Plugging into Infrastructures with Happy Plugs Headphones

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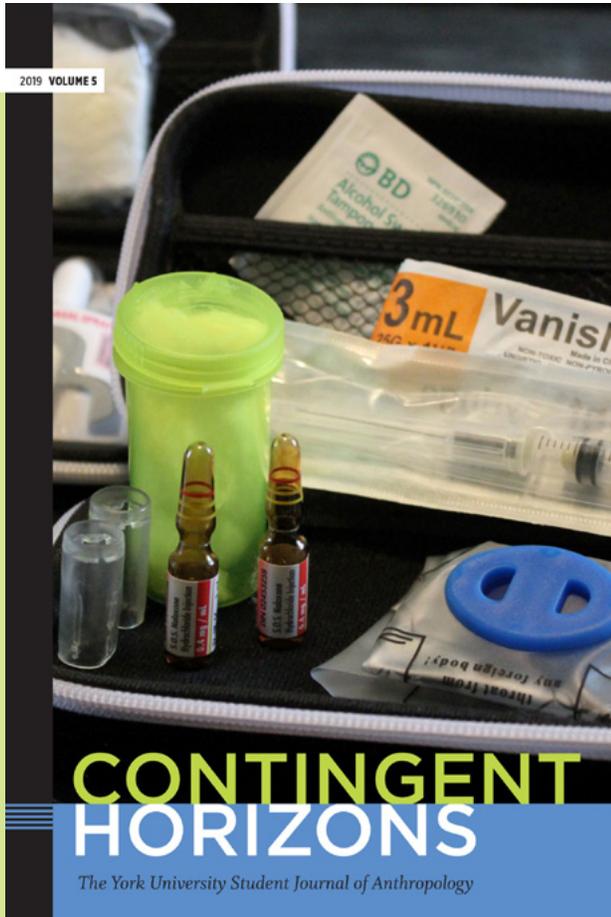
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Plugging into Infrastructures with Happy Plugs Headphones

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Happy Plugs headphones are a global object—they are designed in Sweden, manufactured in China, and exported to various countries the world over. Through the slogan "What color are you today?®" the Swedish company Happy Plugs frames the headphones within an economic infrastructure that is centred on ideologies about individualism and practices of constructing one's identity. Through this marketing strategy, vision becomes the primary sense that provokes the product's purchase and over-consumption; sound becomes secondary to style, function becomes eclipsed by fashion. As such, the headphones shift from being a means to an end (accessibility to music/sound) to becoming an end in itself (a visual commodity). Furthermore, potential growth for the company is tied up with their ability to produce a piece of technology that heavily depends on its allure as an accessory. Yet, alongside being an accessory, headphones are also protective prosthetics. As a kind of "Do Not Disturb" sign, headphones can offer some people, often women, a sense of temporary security in public. Happy Plugs headphones are not just an object with which we can access the music in MP3 players and smartphones, they also help us plug into myriad infrastructures.

KEY WORDS Infrastructures, Happy Plugs headphones, protective prosthetics, accessory, commodity, salvageable materials

Beginnings and Backgrounds

After my Apple earbuds stopped working, I had no choice but to go and buy new headphones. I say that I had "no choice" because how else was I to access the music on my android phone? How else was I going to be able to access my tunes, and think about choreography and movement, while using transit? How else was I going to plug in but with another pair of headphones. I went to Data Integrity, the electronics store at the York University Keele campus in Toronto, Ontario (Canada) and found a pair of earphones that were just the right price, and more importantly, the right colour: black. My earbuds had been white, and I thought black would be a nice, subtle change—after all, don't they say in the fashion industry that "black is the new black"? Little did I know that my new, black Happy Plugs headphones with silicone in-ear tips would one day be "waking [me] up to connections" (Dumit 2014, 345), transporting me into a lesson of intolerability,

and transforming from an "innocent" prosthetic technology to a global object situated in numerous infrastructures.

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This article situates headphones from a Swedish company, Happy Plugs, in the world and also the world in the object (Dumit 2014, 350)—an exercise that requires a sort of "promiscuous knowledge" (345). I interpret this as the engagement of numerous platforms and sources, and I therefore bring together personal experience, information on websites, YouTube videos, internet comments on products, news articles, blogs and more to highlight the various networks and links to which this object is connected. It is through what Joseph Dumit (2014) calls an implosion project that I am able to learn and relay the embeddedness of headphones and explore the various dimensions of this object which are always intertwined and messily spilling into each other. Nonetheless, I begin with the historical dimension by providing a backstory for Happy Plugs headphones and revealing the various stories that surround the Happy Plugs brand. Then, I move to the economic dimension by focusing on the marketing and consumption of the product. From there, I delve into the material and labour dimensions by concentrating on and attempting to track the materials and places involved in the manufacturing, production and distribution of headphones. Next, I consider the relationships between headphones and (non)people, or the bodily and educational dimensions. I finish off with a mytho-material dimension that considers the consequences of over-consuming technologies and ideas of replaceability.

