

Article



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SOUNDS THAT DIDN'T FIT INTO THE TECHNOLOGY

(about the decolonial crafts of listening)

*Sons que não couberam na tecnologia (sobre as artesanias decoloniais da escuta)**Sonidos que no encajaban en la tecnología (sobre el arte descolonial de escuchar)*

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ABSTRACT:

This essay discusses some problematic issues found on listening studies in Communication, with a special focus on relations with the fields of Aesthetics and Performance Studies. Recognizing the trajectory and transformations of the concept of listening, we establish three axes on which the correlation between listening and communication are anchored: the debate on performance; the very notion of what constitutes an experience; and the craft of listening as a critical and inventive fabulation of possible futures and existences. At the conclusion, we point to the power of studies focused on oratures, oralitures and listening as conditions for the possibility of comprehension of what eludes speech.

Keywords: Listening, Performance Studies, Experience, Decoloniality, Fabulation**RESUMO**

Este ensaio debate algumas questões-problema dos estudos sobre escuta na Comunicação, com especial enfoque para as relações com os campos da Estética e dos Performance Studies. Reconhecendo a trajetória e as transformações do conceito de escuta, apontamos três eixos sobre os quais as relações entre escuta e comunicação se ancoram: o debate sobre performance; a própria noção de experiência; e as artesanias da escuta como fabulação crítica e inventiva de futuros e existências possíveis. Apontamos, ao final, para a potência dos estudos que enfocam as oraturas, oralituras e escutas como condições de possibilidade de apreensão daquilo que escapa ao discurso.

Palavras-Chave: Escuta, Performance Studies, Experiência, Decolonialidade, Fabulação**RESUMEN**

Este ensayo analiza algunas cuestiones problemáticas en los estudios sobre la escucha en la Comunicación, con especial atención a las relaciones con los campos de la Estética y los Estudios de Performance. Reconociendo la trayectoria y transformaciones del concepto de escucha, señalamos tres ejes en los que se anclan las relaciones entre escucha y comunicación: el debate sobre la performance; la noción misma de experiencia; y el oficio de escuchar como fabulación crítica e inventiva de futuros y existencias posibles. Al final, señalamos el poder de los estudios que se centran en las oraturas, oralituras y la escucha como condiciones para la posibilidad de aprehensión de lo que escapa al discurso.

Palabras-claves: Escucha, Estudios de Performance, Experiencia, Decolonialidad, Fabulación

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A spectacle to hear absences

“Come listen to the invisible woman,” announces a white-lettered banner next to the door of the Shakespeare Gallery in New York, in the USA, a small theater whose calling relies on popular *vaudeville* spectacles, almost always of dubious taste, in which high society ladies could not even think of going inside, but whose husbands frequently attended. During the year 1804, invisible women populated the stages of popular entertainment throughout the whole of the United States, occupying the space between comedic performances, white singers doing blackface and pin-ups exhibiting lingerie. The idea to present this “invisible woman” was similar to the freak shows, the circus attractions that migrated from the traveling troupes and inserted themselves in the veins of the entertainment industry, strengthening the nascent market of spectacles that would later consolidate in the 19th Century (Toll, 1982; Sevcenko, 2001).

The depth of the theater stage was reduced by a black curtain, which emphasized the dimension of closeness between the spectators and the performer. At the center of the already downsized stage was an empty glass box, the size of a coffin, lit by oil lamps, which were lighted while the invisible woman slowly “appeared”. The apparition, naturally, was made by sound. Ethereal sounds, which simulated the siren’s chants, emerged from inside the glass box while the darkness settled in. “More than a horror spectacle, what happened on the stage was similar to an erotic show”, relays historian Jill Lapore, in “The Invisible Lady” episode of the podcast *The Last Archive* (2020). According to Lapore, the experience of the spectacle of invisible women were central to the consolidation of *peep shows* years later, the “boxes” in which men watched women exhibiting themselves without touching them, and with the emergence of filming and cinematic exhibition equipment, resulted in the private showings of erotic films.

