Colloquy

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND FEMINIST SOUNDWORK

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Soundscape. ***Academic Freedom*****, 12:02. By Nat Nesvaderani.**
https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/425k32935m.

Although a big part of my scholarship for the last thirty years has focused on this place between the river and the sea, the university where I'm teaching didn't reach out to me to ask how I understand the current situation and its history. And yet, the administration has sent several messages in the last couple of months indicating that they consulted members of the Jewish community at Brown. But it is important to clarify—it was never me that they consulted, neither as a Jew nor

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> as a scholar whose work is about Palestine and Israel. I wonder: Who are the Jews that they did consult? Do they have any expertise in the history of the colonization of Palestine? Or is their knowledge shaped mostly by a Euro-American history of Zionism which for decades has normalized the ongoing Nakba?
>
> —Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, April 25, 2024, Brown University

In Ariella Azoulay's speech at the student-led encampment at Brown University, she describes her experience as a Palestinian Jew and as a scholar of Palestine as one of exclusion from the university administration's response to the genocide in Gaza. This suppression through avoidance illustrates a revisionist history, one in which colonial and imperial state actors, like Israel and the United States, promote tidy, discrete identities that allow people to be categorized within religio-national binaries.[1] Azoulay's statements join those of others ignored and silenced by university administrations for resisting, contextualizing, and historicizing Israel's genocide in Gaza and the longer ethnic cleansing of Palestine. As images of militarized violence in Gaza surround us, media studies scholars observe that the circulation of such images of genocide can lead to secondary trauma and political inaction (Melhemallaham 2024; Torchin 2012).[2] Moving away from the reproduction of graphic imagery, what can a focus on sound offer for listening to the global university solidarity movement that unfolded from April to June 2024? The intersectional feminist approaches to sound discussed in this Colloquy are attuned to gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, and nation. In *Academic Freedom*, feminist soundwork—encompassing both the critical analysis of and production of sound—provides a method for refusing the simplistic, nationalistic, discrete categories of belonging and exclusion used to manufacture consent for settler and imperial violence.

The sounds in this piece are attuned to experiences of academic freedom on college campuses. On college and university campuses, which can look back on a long history of activism against imperial and colonial violence, both student and faculty resistance as well as repression of their organizing have never been as pronounced as following the student encampments in spring 2024 (Deeb and Winegar 2024). My listening and production of sound resonate a global solidarity movement through the sounds of collective action, as well as new and "enhanced" forms of repression in the sounds of surveillance and policing that stifle student and faculty expression on campuses today.[3]

Through listening to and producing sound, I explore how practices of embodied listening and sound production contribute to intersectional feminist solidarities. The method of soundwork discussed in the introduction to this

collection incorporates a feminist awareness of proximity, emphasizing intimacy and interconnectedness across physical spaces and across struggles. I explore this interconnectedness by recording sound in the province of Quebec, Canada, where I live and work, while also collecting global sounds shared by activists and journalists on social media including X (previously Twitter) and Instagram.[4] In Quebec and Montreal, I recorded sounds of protests and rallies from winter 2023 to summer 2024. Sounds produced in the province of Quebec include interviews with colleagues organizing in universities. I used free AI text-to-voice software to anonymize their voices, which seems ironic as they reflect on the limits of their academic freedom in their respective university settings.

CRITIQUING AND USING AI

My choice to use AI while also being critical of it is a product of creating sound media in 2024. At that time, we saw an inchoate discussion about the use of artificial intelligence for new AI-enabled military technologies (González 2024), including Israel's reliance of AI for "target selection" in the genocide in Gaza.[5] Although this "target selection" has a 10 percent error rate, it was increasingly used in military activity. For example, in the U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran, the use of AI resulted in the bombardment of the Shajareh Tayyebeh Elementary School for girls in Minab, Iran, killing 156 people, including 120 schoolchildren, producing one of the highest numbers of civilian casualties in a single incident in decades. Why would any technology with such a large error rate be used for operations with such high stakes?

