Colloquy

TUNING IN

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Soundscape. ***Tuning In*****, 11:33. By Laura Menchaca Ruiz.**
https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/z30p78q92z.

The human imagination can conjure all sorts of sensations from listening to audio.[1] When we are placed in an aural experience, our imagination accompanies the sounds we hear with images, textures, tastes, scents, and sensations of our own making. These sensory experiences filter through our knowing and experience, and the sensuous is synthesized, not as an intellectual practice, at least not at first, but as a visceral one. Our ability as humans to experience the world through

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the sensuous allows us to know and communicate with each other at different registers, offering various entry points for understanding and describing the world around us, sometimes even in ways we may find difficult to put into words, or perhaps even in moments where words fail altogether (MacDougall 2006).

The sound piece *Tuning In* emerged from a moment when, for me, words had failed.[2] It was not only my words that had failed; it was a moment when it felt like other words were failing too. The words of academia, of diplomacy, of politics, of journalism, of human rights, of that slippery entity we refer to as "humanity." It was a moment where there was an abundance of words—stitched into phrases, which stumbled into sentences, then fell into paragraphs, and finally, barricaded themselves into political messaging. Words were running rampant, and yet, some words proved more audible than others. This failure of words led me to think about whether the issue was less about the words themselves, and more about the way they were offered and received—the way they were transmitted through the proverbial airwaves and reassembled in our bodies—the way we *heard* and *felt* them.

Because each of us is also a world unto our own—an expression of our experiences and relations—our senses and sensations are distinct in how we embody them, in the meaning we make from them, and in the way we express them to others. There is an interplay between the sensorial knowledge archived in our bodies over decades and the sensory information that our bodies receive and interpret daily. Audre Lorde (1984) describes the power of the sensorial as "the erotic . . . our deepest and nonrational knowledge,"[3] a power and knowledge from which she argues that women, in particular, have long been alienated:

> The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, often in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered course of power and information within our lives. . . . As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. (Lorde 1984, 61)

To reclaim the power of the erotic, Lorde argues, one must allow oneself to be native to one's own body, to live in it, to know from it, to connect to others' bodies through it.

To my body, in the context of the political moment in which the sound piece was created, it felt like words were failing because the loudest words seemed to be asking us to "adjust to injustice" (Glaude 2024). That is, to adjust to a particular (colonial) way of hearing and knowing. As one who hails from a settler state twice over, first from Mexico's colonial project of *mestizaje* and second from the U.S. so-called melting pot, the epithets of assimilation are familiar to me. One becomes accustomed to the moves that (neo)colonialism makes, the slippages that galvanize everyday people to support, and even promote institutional racism, (hetero)sexism, classism, where, as Eddie Glaude Jr. (2024) so aptly describes, "we are constantly faced with taking the bribe"—that is, trading off a miniscule semblance of stability and livelihood for a silent existence that doesn't question the exploitative foundation on which one's supposed stability is built. Where we become white noise, ever barely surviving in the interstitial static between radio tunings—where our attention becomes so deformed that we begin to sympathize with the settler—the destiny that is manifest, the land that is promised, the people who are chosen. The words we heard during these early days of genocide sought to convince us to take the bribe, to look away, not only from the rapid and (in)discriminate killing of thousands of people but also from the years of siege, the decades of brutal occupation, and the wider context of centuries of European colonization.

I consider *Tuning In* a recuperation of the sensorial as a critical form of intersectional feminist practice, emerging from the depths of my knowing and the knowing that has been shared with me through the practice of solidarism and collective action. My "feminist homework" (Ahmed 2017) was to be native to my own body, forged in the crucible of the border politics and "isms" particular to the U.S. Southwest, while also centering what I have learned from Palestine and its people.[4] When I watch the news of a genocide that, at the time of writing, can no longer be qualified as "unfolding," my body recovers other violences. It brings to the surface the failed promise of diplomacy; the pain of wanting to live when others want you to die; the deliverance that is hypocrisy for those who wield state power; the feeling that one is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, crying out and yet inaudible.

When I see Palestinians harassed and humiliated at Israeli checkpoints, I cannot untether that sensory experience from one of being harassed and humiliated by border patrol agents in the U.S. Southwest. When I see Palestinian mothers and fathers weeping over their murdered children, I cannot unhinge that from seeing migrant children torn from their parents and put into cages.

