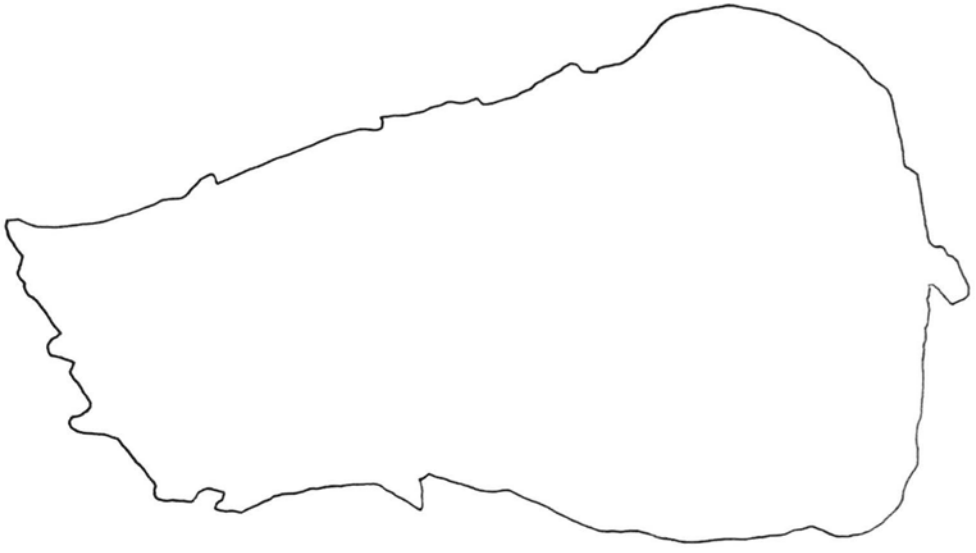

Sounding the Margins: What Gets Amplified
Raven Chacon and Candice Hopkins

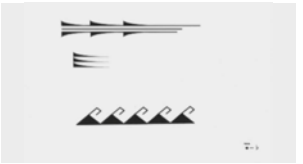

Fig. 1: Raven Chacon, score excerpt from … lahgo adil'i dine doo yeehos-inilgii yidaaghi *(2004)*

Candice Hopkins (CH) "We have no ear lids. We are condemned to listen." These are the opening lines of composer R. Murray Schafer's essay "Open Ears." While we can't close our ears, this doesn't mean that we listen to everything that is being said, and this is particularly true for those whose ears seem closed more often than they are open. How can we attune ourselves to pick up different frequencies, to feel what reverberates, to hear what sounds at the margins? What might be a decolonial practice of listening? Dylan Robinson suggests that this is necessarily an intersectional action, one that takes place both bodily and ideologically. How might we tune out the colonial subfrequencies that constantly hum in our ears and hear beyond them, beneath them, hear another future aside from them?

Indeed, a missing component of discourses on decolonization is the practice of deep listening—a term coined by composer Pauline Oliveros. In the visual arts we are so conditioned by our eyes that we have all but forgotten about our ears. Many of our minor voices sound out to the void. But this void is not truly a void. Dolleen rightly relays that the harmonics are everywhere if we can just tune in. This includes the harmonics of the stones—our grandmothers and grandfathers; for Dine, they are the gods. This includes the harmonics of the leaning trees that always reveal the direction of the wind and their teaching in the way that they bend to pressure rather than break; this includes the harmonics of the water, host to another world of beings, powerful even today. This is the water that you sense in this place by feeling it, by smelling it, before you hear it.

Lately, I have opened my ears. This is what is sounding at the margins; it is a chorus that is becoming louder by the day. A collective of minor voices filled with major players. A peripheral ensemble perhaps, but we practice every day, conditioning our vocal chords, we are finding our tune. It might be a cacophony, but noise is generative: Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write in *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* that "[t]he cacophony is "extra-musical"—"we hear something in them that reminds us that our desire for harmony is arbitrary."[1] In other words: "Listening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild beyond to the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us"—the wild beyond.[2]

1 *Harney, Stefano / Moten, Fred: The* Undercommons. Fugitive Planning & Black Study, *Wivenhoe / New York / Port Watson 2013, S. 7.* **2** *Ebd.*

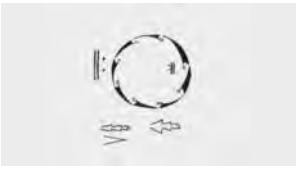

Fig. 2: Raven Chacon, score excerpt from … lahgo adil'i dine doo yee-hosinilgii yidaaghi *(score excerpt)*

Fig. 3: Raven Chacon, While Contemplating Their Fate in The Stars, The Twins The Enemy *(2003). Sound sculpture with two live finches, theremin, cage, amplifier, speakers*

Fig. 4: Beau Dick, copper cutting ceremony, Victoria, BC

What is *the sound of the sovereign*? Is it here among us now, in this room? Is it here as you are listening to me and I am listening to you?