I considered other forms of anonymization, such as hiring a voice actor. An established activist colleague at one point offered to read the anonymized text detailing the experiences of early-career colleagues. I could have employed either of these, as well as other creative solutions, to anonymize the interviewees' voices without using artificial intelligence. Yet after days of recording, archiving, and editing sounds, I found myself up against the 2024 deadline of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) conference, where we wanted to present these sound projects for the first time. I used AI—the fastest option—to complete this part of the project, giving me creative control without arranging an additional recording session. I first discussed this step with the participants who had requested anonymity, and then I used a free AI text-to-voice website, www.naturalreaders.com, to input text excerpts of the experiences that colleagues shared with me. The website produced a "natural-sounding," AI-generated voice reading in MP3 format—though the criteria for what sounds "natural" is quickly changing, and already quite different from 2024.

Using text-to-speech AI to generate sounds for this project in part reflects working in the university today. Although teachers try to limit its use, artificial intelligence is used by our students and has become integrated into the administrative and teaching platforms managed by our universities. This creates a situation in which many teachers and researchers are critical of AI, all the while using these technologies in some instances at work. In these cases, the purpose of use is relevant. Artificial intelligence has a multiplicity of meanings and different implications for its use, from military target selection to anonymizing the voices of activists. My use of AI to anonymize scholars' experiences reflects the ways in which many feminists strategically leverage new technologies to amplify their activist projects, all while remaining wary and vigilant of their extractive and potentially exploitative uses (Toupin 2024). Critiquing AI while also making pointed, limited use of it in this project is a reflection of the nature of AI and university work at the time of editing this sound project in 2024.

VOLUME AND VIOLENCE

The need to anonymize the voices of early-career scholars speaks to the fragility both of speech and of the institutions attempting to suppress it. The act of speaking about genocide is cast as more dangerous than the actions of those perpetrating it. I am aware that many of the sounds in this project—for example, the emotive voices of activists, which are audibly incredulous, angry, and tired—have been dismissed by many as too loud, too disruptive to "business as usual," and, therefore, too "violent." To some listeners, the words and affects of the protesters, no matter how loud, how multi-sited, or multivocal, will remain unheard. Casting anger as violence effectively dismisses and ignores the many people who have refused quiet complicity as their tuitions, university endowments, and tax dollars are directed toward the bombardment of Gaza.

As I listen to global responses to student and faculty movements for solidarity with Palestine, I hear powerful, unified expressions of solidarity; I hear cacophony; and I hear silence—or perhaps more specifically, the "quietness" of some of the university spaces and places through which we move. Something akin to this quietness is also discussed in the soundwork by Laura Menchaca Ruiz (*Tuning In*, this issue) in her response to the ways in which we are asked to adjust to colonial ways of hearing and knowing. She reflects on how we are constantly being bribed into a trade-off that invites us to accept a veneer of stability in exchange for silence to complicity. Feminist soundwork compels us to listen, record and create in ways that refuse this "trade-off." In *Academic Freedom*, I listen to silence, or to quietness, in 2024 by asking my colleagues about their experiences and listening to the limits tacitly communicated to them, through body language, ignoring, and avoidance.

EMBODIED SOUND PRODUCTION

Through an embodied practice of feminist sensory ethnography, media is experienced and produced through differently situated and able-bodied experiences (Guzman and Hong 2022). Listening practices are embedded in colonial and imperial histories, and, as discussed in the Colloquy introduction, we can resist these imperial legacies in sound by embracing intuition and affect through listening (Kheshti 2015). When I am recording while marching in a protest, or recording interviews, or atmospheric sounds, I put on my headphones and my body changes. In my daily life, I am constantly hearing all kinds of sounds, and my body is accustomed to not listening to all of them, but rather clustering them together as a background noise. But when I put on my headphones, I hear my environment differently, and my body moves to accommodate this changed listening practice. I become attuned to the sounds around me and their proximity to the microphone in my hand. My body moves to get close to the source of the sound I aim to record: I use my back to shield the microphone from the wind, I hold it up above the protesters around me, I lie on the rocks to record the water's edge, I stretch in the direction of a passing plane. The physical act of recording in itself makes for a listening practice, one in which the body's relationship to the environment changes, becoming more attuned to specific sounds and more intimate with the physical spaces close to those sounds.

