About Decolonizing Sound
By Sharmi Basu, edited as comment from an interview with M. Akkermann

I went to Mills College and worked with Fred Frith, Pauline Oliveros, Chris Brown, and Maggie Payne. I worked with all of them, and I learned so much from that process and was grateful to be there. I also felt very alienated; In the music department, I was often the only person talking about racism, colonialism, and white supremacy while we were having protests about police brutality in Oakland, where Mills is located, not even 10 minutes away. I continue to benefit from my connection to Mills, but I really dropped out from that academic music scene. Since leaving Mills, I have been so fortunate to be connected to a very diverse queer and trans freak experimental music community that is engaged with both arts and politics. While there are plenty of Queer and Trans people of color using computers to make music, this community doesn't necessarily embody computer music, which is ok! The white supremacist nature of computer music in the west often means that it can be very boring. There is a dryness to technique

without soul, or story, or struggle. There are missing pieces when composers and musicians put too much emphasis on sound for only sound's sake.

As a South Asian person, I have felt it strange to be in between this academic "new music" world and this punk DIY realm. I find myself fitting into this model minority idea of myself, at least initially. Quickly and dramatically, I break that mold, intentionally or unintentionally – I don't know if it is colorism – I don't know what it is. But as soon as I say something like 'racism', they – the people in power – want this person, me, away from them. And then, when there is an opportunity for said institution to build its reputation through addressing issues, they will call me back in. It's confusing to see where I stand, where people will appreciate my presence and where people will push away my presence, within academia and institutions.

I live in the US and my family is from India, so as Indians, we have our own colonial history. In India, and in most of the world, they have less of a connection to what the American colonization process was. The colonization of what is now known as the U.S. was a devastating mass

genocide, which is far different from what colonization process was like in India. When I talk about decolonization with sound, within experimental music, I try to focus on our relationships with sound and trauma. I try to think of our practices as forms of resistance that have ancestral roots in resilience. So much of experimental music, computer music and electronic music is mediated by the Academy and by western institutions. Arbitrary white men decide what is good and what is bad, what belongs in one funnel versus what belongs in another funnel, what deserves funding and what doesn't, until that object feels accessible and commodifiable to the white man. So many things could be considered computer music that are actually popularized or discovered by Black communities or by indigenous communities all over the world. I think about minimalism, like LaMonte Young, Steve Reich and Terry Riley or whomever. All these dudes went to India once, came back with these practices and then implemented those practices into their own – and are suddenly the king of this music, because this music that's been existing for thousands and thousands of years has

been "discovered" all of a sudden. There is this constant colonial approach to the ways that computer music or electronic music codify music.

This decolonizing approach is really to first of all recontextualize and rehistoricize what is good music and what artists deserve support and funding. For myself, I feel that so much of my music has a strong influence from ancestral sources – you don't even have to go as far as to say ancestral. But I grew up going to Pujas with my parents, which are like little festivals that go on at a community college or something, with some guys singing for like six hours at a time. I grew up falling asleep in these auditoriums to all sorts of Hindustani music, over and over again, so for me it is part of my blood. In so many ways, this is a part of how I grew up. It is automatically incorporated into my music whether or not I'm explicit about it. I make ambient music and I have this really formative history with me. I also came from punk, and I feel grateful for that, because I think for me the idea of 'no rules' mixed with communal care comes from that. It doesn't come from John Cage or prescriptions of what a randomized

music or chaotic music system is. I don't have to like these horrible people. In my opinion, John Cage is a racist, and we shouldn't be talking about him ever, as he is explicitly Anti-black. We also have plenty of people around now, of whom we can say are the forefront of Black thought in experimental music. George Lewis is an amazing computer musician who has really shifted a lot of what these experimental music communities looked like, throughout his time in Chicago and in New York. Or Raven Chacon, a noise musician who is part of Post-Commodity, who does really whatever he wants, all sorts of multimedia sound art and performance art. He is based out of New Mexico, he is an indigenous artist who very much makes work about colonialism and struggle, but is also a total noise guy. There are so many Black and Brown artists out there; even the history of techno is rooted in Black resistance. There is so much history in Black, Indigenous, Asian, Swana and South American cultures that we ignore because the people who have commodified and capitalized it were white, as are the people who have authority to decide to do so. I think the function of music is to ad-

dress aspects where the soul and spirituality meet. This can get taken out of computer music and electronic music when so much emphasis is put upon the technical process. The decolonial process is actually having tools and asking, how can we further access the healing that we need. It can be expressing our emotions or maybe at least feeling connected emotionally to what we are doing. Why is music even important to us? Because it serves these multiple functions that do have decolonial purposes. I grew up listening to indie rock – when I was in middle school and 11-12 years old –, this provided me some emotional solace. Later, this was how I found my community, my friends, and the people I politically organized with: through experimental music. These functions are actually deeply important. Punk functions in both here and Europe when people open up their homes for folks who are on the road. I think so many forms of mutual aid developed within underground musical communities. Within the Academy and institutions, the musical community functions differently. The Academy continually holds on to computer music as a means to decide who gets what

resources. That's what keeps it white. All these folks of color doing techno, thinking about what sampling is and where plunderphonics come from just don't exist for them. Any of these artists could get support from the Academy, but the academy does not exist to provide resources for them.

For me, it is really hard to talk about anything that has to do with decolonization or decolonial practices without talking about material struggle. Having to actually think about what is anti-colonial, what is anti-colonial struggle, what does it look like to confront the state, what does it look like to confront the police, what does it look like to confront the systems that keep people unhoused, that keep resources out of people's hands, that keep people unfed. Those things are really important to think about together. My wish is for all institutions to disappear, and for all of the resources within institutions to be freely accessible to whomever wants them. I wish for the world that people have enough food and shelter and security – internal and external security – to be able to be creative in whatever ways they see fit and experience joy and presence within that.

I really wish for respect and kindness for all of us who are having to navigate such annoying paths just trying to make some bleeps and bloops.