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Situated Listening: Partial Perspectives and Critical Listening Positionality

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ABSTRACT

Critical listening positionality, as theorized by sound studies scholar Dylan Robinson, points to the way in which our identities and histories shape what and how we hear. In his 2020 publication, "Hungry Listening," Robinson remarks of Deep Listening, the practice of sonic attunement developed by composer Pauline Oliveros: "in my experience the meditative opening up of listening through the body has also seemed to distance me from the particularity of listening positionality." In this paper, we explore the tensions between this "opening up of listening through the body" and the prospect of critical listening positionality. Thinking alongside Robinson, Oliveros, and decolonial scholars such as Rolando Vázquez, we propose frameworks for situated listening that acknowledge the partial perspective of our own listening, while allowing for the porous and transformative experience of attunement to the many presences within, and histories of, the places and times we are embedded in.

1. THE COLONIAL SENSORIUM

It is through the senses that we come to know the world and experience our place within it. Our ways of sensing, however, are not neutral. Through processes of sensorial acculturation, we internalize and perpetuate the dominant norms of the cultural, social, and political systems we are born into. Depending on location and context, these systems are made up of, and sustained by, imperialism, neoliberalism, cis and hetero-sexism, white supremacy, settler-colonialism, the carceral state, etc. These intersecting systems are what Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano calls the "colonial matrix of power" [1].

As sonic researchers grappling with our own positionalities in relation to the colonial matrix, we ask: How does coloniality delineate what and how we hear, and how might we listen otherwise? The practice of undoing coloniality spans movements for anti-imperial sovereignty in colonized nations and Indigenous calls for "landback," as well as attempts to disrupt colonial impositions on ways of knowing and being in the world. Approaches to decolonization are diverse, often contested, and emerge from different histories. In our research practices, we engage the tangled intersections of Decolonial theory emerging from a Latin American context, Postcolonial scholarship emerging from European-centered postmodernism, and Settler Colonial Studies which centers the ongoing repression of Indigenous peoples and cultures. Some of the dissonances between these interconnected movements are heard in the words of Indigenous scholars such as Eve Tuck, who (with Wayne Yang) calls out the metaphorization of decoloniality, a move that shirks accountability for the "repatriation of Indigenous land and life" [2]. Further, in the work of Bolivian feminist activist-scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who cautions that Latin American decolonial scholars have simplified, commodified, and exported decolonial concepts that are tied to very local struggles [3].

2. DE/COLONIAL LISTENING

Mindful of our own situated relations to coloniality, in this talk we consider practices of listening in relation to the colonial order. Here at the conference of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, situated on the ancestral lands of the Timucua, Mayaca, and Seminole peoples, in a state where all kinds of colonial reverberations are evident, we consider: What might it mean for us, as settler sound scholars, to unsettle the ways we connect with the complexities of place, through listening? In thinking through this question, we draw from the work of two scholars who consider decoloniality in relation to aesthetics, sensory practice, and listening: Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson, who works in the context of Truth-and-Reconciliation-era Canada, and Rolando Vázquez, whose work emerges from the modernity/coloniality group, a collective of Latin American scholars, including Arturo Escobar and Walter Mignolo, who highlight the omission of Latin American voices in dominant discourses of modernity.

The modernity/coloniality group sees coloniality as a structure of control that is inseparable from Western modernity. This is the worldview that universalizes the modern human subject who experiences themselves as unitary, rather than made up of interpersonal and more-than-human relations; and as existing in what Vázquez calls "the contemporary," rather than being shaped by ancestries and histories [4]. This worldview is perpetuated through modernity's continual assertion of Eurocentric and Anthropocentric understandings of the world, and the negation of other ways of knowing and being. In the face

of this, Vázquez offers *listening* as an orientation with the capacity to foster relationality, receptivity, and connection with one's location on the earth and in history. That said, as many scholars of late have pointed out, it is important to recognize listening as not defacto emancipatory. In his 2020 publication, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Robinson coins the term "hungry listening" to describe an extractive settler mode of perception [5]. The term emerges from the Halq'emèylem word for white settlers, *xwelítem*, which translates to "starving person" and refers to early settlers' hunger for food and gold. Towards dismantling this hunger, Robinson advocates that settlers practice "critical listening positionality," an allied form of listening that considers how our identities and histories affect what we can and cannot hear. Robinson's articulation of positionality is informed by both Indigenous protocol and black feminist praxis and resonates with Vazquez, who in *Vistas of Modernity*, published in the same year, asserts that: "It is only from an awareness of our positioned realities that we can enter in relation with each-other, that we can listen to each-other and learn each-other" [6].

Robinson's call for settlers to work out their own listening strategies affirms and challenges our ongoing attempts to imagine what allied listening practices might mean within our respective contexts. This paper is part of this work. It also constitutes an emergent response to a moment in the conclusion of *Hungry Listening*, wherein Robinson invites two settler colleagues (Ellen Waterman and Deborah Wong) to process their responses to his book. In the course of their dialogue, they propose Deep Listening as a potential starting point for allied settler listening.

