When I was asked to curate this audio companion, three questions immediately came to mind:

1. How can this money and platform be redistributed to Black trans and queer composers?
2. How can redistribution and amplification of these voices occur without further tokenizing or marginalizing?
3. How can I acknowledge and confront the space I personally take up in this endeavor?

In the past 30 years, Leonardo Music Journal’s Audio Companions have featured zero Black curators—and only about a half-dozen Black artists have been represented since 2010. It seemed obvious to direct both the space and the money (a small stipend is sent to the curator, not the artists whose music is featured) to Black artists—specifically, Black trans, queer and disabled artists.

It also felt important to at least attempt to explore the manners in which my own whiteness, male-ness, cis-ness impacts the curatorial choices I make and the manner in which these choices are received.

This Audio Companion features works written and performed by some of the most vital creators of new experimental music on the west coast of the United States. Davia Spain and Star Amerasu are composers and solo artists utilizing electronic processing on their own voices, crafting loops and layers of ambient texture as the foundation for arresting art songs. In Juba Kalamka and Leroy Moore’s collaborative JKLM project, producer Kalamka utilizes vocal processing and manipulated samples to foreground Moore’s texts and vocal performances interrogating the intersection between queerness and disability. Ygslrhstfut is a Los Angeles ensemble that utilizes noise, feedback and powerfully propulsive percussion to set text written and delivered by vocalist Chella Coleman.

These four pieces are framed by the five works that comprise AFFIRMATIVE ACTION, a project led and conceptualized by composer/guitarist/improviser/superhero Zachary James Watkins. In 2016, Watkins began working with The Living Earth Show (an ensemble in which I play percussion alongside electric guitarist Travis Andrews) and four other composers of color for whom racial identity plays an integral role in their work practices (Ava Mendoza, Sharmi Basu, Raven Chacon and Morgan Craft) to examine a fundamental research question: Is it possible to use the tools of white privilege to dismantle whiteness supremacy?

Recorded live in Oakland in 2018, each individual work in AFFIRMATIVE ACTION, and the production as a whole, was intended to dialogue with and interrogate the idea of the “lens of whiteness”—the idea that it is impossible for whiteness to not refract the institutional presentation and consumption of the work of artists of color. The collaborating artists worked to put a magnifying glass to the relationship between the composers and the performing ensemble (of which both members are white men) to ask the question: Who is really speaking for whom?

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Andy Meyerson is a drummer and percussionist based in San Francisco, California. He is music director for San Francisco–based dance company Post:Ballet, drummer and co-founder of queer nü-metal collective COMMANDO, and a renowned solo artist. He has performed with Kronos Quartet, So Percussion, Roomful of Teeth and numerous other renowned ensembles, but the overwhelming majority of his work takes place as percussionist, artistic director, and co-founder of The Living Earth Show, one of the premier experimental classical music ensembles in the United States. In this capacity, he has commissioned over 75 new works, released albums through Innova Recordings (High Art, 2013), New Amsterdam Records (Dance Musíc, 2016), and Negrogothic Records (Lordship & Bondage: The Birth of the Negro Superman, 2019), and toured extensively throughout the United States. His first solo album, "My Side Of The Story," was released through Slashsound records in 2016 and his second, Extra Time, features new solo percussion compositions written for him by Sarah Hennies and will be released via Hasana Editions in 2020. Andy Meyerson is an endorsing artist for Spaun Drums and Innovative Percussion.

A Note from The Living Earth Show

I worried that it might be gauche to include my own ensemble’s recordings in this Audio Companion. In the interest of full disclosure, I was given a stipend of $600 to curate this Companion. $500 each went to Star, Davia, JKLM, and Ygslrhstfut, and $40 each went to Zach, Ava, Sharmi, Raven and Morgan. I thought a lot about simply including works by those five composers that I didn’t perform on, but I thought that, effectively, publishing one’s work for $40 is more or less the same as giving it away for free. I felt (and Travis, the other half of The Living Earth Show, agreed) that if I was going to ask these composers to have their work published with only $40 of compensation, it was only fair for me as a performer and recording artist to have some skin in the game as well and share in the lack of royalties from these works’ publication. This is certainly not meant as a slight to this journal (exposure here is certainly an honor!), only a window into my own thought process around the monetization of musical labor. If you’re feeling so inclined, please explore and purchase works from these artists’ catalogs on their websites!