

## On listening and the Bioacoustic

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I want to consider what happens to the body when we listen, and how we negotiate the positionality of our listening. While I have been focusing on the topic of social acoustics, including understandings of the importance of hearing and being heard, I want to approach listening and how this may lead to the concept of the bioacoustic: while social acoustics opens up questions of relationality, of being-together, and how we work at collective struggles, bioacoustics may help consider understandings and conceptualizations of the body, and of life, by way of sound and hearing.

How do we experience the body as listeners? Or, what, if any, consequences does listening have on a relation to the body as a living entity? And how does this influence understandings of life in general, and what or who counts?

### *Listening / Body*

In her book, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*, Silvia Federici argues that within today's capitalistic environment, we need to reappropriate the body. She writes: "Our struggle then must begin with the reappropriation of our body, the revaluation and rediscovery of its capacity for resistance, and expansion and celebration of its powers, individual and collective."

Federici suggests that attending to the body's powers is to learn from its languages, its rhythms: "Our bodies have reasons that we need to learn, rediscover, reinvent. We need to listen to their language as the path to our health and healing, as we need to listen to the language and rhythms of the natural world as the path to the health and healing of the earth."

How might we follow Federici's call for listening to the body? In what sense can the body be listened to? And how might we understand such listening as the basis for countering capitalism's appropriation of the body? And which can also enable solidarity or collaboration with planetary life?

There are two things we might start with: Firstly, the sense that the body can be listened to: the idea of the body as an acoustic dimension, as listenable; which suggests, that my body is something other to myself: to listen to my body is to pose it as another: to posit it as a relation. Secondly, to capture the potentiality of listening, as one of transformation: that listening wields a transformative power – how listening to the body is to effect a change, to rework its orientation, its situatedness.

Listening, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, is always a listening-to: in listening, one evokes a relationship, a listening-to: something, someone; there is never quite a form of listening without relation (we might even say: listening forces relation even when we don't want it). Even listening to myself is to make of myself another; as the notion of "self-reflection" suggests, in turning to myself I evoke myself as an acoustic dimension, where reflection is precisely an echo by which I orient myself. I approach myself as listenable, and in this sense, I return to myself: I may not so much answer back, rather, I reverberate or resonate as Nancy suggests: resonance as a "complex of returns": a turning, returning.

We might appreciate Federici's proposal along these lines: listening to the body as what returns me to myself, and in such a return, I gather myself; I attend to

the original home of the body, I take care of myself. In this sense, it's important to emphasize that listening to the body is not necessarily to focus on how it sounds; rather, to attend to its liveliness, its situatedness.

At the same time, there is something more I want to pose: I might ask, where does my body begin and where does it end? Is the original home of the body strictly limited to myself? If the body opens by way of listening, in what ways does such opening, such resonance show the fact of myself as always being more than imagined? If I emerge as a relation by way of listening, is this a relation between two, or rather, between many?

In turning to "my body" the body may also turn away, or rather, it turns me toward others, showing the degree to which "my body" is always more or less than myself. From the hands that have nurtured me, the support structures that allow me to live, the air and food I take in, and that populate this original home, making it their home as well; I think this is what Nancy means by the "complex of returns" – it is not so much a single turn, that resolves everything; rather, I am turned and turned continually, and listening might be what allows me to attend to such turning, to be part of the body as something that is stretched and poked, pulled and placed: a being-with-with.

Listening to the body is to collaborate with the body, understanding it as something that is fundamentally more and less than myself; and which helps in recognizing the social or institutional bonds that may keep one in place, and that one must work through. This points to the potentiality of listening, as something that enables a reclaiming of the body; a reclaiming of its powers.

It is helpful to consider that listening to the body is not an easy task: rather, it poses listening as a work, an affective labor, a probing, a doing; listening might be a form of concentration, and yet, we can appreciate how listening is also full of distraction, drift, pleasure; listening may be a deep listening, but such depth also entails a lateral movement, a skimming of the surface. As Pauline Oliveros suggests, listening may capture detail, while attending equally to the big picture: the capacity of listening might be in the ability to keep us close to both, simultaneously: to hear the body, as an inner acoustic, along with its situatedness and positionality, with what is always around it.

If we think about sound, do we not hear both an object and its reverberation? A thing, a voice, an event whose tonalities, textures and meanings are shaped by its placement, its situation; sound as a relational object – a composite of source and context? Both; a turning and a return, a complex.

I want to suggest that an aspect of the transformative potential of listening is found in how it moves across object and context, depth and surface, from ourselves to the bonds that hold us; listening as precisely an act that may displace that sense of boundary between subject and object, voice and meaning, ontology and ethics – that is, between the state of the body and the forms of life it comes to inhabit, or is made to inhabit.

This passage, this capacity of movement, maybe even an auditory threading, I want to consider by way of the term: listening-dreaming. Dreaming can be approached in a number of ways: as a question of imagination, in terms of being able to project a sense of possibility, to fantasize even; a creative presencing to the things around us: what Bachelard would call "double consciousness" found in acts of daydreaming). For Bachelard, poetics is founded on reverie: the capacity to see double: the fact of things around us and their resonant becoming, together (Moten: the refusal to settle).

Dreaming further leads to the unconscious, intuition, even not-knowing: what keeps us close to the affective, even traumatic states of experience: dreams as what helps us work through repression, anger, etc.: a therapeutic dream-work. Or, what Elena Loizidou calls “dream-acts” (placing dreams within a frame of political subjectivity, a dream-activism: to narrate what otherwise cannot be told).

