
Sounding Emancipated Futures

ABSTRACT This commentary discusses the aural dimensions of resistance as addressed in several essays published in this issue of *Resonance*. **KEYWORDS** emancipated listening, materiality of sound, protest, Paul Robeson, Indymedia, Etta Moten Barnett, media activism

How might we best hear the aural dimensions of resistance? How does resistance resonate—both within the immediacy of sensory experience, and across histories? The presence of song and voice have of course always been central to protest, but how might we account for the various technological and aesthetic features that inflect the transmission, conduction, and reception of these sonic interventions? What kinds of subtle and overt acoustic textures shape our sensory and phenomenological relationships to protest? These points of inquiry are addressed and compellingly extended in various ways across several essays in this issue of *Resonance*.

In “The Emancipated Listener: Embodied Perception and Expanded Discourse,” Whitney Johnson proposes how we might theorize the possibility of *emancipated listening*. For Johnson, the sonically expanded sensorium, a phenomenological register of perception and meaning based less on the fixity of the visual and more on the fluidity and ephemerality of sound, emerges through and beyond Bergsonian notions of temporal duration and Kantian ideas of a cultivated universal aesthetic taste, signaling a contingently determined sense of aesthetic-political value based on “shared notions of identity.” If, as Johnson argues, recognizing sound in its nonlinear, polyphonic possibility can help us better account for the dynamic qualities of social engagement that generate new horizons of political discourse, then we might do well to consider how Gabriel Mindel, Luz Ruiz, and Angela Tate map the ways in which listening communities composed of differentially embodied identities and experiences are marked through the aurality of radio, voice, and song.

The relational and contingent qualities of sound, what Ana María Ochoa Gautier has generatively termed “acoustic assemblages,” are explored by Mindel, Ruiz, and Tate through sound studies analytics attuned to the technological and phenomenological interrelations of acoustic life.¹ What is particularly compelling and insightful in each of these eloquent case studies is the suggestion that the phenomenological qualities of sound are not defined simply by the ontological impacts of sound’s force on our bodies and capacities for perception—how we can feel its vibrations, for example, and how those physical encounters with the sonic might serve as proof of the autonomy of sound. While

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these writers certainly acknowledge the importance of such factors, they do so by bridging the materiality of sound—the transduction of sound waves projecting voices through the radio, for example—with its more ephemeral semiotic, experiential, and symbolic resonances. Put another way, these essays propose how communities and collectivities formed around struggle and resistance to economic, gender, and racial oppression convene and are fused through the materiality of sound at the same time as the sound gains degrees of resonant meaning through this correspondence.

In discussing Paul Robeson's historic 1952 concert at Peace Arch Park along the Canada–US border, a performance organized and performed in defiance of Cold War surveillance and prohibitions on Robeson's international movement, Gabriel Mindel shows how the subversive transduction of Robeson's voice across the physical space of the border undermines the settler imperialist cartography of nation-state borderlines and the regulation of transgressive Black bodily movement. The fugitive articulation of "alternative acoustic territory" that Mindel outlines through Robeson's Peace Arch concert is also premised on a bending of time, drawing upon sonic forms that speak to the longevity rather than solely the discrete nature of historical conditions of subjection through the technological manipulation of the voice and its projection of musical forms. Such an encounter between sound and state power points toward the possibility of a strategic de- and re-materialization of space through which communities, collectives, and coalitions converging around social and political struggle might reinvigorate visions and strategies of transformation.

The experience of reading Mindel's essay alongside the contributions of Ruiz and Tate encourages us to consider what Ruiz terms "altermundos sonoros" (sonic alterworlds) as alternative structures of feeling, meaning, and action that might elude and counterattack networks and machinations of global-historical oppression. Luz Ruiz explores the sonic presences of Indymedia Cancún and Radio Huracán within the 2003 WTO protests, pointing to this specific context of struggle while also more broadly noting the importance of sound as a tool that helps underline and amplify the unification of purpose among those collaborating in collective refusal. Building upon and taking into account the work of Ian Baucom, Tom McEnaney, and Michael Allan, the essay makes a notable turn back to Frantz Fanon's "This Is the Voice of Algeria" and, to my mind, lingers on Fanon's closing reflections on the centrality of the transmedial radio format within the emerging Algerian national consciousness and the resistance to French colonial occupation. For Fanon, the radio is the "means of saying 'no' to the occupation and believing in the liberation," as the "fundamental truth" of the radio's revolutionary possibility "has opened limitless horizons."² A crucial connection between Fanon's critical perspective and the cohort of connected essays in this issue is the collective push to recognize the differential possibilities and capacities for listening as radical praxis. In this sense, the "radical" is represented through its braiding of action, in terms of the immediacy of confrontation, and imagination, in the ability to envision futures outside of what a system might present as viable.

