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- 1 Mack Hagood, *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control*.
- 2 Duke University Press, 2019. Pp. 288. ISBN: 9781478003809
- 3 Katherine Marazi
- 4 In an age of overwhelming information, consider the impact of noise-cancelling headphones, or white noise machines that, similarly to the case of Orpheus, drown out the “sirens” around us allowing us to “remain unaffected in changeable, stressful, and distracting environments,” creating a “hear no evil, fear no evil” effect (Hagood 3). In his book, *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control*, Mack Hagood raises awareness towards these types of media technologies and their orphic dynamics and goes beyond the mere experience of sound and silence. Rather, “orphic media foreground a deep desire for control as freedom, a desire that motivates the use of nearly all electronic media today” whereas understanding their function and mediation provides insight to “how we allow ourselves to resonate, especially where the vibrations of others are concerned.” This, in turn, can have integral sociopolitical potentials into areas of the public/private spheres, “media echo chambers, urban noise, online noise, fake news, trigger warnings, and safe spaces” (4). As Hagood highlights, the reason why examining such media dynamics is important is because, on the one hand, when information is overwhelming this fosters a “hear what you want” a tendency that could lead to sensory and political intolerances, but it also substantiates the need for guarded listening in order to preserve one’s sensory and emotional self-care. Consequently, “sensitive listening” becomes a central issue and “begins with changing our notions of what media are and what they do” (4). Drawing on the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza (1970) and similar theorists, Hagood argues that the essence of media use is not the transmission of information, but the attempt to control the affect – “the continually changing state of bodies that condition their abilities to act and be acted upon” (5).
- 5 Hagood approaches the aforementioned by taking into consideration the modes and potentials of affective media use, identifies the ideologies that motivate it, examines

the remediation of affect and how it is designed, marketed, and monetized whilst contemplating how orphic technologies may ultimately be designed to hush the fact that we have never been and will never be in full control. Hagood's book is divided in three parts. In the introduction, he contextualizes his topic of examination by providing the theoretical frameworks and a brief historical background as to why sound became a problem that required personal mediation. Part I of the main body provides an ethnographic study of tinnitus (phantom sound) via personal experiences and clinical treatments in an attempt to consider the depths of aural suffering, "showing how an affect of fear can attach to our listening at a neurological level when we feel sonic difference diminishes our ability to act" (7). Part II examines the evolution of white noise machines, nature sound LPs and their digital descendants on a larger commercial and national scale, while Part III considers the racial, gender, and class politics of fighting sound with sound in the 21st century through the orphic mode of phase cancellation whilst questioning how hearables or hearing what we want may have atrophied our ability to listen across difference. What is intriguing in Hagood's book is the nature of the media he's examining but also his attempt to raise our awareness towards the orphic aspects of all media. Where his book is highly noteworthy but may also pose as challenging is the varied and interdisciplinary synthesis of theories, concepts and frameworks he draws on to examine orphic media. At the same time, though, this poses as a major strength as it demonstrates the multiple implications this book and topical area can have for various fields and disciplines.

- 6 If sound can pacify a disordered space, establish fortifications around an orderly space, or open up new spaces of possibility, then "why have orphic media emerged in such defensive and utilitarian configurations?" (9). While the world has become noisier, Hagood urges us to consider noise as a symptom and not a cause. Drawing on a variety of historical – and mythological examples – Hagood demonstrates how we have moved from the soundproof study to the Isolator to noise-cancelling head-phones to filter bubbles and we see all these examples becoming more refined, available in miniature even as virtual technologies "that afford the freedom of not listening to difference" (15), but that freedom of choice is within the system. Hence, "[u]sing sound as a way to think about media, and mediation as a way to think about sound, [Hagood presents] an orphic model in which media use is neither informational nor representational, but instead relational" (19). Consequently, the types of media he focuses on in his book are characterized by their empty state. As he explains, whereas other types of media draw our immediate attention towards the content (either to inform or to entertain), orphic media "complicate this dynamic because their content is designed to negate itself as content, creating a perceptual absence rather than attention-grabbing presence for edification or enjoyment" (22). The modes of these media can be envisioned, according to Hagood, as three concentric circles.
- 7 The first and smallest contains tinnitus maskers, white noise machines, LPs, apps, headphones, and hearables – technologies designed for sonic control of one's affective state. The second circle contains audio media such as music and film sound that can work to construct, energize, unify, pacify, dominate, or terrorize spaces and the subjects in them. The third circle contains all media (23). Orphic remediation can be intramodal – fighting sound with sound by "suppressing, masking, canceling, or simply shifting aural attention" – or cross-modal ("using silence or sound to alter the experience of other sensory modalities, affective states, or the passage of time") (25).