In this project I use the concept of infrastructures to think about the stories of which Happy Plugs headphones are a part of and to which they connect. Susan Leigh Star (1999) states, "Infrastructure is both relational and ecological—it means different things to different groups and it is part of the balance of action, tools, and the built environment, inseparable from them" (377). Star (1999) couples this open-ended statement by defining infrastructure through demarcated dimensions created by herself and her colleague, Karen Ruhleder. For example, one of the properties of infrastructure, "embeddedness," situates infrastructure as "sunk into and inside of other structures, social arrangements, and technologies" (Star 1999, 381). With this in mind, I wonder within which infrastructural design(s) Happy Plugs headphones are embedded or active? As the anecdote above suggests, headphones exist within a technological structure that requires them. Without headphones there is an inability to access music and sound on digital devices on a personal level. Without headphones individual music choices and sounds from preferred moving images are imposed on others because inclusive aural experiences in public are not necessarily the norm. The technological structure is one example, and the most obvious example at that, since Happy Plugs headphones are also embedded in manufacturing processes and consumerism.

Star's (1999) ecological dimension in the definition of infrastructure not only infuses the concept with ideas of complex relationships but also with multi-dimensionality. Explicitly, the ecological aspect highlights the relationality between foreground and background, visibility and invisibility, respectively. As Star (1999) mentions, "The normally invisible quality of working infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks" (382). Although she pairs invisibility with background, I propose that Star (1999) intends to make

us aware of how the background, the "working infrastructure," becomes foregrounded when it breaks. As such, I will focus on background and not visibility because, perceptually, backgrounds are not necessarily invisible. Furthermore, as one background becomes foregrounded another appears on the horizon ready to be perceived (somewhat reminiscent of the eternal edges of the implosion project). In fact, Brian Larkin (2013) recognizes that infrastructures "are present to the senses, yet they are also displaced in the focus on the matter they move around" (329). In other words, infrastructures foreground the objects they are in relation to and in so doing they become background. In thinking with backgrounds, I will discuss how headphones bring to the forefront and are entangled in narratives of sociability, sharing, and safety. This is not unlike Star's (1999) "idea that people make meanings based on their circumstances" when thinking about data collection and analysis (383). In this case, however, these backstories emerge when headphones are unplugged from their basic functions and imbued with different purposes based on experiences and situations. The stories that follow in the next section position my Happy Plugs headphones within ideas of corporate success, global consumerism, and transparency.

Stories of Success, Excess, and Access

Happy Plugs is a Swedish company that manufactures headphones, as well as other accessories. The company is quite young, as the following origin story of the company relates:

> It Started with a Love Story…
> Happy Plugs was born at the end of 2011 when the founder Andreas Vural was looking for a pair of colorful headphones for his girlfriend. When he didn't have any luck, he finally took the matter in his own hands – and painted a pair of headphones himself. And she and her friends loved them! He then realised there was room for well-designed and affordable quality headphones that went beyond functionality within the tech space. From this belief, the brand Happy Plugs was born. (Happy Plugs 2018a)

Underneath this short story the words "turning tech into fashion must-haves" (Happy Plugs 2018a) signals the individuating infrastructure that this piece of technology lies within.

Vural's vision is "to build a brand that allows consumers fashion freedom, where they can enjoy a wardrobe of headphones that can vary by style, mood and of course, music" (Happy Plugs 2018b). It may come as no surprise, then, that Happy Plugs' tagline is "What color are you today?®" This tagline frames the headphones within capitalist and consumerist ideologies that endorse individualism. These are ideologies that are imposed on practices of constructing identity or identities. "What color are you today?®" does not evoke a verbal reply, rather, it elicits a behavioural response in which one must pick and put on one's daily colour, implying that individuals should have more than one set of headphones from which to choose. By placing colour as the focus, the question primes personal choice mostly through the visual characteristics of the object not its acoustic quality. The Happy Plugs company, a self-proclaimed lifestyle brand, transparently communicates that the product is meant to be a stylish technology, an electronic accessory, a fashion must-have (DOSE 2017; Gustas and Blixt 2016; Hagelbäck 2016; Happy Plugs 2018a; Into Tomorrow 2015).

Transparency appears to be important to Happy Plugs: their website contains a lot of information about their products. Under "Product Material," for example, the company details the technological devices the Happy Plugs earbuds are compatible with, some audio information about the product, and that they are made from ABS and TPE plastics (Happy Plugs n.d.). A quick Google search on ABS and TPE reveals more information with regards to each plastic suggesting that elsewhere this information is readily available. Interestingly, the website also allows its consumers to inquire about where their products are manufactured, which in this case is China. For more information one is instructed to visit the "About Us" section. But following this link takes one back to the company's successful origin story, where there is some evidence to back up their claims of achievement and growth: the 70+ countries to which they have brought happiness; the 10,000+ stockists that carry the product; and the 5 million+ happy people served that are part of the Happy Plugs "fan club" (Happy Plugs 2018a).

