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# On Acoustic Justice

#### BRANDON LABELLE

It is my concern to bring into question the issue of acoustics and the ways in which it can be understood to impact onto expressions of individual and collective agency. While acoustic design is mostly a professional practice contributing to urban planning, and the construction of specific architectures, such as concert halls or recording studios, I focus on understanding acoustics by way of the acts or practices whereby people modify and retune their environments or situations in order to support the movement of particular sounds. In doing so, such enactments contend with a given order of hearing, or what Roshanak Kheshti terms “regimes of aurality” (Kheshti 2015: XIX).

In considering such a perspective, I'm led to pose acoustics as a political question. If we consider acoustics as a range of material and social practices that condition or enable the movement of sound, and often in support of the articulation of particular views or desires, it can be appreciated how it impacts onto experiences of participation and emplacement, defining who or what is heard – whose voice may gain traction within particular places and in what way. In this sense, I highlight acoustics as *the distribution of the heard* extending from Jacques Rancière's political theories, and how “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (Rancière 2013: 8). As the distribution of the heard, acoustics contributes to what or who one hears, to the ways in which such hearing impacts onto processes of self-orientation, and how orientation gains definition according to the particularities of environments, institutional systems, and ideological leanings.

Following such perspectives, sound is emphasized as a deeply relational medium, one that enables social connection, processes of synchronization and desynchronization, attunement as well as interruption, and that moves across hearing and feeling, listening and touch; from the consonant to the dissonant, the harmonic to the cacophonous, sound provides a compelling framework for probing questions of relational experience as well as social equality.

Acoustics, in this sense, is positioned as a critical framework for engaging a politics of listening and the differing imaginaries and ideologies that work upon listening habits. As Kheshti highlights, regimes of aurality call upon particular ways of listening, establishing or reinforcing certain meanings and understandings of “the ideal listener” and how we take pleasure and support from what we hear. Yet, aurality is never so fixed, as one may equally find unexpected routes, or ways of hearing differently, tracing over or disturbing the acoustic lines placed before us.

What kinds of material, spatial or social arrangements are made to facilitate the movement of a given sound? To support the articulation or reverberation of certain voices and meanings? In what sense does acoustics function to host shared desires, or to hinder their circulation? What acoustic forces or forms exist that enable one's own voice to resound within particular rooms or institutions, and that aid in struggles over recognition? And further, how is one situated within the acoustic economies and histories at play within specific contexts?

In probing such questions, I argue for acoustics as the basis for considering approaches toward social recognition and the making of collective worlds; acoustics as a path for reflecting upon the different forces at work in shaping the movements of people, particularly in struggles over recognition. In this context, acoustic justice is considered on a micropolitical and macropolitical level, from the immediate ways in which questions of access, fairness, and ethical regard play out within street-level encounters, and further, to how acoustics participates on the level of law and governmentality, for instance in the courtroom or the classroom, by contributing to the rules of audibility and the norms that impact on how bodies and voices are made to matter. Acoustic justice moves across issues of architecture and affect, social equality and recognition, and is posed in order to engage how hearing and being heard are vital to a political ecology of mutual concern and civility.

#### **ORIENTATIONS: THE PSYCHOACOUSTIC TO THE SOCIAL ACOUSTIC**

Understanding acoustics as a political question is based foremost on recognizing it as both a material and social issue. On one hand, acoustics is understood as the physical conditions, the architectures and spatial arrangements, that facilitate and shape the reflections and

reverberations of sound: acoustics as a question of the physics of sound, the material properties of space, and the physiology of hearing, and how these are applied to strategies of design (Grueneisen 2003; Blesser / Salter 2015).

Following this perspective, acoustics dramatically contributes to a sense of personal orientation as well as social participation, lending to how one navigates through spaces and environments in capturing a sense of place or belonging. This includes appreciating how one synchronizes, attunes, and aligns with others by way of what one hears and feels, and how bodily or affective experiences support forms of participation. From such a material and social base, acoustics is understood to affect experiences of hearing as well as that of sociality, to influence the relationships one may form and within which listening becomes more operative. This leads to considering acoustics as having an impact onto the politics of recognition and location, and subsequent articulations of forms of life: acoustics as a politics through which struggles over recognition and rights, movement and access, belonging and participation are drawn out.

From a street-level perspective, acoustics may be considered less as a professional skill or science, and more through the everyday practices or gestures that work at securing paths of orientation. For instance, the spatial arrangements and social scenes, the vocal articulations and verbal arguments, the technological systems and cultural expressions communities make in support of particular forms of life, come to position acoustics within the arenas of everyday experience.