This kind of remediation indicates the human angle. Meanwhile, orphic media also have 3 sonic potentials. The sonic potentials underlying orphic mediation are: i) sound is mediated as mechanical waves in an environmental medium, e.g. air; ii) sound can be mediated/changed as a signal through electroacoustic and digital processes of transduction and signal processing; iii) sound is a medium in itself, a “vibrational ontology” that requires a distance but can also bridge that distance (27). Even before venturing into the main chapters, Hagood’s Introduction provides an insightful perspective to sound, silence, affect and how we experience and understand control through such concepts in relation to media. Part I titled *Suppression* focuses on tinnitus and aural remedies.

- 8 Evidently, we live in a world that can be all too loud but also all too quiet. Tinnitus, the focal point of this chapter, is the term that describes “the experience of sounds in the head or ears that have no external physical source” (33); it is the most common auditory disorder and often referred to a “phantom auditory perception” because it is comparable to phantom pain felt in amputees. According to Hagood, tinnitus sufferers are among those most dedicated to using orphic media because there is a lack of proven medical interventions and the medical community has been slow to realize how serious it is. Oscillating between the characterizations of “harmless” and “a handicap” the overall conclusion is that tinnitus is indeed serious. In this chapter, Hagood aims at demonstrating the relationship between media, the body and experiences of disability – thus raising awareness towards the field of “disability media studies” – seeing as “tinnitus becomes louder in quiet spaces, quieter in loud ones,” poses as a profoundly relational phenomenon and allows for the affective suppression by orphic media (35). The transductive ethnographic study of this chapter shows how “media technologies are often implicated in the emergence of bodies as ‘able’ or ‘disable’ in a given moment” (35). Hagood identifies and traces the transductive practices and experiences through fieldwork and includes tinnitus sufferers’ accounts in the chapter that are quite illuminating not only in relation to tinnitus but in the case of hearing/listening and media in general. Through case studies and interviews, Hagood considers the clarifying power of fear – how fear heightens the stakes of tinnitus sufferers’ use of orphic media, also how the power of fear deepens their attention to their own hearing and practices of listening (36-37). He additionally examines the culturally influenced habits of listening that perpetuate tinnital fear and suffering specifically in North America and concludes by viewing how orphic media are seen and used as treatment for tinnitus (36-37).
- 9 A note-worthy point in this chapter is the definition and understanding of disability. As Hagood clarifies, disability can be understood through implicit definitions – that are in opposition to those of disability theorists. Implicit definitions of disability conceive the condition as a “bodily or mental flaw” that disables one from doing things, that makes one not themselves and is different from the norm. Disability theory, however, views disability as “not a physical or mental defect, but a cultural and minority identity” (41). Drawing on Tobin Siebers, Hagood explains that this aversion to reality is the “ideology of ability” and the fear embedded in this ideology can obscure a central contradiction in Western understandings and practices of the body demonstrating a conflict between our Cartesian views/beliefs about the body and cultural obsessions of perfecting it (41). What makes matters more complex in the case of tinnitus is that in most cases it is an “invisible disability” but still warranting attention and examination. As Hagood points out though, to view it only as an “ideology of ability” would be to

degrade its status and significance; hence, considering its phenomenology and physiology is also vital.