In a certain way, Jill Lapore translates similar arguments to that of historian Nicolau Sevcenko (2001), which demonstrates that the entertainment experiences of the 19th century established modern ideals, aligned with the teasing and erotic which were molded by technology and the ways society morally named its actions. What interests us in the motion of reviving the spectacle of invisible women is to recover a type of tactile listening experience, which permeates the comprehension of the aesthetical apparatus of emotions. In “feeling” the invisible women through hearing, men—white, middle and upper class in general—also “disembodied” these women, imagining scenes and sensations that weren’t a part of the sentimental education of the bourgeoisie marriage.

The ethereal singing that echoed from the glass box under dim light was converted in whispers pointing to the indistinguishable zones between oneiric and erotic. The song of mermaids and nymphs molded the masculine imagination as such while imprisoning the female fantasy (Cavavero, 2011). The experience of listening happened in a set scene: the glass box, the smaller stage, the artificial creation of intimacy, the sound tubes in which, in general, the women who worked in the “kitchen” of those theaters—black women with strong voices, usually maids—whispered and enchanted the men through hearing. Women who were heard and came to life, even if without faces, in a context in which the entertainment industry, which had rigorous body standards for white woman (the pin ups), rejected them from performing. In the depth of the theater, usually filled with orchestras for the musical numbers, other “invisible women” took form in the cracks of hearing.

Thus, the first question: in the midst of the debate for visibility and representation, in which in some way, concerns itself in the dimension of appearance and conditions for that appearance (Butler, 2018), what is the role that hearing takes in the formulation of these research questions? What does hearing a body mean, under the point of view, predominantly aesthetic, in understanding aesthetic as the field of formulation of politics, form and expression? We suggest returning to the writings of Jacques Rancière (1996), notably when the author describes the establishing of “word beings”, which, in the process of emancipation, are divided from the sharing of sensitivity, and develop ways of making themselves heard—addressing the transformation of whispers into phrasings.

The conflict separates the two manners of human being-together, two types of division of the sensitivity, opposite in principle, and yet intertwined in each other in the impossible enumerations of proportion, as is in the violence of conflict. There is the manner of being-together which establishes the bodies in their places and in their functions, according to “ownership”, according to their names or the absence of names, under the “logic” or “phonetic” character, of the sounds that come out of the mouth. The principle of this being-together is simple: it attributes to each the portion which is fitting according to the evidence of what it is. The manners of being, the manners of making, and the manners of saying—or not saying—thus refer exactly to each other. (RANCIÈRE, 1996.)

The moments in which the separated groups become word beings are the moments in which we can say that

they produce articulated sounds, capable of influencing the sharing of the established sensitivity. In that sense, the influence is part of a double movement: the separated groups develop mechanics to comprehend meaning and logic from the ones who possess it, while the groups that take part in it begin to have awareness of the “speech” of those who do not have a part in it—it stops being a whisper, and becomes a phrasing. This awareness with the speech, with the making of sounds, depends entirely on the ability to hear. This is why we have seen in many institutionalized spaces the claiming of welcoming productions through “listening”. Its focus is to guarantee better conditions to those diverse groups which have no part to be listened to, protected, and to form alliances in the process of reorganizing the sharing of sensitivity.

When the spectacles of invisible women were already in decline, considering that electricity had been discovered and the wonder of images, essayist Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1881) wrote a text that stated that the *invisible woman* had been an important metaphor to consider the politics around gender issues of the 19th century. Secluded in their pits, without faces, the invisible women, on the author's perspective, synthesizes the premise that women had to be “kept” outside the reach of society—and in that, he was endorsing the suffragette movements in the fight for women's right to vote. The political angle in Higginson's interpretation leads to the paradoxes and ambiguity of hearing: the invention of privacy for the bourgeoisie women, as described by Sennett (2015), allows for the recognition of the converted confinement in the absence of visibility, at the same time that in the rifts between this intimacy, voices start to appear, creating a sort of “invisible life” to other women. The ethereal, dream-like voices of the invisible women point to the questions around the politics of the listening performances: feminine voices would also mean to be soothing, providers of comfort.

The apparent dialectics of the approaches on hearing—amongst the questions of language and performance in accordance to identity and political aspects, emphasize aural epistemology (Gautier, 2015), in other words, the hearing and aural regimen as the factors in organizing the differences and inequalities of the world, and which propose a sort of revision or theoretical turning-point to reframing issues in the research of Social Sciences from a hearing standpoint. In Gautier's perspective, the difference is heard in the ways that the world allows unequally allows certain sounds and certain voices to “appear”, while other sounds and bodies are not acknowledged.