Such a view may be further unpacked to recognize a series of levels or modes by which acoustics is operative. This includes engaging with the psychoacoustic, and the physiological and neurological experiences or conditions of hearing that greatly inform not only what one is able to hear, but additionally how those experiences nurture a form of auditory cognition and imagination – the psychoacoustic as nonconscious or unconscious ways of experiencing or relating

to sound. Following the psychoacoustic, and the more personal status of hearing, we may consider the social acoustic and the dynamics of life with others; how acoustics, and the circulation of acoustic information, influences all types of social relationships – social acoustics as the exchanges afforded by way of sound and listening within given environments. An acoustic model or framework further integrates the electroacoustic, as the mediations of distributed sound and the technological apparatuses that enable sonic diffusion, that “point” sound in particular directions and around which social identities often gravitate, for instance in musical cultures. Finally, acoustic ecologies of human and more-than-human life allow for greater appreciation of acoustics as a critical ecological framework, which can assist in practices of care and sustainability. Through such an ecological perspective, a notion of the bioacoustic may be put forward to also speak toward the ways in which conceptualizations of *life by way of hearing* become politically operative, for example by the positioning or othering of the Deaf as being “unable” to hear and therefore less-than-human (Bauman 2004; Ladd 2003).

These levels or frameworks are suggestive for elaborating how acoustics can be thought in terms of regimes of aurality, and how the establishment of sonic or acoustic norms become sites of contestation – to contend with the social or bioacoustic framing of what counts as “good” or “acceptable” sound for example, or with the technological constructs that distribute sounds in particular ways to figure listening positionalities. In addition, identifying acoustics across a range of perspectives provides a framework for querying how individuals and communities construct paths of resistance, togetherness, and social consciousness by way of sound and listening. This may be found in a range of instances where people rise up to demonstrate against systems of oppression or injustice. Throughout the uprisings in Beirut starting in October 2019 for example, there appeared a constant reference to “feeling unheard” on the part of ordinary people.

Dubbed “the open-mic revolution” (Battah 2019), the protests and subsequent assemblies organized in Beirut were consistently based upon upsetting a given distribution of the heard (as dominated by the political elite and related media channels), and can be appreciated as an attempt to reorient the acoustic or sonic norms that often define not only what one hears, but equally how such auditory experiences can meaningfully resonate to impact systems of governance.

Rather than a strict concentration on sound, acoustics brings focus to the material, technical, and social conditions that surround and that affect embodied and collective life. In this regard, focusing on acoustics – from sonic imaginaries to electroacoustic mediations – enables a range of inquiries, which have at their center a concern for the ways in which one navigates and negotiates systems and discourses that impact onto defining a sense of place and participation. While expressions of sonic agency find articulation by way of the punctuated sounds one may make, acoustic justice is figured by considering the arrangements and configurations that allow for different types of orientation, from social and political to bodily and communal.

## QUEER ACOUSTICS

Following this critical framework, I’m concerned to mobilize acoustics as the basis for contending with a politics of orientation; from the experience of hearing a specific event to the processes by which communities develop specific forms of being together – how some find their way by drawing support from the materialities and affordances of sonic experience, which include communicational, organizational, and affective capacities of acoustic acts, from the silences and noises, rhythms and vibrations that shape and inflect a sense of place and possibility. Acoustics may define a range of processes around which bodily orientation and recuperation, cultural expressivity and nego-

tiation, social navigation and construction are worked at. 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 her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed challenges the ways in which traditions of phenomenology may bypass the more socialized, racialized, sexualized 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 that work to establish the normative shape of what we may associate with and how (Ahmed 2006). For Ahmed, one’s figuring in the world is thus always already defined by a set of dominant constructs that are deeply material and spatial, coded and regulated, 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, political, and identity norms, which act to limit the phenomenal availability of things according to the social, racial, sexual 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 (Ahmed 2006: 14-15).

Ahmed opens an important view onto how orientation is never freely found, but rather, is shaped by established patterns that bring one into certain alignments, or that make particular misalignments dangerous. One is equally oriented by the world as one makes orientation for oneself. Orientation is performative, whereby one may seek support through the material world while contending with the lack of availability of access or things. One therefore practices orientation, which shifts as bodies shift, as one aligns or misaligns, attunes or disturbs, is welcomed or pushed out. This includes the ways in which some bodies are racialized, positioned by way of a dominant white world that defines how people of color experience a relation to things and spaces, and what it means to be at home in the world. As Ahmed poses: “If the world is made white, then the body at home is one that can inhabit that whiteness” (Ahmed 111). Being at home in the world, feeling as if things and spaces of that world are made available, is deeply influenced by a racialized ordering, for example, and its social and political orientations.