Kathleen Pine and Max Liboiron's (2015) politics of measurement seem apparent here as these numbers are socially situated within an infrastructure of economy that values the occupation of space and place. As Pine and Liboiron (2015) indicate, what gets measured or counted, and what does not, is situated within a social or cultural context. Further, it is not just that data gathered and numbers presented are political and intentional, they also get leveraged for action. With regards to Happy Plugs, data (such as 70+ countries, 10,000+ stockists, and 5 million+ "happy fans") indicate to consumers and other companies, such as potential collaborators, the (growing) value of this company and the value of being part of this "fan club"—which I realized I had unknowingly become a part of by virtue of buying a pair of Happy Plugs headphones. These numbers frame the company as global and successful by highlighting the consumption of its products worldwide. Yet, divulging this information is a distraction for numbers or measurements that Happy Plugs does not wish to readily reveal to the general onlooker such as data on profit and production, to name a couple.

In their study of the marketing approaches of international new ventures, Tada Gustas and Caroline Blixt (2016) highlight how transparency is coupled with the idea of information sharing: "One major constructor of a firm's marketing capabilities showed to be the sharing of information with other companies" (22). An interview with Linda Nordlund, the marketing director of Happy Plugs who was part of this study, clearly demonstrates this coupling. Nordlund reveals,

> We are a very transparent company. We want to sell the product but also the story of Happy Plugs, so as we love our brand we want our retailers and distributors to have the same feeling about us and the brand. Therefore we are really transparent about the things we do (…) we share all the reports, everything we know, but also let them tell us all they know. We believe that sharing is the only way. Sharing is caring, if you give, it will come back. (qtd in Gustas and Blixt 2016, 22)

Through sharing the relational comes into play, invoked through both the selling and telling of story and transparency in the hopes of reciprocity.

"Sharing is caring," Nordlund proclaims, but there is only so much that Happy Plugs cares to share. While the company's value—70+ countries, 10,000+ stockists, 5 million+ happy people served—is openly disclosed, the website does not reveal which countries,

retailers, and people it is referring to. Clicking on any of these three sections is futile as the page only refreshes itself. There are no links even though the cursor suggests the opposite. Which countries? Which retailers? Which people? The "About Us" page is meant to have more information, as is suggested by the "Product Information" page when it directs inquirers here. Yet the specific locations of the countries, retailers, and people are ignored or unacknowledged; dislocating the headphones from place by making them a global object that can be found both everywhere and nowhere, emphasizing their excess- and accessibility. In a sense, this un-situatedness (Haraway 1988) involves a capitalist and economic mathematics in which value is created through (numerical) displacement. What Happy Plugs really cares to share is how the company is greater than the sum of its products.

The marketing structure is governed by growth as many business theses stress (Björck, and Thomasson 2014; Gustas and Blixt 2016; Hultman, Nazem, and Razafimandimbison 2015; Johansson and Engström 2016), and market growth provides yet another reason for the company to mention its far and wide tentacular reach, as Donna Haraway might say (2017). Through Happy Plugs' marketing tagline—"What color are you today?®"—sound becomes secondary to style as vision becomes the primary sense that provokes the product's purchase and over-consumption. Through this marketing strategy, the headphones shift from being a means to an end, a technology through which to access music and sound, to becoming an end in itself, a visual commodity. Despite them not being a technology that enhances vision, through this marketing strategy Happy Plugs headphones join the "technological feast" for the all-consuming "cannibaleye" (Haraway 1988, 581) as a technology to be looked at. Therefore, I argue, potential growth for the company is tied up with Happy Plugs producing a piece of technology that heavily depends on its allure as an accessory with the target market being women. As Vural comments, "Happy Plugs is for … the stylish woman who want their tech to be a little more than just tech" (DOSE 2017).

Further, the tagline "What color are you today?®" promotes what Natasha Myers (2017) calls "promiscuous consumerism," as people are encouraged to collect the various colours available. As mentioned by Daniel Björck and Tom Thomasson (2014), the Happy Plugs company's "focus lies on the distribution of retailers since it is easier for the consumer to get a visual experience of the product before purchasing it" (30). It is through the possibility of an impulse purchase from a tactile experience of the product that Happy Plugs hopes to make and increase sales (Björck, and Thomasson 2014, 30–31). As such, the spectra of colours that Happy Plugs offers, coupled with the numerous retailers at which the product is available enable both access and excess. Again, however, particular retailers are not mentioned just alluded to in numerical terms. No locations, no names, just numbers; numbers that are made to tell particular stories.