What might it mean, then, to imagine the contours of Black feminist intellectual and political activism through sound? Angela Tate's critical mapping of Etta Moten Barnett's

mid-20th-century radio broadcasts takes up this question by demonstrating how Barnett gave voice to the experiences and critical perspectives of important yet overlooked Black women engaged in Pan African political activity across the African diaspora. Tate carefully notes how Barnett's Black feminist diasporic sonic networking emerges through a transmedial interplay of sound and text, with Barnett often using the radio broadcasts to create points of departure from written newspaper and archival accounts of contemporary events in the African diaspora that provided perspectives defined primarily through masculinist frameworks. Tate points to a sonic seriality and circulation of what may otherwise have been largely overlooked and unheard Black women's voices that Barnett is able to uncover and highlight through the airwaves of the radio—perhaps most notably in relation to the occasion of the 1957 historical moment of Ghanaian independence, as captured through the Black feminist broadcasting efforts of Rose Odamtten of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, and through her radio interviews with Lucienne Heurtelou (Estimé), the First Lady of Haiti from 1946 to 1950, who was a staunch advocate for the rights of Haitian women in political and everyday life as the nation evolved between decades of US occupation and the brutal dictatorship of François Duvalier. Tate's deeply insightful and captivating archival recovery of Barnett's sonic archiving offers a double layering of unearthing the unheard and uncharted aural/oral histories of Black resistance that have too often been overshadowed by dominant masculinist-inflected paradigms of socio-historical accounting, and her work reminds us, alongside Ruiz's generative critical framing of "altermundos sonoros," of Fanon's meditations on the crucial place of the radio in furthering decolonial futures.

John Barber's descriptions of the multimedia memorials *Remembering the Dead* and *Say Their Names* outlines an approach to media activism that mobilizes vocal sound to represent and rearticulate the presence of those lives lost to mass gun violence and police brutality. Text that visually represents the names of the memorialized becomes unfrozen through the mobilization of sound that marks the emergence of names on the screen. While Barber looks most immediately to Jacques Derrida to theorize the spectrality of sound as an active force of awareness and change in the present, his critical perspective on this dimension of aural memorialization also offers a rejoinder to Jonathan Sterne's observation about the initiation of technologically recorded sound and death in the late 19th century: "Recording was the product of a culture that had learned to can and to embalm, to preserve the bodies of the dead so that they could continue to perform a social function after life."³ Building upon this vein of Sterne's observation, Barber envisions these memorialization projects as productively and imaginatively engaging with the spectral dimensions of death and afterlife, unmooring loss from stasis, and resetting these existential terms within an ongoing activist present that looks toward emancipated futures.

Barber shows us how the advancement of sonic technologies pushes the possibilities for memorialization beyond mimetic remembrance and into the creative rearticulation of loss and mourning in order to constantly refashion the grounds for artistic and political engagement. The sonic work of multidisciplinary artist and activist Moor Mother (Camae Ayewa) offers an additional creative lens that speaks to Barber's and can help us

enlarge the project of imagining how Black life might be sonically rearticulated in the face of violent loss. Moor Mother's 2016 album, *Fetish Bones*, opens with the heavily produced sonic collage "Creation Myth," a track blending spoken words, samples (from Wu-Tang Clan, among others), and various electronically manipulated sounds. The opening features faintly whispered lyrics "... every day a slaying / Two black girls hanging / Three black men choking / Gun to your face when you praying / Get lynched in ya cell for changing lanes," underneath the reverberating revolutions of what sounds like air rotating or being propelled by propellers.⁴ The sound is an invitation into lyrical and sonic time travel as Moor Mother announces within the unfolding opening movements of the composition that the piece is based on her speaking persona engaging in "travel throughout the race riots / From 1866 to the present time." The aural tapestry Moor Mother creates as the composition advances the spoken word contemplation of the historical terror of anti-Black violence ("the whisper of death . . . that has always been lingering") blends sonic presences, including the keyboard sound of what could be dub-era reggae, segments of free jazz saxophone, and strains of early blues singing. The narrative presence within the song travels through a psychic landscape of Black death punctuated by 1919, Watts, Ferguson, and references to James Byrd, Oscar Grant, and 13 Black women whose lives were taken in the context of white supremacy, ultimately arriving at the conclusion that she has returned to:

The same place I was in in 1866
A bleeding black body blowing in the wind
Tripping an ironic thickness of things never changing
Time is a balancing act that encompasses all things
Suspended in illusion⁵

Ayewa (Moor Mother) identifies as an Afro-futurist and has co-organized, with Ra-sheedah Phillips, an ongoing multidisciplinary collaborative project, Black Quantum Futurism Collective. They describe the commitment and orientation of the project as one that offers "a new approach to living and experiencing reality by way of the manipulation of space-time in order to see into possible futures, and/or collapse space-time into a desired future in order to bring about that future's reality."⁶ Ayewa and Phillips are committed to finding ways to bend time through sound in order to consider futurity as an alternative present within existential realities of contemporary Blackness.

Sound, as all of the writers and artists I have drawn upon in this essay elegantly demonstrate, reflects the immediacy of our environmental and ecological contexts, the contingent dimensions of our memories and histories, and the creative possibilities of our imaginations. The project of constructing anti-racist, anti-sexist, decolonial futures through sonic innovation points us toward the recognition of the epistemic and structural complexity of regimes of white supremacist and logics of division—systems that work seemingly incongruously, yet quite efficiently toward the atomization of identities through hyper-visible forms of representation that are nonetheless reductive. Form is a key word here, and we should consider how sound in this context can help sustain our inquiries into what Richard Wright refers to as "the forms of things unknown"—the ways

that sonic innovation creates avenues for the creation of identity and critical thought against the grain.

NOTES

1. Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
2. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965); Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).
3. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 292.
4. Moor Mother, "Creation Myth," *Fetish Bones*, Don Giovanni Records, 2016.
5. Moor Mother, "Creation Myth."
6. "Black Quantum Futurism," <https://www.blackquantumfuturism.com/about> (accessed July 20, 2021).