pitched tones in order to court their mates; in case their courting and mating remains unfulfilled, the dragonflies sing so loud that they explode and drop dead. With its rhythmic drones of dying (yet mating, singing, and reviving) dragonflies, *Brokenhearted Dragonflies* defies Russolo's simplistic binary between "sound" as a succession of regular vibrations and the erratic and irregular "noise" (Russolo 1986, 37). Starting with a mild drone, these dragonflies and cicadas erratically and madly intensify their singing before they subside into near silence. But as John Cage has taught us, complete silence

is unthinkable—even in an anechoic chamber there is always something to hear, like one’s blood circulation or the nervous system (Cage 1961, 8). Yet the dragonflies cannot be completely silent or just produce Russolo’s regular vibration or Cage’s low, but consistent sound of the nervous system, because their music (if one can call it music in the human sense) is not only driven by an urge for the absolute expenditure or death, but also by the principle of revenant, replacing the dead through singing or inheriting sonority. This inheritance of sonority from the dead, rather than from hearing-oneself-speak, which, Cage suggests, makes silence impossible, even in the face of one’s explosion to death. What makes the dragonflies’ droning to death hauntingly beautiful, thus, is the rupture of the circles of exchanges, economies, and the body, and the evocation of expenditure beyond reserve in death. These “drones to death” at once distinguish Sublime Frequencies from other collectors’ exotic employment of animal sounds, and define Frequencies’ project as a whole, as ghostly drones to death and back again into haunting scream. The relentless and obsessive singing of the dragonflies—which sing as if to keep counting the dead, but at the same time expose the countable, to quote Hamacher’s apt formulation, “in and beyond counting, to what cannot be counted” (1997, 298)—is what makes Frequencies’ musical production sovereign and beautiful. The babel in Frequencies’ voice seems to echo Derrida’s concept of the voice that “separates,” provokes desire, and creates a sense of inaccessibility, as if to say, “you will not consume me,” for what is beautiful “isn’t consumable,” and should not be brought into the cycle of consumption (Derrida 1994, 23).



NOTES

1. For instance, in *Of Grammatology*, while critiquing the privileging of *phonè* in the Western concept of language, Derrida writes that such a privileging “responds to a moment of economy,” or a “system of ‘hearing-oneself-speak’ through the phonic substance—which *presents itself* as the non-exterior, nonmundane,” which “has even produced the idea of the world” (1997, 7–8). In *Speech and Phenomenon*, Derrida evokes this phenomenon of “hearing-oneself-speak” again, which in this text he calls “pure auto-affectation.” He relates it to the notions of voice as consciousness and the supposed

proximity between the signifier and the signified. The pure auto-affectation affects even when one speaks to someone else, because to “speak to someone is doubtless to hear oneself speak,” but at the same time, to speak is to make someone “repeat immediately in himself the hearing oneself speak in the very form in which I effectuated it” (1973, 80). Derrida comes back to upset this proximity of “hearing-oneself-speak” in *The Ear of the Other*, where he argues that even when telling my story necessitates passing “by way of the ear” (1985b, 49), this monological discourse remains at the stage of hearing oneself speak unless it passes through “*the difference in the ear*” or the ear of the other (1985b, 50).

2. In his book *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera*, Tomlinson calls (and rightly so) this remarkable moment in Nietzsche “ethnic and geographic exoticism” or a “Teutonic orientalizing of the south of Europe” that is reveling in the “tried-and-true gypsisms and hispanicisms” of Bizet’s *Carmen* (1999, 123). The critique is slightly hasty, albeit very convincing, precisely because Nietzsche’s “gypsyism” is neither French nor German—it’s the other as sensuality, and it is Africanism that interrupts the Teutonic rootedness and makes it unhomely.
3. Bill Meyer argues that, like the fez-domed English ensemble that claimed to hail from the fictitious Balkan town of Szegerey, the Seattle-based trio of Sublime Frequencies cloaked themselves in mystery, and mixed and matched “their favorite musics from around the globe with a fine disregard for purist priorities.” But unlike the Mustaphas, whose joke wore pretty thin after the crisis in Yugoslavia that necessitated disbandment, Sublime Frequencies has shown impressive longevity. See www.dustedmagazine.com/reviews/1646.
4. See www.sublimefrequencies.com/about.htm.
5. According to Alan Bishop, he used the term extrageography after Charles Fort, who coined this term to describe phenomena outside of the accepted dimensions and perceptions of science and the common man. Bishop explains, “I use it as a generic place name to describe cultural areas which have vibrant folklore and music that are beyond the will of most to entertain as ‘valid’ points of reference to study or merely want to learn about. For example, Niger, Benin, Oman, and Nagaland are extrageography because most people don’t know anything about them, yet I could argue that people in those four areas of the world are as valid and perhaps superior to others when it comes to creating music of expressive beauty” (qtd. in McGonigal 2004).
6. For more details of his early childhood, see www.furious.com/perfect/suncitygirlsinterview.html.
7. In his radio interview with Oversight Radio, Alan Bishop talks about the difference between Sublime Frequencies’ method of music collection and that of other collectors that conduct similar ethnological fieldwork, like National Geographic. The interview is available at <http://musicsojournal.com/AR/Alt/page/b/BishopAlan.htm>.
8. In an interview with *Arthur Magazine*’s Brandon Stousy (who actually reminds Bishop that so many of the places documented with Sublime Frequencies rarely appear on America’s radar unless there is a crisis), Alan Bishop explains that his musical forays are personal and that his experiences may not translate well for others. However, he

appeals to the audience to not be “fooled by the fear patrol out there who say that terror is only a minute away” (Bishop 2005, 18). In a way, therefore, Sublime Frequencies is involved in listening to, visiting, and bringing back sounds that are sometimes taboed by the official cultures.

9. One can argue that Sublime Frequencies is like Radano’s “lies” that try to lie up a nation—not through authentic sounds of the places, but through, to quote Radano, “rather, creative expressions of poetic license.” The better the editing, the better the lie. Radano continues: the better “the lie, the closer one gets to the ironic pleasures and Terror of America’s racial sublime” (Radano 2003, 47).

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