Listening to, archiving, and editing sound calls for a series of affective choices. In the winter of 2023, I grappled with feelings of dislocation, anger, and sadness, feeling a deep dissonance with the relative quietness, tranquility, and even beauty of seasonal change. Then, through the production of this feminist soundwork, in the spring of 2024, I changed my relationship to social media by embracing the feminist scholarship centered in this collection. Intersectional approaches posit listening not as passive, but as active, inviting careful choices in how we listen to and learn about the sounds we are hearing (Ahmed 2017; Kheshti 2015; Sundar 2023). I shifted from a passive experience to a more active one, listening to, downloading, and editing the works of citizen journalists, activists, and student protesters. The editing concerns my choices about where to position the sounds from social media on an editing timeline. I also intersperse these snippets with the sound of rock falling on ice, for example, a sound I initially collected in freezing, snowy Quebec, with the intention of drawing attention to the length of the genocide, stretching from fall to winter. But then winter turned to spring, and spring became summer. The ice breaking from these rocks melted away. When editing these sounds together, repeatedly coming back to this one produced, for me, a feeling of repetition.

The concept of repetition is prominent in scholarship from and about Palestine. We hear this in poetry and testimony of repeated mourning, loss, and perseverance in rebuilding Gaza (Alareer 2022); in the pressure on Palestinian refugees to repeatedly narrate their traumatic stories of expulsion to legitimize their right to return (Allan 2014, 44–45); and in Israel's continuous development of bureaucratic and physical barriers that produce repeated experiences of fatigue as well as quiet resistance among Palestinians (Bishara 2022). Azoulay (2019) argues that the representation of Palestinian artifacts as "new" and "newly discovered" objects enables recurrent imperial violence by showing the erasure of Palestine as foregone, inevitable, and residing in the past. Dealing with visual matter (artifacts, objects, photographs), her archival approach seeks to "unlearn" imperial violence by rejecting the authority of the camera and the "rhythm of the shutter" (Azoulay 2019, 8). Some of the projects in this Colloquy resonate with Azoulay's archival approach by extending this method of unlearning what we see to unlearning what we hear. For example, we can hear the archival approach to repetition in Menchaca Ruiz's (*Tuning In*, this issue) treatment of newscaster reportage as she interrogates and undoes the colonial temporality of Israel's repeated "right to defend itself." These scholars examine the emotions, policies, objects, and sounds presented as new, immediate, and emerging, contextualizing them within the longer, continuous ethnic cleansing of Palestine. In *Academic Freedom*, when editing the sounds of rock falling on ice, my repetition of this sound on the editing timeline stopped being specific to winter 2023 and, rather, resounded my disappointment that repeated marches, rallies, and demonstrations remained largely unheard and ignored.

This soundwork points directly to the presence of my body in production, as an aural reference to the hand that drops the stone, the hand that carries the microphone, and the hand that, later, moves these sounds around on an editing timeline. In this way, the editing process moves away from the scientific use of recording devices in observational approaches to anthropology. Instead, revealing my hand in this sound production—the recording and editing—makes for an autoethnographic method, in which production reflects subjective practice. My hand is heard in the recording process, as is my voice (in the inclusion of voice notes exchanged with my mother), as I reflect on my emotional response to social media coverage from Gaza. In this way, this embodied soundwork reflects the autoethnographic themes of the present Colloquy, including the exploration of familial subjects (Mihai, this issue; Stock, this issue). In keeping with embodied and autoethnographic production, the voices and the bodily movements of the makers are heard in the soundwork.