I begin to rethink Happy Plugs' transparency as I find roundabout directions, broken links, pages that can only be accessed through other means—the FAQ page only pops up when conducting a Google search—and missing information. Something does not add up. And the questions begin to pile up. Which kinds of dye are used to colour the plastics? Why is copper not mentioned as one of the materials used? Why isn't silicone mentioned? From where is the copper extracted? How is the silicone obtained? Where in China have the headphones been manufactured? Which factories are building these products? None of this information is easily found within or outside of the website unlike the information on plastics. Conversely, the actual location of the Happy Plugs headquarters and some of its

employees can be found on their LinkedIn profile (accessed April 19, 2019)—Kungsgatan 4B, Stockholm, 11143 (Sweden)—as well as its Hong Kong, New York and L.A. offices. However, locating the factories and workers that make the headphones is impossible, highlighting who matters and who is valuable. These factory workers are "people whose work goes unnoticed or is not formally recognized" (Star 1999, 386). They are a kind of "non-people," to use Star's (1999) concept, who are part of the background and also necessary for the Happy Plugs company to work.

But, luckily, the Happy Plugs website has a place to submit a request if there are more questions. So, I send them an email:

> Hello,
> I bought a pair of black Happy Plugs headphones and I love them. I am doing a project on them and the history of headphones, and I was wondering where the headphones were manufactured in China, as well as which materials were used.
> Any help would be greatly appreciated.

And I sign off. I begin with a compliment because I figure that the positive feedback might help my chances at receiving more information. And I try to keep my inquiry general so as not to scare them. However, neither manoeuvre has any effect since the response that shows up a few days later feels automated and is not helpful:

> Hi,
> Thank you for reaching out to us!
> The headphones are made in China.
> You can read more about that and the materials if you follow this link:
> https://happyplugs.zendesk.com/hc/en-us
> Let me know if there is anything else I can do.
> Have a happy day,
> Best regards,
> Aros & The Happy Plugs Family
> Customer Care
> (email to author, December 4, 2017)

The link takes me back to the webpages I have already looked at, which means that I need to dig elsewhere for more information. I turn to Google, but I have to carefully craft my search because the first results that show up when typing "Chinese factories that manufacture Happy Plugs" have the words "Chinese" and "factories" omitted. Thus, I am forced to search more broadly and find other avenues for information on the materials for and manufacturing of headphones.

Materials and Manufacturing

Searching on YouTube, video walk-throughs of factories that manufacture headphones pop up and provide some answers to questions about the process and the component parts of headphones. A video posted by USDigitalMedia (2013) called "How Earbuds are Made

– An inside Look at a Headphone Factory" offers exactly that: the opportunity for viewers to virtually "visit" a Chinese factory in which headphones are made in order to take a peek at the production of Audio Spice headphones, another earphone company. Although it is acknowledged that the factory is in China a more specific location is not provided. This response echoes the unnamed personnel ("nonpeople") and machines that the audience encounters during the "walk" through the factory. What Matthew Harris, the narrator, does verbalize and acknowledge are the materials that make up the headphones: copper wiring, coloured PVC cables, iron plates, magnets, copper coils, plugs for connection, earbud caps, and plastic for packaging (USDigitalMedia 2013).

Although I find some more information, I am dissatisfied. Answers lead to more questions, and the occlusion of *who* makes the headphones by *what* they are made with makes me wonder about the people and machines that reside in the background. It becomes clear that the enterprise of manufacturing involves manual and mechanical dimensions: headphones emerge within a cyborgian infrastructure in which people must relate, cooperate and connect with machines to manufacture prosthetic devices that enable other connections (Haraway 1991). But, like the "nonpeople," these non-beings are not formally recognized, they are made to exist in the background since the materials they act upon, and the resulting technologies that manifest through their labour, are given more significance. Additionally, what headphones are made with point to other beings of importance: the people for whom these prosthetic devices are catered.

An unknown contributing writer on Techwalla—a website that offers information on various technologies—addresses how "the first headphones were comprised of hand-made materials that were readily available such as rubber, leather, copper, and ceramics" (Techwalla 2019, under "Basic Materials").[1] Nowadays headphones are "made with sophisticated plastics, silicone, artificial leather, rubber, textiles, vinyl and foam materials" (Techwalla 2019, under "Basic Materials"). While the author notes that the type of headphone design—earbud, super-aural, in-ear, circumaural—will dictate which materials are utilized, there are other factors that could be taken into consideration. For example, because in-ear headphones as the name suggests go into the ear canal "there are some types that are made of hypoallergenic and sometimes medical grade silicones" (Techwalla 2019, under "In the Ear"). The foregrounding of allergies and sensitivities in the economic infrastructure imbue materials with more importance, moving people and machines further into the background while also propelling wearers to the forefront as companies cater to these consumers.

While consumers with sensitivities might only want access to their devices—after all, how are they to plug in if their bodies reject these prostheses created with common components?—they are nonetheless a part of the larger world of consumerism, and are often the target. Again, what headphones are made with eclipse who (and what) makes them, even outside of medical scenarios as the figure at the front seems to be the one for whom headphones are made. And sometimes those people are music enthusiasts who want the best sound. It is no surprise, then, that there is a value hierarchy placed on materials. Responding to Veronica176 on an Apple forum, Meatplate (2014) reveals the specific materials used to make the speaker, wire, and plug of the Apple earbuds. Moreover, Meatplate (2014) comments on the way the quality of acoustic experience depends on which materials are utilized for each part. For example, at the point of connection to the

human body, the speaker, Meatplate (2014) points out that neodymium magnets are better than ferrite magnets because their increased magnetism "enhances the acoustics of sound and prevent[s] any loss of sound" (para. 2). The oxygen free copper wire, the component that transfers the signal, is "considered an above average material for headphones, thus ensuring better sound quality" (Meatplate 2014, para. 3).

