Tactical Soundwalking in the City
A Feminist Turn from Eye to Ear

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This article investigates a turn from eye to ear in the literature and practice of walking-as-art. Arguing for listening as a feminist and ecologically oriented mode of engaging with the world, the author examines the practice of soundwalking (Westerkamp) and Deep Listening (Oliveros), placing them in conversation with the work of Michel de Certeau, and concludes with a discussion of the creative projects of Suzanne Thorpe, Viv Corringham and Amanda Gutierrez in order to chart the importance of relational listening practices today.

FLÂNEUR/FLÂNEUSE

Let us begin with the flâneuse: The term flâneuse is a reapropriation of flâneur, a word that is gendered as male not only grammatically but conceptually. A popular literary figure of nineteenth-century France, the flâneur is the quintessential urban wanderer, a dissociated observer of modern society. The flâneur is also the archetypal figure of a history of walking in art and literature that has generally been oriented around the male subject—from Charles Baudelaire to Richard Long to Vito Acconci to Paul Smith. In response, recent feminist histories have turned to the walking practices of writers like Virginia Woolf and George Sand to uncover how female subjects have historically navigated public spaces differently from their male counterparts [1].

For example, Lauren Elkin, in her publication on this history of the flâneuse, quotes an anonymously authored pamphlet from 1806 that defines the flâneur as “a man about town who comes from sufficient wealth to be able to have the time to wander the city at will, taking in the urban spectacle” [2]. But, as Elkin muses in an interview on her treatise:

if the flâneur represents an emotionally detached man out on the street taking it all in, maybe if that’s not possible for a woman, she can instead choose to be very engaged. For women, perhaps being in the city and walking is a form of extreme un-detachment . . . bound up in everything that’s happening in your environment [3].

As he walks, he looks. As she walks, she listens.

How does the flâneur “take in” his environment? Honoré de Balzac described flânerie as “the gastronomy of the eye”; Victor Fournel described the “art of flânerie” as a moving picture (“un daguerréotype mobile”) of city life [4,5]. In other words, as the historically male figure of the flâneur walks, he looks. I would like to offer an alternate figure that I find much more generative: the female flâneuse who walks the city and, as she walks, listens.

I articulate the necessity of this shift to listening, and its relationship to feminist practice, by contrasting the work of French philosopher Michel de Certeau with that of Pauline Oliveros (founder of the philosophy and practice of Deep Listening) and Hildegard Westerkamp (innovator of the practice of soundwalking). I close with an examination of soundwalking projects by three contemporary artists (Suzanne Thorpe, Viv Corringham and Amanda Gutierrez) that help me tease out an alliance between feminism, walking practices and listening, ending with the question: What is feminist soundwalking, or flâneuserie sonore? [6]

WALKING IN THE CITY

Michel de Certeau’s influential The Practice of Everyday Life [7] explores creative reappropriations of everyday activities for revolutionary ends. In the seventh chapter, de Certeau turns to the everyday practice of walking, building on Guy Debord’s psychogeographic concept of the dérive (itself grafted on top of the idea of the flâneur): an unplanned “drift” through a city in which one allows themselves to be drawn by the flows of attractions exerted by different locations [8]. In “Walking in the City,” de Certeau proposes his own methods of walking as a tactic of creative resistance to the systems of repression that, for him, are structurally built into our urban environments [9]. Of course, no matter how revolutionary the aim—
whether embodied in the nineteenth-century flâneur, the psychogeographer of the 1950s or the tactical walker of the 1980s—this ability to roam the streets remains constricted by gender, race, class and ability [10]. Furthermore, this white, male, able and bourgeois flâneur not only walks, but looks.