When I see Palestinians burying their beloved in makeshift graves, I cannot help but think of all the migrant bodies—each one a sanctuary—lost to the Sonoran Desert. When I see, as I have seen, an unarmed Palestinian young man executed in the street by Israeli police without charge, trial, or conviction, I see Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Pamela Turner . . . . The associations are more than I can name here.[5]

The vitality of the sonic is its ability to reverberate through our bodies. This reverberation is not just a physiological one—acoustic energy transformed into electrical signals by the cochlea, and so on—but it is also one that reverberates through our psychological and spiritual associations, our traumas. I created this piece from a deep "nonrational" desire for the context lost to political posturing to be heard and perceived. I wanted to assemble the way that I heard the story of Palestinians and offer it to others. I wanted others to hear the shrouding of one hundred years of history in the phrase "the right to defend." I wanted to recontextualize these words in a wider and longer broadcast history of Palestine that puts contemporary news reports alongside news reels from throughout the twentieth century. I wanted to make audible the way that this juxtaposition makes apparent the colonial fantasy of Israel's "right to defend" and highlights the ways in which Palestinians are demonized to justify this supposed right on a global stage shared with other countries with colonial pasts and presents.[6] I wanted to express what it feels like to hear these, not through the rationalizing conduit of mainstream media, but as a cacophony of those same media forced to confront each other in a collapsed timescape,[7] one that is very much a reality for Palestinians, not just a news beat.

This nativity is central to the practice of ethnography. To be attentive to the way humans inhabit their lifeworlds requires us, as ethnographers, to be native to our own bodies, to our own lifeworlds, and just as importantly, it requires us to be self-aware of the dialogue and relations between our body and the bodies around us.

Ethnography as a practice relies on the ethnographer's sensory experiences, and yet, in conventional ethnographic writing, those sensory experiences have often been abstracted from it. Being "in the field," that is, being in the space in which one wonders about the world, is critical to the consideration (and inflection) of that wondering. But what if the "field" is conceptualized as a third space, such as the nexus between on-the-ground experiences and the representation of those experiences via radio waves, satellite signals, internet signals? Conventionally, the ethnographer makes meaning through their sensory experience, then works that meaning into text through the register of academic writing[8]—the meaning becomes intellectualized, and in doing so, can sometimes become clinical, even obscuring the emotional landscape of both ethnographer

and interlocuter,[9] and the third space that they create. This kind of knowledge production can be valuable, insightful, profound. However, it is not the only register through which we can or do communicate ideas, problems, questions.

When we limit ourselves to the academic register, we miss an entire field of human experience.[10] Our *knowing* (as distinct from knowledge) can also be powerfully rendered through other sorts of media and sensory experiences. These registers invite listeners into a third space—the anticolonial space of being in relation with one another, of being dialogic—the sound of being haunted (enchanted?) by a grandmother's ghost (Mihai, this issue) or the sound of someone savoring transnational solidarity (Nesvaderani, this issue). Psychologists say that the aural has the potential to fold us into collective effervescence, and I suppose that is exactly what I was longing for when I created this sound piece: a collective effervescence, a third space, powerful enough to inspire people to do something, something beyond words (Keltner 2023).

ABSTRACT

Tuning In *is a sound-based ethnographic work that examines the limits of dominant political, journalistic, and academic discourses through an embodied practice of listening. Grounded in intersectional feminist theory and sensory ethnography, the piece foregrounds "nonrational," affective modes of knowing as critical resources for interpreting colonial violence and its reverberations across time and space. By juxtaposing historical and contemporary broadcast media, the work renders audible the longue durée of Palestinian dispossession while tracing resonances with racialized and borderland violences in other contexts. This sound montage collapses temporal distance and unsettles authoritative narratives that normalize injustice through abstraction and repetition.* Tuning In *invites listeners into a dialogic, sensorial "third space" where collective memory, affective recognition, and political awareness converge, opening possibilities for solidaristic engagement and forms of action.* [sensory ethnography; sound and listening; affect and embodiment; settler colonialism; feminist homework]