Finally, dreams put into question the certainty of things; they draw out a sense for the unknowable, the contingent, the ephemerality of things: the uncanny: how dreaming relates us to the unrecognizable, the strange, turning the world upside down (dreams are also nightmares, reminding of the limits of control).

Following these aspects, I’m interested in how listening also dreams, is a dreaming; for instance, I can ask you: where are you now, as you are listening to me? Are you in this room, in my voice, in your own drifting thoughts? Are you aware, or distracted, or both? Listening seems to move across states of presence and absence, attending to the facticity of things along with their more impressionistic, intangible dimensions; listening as what traffics across the knowable, the apparent, and the unknowable, the unrecognizable, what concentrates as well as drifts: or, concentrates by drifting.

Listening-dreaming highlights the fact of things – the apparent, the given, the tangible – as always already related to something else: this might be context, situation, positionality, the invisible hand of this or that system, even the repressed, the impossible (the thing); in this sense, to listen, in that way Federici calls for, is to encounter oneself as always already more and less than one may ever know, and yet, to approach it nonetheless; to send out a signal in order to hear all that may reverberate back. Such a form of activism (for surely, this is what Federici is calling for), may assist in transforming who we are and how we are together, and what togetherness might be.

### *On the Bioacoustic*

I want to shift by following the question of listening into the notion of the bioacoustic: to consider the bioacoustic as an acoustic framework. There are at least three sides to this that I’d like to map out: on one hand, understanding the bioacoustic as the audible, or sonified, articulations and expressions of planetary life; as an opening onto hearing beyond the human, and how sounding and hearing are not only human activities. Then, to also think the bioacoustic as the ways in which we conceptualize life by way of sound and hearing: this would be more along the lines of thinking bioacoustics from a biopolitical perspective. Finally, to take a more poetic approach or view, which would consider what kinds of imaginaries a bioacoustic perspective supports: in what ways do sound and hearing lend to a bioacoustic imagination or even fantasy, in terms of what life and the body can be.

Ecologically, I’m struck by the degree to which sound and listening are often positioned as what can enable forms of contact and consideration of the nonhuman, or the more than human – the acoustic as a pathway of radical alterity; and further, how listening is defining us as conscientious or ethical subjects: listening as what heeds the “call of conscience.” This appears foundational, for example, in what Anna Tsing calls “the art of noticing”, which she poses as the basis for taking a more nurturing approach to planetary co-existence. Interestingly, for Tsing the art of noticing is founded on our capacity to attune to the polyphony of planetary life, where listening may wield an intervention onto scenes of ecological damage or negligence: listening as what sensitizes us to *pachamama*, or mother earth, allowing for greater

synchronization with an ecological pluriversality. Additionally, the law professor Cormac Cullinan poses listening as a means for recognizing the rhythms of planetary systems, natural cycles, and the movements of biodiversity: through listening, as he suggests, we may arrive at a more ecological position attuned to the laws of nature.

Such views are suggestive for a bioacoustic articulation: to situate acoustics as what may support an ethics of interconnectedness. A being-with that may lead to a more-than-human sensibility and systems of governance. If listening is listening-to or -with the other, it emerges as what brings the other near, in a nearness by which ethical or conscientious ways of living find guidance.

While such views are deeply empowering, and insightful, I want to also complicate the seemingly smooth application of sound and listening as what facilitates ethical and holistic potential. Here, I'm interested in a bioacoustic politics, or an acoustic biopolitics. I can suggest as an entry point that we might consider how deafness has historically been positioned through a phonocentric or audist colonization: As Deaf scholar Paddy Ladd argues, the Deaf Nation has always had to struggle under the imperial force of the Hearing World.

Here, conceptualizations of life by way of sound and hearing come to support particular practices: educational practices that have attempted to school the deaf in verbal speech, casting sign language as a primitive form of pointing, or medical practices that have attempted to cure deafness through a range of devices, or social environments in which being "hearing impaired" leads to daily challenges – deafness is still mostly positioned as a disability, rather than an ability.

I'm interested to pose bioacoustics in this way, as it may help in attending to the project of decolonizing legacies of phonocentric supremacy, and the understanding that having a voice is always something to be heard. A bioacoustic politics may wield a critical intervention, allowing for different articulations – to recognize the degree to which manners of living are influenced by normative assumptions as to what counts as listening and speaking.

Finally, I'm curious to follow the bioacoustic as a framework for imagining life by way of sound and hearing, what we might think of as a bioacoustic imagination. What becomes of my body when I hear, sound, listen, echo, transmit, or resonate? What may emerge as a sonic life-form – if listening is a transformative power, where might such transformations lead? How might a bioacoustic imagination enable different kinds of stories, different ways of hearing, of understanding life? The bioacoustic might be posed as a sonic fiction: a poetic device for crafting alien relations, mutational bodies, strange alliances, a biohacking platform for configuring interspecies assemblages, or for evoking other dimensions: bioacoustic dimensions in which one may travel in time, enter into vibrational worlds with other things, reinvent life and the forms it may take.

To conclude, I have moved from listening as a question of the body, and how listening forms the basis for engaging with what it means to be situated: listening to the body as a step in attuning to the greater capacity of bodily power. Such inquiry allowed for drawing out the notion of listening-dreaming, which is understood as a movement (affective, intuitive, oneiric) across the fact of things and a horizon of speculation – listening-dreaming as a poetic ecology that helps us inhabit a world of visibility and invisibility, a dream-activism in terms of "being political": to draw out the bioacoustic as a critical base for conceptualizing life. In what ways might the bioacoustic challenge and extend how we understand sound and listening? Are there other expressions, other alliances, other bodily forms to be captured or invented by way of acoustic imaginaries, fictions, an errant listening?

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