Situatedness extends beyond the question of racial appearance as well, and the physical reading of the body; sexual orientation is equally made to matter within dominant heterosexual society, placing emphasis on the straight life that comes to cast other sexual behaviors and orientations as “deviant.” “To become straight means that we not only have to turn toward the objects that are given to us by heterosexual culture, but also that we must ‘turn away’ from objects that take us off this line. The queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant” (Ahmed 21).

Following these perspectives, Ahmed poses the concept of “queer phenomenology” to challenge the seemingly neutral matters of worldly contact and how ideas of “free movement” are defined (or assumed) by way of a white, heteronormative imaginary and ideology. In contrast, Ahmed captures how orientation is a question of “lining up” – a “falling in line” often derived by way of heteronormative or-

dering, where “being straight” is often to “straighten up.” In response, Ahmed mobilizes a critical phenomenology, which can support the making of other alignments and movements. “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” (Ahmed 107).

I’m interested in following Ahmed, and what she emphasizes as “the work of reorientation,” in order to consider how enactments of non-normative worlding queer the acoustic, giving accent to the ways in which acoustic practices assist in processes of (re)orientation that upset the dominant tonality of a given place. Voices find resonance within certain environments according to the availability of particular acoustic 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 one moves are enabled or enhanced by material and social supports, while such rhythms may also work to demand entry, seeking to bend or break the shape of a given situation so as to move differently, to give expression to an altogether different pattern. Acoustic orientation is thus never only about the material supports that enable the movement of a specific sound, rather it contributes to the establishment of particular acoustic norms, setting definition to what counts as “good” or “fitting” sound – fidelity here must be underscored as political, forcing the question: fidelity to whom or what, and for what end?

Writer and scholar Nina Dragičević offers similar lines of thinking through her research into the culture of queer community life (Dragičević 2019, 2017). Focusing on the social environments of bars in the city of Ljubljana, and the formation of the lesbian disco, she highlights how sound and music, listening and an overall acoustic dynamic, contribute greatly to supporting queer togetherness, particularly when speaking out loud may put one in danger. Rather, the

articulation of lesbian desire partly turns upon a sonic axis, a queer acoustics, finding facilitation through the playback of particular music. Historically, Dragičević considers how the making of lesbian scenes within heterosexual bars (in the US for example) were greatly strained by an environment dominated by homophobia, which impacted on ways of socializing together. The playback of songs on a jukebox, for instance, came to assist in narrating otherwise unspoken communications, where potential partners may stand in or identify with singers, or those being sung to. Songs, in this sense, provided an acoustic affordance enabling the expression of lesbian desire, and importantly, for the construction and maintenance of a culture of queer life.

Extending her research into more contemporary situations, Dragičević moves from the jukebox, and the strict territorialization of heterosexual bars, to the live DJ and the lesbian disco. Within such spaces and scenes, lesbian desire finds greater traction by way of outright collective volume, a loudness that can “act against oppression” (Dragičević 2017). From the jukebox, and the undercover flirtations enabling an articulation of desire, to the DJ, and the collective volume of the lesbian disco, Dragičević captures a sense for the particular power of sonority in struggles and celebrations of shared identity. Finding orientation by way of such sonorities and expressions greatly affords world-making activity, that is, the making of a space and time that does not need to continually differentiate itself against heteronormative society. Rather, as Dragičević poses, the lesbian scene celebrates itself and each other by way of volume, and the making of a particular acoustic norm, allowing for a deeply emancipatory and affirming sense of togetherness.

Following Dragičević’s work, a queer acoustics as I’m suggesting poses an interruption or distortion onto the heteronormative tonal shape of a place to allow for other resonant flows or vibrational constructs, other communal worlds; queering the acoustic may en-

able the retuning of a sonic horizon, surprising a given auditory arena with the rarely heard or with an altogether different reverberation. A queer acoustic may give support by upsetting the acoustic training and positionality informing how one hears or listens, to critically agitate or color the particular leanings and learnings that affect what one is able to hear, and how that figures a sonic imaginary. In this sense, a queer acoustic might strain phenomenology with the noise of social conflict, the rhythms of particular identity struggles and desires, and the configuration of marginalized spaces and their histories, tensing given regimes of aurality so as to allow for the articulation of accommodations as well as resistances to emerge: to pose the work of acoustic justice.