- 10 Adopting the conception of human aurality as biomediated, Hagood draws on and compares the works of Pawel Jastreboff and Jerzy Konorski with that of Ivan Pavlov and B. F. Skinner to consider the physiological and phenomenological aspects of tinnitus. As Hagood explains, “the human sensorium is always self-regulating in relation to the fluctuations of its changing environment,” therefore, automatic gain control (AGC) is “an audible manifestation of the cybernetic insight” to that tendency (46). For tinnitus sufferers, the impact of orphic media assists in the “suppression” of tinnitus. What is more, Hagood emphasizes how “a synthesis between affect theory in the humanities and the neurophysiological model may better account for all the dimensions of biomediation that enact tinnital suffering, from molecular to discursive” (49) and allow one to speak of ideology at the level of conditioned reflex seeing that tinnitus is a multiple phenomenon produced in different moments, material conditions that further produce different understandings and “different sonic phenomenologies” (50). In other words, there are different cultures of tinnitus that warrant attention. The reason for this is because there are varying cultural explanations for the nature, impact and meaning of tinnitus just as there is “cultural variance between individuals’ *habitus of listening*” (53). In one of the examples provided, Hagood directs our attention to how audio media and technologies can assist in a first type of remediation of tinnitus, that of objectifying it, making it real to those who cannot hear either as a graph or sonic reproduction. The second remediating practice – the remedial use of orphic media – “electronically leverages tinnitus’s homeostatic emergence and diminishment in relation to changing levels of environmental sound” (63). This points to an area of media studies deserving greater attention, where individuals use media for self care, they are responsible for cultivating their own affect through choice and those choices can alter consumer practices and provide insight to the cultural understanding of self, body, choice, freedom, fear and media technologies, thus leading to the second chapter where the broader commercial scales and the sociomaterial conditions that give rise to orphic media are considered.
- 11 Beginning with an illuminating historical reference to the conception of the first sound conditioner (later to be named “Sleep-Mate”) (James K. Buckwalter, story of Marpac, 1968), Hagood in the first chapter of section two examines the history, production, patent and marketing of the sound conditioner, calling attention to the prespecified groupings of technologies and how orphic media – in this case the sound conditioner which is more an electromechanical rather than transductive device – and its technological assemblage influence the subjective-spatial relations in the American home. More specifically, he argues that sound conditioners “domesticate noise” due to the fact that the space of the home in postwar America had already been penetrated by “new flows of technological circulation, flows driven by the military and economic exigencies” of World War II (79). The sound conditioner acts as a reference point not only for what ought to be considered media but also how such media have now become “natural” domestic appliances. According to Hagood, the “personal therapy sensory devices” market exceeded the \$1 billion point in 2006 (80). The story – illustrating both the problem and the solution – point towards “the soundscape of modernity” – one Hagood argues was paradoxical “in that it consisted of a proliferation of human and technological intentionalities” (84) – and how that was affected by technology, media, but also the impact that had on one’s capacity to and for listening. Drawing on Don

Idhe's postphenomenology frame, Hagood too considers the changing sonic-spatial relations particularly in light of the "human-technology relationship [being seen] as both embodied and cultural" (82).

- 12 Hagood, drawing on Idhe's concept of macroperception (and by extension microperception), further considers the sonic dimensions of speed in light of his argument that the accelerated and militarized practices of circulation in the World War II era "strongly reshaped relations to sound and space" in the U.S. (87) and raised attention to postwar *quiet* (90). This is considered both alongside and through discourse of patent and advertising – in other words, metaculture – as cultural objects do not circulate on their own, but as Hagood points out, they require "discursive cultural productions" to aid them, just as in the case of the sound conditioner. Producing a metacultural analysis of the sound conditioner's patent, Hagood then considers the domesticating and feminizing noise aspect of the sound conditioner by examining the representation of space in Marpac's marketing and taking into consideration more recent products, such as the Dohm campaign in 2012.
- 13 In chapter three, Hagood examines the "fossil records of *environments*" – cultural products that prompted listeners to "fine-tune themselves through a cybernetic commingling of nature and audio technologies" (118). More specifically, each *environments* album as Hagood explains is "a multimedia production combining recorded sound, graphic design, nature photography, and copywriting to facilitate a desired affective response in the user" (120). To examine these albums, Hagood takes into consideration the story of Syntonic Research Inc. and the work of Irv Teibel whose work reflects the cybernetic thinking of "New Communalism" and the "systems of counterculture" (119). In addition to displaying the interconnections of nature, media technologies and the imaginations of users, Hagood argues that this record series depicts a more open – and less utilitarian – opportunity for orphic mediation that can go beyond the informatics sleep/concentration binary and assist in exploring the self, the other and the environment via sound. Teibel meant to provide users with a way to "tune in to a 'sensuous sonic environment' and thus enhance inner functioning" (124). In drawing a comparison between Buckwalter and Teibel, Hagood notes that the promotional metaculture was different between the two cases: where in the first it targets a "feminized vision of domestic tranquility," in the second case it appeals to "a scientific vision of natural equilibrium" (124). What is more, Hagood highlights how the systemic relationship between the environment and the listener/use is reflective of cybernetic theory (124). Though Teibel's "tellings" of the Syntonic story differ, according to Hagood, the emphasis he places on two specific ones highlight *environments* as a "biomedium" that displayed a "technopastoral fusion" whereby ecology and technology were understood "as systems that could be fine-tuned for the benefit of mankind and the planet" (131). Of course, practical issues were evident and hindered a sense of realism upon listening/hearing; nevertheless, the mediation process, as Hagood states, ultimately can be seen as one where waves were "pushed" through a computer and the real was synthesized into the ideal so as to resemble the "ultimate ocean of the mind's ear" (139). *Environments* had implications on fields and areas such as: mental health work, spiritual practices, pop culture (140), psychotherapy, biofeedback, and others. According to Hagood, in the 1970s and 80s, SRI "was a fully realized cybernetic entity," a network comprised of sounds, spaces, images,

texts, nature, technology and people (145) and stands on its own in his book given the flexibility of spaces it generated.

