

Thoughts on Acoustic Justice

Brandon LaBelle

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For today, I would like to reflect upon the topic of acoustics, acoustics as that particular work which contributes to shaping the movement of sound through an environment – for instance, in this room; acoustics as the “sonic image” that an architecture or an environment helps produce. While acoustics is often understood as a professional practice contributing to urban planning, and the construction of architectures, I want to highlight the more informal, everyday practices: acoustics as a process whereby people actively modify or retune their environments in order to support the movement of particular sounds: to alter the order of hearing as well as the felt and the shared.

This leads me to understand acoustics as a political question: if we consider acoustics as a range of practices that condition or enable the movement of sound, which supports the articulation of a certain sonic image, we can appreciate how acoustics impacts onto experiences of belonging and emplacement, defining who or what is heard or not – whose voice may gain traction within particular places.

In this sense, I would highlight acoustics as “the distribution of the heard” (extending from the work of Jacques Rancière¹). As the distribution of the heard, acoustics contributes greatly to not only what we hear, but importantly, to the ways in which we orient ourselves, or are oriented according to particular environments. Acoustics is therefore a framework for elaborating what is at stake in listening, and by extension, what is at stake in the field of sound studies and the practices that work to shift a dominant acoustic.

Fundamentally, acoustics is defined by ideas of “fidelity” and “reflection”: fidelity being a type of resolution of the sonic image, bringing focus or intensity onto certain sounds; within the production of a sonic image, value is often placed upon *staying true* to particular sounds – acoustics performs to remain faithful to the event of sounds, tuning environments, for instance within concert hall design, so as to minimize disturbance or coloration of a sound. Alongside fidelity, as the production of a truthful sonic image, reflection enables the circulation and propagation of sound through an environment. Therefore, I must ask: what acoustic forces and forms exist that enable my own voice to resound within this room? What acoustic decisions have been made to support one’s sense for being able to stand up, a standing in front and a speaking forth? And how am I situated within the acoustic economy at play within specific contexts?

Acoustic support

Acoustics is implicated in the shaping of sociability itself, which is often about how we align with particular tonalities while disturbing others, giving way to expressions of agreement or disagreement, harmony or discord. For instance, we can appreciate reflection as a locational *sounding out* – a throwing of sound by which to capture a sense of belonging through all that may come echoing back (the feedbacking of self

¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

and place, collectivity and community so vital to nurturing the figuring of this identity I may become).

Here, we can consider the practices by which people rework the distribution of the heard by retuning their environments and a dominant acoustic in order to hear differently, or to gain traction for other voices: to demand a shift in the project of fidelity by dilating the resolution of a certain sonic image, enabling the reflection and distribution of other concerns, and other desires.

Reflection and echoing are thus acoustic practices by which to orient or reorient oneself and others, that work to support experiences of recognition as well as differentiation – the echo that returns myself to me yet as another, in another, this other that allows me to become more than myself. Echo finds particular dynamic in relation to language performativity and the work of the voice. Through the acquisition of language, one is called upon to echo back words as specific sonic patterns; to repeat the particular vocal cadences of a certain language or linguistic home. The sounding of speech is therefore a framework in which we may learn of the powerful and complex performativity of echoing, where meaning and subjectivity are drawn out through the shaping of sounds. This includes a recognition of oneself, as a particular type of voice, a particular accent or ability that is always contributing to how one is heard. Language performativity is thus deeply aligned with acoustic matters, giving way to practices that continually work with and against the powers and politics of meaning. As such, echoing works to craft spaces of difference: we may echo each other in moments of social encounter, picking up words and returning them, yet such exchange is central to outlining more clearly one from the other – the echo might be said to enable others to appear by granting a form of migration from home and the familiar.

I may elaborate this understanding of acoustic practices by posing two other forms or frameworks. Rhythm is one such framework, rhythm as that which lends to the making of alignments or misalignments, synchronizations and desynchronizations between oneself and an environment for example: the steps I may take, following in line with particular beats, or beating back against certain patterns by being out of step: we might say, by taking a short cut, or drifting off the beaten path. Rhythm, in other words, leads to issues of organization, how one particular set of features grate against another's, producing in their frictional meeting a pattern – a beating through and by which we gain or challenge synchronization. The passing of time, and the capacity to enter and exit spaces, to reshape one's immediate surroundings, are cast as rhythmical formations and modulations.

Vibration, for example, is posed not only as a particular form of energy passing through the environment, but equally one that may be deployed to generate forms of commonality: vibration collapses distance in favor of tactile contact, bringing subjects and objects, bodies and things into a space of togetherness. It may provide a means for carving out particular forms of sharing within the built environment, enabling a fortification for what we may hold or produce in common. From the felt knowledges gained through vibration, we may tend towards a certain “commonability”, inflecting everyday life with an ethical tension over the right to be heard or felt.² As such, I'm interested to understand vibration as an “ecology of

² In a lecture by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa and Dimitris Papadopoulos on the eco-commons, they suggest a shift from “sociability” to “commonability” in an attempt to replace human-oriented sociality and kinship with a posthumanistic model, where

feeling”, an undulation of sense that all places contain and that impact upon one’s affective capacity to belong or to contribute to a given environment: one enters, one senses the environment, this vibratory envelope that grants support to feeling at ease, or that may undermine or cut into one’s ability to find comfort or balance.