It is at the plug, the link to the technological body, however, that acoustic quality and cyborgian connection might waver. Meatplate (2014) explains:

> The nickel plated plug used by Apple is a standard connection and joins to a female connection into the iPod (for example) which is also nickel plated. Where gold plated plugs are renowned to transfer more data and superior sound quality when connected to any device. Connecting the same metals during transfer (nickel plated plugs and nickel female connections) ensures optimum sound as the signal will not be jumping different kinds of metal. The lack of gold plating also helps to reduce the cost in manufacturing and to the customer. (para. 4)

Therefore, at the nexus of transference, of going from one medium to another, the problem of connection is made explicit.

Connection is not just a matter of plugging in and quality is not just a matter of utilizing high-value materials. The quality of connection requires bringing (similar) bodies together to maximize transmission. And some bodies are easier to connect than others. There is a significant distance between the 5 million+ people served and "nonpeople" in the background. Which customers? Which workers? Who are these people? It is clear that gain and loss are a part of the infrastructures of production and consumerism. And sometimes it is hard to tell who or what is in the foreground. One might think that the 5 million+ people are central but they are just as much in the background as the factory workers making the product, the "nonpeople." In an economic infrastructure, product appeal is central. With Happy Plugs—What color are you today?®—it is through colour that one is primed to connect with the product (and with the company). In connecting with the Happy Plugs company and its product other (dis)connections are activated. The functional purpose of headphones is ultimately to access the music housed in our technological devices. And while sharing music can serve as a way of bonding, a potential outcome of plugging in is a disconnection from other bodies.

To Plug in, or Not to Plug in?

Often, hearing other people's music feels like an infringement of my personal space, and elicits judgment as I think about how these people are ignoring public music/sound etiquette. What has emerged with headphones is the expectation of the opportunity to detach from others or the chance at a closed-off individual experience. Headphones offer the promise of an individually curated, temporary immersion into the realm of sound.

"I do like function and form. But if I really had to choose, ultimately I prefer function because I like a good bass. And we'll see what Happy Plugs offers me in terms of that," reveals Sabrina Poh (2014) while unboxing her first pair of rose-gold Happy Plugs in-ear headphones on YouTube. Part of the unboxing video is to provide a mini review of the

product which means testing it out in front of the camera. After putting them on and playing some music on her phone, Poh (2014) removes the headphones and recounts, "I'm really impressed with these earphones. I can hear a really good bass, and the reason why I chose the in-ear … is 'cause … I like to listen to [music] entirely and not be distracted by any kind of environment or outside noise. So, this definitely blocks out and cancels out any background sound." Poh (2014) ends her unboxing video with a final endorsement, "I recommend the in-ear if you want to cancel out sound noise and to really hear the music … these fit really well."

Robert Cribb (2005) also speaks to the benefit of noise-cancelling headphones by addressing how "a little noise-cancelling therapy can offer a welcome assistance in the personal immersion process" (C04). A decrease in environmental noise pollution or as Cribb (2005) puts it, "auditory bombardment," is linked to the promise of "purified music or movie dialogue to [the] ears" (C04). Noise-cancelling headphones are connected to peace, reducing the mental distraction from outside noise and removing the unwanted acoustic awareness of one's surrounding (Cribb 2005, C04). Noise-cancelling headphones promote "personal immersion," and the possibility to "really hear the music," as Poh (2014) suggests. And yet, there are also warnings attached to this device and desire. Cribb (2005) comments, "Audio seclusion isn't always good to have. Or safe" (C04). Desires for auditory peace are coupled with scenarios of safety in popular discourse and mainstream media.

But personal auditory immersion or this idea of dissolving into an acoustic environment, as Stefan Helmreich (2009) makes note of, collides with the other senses and the energies of other bodies present. There is no "becoming one" (Helmreich 2009, 219) with the music or sound because "fluid osmosis of environment by [an …] auditor" (230) is an illusion. As a prosthetic device, headphones can only transport and re-locate the listener into an interstitial space between or within the boundary of "part and whole" (Helmreich 2009, 230). As a wearer of in-ear headphones I find that the types of noises I cannot escape or that I am made most aware of are those produced by my own chewing and swallowing. It is hard to listen to music when eating food since masticating masks the music. In these instances, I become aware of my own violations to my aural experience: the noises produced by my mouth and throat that normally and unnoticeably vibrate out into the world. As I shut my ears to the world through headphones internal (head) sounds are magnified while external environmental noises are minimized. Headphones, like other prosthetic devices, raise questions and critiques regarding ideas of parts and wholes by highlighting and co-production not separation and individuation. Yet, the "personal immersion" mentality of headphones provokes conclusions of distance and detachment.

