

Is it possible that our ears are no longer able to listen? Not because they have been physically damaged, but through an ongoing process of conditioning that has reduced our capacity to hear anything other than what we are *made to hear*. My research seeks to understand the cultural reception and production of sound. Specifically, I am looking at the politics of sound: how sound has been used as a form of social control by those in power to intimidate and silence, and how artists have used sound as a form of resistance against imbalances of power.

In our daily lives, we are constantly bombarded with sound, but usually do not pay much attention to it. Exposed to escalating densities of sonic signals, our audio faculties begin to fatigue – both in the physical experience of hearing sound, and the psychosocial act of listening to what it might communicate (Truax, 2001). Talking heads spout violent rhetoric, creating a system of discourse where the loudest voice, not the most reasoned argument, wins out. This creates an echo effect, where misinformation reverberates to become amplified in the public sphere. Under these conditions, “the soundscape slips from hi-fi to lo-fi condition and ultimately consumes itself in cacophony” (Schafer, 1993). This aural draining invites emotional deafness, silences dissent, and further disenfranchises people from participatory spheres. In today’s “iPod society” this trend towards “mediated urban isolation” is of growing significance (Bull, 2007). If “Othering” occurs through societal constructs that position certain sounds as residing outside of harmonic structures, so that they can only be perceived as noise (Kahn, 1999), is it possible to sonically subvert the situated listening of coloniality, which uses “circuits that disavow a relation of acoustic or other forms of accountability” (Posocco, 2016)?

The status quo is defined by which sounds are amplified and which are silenced, an effect that can ironically require those in power to silence themselves as well (Solnit, 2017). The social pressures of patriarchy enforce “psychic self-mutilation” so that men silence their own inner voices and feelings, at the same time they may violently regulate the silence of others (hooks, 2004). While “being heard” might simply offer the illusion of inclusion when it attempts to pacify rather than empower (Arvin, Tuck, Morrill, 2013), my research will examine how a move beyond hearing toward a focus on listening might invite an “ethics of attunement” that draws awareness to the “harmonic interconnectivity of all beings and objects” (Lipari, 2014). What might we do to remix societal “sound structures,” inspire deep listening as a vital means of participation (Oliveros, 2005), and create more equitable auralities? If we better understand the ways listening is positioned, might it be possible to decolonize the ear (Robinson, 2020)? The refusal to listen presents a sonic threat, an attempt to deny aural agency. Simultaneously and ironically, being silenced can also open channels of resistance through sonic acts of subversion. Just as power is not an absolute binary of dominant and dominated (Foucault, 1998), sound moves omnidirectionally to reveal that acts of silence might produce new ways of sounding as well.

The change in our soundscape since the industrial revolution is one of the most significant societal shifts humanity has experienced, but it is also the least noticed, receiving very little academic study. My research will review existing literature to investigate ways of making these situations more audible and propose ways that sound can be employed to build stronger communities, rather than sonically divide them. In exploring the potential of sound-based art to create new meanings and understandings in relation to political, environmental, and cultural issues, I will examine specific artists who have aurally activated the production of knowledge. This research-creation project will be expressed in a written component supporting a curated art exhibition of sound-based artworks. The value in this research is creating a better appreciation for how sound affects our daily lives, revealing how capitalist and nationalistic structures have often exploited the use of sound to manipulate and intimidate. By making situations of sonic control more audible, the public will be better equipped to recognize and resist these effects. Coming from a background of both music performance and museological practice as a curator, writer, and exhibition developer, I am interested in how audiences respond to sound and generate “embodied ways of knowing” (Barbour, 2016). I am confident that the combination of my past experience and use of transdisciplinary research methods will produce new forms of cultural knowledge, and make a significant contribution to the emerging field of sound studies.

References

- Arvin, M., Tuck, E., & Morrill, A. (2013). Decolonizing feminism: Challenging connections between settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy. *Feminist Formations*, 25(1), 8.
- Barbour, K. (2016). Embodied ways of knowing. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 10(1)
- Bull, M. (2007). *Sound moves: iPod culture and urban experience*. London; New York;: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1998) *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, London, Penguin.
- hooks, b. (2004). *The will to change: Men, masculinity, and love*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Kahn, D. (1999). *Noise, water, meat: A history of sound in the arts*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Lipari, L. (2014). *Listening, thinking, being: Toward an ethics of attunement*. Penn State University Press.
- Oliveros, P. (2005). *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*. New York: iUniverse, Inc.
- Posocco, S. (2016). (Decolonizing) the ear of the other: subjectivity, ethics and politics in question. In: Bakshi, S. and Jivraj, S. and Posocco, S. (eds.) *Decolonizing sexualities: Transnational perspectives, critical interventions*. Oxford, UK: Counterpress.
- Robinson, D. (Forthcoming 2020). *Hungry listening: Resonant theory for Indigenous sound studies*. Minneapolis, MN. University of Minnesota Press.
- Schafer, R. M. (1993). *The soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*. United States; Rochester, Vt;: Destiny Books.
- Solnit, R. (2017). A Short History of Silence. In: Solnit, R., & Calzada, P. d. l. (eds) *The mother of all questions*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books
- Truax, B. (2001). *Acoustic communication* (2nd ed.). Westport, Conn: Ablex.

Additional Bibliography/Resources

- Barthes, R. (1991). *The responsibility of forms: Critical essays on music, art, and representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Blessner, B., & Salter, L. (2007). *Spaces speak, are you listening?: Experiencing aural architecture*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Eshun, K. (1998). *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*: Quartet Books.
- Goodman, S. (2010). *Sonic warfare: Sound, affect, and the ecology of fear*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Ihde, D. (2007). *Listening and voice: Phenomenologies of sound* (2nd ed.). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kohut, T. (2015). Noise pollution and the eco-politics of sound: Toxicity, nature and culture in the contemporary soundscape. *Leonardo Music Journal*, 25(25), 5-8.
- LaBelle, B. (2006). *Background noise: Perspectives on sound art*. New York: Continuum International.
- Nancy, J., & Mandell, C. (2007). *Listening* (1st ed.). New York: Fordham University Press.
- Simpson, L. (2009). The Attempted Dispossession of Kwe. In *As We Have Always Done*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Stevenson, L. (2014). Facts and Images. In *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Stoeber, J. (2016). *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: NYU Press.
- Toop, D. (2010). *Sinister resonance: The mediumship of the listener*. New York: Continuum.
- Volcler, J., & Volk, C. (2013). *Extremely Loud: Sound as a Weapon*: New Press.
- Warren, J. (2014). *Music and Ethical Responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.