Acoustic practices therefore engage a range of audible and inaudible, embodied and affective means that put into question the order of hearing, reworking the construct of particular volumes to support other forms of orientation.

Orientation: Vertigo

Following from this critical framework, I’m interested to shift the discussion from that of sound to that of acoustics, from that of a heard event to the processes by which we balance ourselves and develop forms of being together. Sound is therefore equally a question of orientation – how we *find our way* by drawing support from the felt knowledges of sonic experience, as well as through the communicational, organizational and affective capacities of acoustic propagations, from the silences and noises, rhythms and vibrations that continuously shape our environments. While this may seemingly give privilege to those who hear over those who cannot, I would pose that hearing be extended by highlighting sound as a tactile, vibratory and energetic force, as well as an organizational matter lending to the configuration of social forms. Rhythm, for example, is not always a question of hearing, but rather works through the coming and going of certain forms and intensities, the timing and ultimate spacing of movements, bringing into relief particular social or structural conditions that give way or not to patterns of exchange, synchronization and linking.³

This understanding of sound and hearing may be furthered by considering the experiences and conditions of vertigo, which are fundamentally driven by an imbalance in the inner ear, either through fluid build up or the accumulation of calcium particles.⁴ Vertigo may highlight the broader physiological and neurological operations of the ear, revealing its connection to how we come to *balance* ourselves. Subsequently, it becomes important to consider how the ear does not always lead to the topic or experience of hearing and listening, but rather, is situated within a larger spectrum of physiological and neurological, and by extension, psychological and social capacities and experiences. In this regard, I would place hearing and listening within a conceptual framework that allows one to additionally reflect upon questions of inner ear health, molecular materiality, barometric pressure and the oscillations of ultra- and infra-sonic frequencies as ecologically pertinent, all of which begin to elaborate acoustics as a larger field of concern and potentiality.⁵ Acoustics may define

“being in common” may extend across human and nonhuman life. Lecture held at the Swamp School, Venice Architecture Biennial, 2018. Author in attendance.

³ In Henri Lefebvre’s work, *Rhythmanalysis*, he defines rhythm as the intersection of time, place and energy. Further, rhythmanalysis as a particular method, aims to capture the articulation of “presence” that rhythmical processes or events come to impart onto the senses. See Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁴ For more on vertigo and its effects see Thomas Brandt, *Vertigo: Its Multisensory Syndromes*, 2nd edition (New York: Springer, 2002).

⁵ It is worth noting here how the field of music therapy equally leads us to a greater perspective onto sound and well-being. In their book, *Music Therapy and Traumatic Brain Injury*, Simon Gilbertson and David Aldridge offer an extremely insightful and

a range of processes around which practices of bodily orientation and recuperation, cultural expressivity and negotiation, social navigation and construction may emerge. To listen therefore is not only to hear, but to also attune and detune, balance and rebalance the forms and forces by which one is figured as well as participates in the figuring of others. In other words, acoustics greatly impacts how bodies may come to access their physical or institutional environments, navigating the situations and systems that work to give order to who may appear and where. In this regard, acoustics is always already political.

Acoustic Justice

In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed challenges the ways in which traditions of phenomenology often overlook the more socialized, racialized, and gendered shape and impress of the phenomenal; the objects and things, the architectures and rooms that surround us are never neutral, never only there for us, but rather, are made available through a range of highly situated, historical and social processes and precedents that work to establish the normative shape of what we may associate with and how.⁶ For Ahmed, our bodily figuring in the world is thus always already defined by a set of dominant constructs that are deeply material and spatial, and that enable or constrain the particular grasp specific bodies may have onto the world around. One gains entry or not according to the availability of passages and pathways, and how they open for some more than others. In short, bodies are never only just bodies, but are already shaped by social and political norms, which often act to limit the phenomenal availability of things according to the social, racial, and gendered specificity bodies and spaces carry.

The lines that allow us to find our way, those that are ‘in front’ of us, also make certain things, and not others, available. What is available is what might reside as a point on this line. When we follow specific lines, some things become reachable and others remain, or even become, out of reach. Such exclusions – the constitution of a field of unreachable objects – are the indirect consequences of following lines that are before us: we do not have to consciously exclude those things that are not ‘on line’. The direction we take excludes things for us, before we even get there.⁷

Following this questioning of phenomenology, Ahmed opens an important view onto how “orientation” is never freely found, but rather, is shaped by the established patterns and processes that bring one into certain alignments, or that make particular misalignments possible as well as dangerous. One is equally oriented by the world as one makes orientation for oneself. To orient is thus to be situated, within space as well as within or against particular social and normative structures and systems. Orientation is equally a performative operation, whereby one may seek out particular support through the material world around while contending with the lack of

probing account of music within therapeutic settings. For more, see Simon Gilbertson and David Aldridge, *Music Therapy and Traumatic Brain Injury: A Light on a Dark Night*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010).