#### **ACOUSTIC JUSTICE**

Acoustic justice is positioned to highlight the practices by which to rework the distribution of the heard, detuning or retuning the tonality of a place, and a given acoustic norm, so as to support the movements of bodies and voices, especially those put at risk by appearing or sounding otherwise.

Acoustic justice is 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 social, political, and performative figuring of oneself and others. The acoustic modalities of such acts, from the rhythmic to the vibrational, the loud to the hushed, often work to support the movements of a shared collectivity, emboldening the energetic and ethical figuring of communal determination by way of the unifying or sympathetic potentiality of the auditory. Such movements and experiences are often the socio-material

basis from which communities or collectives acquire a sense for the possibilities of what one may compose within given environments or situations, extending from sonic warfare to acoustic welfare – from sonic force to acoustic care. And through which understandings of justice are played out in the everyday in terms of working at social equality and safety.

Acoustic justice is about expanding upon listening as an extremely dynamic expression of bodily power, as a sensual and deeply transformative capacity by which to express individual and collective understanding and collaboration. Listening as a broader capacity to attune and attend, to hold and nurture, defend and debate, and which supports reflection and sympathy, compassion and care, for oneself and for others, and that greatly assists in contending with dominant and prevailing systems that make and unmake bodies. As Silvia Federici poses in her argument on the need to reappropriate the body: “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” (Federici 2020: 124).

Listening is captured as the means by which to learn the languages of the body, to attune to its inherent rhythms as paths of power and knowing, as well as healing. Against the colonial legacies of modernity, and conflicts over forms of life and the biodiversity expressive of a pluralistic world, listening is wielded as a capacity to contend with genealogies of capture and exploitative enclosure by explicitly forging a path – an acoustic frame by which to cultivate more considered approaches for being on the planet, which further entails a commitment to decolonization (Vázquez 2012).

Such an egalitarian and planetary view finds a compelling articulation in what Cormac Cullinan terms “wild law” (Cullinan 2011). For Cullinan, it is imperative that we radically adjust existing modes

of Western governance – grounded in legacies of what Rolando Vázquez highlights as the modern/colonial order (Vázquez 2012) – so as to work at greater ecological sustainability and flourishing. By way of wild law, Cullinan makes the argument for Earth governance, in which understandings of the legal status of the human subject be extended towards the Earth community as a whole, shifting the human-centric basis of law and rights in order to support a bolder planetary order. Such a view finds support by referencing Indigenous understandings and cosmologies, especially the concept of *buen vivir*. *Buen vivir* (or *sumak kawsay*) argues for an expanded understanding of “the good life” or “well-being” beyond the individual (and the concept of individual rights); rather, *buen vivir*, from an Andean cosmological view, understands well-being as a collective and planetary question and concern that exceeds the human. Increasingly taken on in a range of constitutional reforms, for instance in Ecuador in 2008, the “rights of nature” come to appropriate liberal concepts of rights in the making of new constitutional and legal structures. As Vázquez poses, “*buen vivir* signals the borders [of the modern / colonial order] and it gives voice to the outside of modernity” (Vázquez 1).

Cullinan’s “wild law” takes guidance from the concept of *buen vivir* and aims to elaborate upon the rights of nature, as what may productively guide Western systems of law in crafting more ecologically attuned policies. Importantly, Cullinan approaches attending to the rhythms and qualities of the natural world by way of listening. As he envisions: “If we want to participate fully in the dance of the Earth community we need to listen carefully for the beat and adjust our rhythm and timing accordingly” (Cullinan 2011: 137).

In this respect, returning to Federici’s call for “listening to the body” as a path toward health and healing, it is important to question in what way listening to the body takes place, or is given place, and how it may truly reorient larger systems and structures that situate oneself, or that impact onto the well-being of a greater social or plan-

etary body. How do I listen to my body? If I understand my body as an acoustic chamber, as something that resounds, how does it give way to such listening, accommodating or resisting it? And in what ways is such listening challenged or undermined by understandings of listening, by one's own cultural background, or the regimes of aurality that shape or direct one's listening – that inscribe onto one's listening ability a set of ordering (and straightening) lines? Or by way of technology, and the electroacoustic systems embedded within environments, which has always participated in defining listening's reach and abilities? Further, what might such listening generate or engender – how to carry this listening into the world and our communities, into the rhythms of planetary ecologies and the project of decolonization?