Performance

The spectacles of the invisible women do not have visual records, namely, they are part of what Diana Taylor calls the repertoire of performance (Taylor, 2013), or episodes that have been narrated or embodied by social actors translating the experience in the form of living, memory or fabulation. The absence of archival evidence of popular spectacles touches upon issues in the canon and their exclusionary dynamics, and at the same time, bequeaths it to the oral histories and the epistemological practices of the History field, which is a significant part on the construction of knowledge. To some extent, we are linking this to Taylor's questioning on how to interpret archives in their absences, gaps and ambiguity. The perspective here is to discuss even more the investigative axis of the author, and highlight the question: how is it possible to listen to an absent archive? We propose a more transversal gesture, which implies in debating what hearing means in Communication Performance Studies.

Thus, the search focuses on reworking the research problems in a sort of aural revisionism of the writings about Performance. When debating performance, reception and interpretation, Paul Zumthor (1993, 1997, 2000) emphasizes the nature of orality as a central aspect in a sort of performance pragmatism. Considering this perspective, there is a species of expression writing, and the attempt to measure the advances primarily in the fields of Linguistics and Literature Theory. In emphasizing the pragmatism of writing and orality, the author also would engage with the emotional aspect of hearing. In a voice, according to Zumthor, the word is an acting-memory of a contact, a trigger which recovers and embodies the phenomenological dimension of performance.

This perspective was intrinsically connected to the argument on musicological studies of consonance with a focus on the anthropology of hearing, as presented by Tia Denora (2000). Hearing would allow to shape mundane scenarios in which the living experience, attachments and connections happening in a deep interrelation between space and experience. The author details, for example, cases in which individual hearing (using earphones) in public spaces, and the kinesthetic overlap between listening and the urban experience, transforming landscapes in places inhabited by the listening body.

Cássio Lucas (2019, 2022) expands the debate of the relationship between hearing and performance. He turns to the term of expanded hearing, to reinforce the methodological challenges of this field:

There is no direct access to a specific hearing (according to someone's living experience), but only to expressions of hearing. Trails, material evidence and symbols of that which has been heard.

Any account of hearing is the attempt to approach this hearing under a specific communicational aspect. Any expression of hearing (be it from a personal account, or the ones risky image-sound experience which we are referring to) is the revision of a possible hearing: a trail to investigate through communication. (LUCAS, 2019, p.2).

Lucas's argument indicates a type of communication spin which emphasizes the boundary zones in the studies of Musicology Listening and Communication. Inasmuch as it points that every hearing is always an account, the author seems interested in debating this construction, the quality and nature of such an account about the act of hearing—in this case, specifically, music. In the perspective of the author, there should be a kind of void space between the production of musicological listening, technique, the arranging of chords and harmonies, timbre and accents; and a communicational hearing, in which listeners without musical “literacy”, outside the conservatories and music schools, left trails of what they heard in their social media, video testimonies and critical journalistic analysis. Particularly, it is the hearing we call banal, ordinary, that interests us here, due to its vernacular and popular aspect, full of remnants that narrate common understandings and disagreements about the amplified ways in which to listen to the world.

Experience

The remnants and material or symbolic evidence that interests Cássio Lucas are also the key to comprehending studies on the experience and aesthetical experience. When the studies to comprehend the listening experience of specific musical genres began in the Communications field, Gisela Castro (2005) and Jorge Cardoso Filho (2010), emphasized that the very technology used was already a way to interact with the environment, landscape and cultural context, and for that reason, listening should be thought of as a practice, which could be exercised as a way to understand the sound's propagation from the starting point of the vibration between bodies.

