Slow Activism: Listening to the Pain and Praise of Others

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doi:10.1017/S0020743815001506

For what is needed is a philosophy of listening. But is this a possibility? If philosophy has its very roots intertwined with a secret vision of Being that has resulted in the present state of visualism, can it listen with equal profundity? What is called for is an ontology of the auditory.

Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound, Don Ihde

What kind of knowledge passes through the ear? How is that knowledge different than other forms of knowing? And how might attention to "sound knowledge"—a nondiscursive form of affective transmission resulting from acts of *listening*—change understandings not only of history but also of unfolding events in North Africa, the Middle East, and their diasporas?

In the past decades, scholars have been elaborating the auditory ontologies presciently called for by philosopher Don Ihde in 1976. Historians, media scholars, and ethnographers have written about the particular ways that auditory knowledge has shaped conceptions of the modern subject and modernity writ large, from analyses of technology, to the role of listening in religion and continental philosophy.[1] What Jonathan Sterne has dubbed "Sound Studies" is profoundly interdisciplinary, elucidating the role audition has played in challenging, checking, and creating a post-Enlightenment subject and society.[2] With notable exceptions, however, these studies have been confined to the West.[3]

There is a reason why auditory knowledge has taken center stage now. Revolutions, protests, and massive population movements have once again created the need to theorize the meaning and power of collectivities. This is a perennial concern in the social sciences and humanities. The current attention to audition, however, is not spurious. As opposed to language or sight, for example, "auditory knowledge is non-dualistic. It is based on empathy *and* divergence."[4] Sound resists both the representation of language and the objectification of the visual. An "ontology of the auditory" thus requires that we occupy the position of the discrete listening subject (a human with ears), while also being a very part of the sound environment (a vibrating, resonating body-object). Inhabiting the interacoustic space of sound forces an encounter between the unmarked "juridical body" (the autonomous self-owning subject of the Enlightenment) and the marked (but usually un-*re*marked) "sound body"—the body with malleable boundaries that transforms according to its environment. Indeed the sound body emerges in the paradox of being a part of and yet distinct from the social field of listening.[5]

In a moment when representation and its object cannot be kept apart, when matter and meaning are not discrete entities but rather give rise to one another,[6] when theory is indivisible from method,[7] understanding sound holds promise for social analysis precisely because sound is never static; sound and the sound body require theories that account for movement, fluctuation, and the inseparability of politics and aesthetics.[8]

Listening is one such theory-method. Listening demands that we *linger in the space of discomfort,* where otherness is experienced empathically as one's "own" and where ownership itself is put into question.[9]

In January 2013 I was at the 4th Street subway station in New York City when I saw a billboard I had never seen before. It had a picture of the Twin Towers engulfed in an inferno next to which was a Qur'anic quote that said,

> Soon shall We cast terror into the hearts of the Unbelievers (Quran 3:151).
> This is a paid advertisement by the American Freedom Defense Initiative.
> The display of this advertisement does not imply MTA's endorsement of any views expressed.

This advertisement, so clearly anti-Islamic, stunned me for several reasons. Despite the disclaimer of the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), it is clearly possible to buy space for propaganda without equal space given to the opposition. The American Freedom Defense Initiative is aligned with the Stop the Islamization of America campaign, a recognized hate group.[10] The MTA said they were obliged under the first amendment to run the advertisements, but that they would limit them to a month's duration. A minute is too long. Only a month earlier, a woman pushed a man to his death in front of an oncoming subway train thinking her victim was a Muslim. It was judged a hate crime.

What this provokes in the context of theorizing sound is the question of different knowledges and forms of transmission. The advertisement uses text and image—two extremely objectifying semiotic systems of representation. Would an aural witness of other beings and their worlds make them more accessible, less able to be so demonized? What role might empathic listening play in the competition (if not war) of signs? Does aural intimacy create empathy?

Empathy is a word that entered English-language usage in the 20th century.[11] Why it was needed at that time is a question not only for cultural historians, but also for those interested in the shaping of subjectivity. Identification with the feelings of others, often through imagination, provides a bridge to the other that was no doubt needed at a period of modernity when the concept of the self as a politically autonomous and rational entity was in full bloom. Empathy—the ability to experience the feelings and sensations of another vicariously *without having those feelings and sensations articulated through words*—supplements the older concepts of compassion and sympathy. And yet, recent research demonstrates not that we are separate until proven together, but rather that we constantly participate in the feeling-states of others in social environments through the media of smell, sound, and pheromones. We are, in fact, together until proven separate, at least when our bodies are in the same virtual or corporeal vicinity.[12] What's more, even our rational centers—the functions that act to distinguish us from our peers and communities—are deeply imbued with emotion. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum synthesizes neurocognitive science in order to prove that not a single "rational" decision is made without recourse to the emotional foundation of being in human cognition. Her research underscores that the "rational" is not the opposite of the affective (or emotional), but rather that these functions are deeply intertwined.[13]