Raven Chacon (RC) Definition of music—beauty lining up with other beauty.

It is the universe reminding you that it is listening to you.

Repeating sound, overlapping sounds. A ceremony of sound. To break the spell or the convention of time that we have been forced to adhere to. Music is the basis for every ceremony, just as art is the basis for every ritual.

CH What is decolonial listening? Decolonization is, as we know, an active practice—a verb not a metaphor, a present process that echoes into the future. I think that the way to begin this, the way to bring people to this place, is to first listen to those who are here.

Freeing the voices wedged beneath dominant history can redress some of the violence that has reduced Indigenous peoples—Indigenous lives—to "numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse." By dwelling in these fragments, by spending time in the discomfort of the incomplete and listening to the shards that stand in for history, it is possible to attune our ears to hear something of these stifled voices. The politics of colonial entanglement offer the possibility not only to hear but to listen to their silences as well.

Trapped voices,
frozen
under sea ice of English,
buckle,
surging to be heard.
We say
"Listen for sounds.
They are as important
as voices."
Listen.
Listen.
Listen.
Listen.
—Nora Marks Dauenhauer

This is a series of remarks predicated on recovering fragments of speech, of sound, on tuning our ears to the voices drowning beneath the colonial din. Indigenous and colonial histories are simultaneously

Figs. 5, 6: Beau Dick and collaborators, Lalakenis *copper cutting ceremony, Parliament Hill, Ottawa, Ontario*

Fig. 7: Demonstrators from the Quebec student movement joined with the Idle No More protest the night of January 16, 2013. Photo: Andrew Brennan

Fig 8: Idle No More protest, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

known and unknown; they hover at the threshold of the audible.

I am listening, and this is what I am hearing.

RC In November of 2016, one week after Donald Trump was elected as the forty-fifth president of the United States, I was invited to join my friend, Hunkpapa Lakota artist Cannupa Hanska Luger, who is based in Santa Fe, on one of his runs back to his home community of Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. The approved Energy Transfer Partners' Dakota Access Pipeline through the traditional homelands and waterways of the Lakota had prompted a worldwide response of protest and gathering at the site of the construction.

I felt it was important to go to Standing Rock for a few reasons.

Firstly, there were many people from my own community as well as friends and relatives from other Native Nations heading to the camp. As of September 2016, the protest had become the single largest gathering of Native Americans in more than 100 years, since the Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876. It was important for me to learn about the encroaching of this pipeline and to offer my friend help on his journey back to his reservation.

CH Here are some of the things that are sounding the margins:

The piercing cry of the Hamatsa song on Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

A copper breaking, an official shaming of the Canadian government brought from Alert Bay, British Columbia, gathering a host of resistors along the way.

Beau Dick on the steps of Canadian Parliament—singing the song of the Hamatsa ceremony. An initiation ceremony whereby boys become men and power is enacted by the eating of the other. Here the cutting of the copper on the steps of parliament is to shame the government for its injustices. The broken bits of copper left as "a gift" as the evidence of the action. The government's response was not to accept the gift, but to ship the pieces to a museum in British Columbia.

Fig. 9: An LRAD mounted on an armored vehicle in Standing Rock. Photo: Ryan Vizzions Image rights: https://www.ryanvizzions.com/

Figs. 10, 11: Rebecca Belmore, Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother, *1991*

How does ceremony create rupture? How does song establish presence? How does it change the course of the future? I like to think of noise as potential, the ability to follow my instincts and trust confusion more.

Originating at a time of great disconnect, and discontent, out of the need to be heard.

We need to come together in this homelessness—to reimagine the future. *To learn more from improvisation.* Improvisation was at the heart of Idle No More, a common form—the round dance, that everyone knew and could take part in. Where all songs were welcome, all rhythms accepted.

An important part of decolonization is refusal—*we refuse to be the broken part.*

As Leanne Simpson writes in her poem entitled "Leaks":

> *for every one of your questions there is a story hidden in the skin of the forest. use them as flint, fodder, love songs, medicine. you are from a place of unflinching power, the holder of our stories, the one who speaks up*
>
> the chance for spoken up words drowned in ambush
>
> *you are not a vessel for white settler shame,*
>
> even if I am the housing that failed you.[3]

James Baldwin insisted in 1962 that the violence towards Black lives on the colonial frontier cannot be allowed to adopt a guise of innocence: "[T]hey have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. … But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime."