In that sense, spaces, animals, plants and other living creatures (we must think of other beings as well) have the capacity to “experience”, as long as there are established exchange relationships and interaction with their respective environments. The argument being made is that measuring the tactile listening experience with the world, with Dewey as basis for a sort of discussion about bioacoustics (Laiolo, 2010), considering vibrations, projections, senses and the sensibility of aural vibrations were central to the debate on natural sciences and their shift toward Communication. Bioacoustics consists in a wide field of knowledge utilized since zoology, biology and oceanography—among other areas—which studies animal communication using sound signals. The dimension of the bioacoustics experience, when branched to the Communications field, contributes much to the observation of deeply interdisciplinary practices and lexical points, as well as to the debate on the role of technology and media on readings, interpretations, categorizations and estheticization on the field of arts and audiovisual culture.

In thinking of the role of listening in the fauna and non-human entities preservation, there is a discussion on aural epistemology which seems to dislodge and attribute the knowledge of indigenous people on the hearing of the forest, the trees and the wisdom of a way of life in conjunction with technological advances which enable science to listen to living beings. The perspective is considering how extensively bioacoustics connects holistic hermeneutics to branches on what we call natural sciences, the ones that developed—and still develops—thanks to technological advances and the construction of artificial equipment capable of reading, interpreting and filtering sounds into data. Starting with aural epistemology, an ecology of knowledge permeates itself, relativizing the positivistic and evolutionary character of sciences, pointing to rules of simultaneity of knowledge which seem to recognize spiraling temporality (Martins, 2021), in the form of knowledge building.

Bioacoustics converts itself not only in approximation with the indigenous aural dimensions, but also in artistic practices of *Land art*, *Earth art* and *Earthwork*, in which the natural landscape, instead of providing environment to a work of art, it is nature that converts in material to artistic creation. One of the main works of art that the aural epistemology emphasizes a premise that promotes the listening to the earth, as well as points out a deep technological aspect of the formation of a poetic listening in Sonic Pavillion, located in the artistic complex in the Inhotim Institute, developed from the experience of the artist by the name of Doug Aitken. Inside a glass gallery, there is an orifice of 552 feet deep, where a cluster of microphones captures the sounds of the earth. The text available in the Institute's website states as such: “transmitted in real time, the noises emitted fill the whole room. The glass in the gallery are lined with a filter that turns the landscape—the valleys and mountains—clear when seen directly, and hazy when observed from any other angle.”

The artistic dimension of listening to the earth, when put in perspective from the point of a divide in the experience order allows to situate, for example, in a relational way, the Sonic Pavilion work of art, until the functional

work of monitoring the “health” status of the oceans in a project such as “Listen to the Deep Ocean Environment (LIDO), made by the Applied Bioacoustics Labs (LAB) in the Technical University of Cataluña, in Spain. The utilized software’s structures allow to identify, analyze and classify noises, as well as to obtain the location of acoustic sources of sounds, which can stem from natural resources (rain, earthquakes) or artificial (platforms, boats) or biological (marine animals) with the objective of following the flux of oceanic action, which are even more important in the preservation of life and safeguarding of accidents considering climate change.

Part of the ecology of aural knowledge described here is also connected to the arguments in Anthropology of Hearing (Domínguez Ruiz, 2015, Bueleto-Bueno, 2017, 2019), in which the fieldwork allows the elaboration of research stemming from ethnographic experience. Here, a cultural turn and the addition of investigative issues focused on Latin America is necessary. In debating how the idea of silence is reframed in the City of Mexico, Natalia Bieleto-Bueno reconstitutes the trauma of listening to tragedy from a prominently geographical and cultural trace: the earthquake. The author’s perspective is to debate how much noise and silence are culturally inscribed in memories, fractures and experiences, and that “listening to the earth” becomes cultural data, experienced by a whole people. The silence, to the dwellers of the City of Mexico that lived the horrors of one of the greatest earthquakes of their history, is a resulting part of the occurrence. And the start of the horrors of searching for survivors.

Bieleto-Bueno proposes, through the Anthropology of Hearing, a double interpretative gesture to the sound culturally inscribed in Mexican society: on one hand, the knowledge of inhabitants that “know” when an earthquake is approaching, based on accounts and sonic interpretation of noises; on the other, the hearing skill of firefighters to rescue the survivors of the earthquakes: whispers, remnants of breathing and vibration are fundamental aptitudes to finding live bodies still pulsing, using their ears. Here, bioacoustics proposes an ecology of knowledge that brings together humans, non-humans and technological assets, promoting an entanglement that allows for the search of life. With the assistance of hearing aids and sniffing dogs, there is a concurrence of technical and sensory devices, as well as animals for rescuing. The triangulation of the aspects allows the recognition the relationship between hearing and the experience with a network of sensibilities (the firefighter manning the operation, the technical device—the earpiece—and the animal with a particularly sensitive nature).