ملخص

Tuning In هو عمل إثنوغرافي صوتي يستكشف محدودية الخطابات السياسية والإعلامية والأكاديمية المهيمنة من خلال ممارسة استماع وإنصات متجسّدة. يستند العمل إلى منطلقات النظرية النسوية التقاطعية والإثنوغرافيا الحسية في إبرازه لأهمية أنماط المعرفة العاطفية والوجدانية "غير العقلانية" باعتبارها مصادر للتفسير النقدي للعنف الاستعماري وانعكاساته عبر الزمان والمكان. يقدم العمل مضاهاة بين مواد بث إعلامية تاريخية ومعاصرة تتيح المجال لاستكشاف تجربة الاقتلاع الفلسطيني الطويلة بصيغة مسموعة، مع تتبع أصداء من تجارب أخرى مع العنف المتولد من العنصرية والحواجز والحدود. يهدم هذا المونتاج الصوتي المسافات الزمنية ويزعزع سرديات السلطات المسيطرة التي تسعى لتطبيع الظلم عبر التكرار والتجريد. ومن هذا المنطلق يقترح Tuning In

الصوت كمداخلة منهجية تتحدى النزعة العقلانية التي تميز الكتابة الإثنوغرافية التقليدية، ويدعو
المستمعين إلى مساحة حوارية وحسية هي بمثابة "فضاء ثالث" حيث تلتقي الذاكرة الجمعية،
والإدراك العاطفي-الوجداني، والوعي السياسي، بما يفتح إمكانيات للمشاركة التضامنية وأشكالاً للعمل.
الإثنوغرافيا الحسية – الصوت والإستماع/ الإنصات – التجسد والعاطفة – الاستعمار الاستيطاني –
النشاط النسوي

NOTES

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1. While this essay primarily considers the aural experiences of those whose sense of hearing is not severely impaired, I do not want to discount the experiences of d/Deaf listeners; d/Deaf listeners have a diverse set of experiences within the spectrum of listening. These experiences challenge the assumption that hearing is essential for listening, as well as the association of deaf listening to tactility. For more on deaf listening in musicology, see Holmes 2017.
2. The sound piece *Tuning In* was created in November 2023. The final portion after the credits was added in February 2025.
3. In using Audre Lorde's (1984) concept of "nonrational knowledge" here, I keep in mind Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's concept of "dis-order" and Franz Fanon's concept of the "zone of non-being" (Fanon 1986). Harney and Moten (2013) argue that, for people living at the margins of power, the call to dis-order is a call to disrupt that which has been referred to as "ordered" by those at the center of power. Moten gives the example of Fanon (1986), arguing that Fanon did not seek an end to colonialism as much as he sought "an end to the standpoint from which colonialism makes sense" (as paraphrased by Halberstam 2013, 8). He states that so as to exist in the place from which colonialism is understood as unacceptable, one must situate oneself squarely in what Fanon calls the "zone of non-being," a zone labeled by the "orderly" as irrational, since any contest of colonial power by the colonized is presumed illogical. Halberstam (2013, 8) paraphrases Harney and Moten noting that "in order to bring colonialism to an end . . . one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism."
4. The reading list created by the Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) reading group is useful for those interested in learning more about the context of Palestine. While this citation proves a useful one, there exist some moments where citations also fail, as in this case, where a good deal of the visceral "knowing" (understanding) I refer to here is one that has come from many years of living alongside, and listening carefully to, my Palestinian colleagues and friends. Find the TWAIL reading list at Third World Approaches to International Law Review, "International Law and the Question of Palestine: A Reading List, February 20, 2025, https://twailr.com/international-law-the-question-of-palestine-a-reading-list

5. In naming these correlations, I do not attempt to equate them and, in doing so, erase the particulars of their histories, contexts, and/or dynamics. In naming these correlations, I seek to call attention to the settler mentality—the settler sensibility that facilitates the extraction of life across contexts with impunity, and the interrelated web of systems that uphold it across contexts.
6. UN bodies and independent experts emphasize that under international law, an occupying power cannot claim the right of self-defense under Article 51 against threats originating from territory it effectively occupies and controls.
7. The notion of "cacophony" in this collapsed timescape challenges the tidy and sanitized timescape of colonial time, which orders and recasts key events into linear and progressive narratives that fulfill the central goals of the colonial project and erase the displacement and destruction that accompanies it.
8. Sometimes this has been further abstracted from the more visceral composition of the personal diary, coded as "fieldnotes."
9. As Diana Allan (2013) suggests, we can also use less technical terms for interlocuters, such as *friends*, *colleagues*, *neighbors*, and *acquaintances*, to bring into full view the realities of "fieldwork."
10. For further reading on sensory ethnography, see Ethnocine Collective 2024.

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