De Certeau himself begins his chapter with an acknowledgment and critique of this visual orientation. He situates the reader before a panorama of the city. The seduction of the panorama, he explains, is in the fantasy it constructs of an ability to grasp everything in a single, totalizing view. The panorama here exemplifies what de Certeau terms the scopic drive: a drive for legibility and disentanglement, the “lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more” [11]. From the panorama, we look without being observed and we experience without being messily entangled in the physical, mental, political and historical realities of the city [12]. De Certeau proposes the act of walking as a way of countering such abstract ways of relating to the city. For de Certeau, when we walk, we experience ourselves as a part of the environment; we are not above it, but within it.

TURNING FROM EYE TO EAR

Merely moving down from the panorama and into the streets is not an adequate intervention into the abstraction and alienation of advanced capitalism with which de Certeau is concerned. We must also turn from eye to ear. While the eye in Western cultural discourse and practice—as exemplified by the panorama—represents control and objectification (a way of approaching the world as a resource to be exploited that is historically bound up in both patriarchal and settler-colonial capitalism), the ear can be figured as an ecologically responsive or feminist approach. Listening—inherently immersive, experiential and ever-present—enmeshes us in our surroundings. While Jonathan Sterne’s influential critique of the “audiovisuval litany” [13] cautions against naturalizing the metaphorical associations of different sensory modalities, we can remain cognizant that sensory experience is individually, culturally and historically varied while still acknowledging that, ideologically and experientially, listening offers a radically different orientation from that of sight. As artist and writer Salomé Voegelin argues, echoing Elkin above, listening is “an act of engaging in the world.” Of course, looking is an act of engaging in the world as well, but, as Voegelin explains, the critique of the visual is “not a critique of its object but of its practice” [emphasis added] [14]. Otherwise put, these two modes of engaging—looking and listening—invoke different orientations and ethical values (or, in the words of Annie Goh, they offer “different maps to a territory” [15]).

Listening Functions Otherwise

To rehearse a few of these differences: While binocular vision is optional and forward-facing, listening functions otherwise. We don’t have “earlids” that we can just close at will. Inescapable, sound surrounds us at all times and comes from all directions. We are situated, immersed, within sound. As vibration, sound literally touches us: our ears, our flesh, our bones. We experience this in our everyday: in bass felt in the belly, in loud sounds vibrating a windowpane, in the visceral response to a high-pitched squeak or fingers on a chalkboard. Most importantly, sound is coconstitutive, or interdependent. We are in the soundscape, but we are also an active part of that soundscape. We are sounding bodies. As Douglas Kahn writes, “there is no visual equivalent to the utterance of the voice” [16]. The early Greeks thought that the eyes projected light beams, but our eyes do not, in fact, emit perceptible light. Our bodies, however, do create sounds: sounds that are heard both internally and from a distance, reconfigured and filtered by our immediate environment. Listening is bound up in its surroundings in a way that—when paid attention to—both models and invites responsiveness, responsibility, collaboration.

While this elucidation doesn’t account for the ways that the ear can be taken up in sometimes unconsciously patriarchal ways, such as in the ahistorical earwitness imagined by R. Murray Schafer and others [17], it does try to situate listening as a feminist act. In other words, I am not arguing that the ear is de facto feminist but rather that the act of listening can be mobilized as a different model of engagement in the context of inherited Western norms and in resistance to hierarchical and objectifying ways of moving through the world organized by ocularcentrism. As Voegelin puts it, “listening affords us a different sense of the world and of ourselves living in this world; it affords a different relationship to time and space, objects and subjects and the way we live among them” [18]. In the final part of this short essay I’d like to consider what Voegelin means by a “different sense” and “different relationship” by turning to the work of sound innovators Pauline Oliveros and Hildegard Westerkamp and three contemporary artists informed by their work.

Deep Listening

Pauline Oliveros was a lesbian, pun-loving Texan who dedicated her life to listening. In the early 1970s, having decided that “we had heard from the men for long enough” [19] and wanting to find out what a queer, feminist music would sound like, Oliveros spent a year workshopping listening and sounding activities in an exclusively female-identified collective. The results of this research were published as a book of instruction scores, called “Sonic Meditations,” that provide a template for community sounding that is profoundly participatory, inclusive and nonhierarchical. These scores also formed the basis of what Oliveros would come to call Deep Listening, a practice of attending to one’s sonic environment as fully and continually as possible. Attuned to both struggles for human liberation and that of the ecological, nonhuman world, Oliveros saw this mode of attention as promoting individual and collective emancipation, and, in her words, “communication among all forms of life” [20].