The same holds true for the ongoing violence predicated towards Indigenous lives. Ann Laura Stoler has a term for active forgetting so couched: "colonial aphasia." The sense of innocence of which Baldwin speaks is one of the elements of colonial aphasia, but Stoler's definition goes further.

3 *Simpson, Leanne,* Islands of Decolonial Love, *Winnipeg 2015, S. 21.*

Fig. 12: Raven Chacon, Drum Grid *(2010), composition for dozens of drummers dispersed in a neighborhood.* Drum Grid *(2010) is a composition for numerous drummers, each positioned on a street corner. Beginning with a single drum hit from one player, subsequent drummers imitate the sound of the previous drummer down the block, with the gesture evolving as it travels around the neighborhood. Over time, the performers misinterpret their cues and source material, therefore adding new gestures to the original musical action, as nearby buildings and houses create more false echoes and polyphony. By performing* Drum Grid, *a community has agency to change the landscape of their neighborhood, activating potential questions and new generative urgencies.*

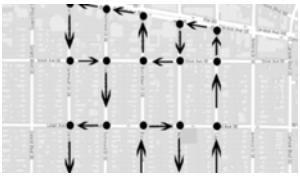

Fig. 13: Map for performance of Drum Grid *in Albuquerque NM, May 2011*

Colonial aphasia implies a "disassociation so profound that colonial history becomes unspeakable." Aphasia produces a breakdown in communication—thus the inability to match language (written, spoken, or read) to thought—despite the fact that the senses and other faculties are intact. Colonial aphasia implies such a profound breakdown that the horrors of the past not only go unspoken but remain incomprehensible—perhaps even unlistenable—even when their effects are acutely felt in the present.

RC Secondly, my collective Postcommodity had been working on a new artwork utilizing Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRADs for short). LRADs are hyperdirectional sonic weapons, first used by commercial cargo ships off the coast of Africa, then later used by military forces around the world and, more frequently and recently, used by police departments in the United States for nonlethal but extremely painful crowd control. Capable of producing loud sounds and the ability of beaming these sounds for miles, they had begun to be used on Americans at the G20 Summit in 2009 and again at Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Oakland gatherings. There are reports that similar speakers have been used on detainees at Guantanamo.

So I had heard from friends and heard others on social media saying that there was an increasing presence of military-grade weaponry being brought to the boundaries of the Oceti Sakowin water protector camp. I had decided that if I was going to be researching these weapons, which use sound to silence the voices of others, and if I was going to be using these as tools for creating artwork, I thought it was only fair that I experience one directly.

CH Rebecca Belmore's Megaphone was first activated in an act of protest in 1991. It is sounding again.

Rebecca Belmore's work is concerned with voice, particularly of those who are silenced. It also amplifies those who need a broader audience, those who are displaced and who continually have to remake their home wherever they can.

March 10, 1990, marked the beginning of the so-called Oka Crisis. The crisis ruptured the thin veneer of moderate Canadian society and exposed the festering

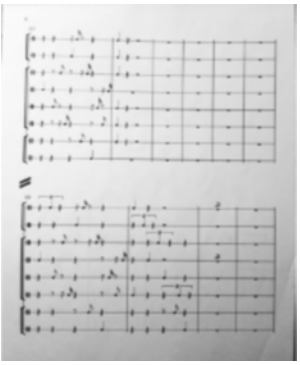

Fig. 14: Raven Chacon, Report *(2001) for firearm ensemble.* Report *is a musical composition scored for an ensemble playing various caliber firearms. The sonic potential of revolvers, handguns, rifles, and shotguns are utilized in a tuned cacophony of percussive blasts interspersed with voids of timed silence. In the piece, guns—instruments of violence, justice, defense, and power—are transformed into mechanisms for musical resistance.*

Fig. 15: Raven Chacon, video still from Report *(2001), for firearm ensemble*

Fig. 16: Image sourced from https://glasstire.com/2018/03/04/art-dirt-the-border-wall-doesnt-make-donald-trump-a-conceptual-artist/

wound of colonialism beneath. A standoff was sparked by the decision by the mayor of the French-Canadian village of Oka to expand a golf course from nine to eighteen holes. For the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) community of nearby Kanehsatà:ke, whose land rights had been continually degraded since the 1700s, it was the last straw. The women formed a line to protect the stand of trees that grew over burial grounds of years past. This line escalated into a bitter seventy-eight-day protest. During their defense of what little remained of their territories, the voices of Indigenous peoples were drowned out or blatantly manipulated by mainstream media.