Don Fernandez (2005), a columnist for *Times,* informs, "An ever-growing throng is using headphones as metaphorical 'Do Not Disturb' signs" (D6). Fernandez (2005) acknowledges how the need for headphones has increased as the "prevalence of portable devices" has grown, making "it easier for more and more people to turn a cheap set of earbuds into a portable escape hatch from reality" (D6). The coupling of headphones to devices, a necessity that has arisen from a technological infrastructure that I allude to at the beginning of the paper, has headphones "joining wallet and keys in the ever-growing list of necessities for the office, gym, sidewalk, bus or train" (Fernandez 2005, D6). Departing from the *need* for headphones, Fernandez (2005) presents various case studies in his column in which people reveal their points of view on the pros and cons of

headphones. Some people vocalize the unsocial aspect of plugging in while others affirm the positive consequences of keeping to oneself.

Through headphones, a family can enjoy their personal music choices separately while in a car, and a workplace can be a place to bond (Fernandez 2005).[2] Focusing on the workplace as a space for headphones Fernandez (2005) relates, "At Context, the staff champions the concept of 'alone-together.' People can plug headphones into their computer and sample iTunes music lists from everyone at the office" (D6). Robbie Blinkoff, the managing partner and principal anthropologist at Context, frames this sharing as a kind of bonding… but also as a kind of immersive focusing: "You put them on, and you're in a different place. […] iPods are about focus" (qtd in Fernandez 2005, D6). In this instance, headphones are employed in a paradoxical manner by both helping to establish a sense of togetherness within employees through music sharing and promoting separation by guiding, if not forcing, the workers to keep to themselves. As such, headphones are imagined as a piece of technology that have the potential to increase productivity, and in some cases surveillance. Thomas P. Farley, the senior editor of Town & Country magazine, reveals how plugging in allows workers to be "more sensitive to the people around [them]" (qtd in Fernandez 2005, D6). Farley contextualizes that sentiment by stating, "The workplace is not a place people should be having long, drawn-out conversations" (qtd in Fernandez 2005, D6).

These scenarios are other examples of how headphones can provide entrance into the interstitial space between part and whole, into interconnectivity and co-production. And they provoke other questions: Are headphones becoming another way to generate productivity? Is technology being used to engage a work ethic that keeps people occupied and happy as well as focused on workplace goals? Although these questions are not explicitly answered in the article, they are worth considering since "infrastructure both shapes and is shaped by the conventions of a community practice" (Star 1999, 381). Nonetheless, the article addresses other questions that are more pertinent to the use of headphones in public: Do headphones separate us from others or provide us with much needed personal space in public? Are they a potential risk as people shut off their sense of hearing or do they provide a sense of safety as people signal "Do Not Disturb"? Whatever the reasons, Fernandez (2005) seems to think that "[h]eadphones are now de rigueur for those craving privacy, a wired refuge from the world" (D6). Ultimately, Fernandez (2005) proposes that headphones encourage a particular (anti)social etiquette.

Surprisingly, Fernandez (2005) does not take up the idea of why some people, and particularly women, might seek refuge through headphones when in public. But then again, the interviewees are mostly men: (in order of appearance) Mike, Thomas, Phillip, Robbie, Adam, Lori, Veronica, John, David, Steve, and Matt all provide their two cents as to whether headphones are antisocial or not. Of the men, Mike and Robbie advocate for the use of headphones. Respectively, these men indicate how headphones can provide personal space in public and promote focus in the workplace (Fernandez 2005). Alongside Mike, Lori and Veronica (the two women of the group) are also explicitly framed within the idea of "wired refuge" (Fernandez 2005, D6). This refuge, however, is about re-charging and being alone, not about safety. And yet for some women headphones are a protective prosthetic *because* they signal to others that they want to be left alone.

Helmreich's (2009) transductive ethnography, "a mode of attention that asks how subjects, objects, and field emerge in material relations" (230), is put into action here. Transductive ethnography speaks "to the modulating relations that produce insides and outsides, subjects and objects, sensation and sense data, that produce the very idea of presence itself" (Helmreich 2009, 230). As can be seen with headphones, preoccupations with "immersion" are infused with desires and warnings of environmental dis-attunement, of being acoustically detached from surroundings and other entities. Headphone-use is seen as an antisocial activity because it is a kind of individualistic listening practice. However, in applying "lateral attention" (Helmreich 2009, 230) the choice to plug in signals to other relations and different stories surface: stories of safety.