If visual observations emphasize our separateness, acoustic phenomena have the potential to integrate bodies, nervous systems, and affect. In the strong version of this theory, listening is de facto empathic, as we are drawn into worlds of sound and vibration that are shared, though not always equally or in the same way.[14] When acting as an aural

witness it is very difficult to engage in "othering" since the listener is necessarily *part* of the sonic field. Does sound knowledge then provide a counterresistance to the objectifications of things such as the anti-Islamic advertisement in the New York subway? Not necessarily, for sounds can objectify and be objectified as well. It is not a shared acoustic space, however intimate, that necessarily changes the political landscape, but the *intention* to listen.

I learned about the intention to listen from my work with women in the Qadiriyya Butshishiyya order—the largest and most prominent Sufi order in Morocco. I began attending Sufi liturgies in Casablanca in 1994, and extended my research to France in 2008. In Morocco the liturgy was in Arabic, and was written down in booklet form for those who were able to read it. In France the liturgy was also in Arabic, but had been transliterated (not translated) for the primarily non-Arabic speaking participants—mostly second generation North African French citizens, as well as some converts of European background. Despite the presence of the written word, however, initiation into the liturgy took place through the ear, through intentional concerted listening.

The Qadiriyya Butshishiyya Sufi liturgy is composed of prayer recitation as well as a *dhikr* (remembrance) ceremony in which the names of God are repeated aloud over and over quite rapidly and with much fervor. The liturgy ends with the singing of songs, often led by a soloist in call-and-response fashion. As most readers of *IJMES* will know, the word *sama'* names both the genre of Sufi praise song in Morocco as well as the act of listening to that praise. Indeed, performers of this genre are not called singers (*mughaniyīn*) but are called listeners (*musamma'īn*). Sufi liturgy involves the practices of deep listening to the prayers, chants, and songs of the order.

As I attended more and more Sufi liturgies, I became aware that many of the non-Arabic speakers in France learned the liturgy not by reading the transliterated text so much as by listening to the intonation, the rises, falls, and rhythmic emphases of phonemes as they were uttered by other initiates. They acquired aural competencies, "literacies of listening."[15] These women did not understand what they were saying referentially, in other words, but participated in affective states of worship. What is more, the repetition of the names of God in the *dhikr* section of the liturgy gave rise to ecstatic states (*aḥwāl*, sing. *ḥāl*) characterized by sudden exclamations, wailing, and other nonscripted sonic expressions that, above the ostinato of regular chanting, were taken up by individuals, echoed, slightly transformed, and circulated. This resulted in a rich texture of chromatic and syncopated sounds achieved through deep listening to others in the surrounding group.[16] The Sufis, in other words, practiced a pedagogy of listening based on what Westerners would recognize as improvisational techniques, "participatory discrepancies"[17] that ultimately resulted in a state of collective (though by no means uniform) sublimity. This form of the Islamic sublime, I suggest, does the work that many other aesthetic expressions after modernity do: *it displaces the human from the center of experience, putting ways of being before ways of knowing and enacting unexpected intimacies that confound rational understanding, insisting rather upon an aesthetic pedagogy that we might refer to as "being-with-paradox."*[18]

Concerted listening such as this may become second nature. When in an ecstatic state Sufis may or may not be aware of creating this rich weave of discrepant yet complementary sounds. Initiation into the ritual, however, takes place through intentional listening—initially to Arabic by non-Arabic speakers, and then to nonverbal sonic

expressions of sublimity that subsequently set off chains of rhythmic and intoned responses in kind. What is more, listening to these sounds of praise (unscored, unpredictable) necessarily enfolds the listener into the public affect of the group. This is not always a pleasant experience. Sometimes the *ḥāl* feels like wailing, grief, crying. Sometimes it is a call to God beseeching help (*yā laṭīf, yā kabīr*, *yā rabb*). To be an ethnographic and aural witness to these acts of praise, it is necessary to *linger in the space of discomfort* long enough to resonate with the sound knowledge being transmitted. Listening to people listening is a method of "slow ethnography"—ethnography that consciously attunes itself to the rhythm of another.[19]