- 14 In chapter four, Hagood focuses on digital orphic apps – such as Chris Newby’s *Lightning Bug* – and the rise of “ubiquitous digital orphic media” so as to explore the “society of control” (150). More specifically, Hagood claims that the digital has “pushed post-Enlightenment utilitarian logic beyond human limits, amplifying the spatial, temporal, and economic pressures” of 19th and 20th century capitalism (150). Viewing the informatic conception as a site worthy of investigation, Hagood critiques the infocentric and neoliberal understandings that conceal digital’s human costs and the nature of how we use media in daily life (151), thus demonstrating that apps like *Lightning Bug* – are not informatic but rather affective because “we are *not* autonomous, informatics subjects” but because “we try to live as if we *were*” (151). Hagood points out that the economy of orphic apps should be considered alongside the type of noise Americans fight with such apps and be filtered for its constituent parts, namely “noise as a material phenomenon, as a discursive construction, and as something that emerges – and is, in turn, suppressed – in social practices” as these in turn are reshaped by “economically driven information technologies, discourse and practices” (155). The “quiet” of these orphic apps exploits “masking in perceptible and imperceptible ways” thus demonstrating “information theory’s simultaneous elimination and domestication of noise” (157). Interestingly enough, Hagood highlights that orphic apps function as “technologies of the self to help individuals with keeping up with the demands of control, but they also naturalize this discourse of autonomous control, masking its contradictions in a quiet storm of faux agency” (163). Drawing on the example of an infant smartphone user, Hagood further claims that neocybernetics better “allows us to denaturalize informatics technologies and practices, revealing the ways that infocentrism injects its inhuman standards into the human environment and capitalizes on our attempts to maintain our boundaries” spatially, temporally and socially because cybernetics perceives information “as the construct of specific systems” rather than as “an immanent and transcendent immateriality” (167). Overall and taking into consideration various gaps and glitches that became apparent in the use of these apps, Hagood, drawing on Protevi’s philosophy¹ notes that the health of social and individual bodies requires adopting an observer position in relation to our affection ideas and by extension reflexively questioning what *really* enables and disables us in exploring our mediating practices of boundary maintenance (167).
- 15 In chapter five, Hagood traces the history of noise cancelling headphones through instances such as that of Bose QuietComfort and considers marketing, news reports and reviews to demonstrate that such headphones pose as integral gear for “the mobile rational actor of the global market, the business traveler” (180). Essentially, such travelers utilize these headphones and their orphic mediation to suppress the perceived presence of others. As Hagood aims at indicating in this chapter, noise-cancelling headphones exceed our normal understanding of sound reproduction devices because they remediate the acoustic environment into “a database of content for filtration of material and social differences – a sonic interface that remediates the sonic color line, affecting audible difference in a separate but unequal manner” (180). What has led to the production of such headphones and has prompted such exploration into their orphic qualities are sociohistorical shifts. Hagood informs that he employs noise perception as a problematic in order to investigate the orphic remediation of public and quasi-public spaces between the 1980s and teen years of the new millennium

– one characterized by neoliberalism. Given this, Hagood argues that friction “between individualism and difference generates noise in the *social* sense – noise as *othered sound*.” And like any type of othering or otherness, this noise is “socially constructed and situated in hierarchies of race, class, age, and gender.” In a way, “noise cancellation came to reinforce these lines of discomfort and power” (179). As Hagood illustrates, Bose noise-cancelling technology initially diminished engine and wind noise for pilots but another aspect of the marketing campaign touched upon the social and sonic significance of the product because it enabled “separating things that you don’t want from things that you want” (183). Hagood considers the status of airports and transportation nowadays, and how the forces of market capitalism create, drawing on Lefebvre, *abstract space* and claims that the same has happened to sound: it “has been rationalized and abstracted for exchange, circulation, and expansion” (184), hence, orphic media such as noise-cancelling headphones assist in navigating “through abstract sonic spaces by further abstracting their relationship between space and sound” (185). More importantly, such devices prompt us to reconsider the use of books, newspapers and other media individuals turn to when travelling and the degree to which technology is employed for entertainment purposes or to signal and maintain boundaries amongst individuals.