Sounds in this piece occur in several languages, including English, Farsi, French, Arabic, and Hebrew. These languages appear here in the ways that I encounter them, shaped by my personal, familial, and professional relationships, and as I find them on social media (Arabic and Hebrew). While the work is physically located in a specific place—the province of Quebec—it is also multilingual, pointing to the complexity of experience locally and globally. Much in the spirit of the activism and scholarship explored in this project, listening to and producing intimate multilingual connections across local and national contexts offers a creative approach to subverting the forms of methodological nationalism reinforced in the social sciences. My own positionality as an Iranian American now living in Canada extends this tension of in-betweenness across contexts. I enjoy educational privilege, stable employment, and the kind of security that many friends and colleagues do not have at campuses facing heavy repression following student encampments. My positionality, like that of so many, is specific to the physical places I have called home, and also extends beyond borders through my solidarities. In this time, when we are inundated with news of war and genocide, it is common to disassociate and become passive. Feminist soundwork offers a way of staying embodied in one's locale and remaining connected to those also listening. This method allows us to produce and process anew the stories that surround us but are presented as a risky trade-off or disembodied, numbing background noise. Active, embodied soundwork refuses the simplistic, nationalistic, binary categories so convenient to fascist sentiments and right-wing politics.

ABSTRACT

What can a focus on sound offer for listening to the global movements in solidarity with Palestine that unfolded on university campuses in April to June 2024? In Academic Freedom*, feminist soundwork—encompassing both the critical analysis of and production of sound—is attuned to multi-cited, multivocal refusals of manufactured consent for imperial violence by listening to, recording, and editing sounds and experiences of academic freedom on university campuses. This choice to anonymize the voices of early-career scholars (using AI) tells of the fragility of speech and the fragility of the institutions attempting to suppress it. This project explores how practices of embodied listening and sound production contribute to intersectional feminist solidarities.* [intersectional feminism; repetition; social movements; academic freedom; auto-ethnography]

NOTES

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activists, many of whom are still facing administrative reprisals for exercising their academic freedom. I'm grateful to my friend and collaborator Emiko Stock for her sustained engagement with this special collection. Thanks to Liron Mor for providing Hebrew translation. This collection received constructive feedback from anonymous reviewers. Thanks to the *Cultural Anthropology* editorial collective, in particular Matilde Córdoba Azcárate and Kate Ehrenhalt. This project benefited from the friendship and support of the Ethnocine Collective, the CoMMPCT Collective, and Le Communité d'apprentisage at Université Laval.

1. Zionism's nationalist discourse, which holds that Arabness and Jewishness are mutually exclusive, has contributed to the erasure of Arab Jews and Palestinian Jews (Shohat 1999). Imperial logics at work in how Palestinian artifacts are treated in archives and museums have contributed to the erasure of Palestinians and their rights (Azoulay 2019).
2. In a recent study at Bethlehem University, the majority of journalism students indicated that they felt sharing images of victims in Gaza was unethical, causing desensitization, emotional numbing, and secondary traumatic stress (Melhemallaham 2024).
3. Although we see this repression in academic contexts around the world, Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar (2024) chronicle the nature of what they describe as "enhanced" repression in the context of U.S. institutions, through alliances among university administrations, pro-Israeli organizations, U.S. politicians, and the Israeli government.
4. Please see credits at the end of the sound piece for attributions to activist and journalist media, shared on X and Instagram, that have been incorporated into this piece.
5. United Nations, "Gaza: UN Experts Deplore Use of Purported AI to Commit 'Domicide' in Gaza, Call for Reparative Approach to Rebuilding," Special Procedures press release, April 15, 2024. Available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/gaza-un-experts-deplore-use-purported-ai-commit-domicide-gaza-call

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