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

availability or not of certain things. One therefore *practices* orientation, which shifts as bodies shift, as one aligns or misaligns, attunes or disturbs, is welcomed or pushed out. This leads Ahmed to the concept of “queer phenomenology,” which specifically gives challenge to the seemingly neutral matters of worldly contact posed by phenomenology. In contrast, Ahmed asks for another perceptual view, one that captures how orientation is a question of “lining up” – a “falling in line” which is often derived by dominant heterosexual ordering, where “being straight” is often to “straighten up” oneself. “Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy. Queer orientations might be those that don’t line up, which by seeing the world ‘slantwise’ allow other objects to come into view.”⁸

I’m interested in following Ahmed, and what she emphasizes as “the work of reorientation,” in order to additionally *queer* the acoustic, giving accent to the ways in which acoustic practices assist in processes of (re)orientation that may additionally upset the dominant tonality of a given place. Voices find resonance within certain environments according to the availability of particular acoustical matters – those who listen, or those things that invite one to speak or not, that acoustically welcome or support certain bodies and their sounds. The rhythms by which we move are enabled or enhanced by the material and social supports around us, while such rhythms may also work to demand entry, seeking to bend or break the shape of the world so as to move differently, to give expression to an altogether different pattern – to refigure the axis upon which movements often occur. Acoustic orientation is thus never only about the material supports that enable the free movement of a specific sound – *fidelity* here must be underscored as a political act, raising the question: fidelity to whom or what, or to what end? As such, acoustics is shaped by the normative patterns that often define spaces, contributing to what can be heard and where, who may speak or not, and what types of behavior can enter into the time signatures of an environment and by whom.

A queer acoustic may pose an interruption onto the particular tonal shape of a place, detouring fidelity so as to allow for other resonant flows or vibrational constructs, other figurations of sounding and listening, to rework how one is oriented; queering the acoustic may enable the retuning of a sonic horizon, surprising our auditory world with the rarely heard, or with an altogether different reverberation. A queer acoustic may specifically give support by decolonizing the acoustic training always informing how one hears or listens; to undo the particular leanings and learnings that affect what one is able to hear. Here, it becomes necessary to have the courage to listen precisely to what or who is often so near and yet far from audibility.

Following Ahmed, posing a queer acoustic may equally be about detouring the study of sound as being phenomenologically bound, where the phenomenal may work to obfuscate the racialized or gendered, and highly entangled situatedness of specific bodies. A queer acoustic might aim to *strain* a sonic phenomenology, to interrupt it with the noise of the broken or the unwanted, the disoriented and the marginalized, or the highly energetic and excited, tensing the sensual and subjective experience of the things of the world so as to allow for the critical articulation of accommodations as well as resistances to emerge more rightly: to pose the work of acoustic justice. Acoustic justice is positioned here to highlight the practices by which some may rework the distribution of the heard, detuning or retuning the tonality of a place so as to support the movements of other bodies and voices, especially those put at risk by

⁸ Ibid., 107.

appearing otherwise.⁹ For instance, Lia García, a transgender artist working in Mexico City, argues that such risks are always already embedded in the sound of her transgender voice, which she refuses to modify. Rather, she utilizes the disjunctive qualities of her voice as a noise that may open a social framework of affection, allowing for others to “transition” with her.¹⁰

Here, I want to conclude by posing the notion of “acoustic justice” in order to indicate the contestations always already at the heart of orientation, and what it may mean to work on behalf of expanding the order of the heard; acoustic justice which is sought through a range of practices that, by intervening onto the distribution of the heard, rework or recompose the normative order.

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As I’ve tried to articulate, acoustics may provide a framework for understanding how one navigates the conditions of particular places, and how one may seek out and construct a path of (re)orientation, which is always related to struggles over belonging, of negotiating the socio-material figuring of oneself and others. The acoustic shape and performativity of such spatial acts often work to support the movements of a shared collectivity and the co-existence of all that is gathered together, emboldening the energetic figuring and potentiality of communal determination. Such acoustic co-existence is often the very socio-material basis from which one acquires a sense for the possibilities of what we may compose, from sonic warfare to acoustic welfare.

⁹ James Parker, in his article “The Soundscape of Justice,” maps out what he calls “acoustic jurisprudence.” This is developed by examining the particular soundscape within spaces of the courtroom, and the mechanical systems, including uses of headphones and microphones, as well as forms of soundproofing. As Parker suggests, “acoustic jurisprudence would be concerned with how law is lived, both in sound and by virtue of it.” Parker’s research opens up a series of important and challenging questions, which the concept of “acoustic justice” I’m suggesting here may find a point of critical dialogue with. See James Parker, “The Soundscape of Justice,” in *Griffith Law Review* (2011), Vol. 20 No. 4.

¹⁰ Lia García, a transgender artist working in Mexico City, has developed a series of performative projects that specifically contend with how her voice and body are always already at odds with the heteronormative society around her. In conversation with the author, 2019.