- 16 What is interesting to consider is Hagood’s claim that in spaces where “multitudes of free agents must negotiate with one another [...] sites of air travel become paradoxical spaces where too much freedom for too many becomes” problematic (188). In such spaces, “orphic media provide at least an illusion of freedom, offering the ability to disconnect from the networks of sound and sociality in which one is implicated” (188), thus retaining one’s neoliberal self. Nevertheless, Hagood offers the other side of this coin by questioning the culture of such separation, of such listening or not-listening to be more accurate. Before considering how such devices can dial down difference, Hagood prompts one to critically consider the following:

When the “normal” perception of noise is already suffused with unexamined race, class, and gender ideologies, the production and use of noise-cancelling technologies can never be neutral. It is important, then, to reckon, with the potential for the sonic interface of noise cancellation to remediate sonic color, class, and gender lines into discriminatory walls of sound. (196)

- 17 In other words, we need to critically consider when we use such technologies and why we use them.
- 18 In his final chapter, Hagood extends his previous chapter by examining the multistability of the noise cancelling technology interface and the various potentials it offers to positioned subjects. The case study he examines is that of Beats Studio Wireless Headphones in connection with black athletes where emphasis is placed on “‘black noise’: disempowering sound and discourse from an African-American point of audition, noise to be avoided, ignored, or overcome” (200). To provide a social context for racialized technologies of silence he compares Beat’s depiction in the ads with the African-American athletes’ *actual* use of silent protest during the national anthem in the 2016 and 2017 NFL seasons. Seeing as some of these athletic stars in real life debated “*the use of silence as risk-filled political action, an affective engagement*” (201), Hagood’s claim that media scholars – among others – should seriously consider the intersections of race, culture and mobile audio technology is quite valid and persuasive. Hagood follows this with a concise account of the Beats by Dre and by extension partnership of Iovine and Dr. Dre but also considers the affective control and the

cultural implications of hip hop music. Also, in 2013, Beat's chief marketing officer, Omar Johnson, shifted the capitalization of African-American affective control into a new market by having athletes sell the company's new line of noise-cancelling headphones (205). The examination of the "Hear What You Want" ad campaigns (including focus on the castings of Colin Kaepernick, Kevin Garnett, and Richard Sherman) leads into the aspect of tuning out haters through such devices. As Hagood argues, the particular ad campaign was not just a commercial success but was "politically prescient, generating market heat from the same affective energies that would soon ignited a conflagration of sports and racial politics" in the U.S. but missed the activism-aspect that would emerge (208-09). As Richard Sherman commented "in our society, you've got to find the right way to do the right thing so *people don't close their ears*" (Hagood 212). What transpired revolved around issues of listening, affect and a sense of self-preservation. More importantly, Hagood brings to our attention how sounds can be associated with race even in their perception, having a "white ear" so to speak, thus indicating the extent of social and racial politics these ads triggered. Hagood concludes this chapter by observing that while both the Bose and the Beats ads sell a similar concept - "the neoliberal male hero preserving himself in a noisy world through technological progress" (218) - it is interesting to diachronically consider our engagement with such orphic media and the cultures that produce, promote and consume them, from the days of the Sony Walkman to the latest headphone devices.

- 19 Hagood concludes his book by briefly providing some more examples of orphic media he identified in the summer of 2017 ranging from a mainstream Hollywood blockbuster, to Spotify, to Apple Music, to news media focusing on noise to Here One wire-less earbuds and wind farms. As he clarifies, a central aim of his book was to examine "this impasse of mediated control in literal and figurative listening" (223) and how certain freedoms are indeed produced but new assaults and sensitivities also arise. This is why Hagood considers reflecting on the listening process as vital in the closing of his book. He states that moving forward and considering future developments, one word that will characterize personal audio technologies is "hearables" (224) and the culture surrounding, developing, promoting and consuming them will indicate how they change both what and how we hear and listen. Hagood further cites autopoiesis as a biological and phenomenological framework that can assist in comprehending what he sees as a fundamental problem for humanity, namely that "we perceive and engage others and the world but can only do so as it 'makes sense' within our systemic limitations" (229). As Hagood points out, humans are becoming ever more cybernetic and informatic and engage with their world through controllable interfaces in order to regain autonomy whilst at the same time constraining their actions within the confines the interface affords; so while we aim to set boundaries and maintain our state of comfort we are also perpetuating and exacerbating divisions and failing to listen across difference (230). In sum, it is clear that orphic media demonstrate added value to media studies and to other fields and disciplines as they can assist us in negotiating the "paradox of control," the mentality of hearing what we want, but also strengthen our powers of audition and enable a kind of deep listening to ourselves and to one another.

NOTES

1. Protevi's philosophy combines neocybernetics and Spinozan affect theory (Hagood 167).