Soundwalking

Around the time that Oliveros was developing her Sonic Meditations, Hildegard Westerkamp, then a research associate at the World Soundscape Project, was developing the
practice of soundwalking—artist-led public walks actively exploring the (usually urban) environment via sounds heard—out of a conviction that sonic information can uncover new and embodied insights about the ecological and social health of a place. While soundwalks are often led in silence, they are almost always a disruption of business as usual as they explore and reclaim public space. Gathered in small or large groups, soundwalkers may walk in silence, they may activate the soundscape with their voices or found objects, or they may walk as . . . slowly . . . as . . . possible. Importantly, these walks are typically followed by listening and sounding in the form of discourse, as participants are invited to reflect on and share their experiences.

CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES

I now turn to three contemporary artists whose work is profoundly informed by both Deep Listening and soundwalking practice: Suzanne Thorpe, Viv Corringham and Amanda Gutierrez. While their work employs a range of different strategies for walking and listening, each relies on the embodied immersiveness of these practices to build connection to, and agency within, their environments.

Environmental Entanglements

Resonance and Resemblance

Suzanne Thorpe’s Resonance and Resemblance is a site-specific performance or, as she terms it in reference to Oliveros's expanded listening practices, “sonic meditation” [21], for a 79-acre woodland garden in Garrison, New York (Fig. 1). As conceived by Thorpe, Resonance and Resemblance prioritizes receiving rather than projecting sound. While the piece does feature some sound projection—subtle, piercing tones composed to harmonize with resonant features of the environment that Thorpe studied over a period of a year—this musical performance is set within a larger structure of participatory soundwalking and Oliveros-inspired listening scores that are designed to make the audience, in Thorpe’s words, “more aware of their entanglements and interdependencies with each other and the environment” [22].

Soundwalking was a core research methodology for Thorpe, a way of developing intimacy with the site over the many hours, days, weeks and months of her compositional process. Wanting the audience to share in this experience of coming to know a site by moving through it, she invited guest artists, all trained in both Deep Listening and soundwalking practices (Michelle Nagai, Lisa B. Kelley and me), to lead the audience in soundwalks of their own design at the piece’s opening. This was a “deliberate strategy of distributing power” [23], as she invited each soundwalk leader to bring their own expertise and agency to the piece. It was also a strategy to guide the listening audience into their own sense of listening agency. Here, listening and sounding agencies are distributed between multiple composers, performers and the landscape itself.

Shadowwalks

Similarly attentive to listening as environmental entanglement is the work of Viv Corringham. In the ongoing project Shadowwalks (2003–present), Corringham asks individuals to take her on a personally meaningful walk, recording their conversations as they amble (Fig. 2). For Corringham, joining together...
in a shared rhythm of walking generates a sense of intimacy and shared everyday experience with her collaborators [24].

It is the guide’s natural pace of walking that establishes the rhythm of the walkers’ encounter, and Corringham will later strive to reembody this rhythm while retreading their route. On this second, solo walk, she will sonify her memory of the first walk through vocal improvisation, listening for the sounds of the present moment, her remembered experience and the resonances of her surroundings. Her final pieces—published on compact disc, via Soundcloud and as an iPhone app—combine recordings of both walks. Here, Corringham engages in a responsive compositional practice that collaborates intimately with the walker, their route and the changing acoustic environment.

Listening as a Shared Orientation

In the two works above, Thorpe and Corringham decenter their own authorship to include the agency of human and more-than-human others. But unlike, for example, the dispassionate decentering of John Cage’s chance operations, they are sensitive to who they are sharing authorship with—whether the resonances of a quarry and the many-voiced landscape of which it is a part or the daily path of a local walker. In the spirit of Oliveros’s feminist music-making, these are compositional forms in which listening is foregrounded as a shared and nonhierarchical orientation.