Struggles over recognition and participation often find traction by intervening upon the conditions that define hearing and being heard, voicing and being responsive, sounding and listening, which regulate or inform one's attention and orientation with respect to oneself and others. It is these conditions that are of concern, and which leads me to understand acoustics, or more specifically, acoustic justice, as those things one does in order to make listening to the body and each other possible, and that one may carry further, to underscore the importance of hearing a diversity of views and life-stories within institutional and public settings as well as bringing attention to the voices and rhythms beyond human sociality.

In this regard, it is important to articulate a critical acoustics, which can bring forward an interrogative view onto acoustics and its specificities. From my perspective, this includes arguing for an understanding of acoustic rights or principles in order to open pathways for elaborating how listening may be nurtured. Such a concern requires a consideration of the right to free speech, or the right of reply, as human and civil rights, and which dramatically entail acoustic understanding, or an *acoustic literacy*. In this regard, it becomes important to address the importance not only of the freedom of speech, but equally that of

setting the (acoustic) conditions in support of such freedom. This includes arguing for a deeper engagement with listening as what often fulfills the power and possibility of speech.

Is not the freedom of speech equally a question of the freedom of listening (Lacey 2013)? As Vázquez argues, listening performs a “critique” of the modern / colonial order by specifically supporting a relationality denied by modernity in which the arrogance of a universal Western voice forcefully silences others (Vázquez 2012). In what ways is listening constrained and undermined within institutional and public environments, and how might “listening as critique,” as relational opening or accountability, be enabled?

Fostering greater concern for listening from different perspectives, and from different cultural positions, can be articulated along a number of lines, such as the right to listen to each other, as the sharing and circulation of life-stories (King 2008), and which can help in attending not only to the said and the articulated, but equally facilitating concern for that which is missing, where listening acts as a creative “holding environment” (Griffin 2016): listening as giving room for what needs to be said and heard, especially that which tenses a given regime of aurality. Emphasizing greater engagement with listening in this way can also help move from nurturing human relationships, and elaborating a diverse public discourse, to acknowledging ecologies of human and more-than-human life in a sustainable manner: to support deeper attunement with a biodiverse planet by acknowledging the “polyphony” of its voices (Tsing 2015).

Approaching acoustics as a question of rights or responsibility along these lines can also allow for greater concern for education, where listening as a practice, a skill, a history, may be enriched, for listening supports the capacity for understanding, affection, responsiveness, as well as critical and creative inquiry, and is essential within learning environments. This explicitly gives way to engaging a politics of recognition, and questions of cultural identity, social mobility,



and institutional access, which includes contending with racialized or gendered acoustic norms and the affective economies at play within contemporary biocapitalism, which, as Federici suggests, are always instrumentalizing the vitality of oneself as a situated body. How to attend to the ways in which bodies – some more than others – are stressed and strained by forces of exclusion and discrimination? In what ways can such attention be sustained, made forceful within greater economies that fully capitalize on attention itself?

Acoustic justice further works at considering the technological or medical approaches to “hearing ability,” which draw out a bioacoustic politics – a politics contending with conceptualizations of life by way of sound and hearing, and thus to further address the issue of recognition by expanding understandings of language and voice to include the diversely abled, issues of translation and interpretation, and that attends to verbal and nonverbal, spoken and signed expression (Bauman 2008; Mills 2011). Finally, a focus on acoustic rights or principles works on behalf of an acoustic commons, as the commoning that may position sound and listening as social resources in manifesting a radical ethics of openness.

From the micropolitical to the macropolitical, from questions of subjectivity, positionality, and the complex experiences of listening and social orientation, to issues of institutional access, structural and systemic exclusions, and what might be gained from bringing acoustic knowledges into the framework of education and ecology, law and government, acoustic justice works across a diversity of issues and sites. The right to listen, as a counterpoint to the right to free speech, captures the necessity for turning toward what must be heard: the expressions often occurring outside or beyond the acoustic norm of distributed sound. In this sense, acoustic justice lends to the forming of gestures and practices – listening practices, wild practices, decolonial practices – that attempt to reshape the arrangements enabling such rights and principles, and in doing so, modulate the norms by which

we may encounter and enrich each other. This includes bringing a critical view onto the issue of rights in general, and the importance of challenging state sanctioned recognition; rather, acoustics, and the arguments I’m making here, may support enactments of poetic world making that do not so much redistribute the heard, in attempts at having a voice, but lead to another form of the sensible entirely.

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