Protective Prosthetics

Sometime in 2016, *The Modern Man*—a website that provides men with dating and relationship advice—released a blog post by Dan Bacon: "How to Talk to a Woman Who is Wearing Headphones." Bacon's (2016) how-to guide encourages men to give a woman an "easy-going smile," to wave in order to get her attention, to mouth a salutation such as "Hello," and to simulate taking the headphones off—all for the sake of engaging her in conversation. Although Bacon (2016) does state that men should walk away if women show no interest, he only directs men to walk away after *all* these modes of engagement have failed. Importantly, his tactics of persistence are a cause for concern. Particularly because Bacon (2016) is under the impression, and informs his male readers, that women sometimes like to test a guy's confidence by ignoring him and seeing what he does next.[3] This is not an innocent how-to guide because by infringing on women's personal space through the interruption of their individual experience, through the negation of their "Do Not Disturb" sign, Bacon (2016) advocates for assertiveness in a scenario that is meant to socially signal refuge.

Needless to say, the article is controversial, and other authors comment on the problems with Bacon's (2016) tactics. Parker Molloy (2016), writing for the website Upworthy, a website that is a subsidiary of Good Media Company,[4] explicitly enlightens, "The truth is that if a woman is wearing headphones, she probably (OK, pretty much definitely) doesn't want to be interrupted for a chat with a stranger" (para. 2). While Molloy's (2016) statement might seem a little reductionist, it is meant to assertively prime the reader for the forthcoming reasoning. Molloy (2016) writes, "Leaving someone wearing headphones alone is just one of those unwritten rules of polite society" (para. 3)—acknowledging a different side of Fernandez's (2005) comment on how "[h]eadphones are now de rigueur for those craving privacy" (D6).

The problem with Bacon's (2016) strategy, as outlined by Molloy (2016), is that gambling with women's discomfort centres on male privilege because they are the ones that end up putting women in the situation. Further, Molloy (2016) illuminates that this uneasiness is likely the accumulation of the continual bombardment of "unwanted male attention from an early age" (para. 12). Molloy (2016) enlightens and educates, "Approaching strangers wearing headphones is different from most other public interactions because, for many, avoiding social interaction is exactly why the headphones are there in the first

place" (para. 15). Guides such as Bacon's (2016) promote finding ways around social cues, such as headphones signalling "Do Not Disturb," and therefore not respecting other people (Molloy 2016).

Also responding to Bacon's (2016) guide, Patty Affriol (n.d.) informs, "Headphones are usually my sole protection from unwanted attention, my signal to the world that I don't want to be bothered" (para. 7). Affriol (n.d.) affirms that Bacon's (2016) article "advocat[es] for men to violate a woman's personal space and take away her precious alone time" (para. 8). Importantly, Affriol (n.d.) explains that men who pursue women without acknowledging social cues "contribut[e] to a culture that allows and excuses harm to women's bodies in public space" (para. 14). Although the backlash that the article received is difficult to comprehend by some—Bacon (2016) showcases various men and women who are in support of his article—reading it with these women's voices in mind, with the lens of safety in mind, the blog post is clearly not innocent. Bacon (2016) is not promoting a friendly, easy-going conversation, he is encouraging the disrespect of people and their personal space.

The week that Terris Schneider (2013) lost her headphones "was the week where [she] discovered just how bad street harassment was in Vancouver because [her] headphones couldn't protect [her]" (para. 2). Schneider's (2013) encounter, her need for a protective prosthetic that is preventative, and many, *many* other scenarios of street harassment bring to the forefront reasons why some women wish for headphones in order to receive some peace of mind when out on the street: the lack of respect that women are given as people; the support of male entitlement which propagates these encounters; and the societal inclination to advocate for "confidence" at the expense of "safety", to name a few. Street harassment including attempting to engage a woman wearing headphones is not good in any degree.

I need to acknowledge and thank the women that brought this concern to my attention, who made me listen laterally, as Helmreich (2009) suggests. In doing so I was forced to look for stories that thwart conventions, that decentre Fernandez's (2005) comments on etiquette, and that shed light on the harassment that women endure often if not daily. I didn't know that headphones could provide protection or were used for that purpose. As a protective prosthetic, headphones emerge in relation to patriarchal, male entitlement.

Colour-filled Consequences, a Conclusion

It is incredible that the idea of coloured headphones arrived about a hundred years after the first successful set were developed by Nathaniel Baldwin (Newman 2019; Stamp 2013; Thompson 2012), and ten years after Apple introduced its earbuds into the market in 2001 (CNet 2011; Weller 2016). In *What Colour Is the Sacred?*, Michael Taussig proposes that the West is uncomfortable with colour, and, in particular, colours that are bright. Writing about "northern Europe … in the early nineteenth century" Taussig (2009) notes how "people of refinement had a disinclination to colors, women wearing white, the men, black" (3). It is no surprise, then, that when the all-white Apple earbuds first entered the market in response to the ubiquitous black headphone cords they signalled status, style and (an elite) association with Apple products such as the iPod (Weller 2016).