3. DEEP LISTENING

Deep Listening is a creative practice developed by the late American composer and performer Pauline Oliveros that develops awareness of one's sonic environment, but also cultivates listening through the body, composition, improvisation, and dreams. One of the authors, Stephanie Loveless, is both a longtime Deep Listener and the current director of the Center for Deep Listening. From this position, it was exciting to read this suggestion of Deep Listening as an allied practice. However, Robinson's response was gently skeptical: "in my experience the meditative opening up of listening through the body has also seemed to distance me from the particularity of listening positionality." This challenge is worth spending some time with: Are practices such as Deep Listening incompatible with the awareness of positionality that both Vázquez and Robinson call for? Hungry listening denotes extractivist sonic practices that are frantic, predatory and harmful. An inverse of this approach might be listening through subtlety, humility, and stillness. This practice of quiet tuning into the delicate filigree of sonorous worlds was also held dear by Pauline Oliveros, who famously asked us to walk so silently that the bottoms of our feet become ears [7]. Aligned with the aims of feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s, Deep Listening was developed within the context of an exclusively female-identified research collective with whom Oliveros workshopped collaborative scores that tune the listener into the embodied rhythms of breath, listening, and response – resisting traditional musical hierarchies and the regimentation of linear clock-time. Musical content emerges from participants' responses to each other, but also – crucially – to whatever and whomever it's possible to hear and sense. This is indeed, to use Robinson's words, an "opening up of listening through the body," as sensory awareness is "opened" beyond the boundaries of the known self, to both human and more-than-human others.

4. "BEYOND COLONIAL MIND"

According to IONE, author, poet, director, and the longtime creative and life partner of Pauline Oliveros, these qualities of Deep Listening function "beyond colonial mind" [8]. In our own experience, Deep Listening practice – in its attunement to site and de-centering of self-contained human subjectivity – does have the capacity to unfix what Robinson calls "settler listening fixations," opening cracks where wonder can come in. In this wonder, we hear whispers of what Vázquez calls "the real" – the pluriversality of ways of being and knowing beyond the universalizing aims of the colonial matrix. In this beyond, we experience connection with our surroundings, and we find that our surroundings have their own animacy and can meet us, in relationship. However, this mode of experience is nuanced and is not without risk, and here we outline two:

The first risk is that we believe in the reality of such an experience, arrogantly mistaking it for truth. The moment we universalize our experience, we have reinscribed our colonial sense of dominance, and the settler-colonial sensorium is re-centered [9]. Another risk is that we forget that our perceptions are shaped by who, where, and how we are. As we enter a state of receptivity to the environment, it's essential to remember the positionality that informs what we can and can't hear in the first place. Both of these risks can be described as forgetting our "partial perspective." As science and technology studies scholar Donna Haraway reminds us, all knowledges are situated in their social, ecological, and historical relations [9].

How then, might we address the friction between the experiential approach of "opening up of listening through the body" and the analytical approach of reflexive "listening positionality"? Pauline Oliveros often said in workshops that she didn't know what Deep Listening was, but that we should go ahead and create it, together. Deep Listening in this way is understood as a living practice continually shaped by all those who participate. In this spirit, contemporary artists informed by both Deep

Listening and decoloniality have offered scores that explore listening practices attuned to history, to place, and to listener positionality.

5. A YEAR OF DEEP LISTENING

Carcross/Tagish First Nation curator Candice Hopkins and Diné-American composer Raven Chacon's DISPATCH calls for the protection of land and was written in the context of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at Standing Rock in 2016. Offered for publication as part of the Center for Deep Listening's 365-day publication project, *A Year of Deep Listening*, their score names participants (or "players") according to the complexities of their positionalities in relation to the land, their identities, and each other, before entering into a series of prompts "of relation, of listening, of action, of witnessing, of performing" [10]. While informed by the lineage of Deep Listening scores, DISPATCH critically raises the stakes by engaging existential struggles for land protection and self-determination. DISPATCH calls participant-performers into an active negotiation of positionality in relation to land, whether as Hosts, Witnesses, Artists, or Temporary Sympathizers – alongside attunement to the "resonant harmonics" and deep time of Standing Rock itself.

In another work published as part of *A Year of Deep Listening*, sound scholar and Deep Listener Ellen Waterman proposes 'bodily listening in place' as an improvisational practice that explores the sensory boundaries between self and other. Created in consultation with Deaf artist collective SPiLL PROpagation, Waterman's score is intended to develop, quote, "a more expansive, intersensory … concept of listening beyond audition." Crucially, in Waterman's piece, we are instructed to spend up to a week simply tuning into one's sensations, "in place" before the work of the performance can even begin [11]. Resisting the temptation to rush to an answer, we sit with the radical listening orientations of Deep Listening, with Robinson's call to Critical Listening Positionality, and with Vázquez' propositions of listening as a way to access "the real." We dwell in the oscillations between the "partial perspective" of our own listening, and the porous and transformative experience of attunement to site. Listening to the work of Hopkins, Chacon, and Waterman, we consider the ways that embodied being-in-site– sometimes slow, and sometimes urgent – is necessary to begin the work of listening to our listening [12].

6. SCORE FOR SITUATED LISTENING

We invite you now to look around the room, or the screen, and notice all the other bodies in this space. How does it feel to be connected to this community of people that we are all part of, in this room, and this Zoom room?

Notice the contact between your body and the chair, your clothes, your shoes, and everything that touches your skin. Notice the feeling of breath as it moves out of your body and in again. Notice the sounds around us, near and far, and the precise moment that sound meets your body.

You can close your eyes here. Can you perceive a moment of connection between your body and the sounds you can hear? Where are you situated in relation to the sound around and within you? Can you expand your listening to the resonances and dissonances of the partial perspectives of all the bodies that you are aware of, and of all of the bodies that you are not aware of–microscopic, infinite, past, and future?

Come back to your own body now, situated, in place. Listen, with Rolando Vázquez, for the murmurings of "the real" beyond the colonial order. Listen, with Dylan Robinson, for the ways your own ears are shaped by your unique identities and histories. Listen, with Candice Hopkins and Raven Chacon, for the rights of the land itself on which you are located. And listen, for a whisper or a scream, for an invitation or a demand, to respond.

7. REFERENCES

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