Belmore saw this as an opportunity to speak back. One year later, in 1991, in time for Canada's embarking on a number of activities to "celebrate" 500 years since the arrival of Columbus, she oversaw building a massive megaphone out of finely inlaid wood veneer with decorative finishes of moose hide and skillfully cut leather lashing. The megaphone then toured for more than a year to communities across Canada, visiting those who needed it most. Its large size echoed the degree of tone deafness towards the dire issues facing Indigenous communities to become a transitory monument. It became a means to amplify the voices of the dispossessed and enlarge the platform for growing agency among Indigenous peoples.

Schafer wrote in 1973 that "The ears of the state have never been more curious or more open"—this is truer today than ever. Consider wire-tapping, the illicit listening, collecting, archiving, all happening on behalf of our "safety." Of course, we know that surveillance is a weapon of power. If the state is an eavesdropping device with ears that are everywhere, how can we turn these ears to our benefit? How might these archives become our weapons? How might this megaphone for amplification, when turned around, be a device also to listen?

RC And thirdly, as I had heard about the existence of the LRADs and multiple other stories about what was happening to Native people at the encampment, and all of this emanating from social media, I felt it very necessary to go for myself and decipher this noise and cascading feedback loop domino effect of information and misinformation aimed at those who wanted to learn more.

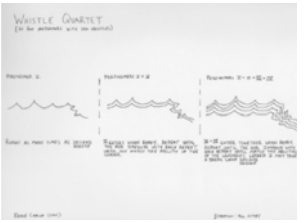

Fig. 17: Raven Chacon, Whistle Quartet *(2001)*

Fig. 18: Window Rock, AZ

Fig. 19: Sandia Mountains, NM

Fig. 20: Canyon DeChelly, AZ.
One of my earliest works were a series of field recordings of places in the Southwest chosen for their quietness. The recordings, captured on quiet times of day or night, are then amplified to their maximum volume. While seemingly reduced to noise, the recordings magnify revealing colors and patterns, giving new information about the essence of each location.

Such misinformation was coming from not only opponents of the water protectors, but from all directions on the internet, allies or non-allies, from people who were there and more from people who were not. If I may, to make sense of who was at the Oceti Sakowin when I did arrive, I think I can organize some of the people who were gathering into three groups—the first being non-Native allies, journalists, and others who were looking for some kind of Burning Man, camping experience.

The second type of water protector that I met at the camp were the young Native warriors, representing tribes from across the span of North America, justifiably angry at the world of the 21st Century and all it has supplied to create this encroaching black snake into another tribe's homelands. Their strategy was to separate themselves even further. To cordon themselves off into a mini reservation, inside of the larger makeshift Oceti Sakowin camp, already inside of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which is trapped inside of the United States of America. To me, I saw their stance as the best position to scream with one's back against the wall.

The worst thing an American Indian can do is preach to a choir that was never listening.

CH At the moment, language is becoming fragmented, polarized, and increasingly essentialized. The voices of the extreme left and the extreme right are starting to speak in the same tongue, their statements and actions underpinned with anxieties of identity, rising nationalism, and fears of marginalization. *Casa tomada* co-curator José Luis Blondet relayed in an early meeting that it was when the right adopted the language of the left (and vice versa) that the political system in his home country of Venezuela broke down. When the middle ground erodes away, what comes to fill its space?

Anxieties about identity and the Other are once again taking political form. They are manifesting materially in things like the border wall prototypes presently installed near Otay Mesa, California (Carolina Miranda, so many shades of putty). They are manifesting legally in travel bans from subjectively selected countries that inherently serve to further bias, injustice, and unrest. They are manifesting personally

Fig. 21: Image courtesy of documenta 14, https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13562/postcommodity

Fig. 22: Marketing images of the LRAD 500X, a long-range acoustic device. The manufacturers' description contends that the product offers "unparalleled long-range communication and scalable non-lethal, non-kinetic Escalation of Force" (capitalizations in original).

Fig. 23: http://www.artnews.com/2017/06/07/pick-a-lock-on-the-hunt-at-documenta-in-athens/

in the mutual suspiciousness of groups of people. Anxiety breeds mischaracterization, as when a police officer tries to justify the shooting of a Black man in the back by stating that he "feared for his life," or when a young white supremacist fears that his "rights" are being threatened and guns down nine Black parishioners and children. More subtly, a woman called 911 on two prospective university students, Native Americans from New Mexico, for being "too quiet" and having strange emblems on their shirts, making her feel "creeped out." In her call, she described them as Hispanic and stated that one was "from Mexico." This is civil society and civil rights deteriorating. This is the middle ground slipping away.