La flâneuse y la Caminanta

Amanda Gutierrez’s work engages with the history of the dérive and the figure of the flâneur in astute and political ways. Her projects situate listening squarely in the messy urban entanglements that de Certeau’s panorama would distance us from, and they highlight the ways in which what we hear and how we listen is shaped in unequal ways by how our bodies are coded in public space.

Gutierrez’s Flâneuse>La caminanta documents individual soundwalks of female-identified participants, using video and virtual reality to communicate the stakes of participating in walking as a female subject (Fig. 3).

In the Brooklyn League of Women Walkers, a collaboration between Gutierrez and Walis Johnson, participatory group walks provide a context for the investigation and reimagining of the daily walking experiences of women of color. Bringing attention to the streets as sites of intersectional difference in need of reclaiming, the methodology for these walks includes identifying what being vulnerable or empowered in public space means to each participant, tuning the ears though Deep Listening exercises adopted from Oliveros and then walking as a group to public locations that highlight the issues discussed. After each walk, participants create subjective maps of their experiences (Fig. 4) and collectively explore how existing sites might be reimagined: a pedestrian walkway here, a bike path there, a community gathering space, etc. [25].

In this work, a focus on sound and listening opens into community dialogue, do-it-yourself cartography and oral history, an approach equally evidenced in Gutierrez’s series of soundwalks in gentrifying areas (Chicago; New York; and Girona, Spain). In these soundwalks, Gutierrez leads participants in what she terms “derivas sonoras,” or sonic dérives [26]. Here, Debord’s psychogeographic flows of attraction are attuned to acoustic geographies, bringing attention to cultural information—from language diversity to flight patterns—that might be otherwise overlooked. The resulting final forms of the projects...
span interviews, field recordings and exercises in guerrilla urban planning (in addition to the photography, video and virtual reality pieces that are presented in gallery spaces).

It is this collective investigation and reimagination that I find most inspiring in Gutierrez’s work. Here, an experience of Deep Listening can open into an insight that can find its way into a conversation, onto a sticky-note on a map, into the ear of an urban planner and onward into a world that is in need not only of new ways of being but of new ways of *doing* that emerge from those new ways of being. In Gutierrez’s projects this political dimension becomes tangible as she invites audiences to engage critically with their surroundings with the goal of developing spaces of collaboration and creation for all but especially for those whose bodies are most vulnerable and whose voices are most silenced in public space and public discourse.

### References and Notes


6. The feminism at stake here is, of course, not simply about women. Rather, I understand feminism as a political orientation able to be practiced by any sex or gender identity that seeks to undo the structural power imbalances of sexism in intersection with racism, heterosexism and class oppression. Ultimately, my claim is for a feminist mode of practice that is oriented toward countering hierarchy and oppression through the strategies of creative listening and responsive collaboration that are deployed by the artists I discuss in this paper.


9. De Certeau [7], pp. 91–110.

10. This reality is eloquently argued in the responses to the recent call put out by the online publication *Sounding Out* for articles on the experience of “Soundwalking while POC”: https://soundstudiesblog.com/category/soundwalking-while-poc/.


22. Thorpe [21].


**WHAT IS FLÂNEUSERIE SONORE?**

To return to the question with which I began: What is feminist soundwalking, or flâneuserie sonore? It is my contention that practices of listening and walking can seed new relationships to the world around us. Feminist soundwalking moves us from eye to ear, from distant panorama to vibrating immediacy. Thorpe’s distributed listening agency, Corrighing’s responsive walks and Gutierrez’s ear-oriented sociopolitical intervention all invite their audiences to both feel into, and reflect critically on, their interpersonal relationships with the world around them. At a historical juncture where ecological and political crises abound, these artists offer ways to connect to who and where we are, to feel our enmeshment in the worlds around us, and to, most importantly, find new ways to respond.

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