

Exploring Cultural Diversity in Experimental Sound

Black and South Asian artists are some of the least represented ethnicities within the genre of experimental sound. By experimental sound, we refer to creative practices including computer music, noise, sound art, electroacoustic music, soundscape, and improvisation, which are overwhelmingly dominated by affluent White male practitioners. This leaves very little space for alternative experiences or diverse role models. Indeed, as highlighted by Born and Devine, experimental sound is “a cultural–educational domain that is generally understood as ethnically unmarked or ‘non-raced’ – as representing the musical-universal, the ‘commonality of humanity’ in music – [but which] is actually experienced as ethnically White and as linked to an invisible politics of Whiteness” (Born and Devine 2015, 139).

Ethnically diverse artists and their narratives have been excluded from the traditional discourse. Their experiences, therefore, provide a valuable counterpoint to the normalised White majority. This project “*Exploring Cultural Diversity in Experimental Sound*” presents the voices of these diverse and often marginalised practitioners, seeking to celebrate Black and South Asian experimental sound musicians and their underrepresented musical practice, it is important to note that the context of this study is situated in the United Kingdom.

Bringing together a diverse array of international artists and practitioners this project challenges the White norm in the field of Experimental Sound, giving underrepresented voices a chance to express their perspectives and addressing a significant knowledge gap into the field of experimental sound. Our research will build an understanding of the experiences of experimental sound musicians from Black and South Asian backgrounds, building awareness of the existing cultural diversity in electroacoustic music and sound arts, with a bias to help transform and support practitioners across Britain’s diverse cultures.

Questions of cultural diversity are almost entirely absent from critical discourse within the experimental sound area, creating a bias of visible Whiteness. This research seeks to challenge institutional Whiteness in Experimental Sound practice and its associated literature. Building understandings from Black and South Asian composers - from their individual and collective experiences – an investigation has begun applying methods of participant observation alongside practice research, as well as in-depth interviews. These interviews have questions focused on three strands biographical backgrounds, musical practice, and their professional careers. Lastly, there will be a notion of bringing the participants together for focus groups where wider issues can be raised discussed and negated collectively. Some findings, for example, but not limited to are the desire for participants to not conform to limited stereotypical assumptions, and there is clear eclecticism and distinctions in their musical tastes and listening habits. A slow analysis of sorts is taking shape, but as we are only half-way through capturing our research data, there is a responsibility to ensure these sensitive experiences and materials are drawn out honestly and naturally.

Latterly, we will develop a report highlighting the challenges inherent for practitioners from diverse cultural backgrounds as they seek to navigate an art form that is institutionally White. This research has potential to make a social and cultural impact, which will help enable diverse communities to play equal roles within contemporary music practice. Whilst increasing diversity in arts, culture and music education that will allow our society to become more enriched, resilient, and supportive towards diverse communities. The research and its outputs will reveal new knowledge that has previously been neglected by academic circles, the research will unpack experiences and practices of diverse underground music that sits outside the traditional experimental and contemporary music scenes, giving voice to diverse composers, which also allows to raise critical awareness of the historical landscape within the field of music technology, re-valuing technology-based music, and its entanglements. This research will unpack how their identities as Black and South Asian artists as well as how their unique experiences are situated in relation to the structural and cultural contexts of experimental sound in the UK.