A fabulatory key

We return to the spectacle of “invisible women”, New York, 19th Century. In all the archives we sought, there is no record of what kind of women were creating those sounds, who inhabited the entrails of entertainment and creation. Women who enchanted with singing, a combination of voices, whispers and lament. Robert C. Toll (1982), in describing the early musical industry in the United States, recalls the use of Black women as disembodied voices, lending throat-larynx-lungs to the bodies of other white women. Something that would later consolidate in the music industry, in which black composers created songs to white idols, such as what happened to Elvis Presley—a white face to Black rock music, putting in perspective racism as a fundamental part of the creation of entertainment industry.

Wayne Koestenbaum (2013), in investigating the Opera singing handbooks of the 19th century, describes the anatomical similarities of the throat and the vagina, in an approach to consider a relationship between voice and entrails, as well as voice and soul, which would convert in a vocal emission to enter another body. In the perspective of the two authors Toll and Koestenbaum, and in the rift of the archives and bibliographical documentation, there is the envisioning of the existence of the Black body of a woman that in a dusty theater basement, sings to be heard. This is the creation of sound, the poetic elaboration of a voice, as Adriana Cavarero (2011) suggests we consider. A political statement that is present in the voice that seduces and hesitates hidden beneath the social fabric. The theater’s basement, in the body’s larynx: the emission that embodies, while disembodied. Dialectics between performance and experience.

There is something that leaks through the archives and allows the establishment of a critical fabulation (Hartman, 2020, 2022) in hearing. The hearing craft of Black women in the theater basement created the illusion that the “invisible women” will tell of other types and narratives in listening. The debate is then arranged around the notion of the decolonial craft of hearing, or in some way, the fabulistic search of sounds which have been lost in absent archives. Instead of thinking like Simon Frith (1996), that the technological devices were capable of storing, amplifying and reconfiguring voices and sounds, the trajectory must be remade: which sounds did not fit into technology? Therefore, the notion of craft as a sort of answer to the insufficiency found in the archival dimension, as well as a methodological gesture to recover the memory which has not been heard. The craft of hearing are methodological inscriptions of oral history that allows the retelling of absent narratives beginning with the archival gaps which configure themselves in the shapes of questioning the colonial aspect (which divides the world in the

validation of experiences from the exploration and extractivism standpoint), rethink how hearing is a device to reconsider the stages of capitalism (the commercialization of the world, exploration through consumption, work and nature) and establish the oppressive legacy of patriarchy (which devalued the bodies of women, as well as their social lives and varied practices).

More than just ontologically, this essay proposes to think of the skill of hearing as a communicational ethics which questions the very notion of authorship and scientific practice academics. In craftsmanship, hearing comprehends, at the very least, a dilution of the idea of authorship, opening itself to collective knowledge construction practices, in which popular and ancestral beliefs, based in other systems that are not the ones based in the archival sciences, constitute as the enabler of a scientific reporting crisis in authority. Debating hearing as a decolonial method recognizes the existence of intermediates, facilitators and advocates of knowledge building, therefore proposing the withdrawal of transparency and neutrality of what is being told. Revising the methodological criterion of hearing presupposes not only reevaluate the preferences of scientific fields, but also point out details whose goal is to reassess colonial practices (Quijano, 2020) and their occurrences and permanence in contemporary studies.

What we propose through this craftsmanship of hearing is something similar to the gesture of creation in orature, in which Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu (1998) understands that there exists a literary, fictional system which permeates the nature of Black culture as part of a process that converts trauma into existence, experience and hope. The notion of orature equips the dimension of oraliture which will enshrine Leda Maria Martins (2021), in the ethnic-racial aspect of Performance Studies, in which; even if the act of colonization has imposed itself in the symbolic and cultural power through the archives, museums and theft of cultural and material property, there is something that persists despite colonial violence and that would be, therefore, the spiral that makes a part of the sounds and Black memory remain.

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