Does this solve the political problems of power? Does it get rid of fanaticism? No. The anti-Islamic propaganda in the 4th Street subway station is instructive in this regard, however. The inferno of the Twin Towers attack is set next to a Qur'anic verse that uses the word "terror," the implication being that terrorism is inherent in the religious doctrine of Islam. The words, in the form of a caption, fix the meaning, erasing any ambiguity present in the image.[20] One semiotic system is used to ground another, avoiding the unease that often accompanies free-floating signifiers.[21] Listening, on the other hand, has the power to unmoor us from categorical preconceptions. Intentional listening demands an openness to what is between categories, a material attunement to both the pain and praise of others.[22]

Two years to the month after I witnessed the anti-Islamic publicity in the New York subway, in January 2015, Islamic-identified terrorists murdered the cartoonists of the satirical paper, *Charlie Hebdo*, in Paris. In the wake of such horror, it is difficult to advocate for slow activism; rather, we precipitate toward debates about secularism and religiosity, free-speech and hate speech, and the effects of postcolonialism, racism, and global inequality. In the wake of such horror, each multitude cries out for a sacrifice to avenge the perceived wrong.

And yet it is just at these moments when intentional listening does its most important work: requiring that we not revert to prescribed positions, but inhabit the in-between that listening demands. Listening to the pain and praise of others with intention is a method that teaches us how to be in the world in beauty as well as in chaos and instability. On this topic, the Sufis have a lot to say to those willing to listen.

NOTES

[1]See Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003); and Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

[2]Sterne, *The Audible Past.*

[3]I limit myself to scholarship in English, in which there are some notable exceptions. See Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Deborah Kapchan, "Learning to Listen: The Sound of Sufism in France," Special Issue, *The World of Music* (2009): 65–90; and Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Columbia* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015).

[4]Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010), emphasis added.

[5]Deborah Kapchan, "Witnessing the Pain and Praise of Others," in *Theorizing Sound Writing*, ed. Deborah Kapchan (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, forthcoming). Deborah Kapchan, "Body," in *Keywords in Sound Studies*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015).

[6]On the inseparability of matter and meaning, as well as ontology and epistemology, see Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

[7]Deborah Kapchan, "Hearing the Splash of Icarus: Theorizing Sound Writing/Writing Sound Theory," in *Theorizing Sound Writing.*

[8]Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Economy of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010).

[9]Deborah Kapchan, "Slow Ethnography, Slow Activism: Lingering in Paradox and Listening in the Longue Durée" (keynote lecture, International Society for Ethnology and Folklore, "Utopias, Realities, Heritages: Ethnographies for the 21st century," Zagreb, Croatia, 2015).

[10]"Stop Islamization of America," *Wikipedia,* last modified 2 October 2015, accessed 2 October 2015, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stop_Islamization_of_America.

[11]"empathy, n.," Oxford English Dictionary Online, accessed 2 October 2015, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/61284?p=emailA/VIVibJvFOMc&d=61284.

[12]Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[13]Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).

[14]Indeed, this veering into otherness may have both positive and negative effects, as sound can be a tool of violence, whether intentionally inflicted, as in the torture at Guantanamo Bay, or overheard. See Suzanne Cusick, "'You Are in a Place That is Out of the World ...': Music in the Detention Camps of the 'Global War on Terror,'" *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2 (2008): 1–26; and J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[15]Kapchan, "Learning to Listen: The Sound of Sufism in France."

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ethnomusicologist Charlie Keil describes "participatory discrepancies" as the slightly off the beat, tone-bending conversations that jazz musicians have. "*To be personally involving and socially valuable,*" he says, music *"must be 'out of time' and 'out of tune'"* (italics in original). Charles Keil, "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music," *Cultural Anthropology* 2 (1987): 275–83, accessed 2 October 2015, doi:10.1525/can.1987.2.3.02a00010. Steven Feld describes this aesthetic as "lift-up-over-sounding"—which, in Kaluli culture, he says "feels like continuous layers, sequential but not linear; non-gapped multiple presences and densities; overlapping chunks without internal breaks; a spiraling, arching motion tumbling slightly forward thinning, and thickening back again." Steven Feld, "Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style, or 'Lift-Up-Over-Sounding': Getting into the Kaluli Groove," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 20 (1988): 78–79.

[18]If violence expresses a kind of hypermasculinity (Daughtry, *Listening to War*), then sublimity is an opening of a radically feminine nature (Kapchan, "Slow Ethnography, Slow Activism"). On the in-between, see Paul Stoller, *The Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[19]"Sound writing" is its translation. See Kapchan, *Theorizing Sound Writing*.

[20]Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

[21]Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang: 1977)

[22]On the materiality of attunement, see Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosiphy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

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