As a marketing tactic, Chris Weller (2016) illuminates, "Apple followed up the iPod's release [in 2001] with a huge advertising campaign highlighting the white headphones" (para. 10). In the advertisements, "[b]lacked-out silhouettes danced over tropical-colored backgrounds, all while listening to the tunes playing through their [white] earbuds" (Weller 2016, para. 10). This campaign ran for five years, from 2003 to 2008, as Apple released new generations of iPods (Weller 2016), some of them in colour—such as the iPod minis in 2004 which came in blue, green, pink, and gold, as well as their original silver colour. It is safe to say that this marketing strategy, as well as the fact that Apple offers customers its all-white earbuds, has imprinted on the public white headphones' connection to Apple products. And, by becoming one of its partners, Apple has managed to dip its toes in the ink of Happy Plugs colours without sacrificing its status or elitist brand "of refinement."

While perhaps not at the same level as Apple, Happy Plugs headphones are encased in socio-economic factors that references status. And headphones in general are a piece of prosthetic technology promoting a different kind of relationship between individuals. Not only are we signalling privacy when putting headphones on in public, with Happy Plugs we are also signalling our identity and participation in a fan club. It is not about what's new, or "what's next," as Yorkdale Mall (in Toronto) promotes, in this case it is about what's now, what you can purchase and put on in the moment, which is a variety of colours. In fact, Happy Plugs offers 22 different solid colours, 4 colours in marble style, 2 different kinds of prints, and their "childhood" pattern which consists of coloured dots; as well as their Co-Labs (or collaboration) lines' colours and patterns. Attempts to animate one's life and palimpsest-like body with colourful markers are reminiscent of the illuminated manuscripts that are enlivened through colour (Taussig 2009). However, these acts do not offer salvation. Submissions to the access of excess, to colourful choices, are tied up with colour-filled consequences.

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I find myself thinking of how my black Happy Plugs headphones are an accessory, a piece of fashion scripture, 3-D marks on my body that speak to identity, to the membership of a fan club, and to an engagement with a different type of social etiquette. Beyond the readily available indicators, headphones are entrenched in relational infrastructures of manufacturing processes, consumerism, sociability, safety and more. And that is while they are still "useful." Wondering about what happened to my white Apple earbuds, because I know I did not recycle them, I bring forth one more background: the Anthropocene, "a geologic epoch determined by the detritus, movement, and actions of humans" (Davis and Todd 2017, 762). The recycling of headphones is possible but not frequently done: "the small components make it hard to separate the materials, and thus it is time consuming and expensive to recycle" (Hough and Cogdell 2016, sec. VII). Further, as Anna Minard and Christina Cogdell (2016) note, "Apple's earbuds specifically are no more environmentally friendly than any other earbud brand" (para. 7). Recognizing that headphones contain salvageable material, such as copper and other metals, I wonder who will collect them? Ultimately, our relationship with materials and the environment is unfriendly and this is

not something that we wear or that overtly marks us. Yet, this relationship marks our sur-roundings. It is quite possible that our capitalist impulses, as we grab the myriad spectra of headphones available, will end up adorning the Anthropocene in a layer of coloured plastic as we discard as quickly as we excessively consume.

Notes

1   The reason that I have included information from this website, even though the author is unknown, is because Techwalla prides itself on being "the definitive destination on tech for [the] home and family" due to its access to information of various technologies (https://www. techwalla.com/about). While conducting my research, I found that the Techwalla article had the most complete history of headphones that I could find; as well as a comprehensive list of materials for and types of earphones.

2   These situations appear to contrast and coincide with the needs of those who work in the deep submergence vehicle Alvin, which is often likened to a car, and in which comfort is created through the sharing of music (Helmreich 2009, 220).

3   Bacon's blog post has changed since first accessed in December 2017. In the blog accessed at that time, Bacon had a step-by-step guide, which has been removed; and he had explicitly written that "women like to test to see how confident a guy is by ignoring his attempts to converse with her and then seeing what he does next" (2016)—an assump-tion that has also been retracted. However, Bacon's "advice" can be found in articles that responded to his initial post: such as in Patty Afriol's "Leave Me The F*ck Alone When I'm Wearing Headphones" (https://bust.com/feminism/17035-leave-me-the-f-ck-alone-when-i-m-wearing-headphones.html); Bibi Deitz's "How to Talk to a Woman Wearing Headphones: Don't" (https://stylecaster.com/how-to-talk-to-a-woman-wearing-head-phones/); Martha Mill's "How to actually talk to a woman wearing headphones" (https:// www.theguardian.com/science/brain-flapping/2016/aug/30/how-to-actually-talk-to-a-woman-wearing-headphones); and Parker Molloy's "Advice for talking to women wear-ing headphones ignores why women wear headphones" (https://www.upworthy.com/advice-for-talking-to-women-wearing-headphones-ignores-why-women-wear-headphones).

4   Upworthy is a media company that strives "to change what the world pays attention to" (https://www.upworthy.com/). And Good Media Company speaks from the context of Social Science, Social Media and Social Change with the intent to "bring people together, change perceptions, and inspire actions that impact culture for good" (https://goodmediagroup. com/). I note them here because of their efforts to bring multiple voices together in order to inform the public.

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