This deterioration has a particular rhetoric. As part of our curatorial research and conversations, we began to listen more closely to the words used to distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic, the narratives used to describe official and unofficial histories concerning who "belongs" and who does not. We also turned our attention to the instances when words fail, to the stutters, the mistakes, and the rise of neologisms—how the descriptor "the wall" rose to replace nuanced discussions on immigration, manufacturing hate while dangling an all-too-simple solution. The wall is a hardened manifestation of the divide between "us" and "them." But we also began to listen to other narratives, stories in which those described as lacking in power begin to turn the tables in order to restore the space of freedom—freedom of thought, freedom of imagination—a space where words have both power and play.

RC An aside: Navajo ontology is utterly connected to language, when something is spoken about, not only has the possibility of its existence now entered in the consciousness and awareness of the speaker and listener, but also a whole world exists where the thing spoken about can now manifest.

New worlds are created when sounds are born, so words and phrases and some songs have become a taboo when sounded.

The third water protector I encountered were Native people who had come to Oceti Sakowin simply to be with other Native people. They came for a few days or longer, much longer, from nearby Native communities or small towns or larger cities, or even further

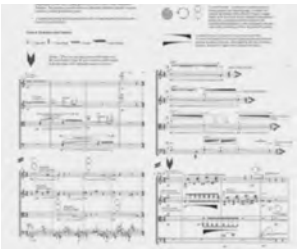

Fig. 24: Raven Chacon, The Journey of the Horizontal People *(for string quartet) (2016).*
The Journey of the Horizontal People *is a string quartet commissioned by Kronos Quartet. The piece is designed so that the players become lost from each other as the music progresses through time. It requires that the quartet include a woman so that she can realign the group when they lose their way.* The Journey of the Horizontal People *is a future creation story telling of a group of people traveling from west to east, across the written page, contrary to the movement of the sun, but involuntarily and unconsciously allegiant to the trappings of time. With their bows, these wanderers sought out others like them, knowing that they could survive by finding these other clans who resided in the east, others who shared their linear cosmologies. It is told that throughout the journey, in their own passage of time, this group became the very people they were seeking.*

places; came to camp, to cook, to eat, to sing, to laugh, to pray, to sit in silence, to be.

CH The words are also a reminder that it is time to reclaim something of the wildness that so threatened the newcomers, to *un-civilize* in order to unleash the potential in other systems, in Indigenous social contracts, in Native understandings of reciprocity, and healing. This impetus isn't only about reclaiming land, reclaiming language, and reclaiming culture (although those are certainly parts of it); it is also about *augmenting* all the things that the newcomers found so threatening in us, a reclamation that is admittedly rife with colonial entanglements. While it may not be possible to unsnarl every knot that now binds us, it is possible to separate off a few threads in order to begin weaving new narratives from the Indigenous experiences of empire and early capitalism. Such an act is both a decolonial and a deimperial one. As scholar Chris Green observes, before decolonialism can be put into practice, deimperialism needs already to have begun.

RC The recent work by Postcommodity, *The Ears Between Worlds Are Always Speaking,* is a long-form, two-channel hyperdirectional four-act opera projected upon the ancient ruins of Aristotle's Lyceum. Broadcasting for 100 days during last year's documenta 14 exhibition, which took place in both Kassel, Germany, and Athens, Greece, TEBW was an all-day opera consisting of twenty-two songs, the libretto gathered from the narratives of refugees from Syria + Afghanistan who have arrived in Greece, stories from migrants who have traversed the desert of US/Mexico borderlands, and stories from the Navajo Long Walk and the Cherokee Trail of Tears. Both of these are instances of the US government trying to remove indigenous people from their homelands and kill them in the process.

CH Sound is weaponized. During World War II, fighter jets flew low to simulate the dropping of bombs, keeping citizens on edge. In Guantanamo Bay, metal music was blasted at intolerable levels in the belief that, over time, the sonic barrage would psychologically break the interned. And now, "non-lethal" weapons that rely purely on hyperdirectional sound are commonplace. Postcommodity, a collective

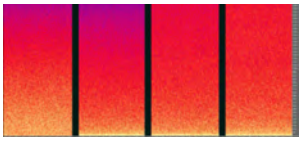

Fig. 25: Pink noise comparison spectrogram—from left: MFOS, "passive," ESP and Adobe Audition generated. Image source: https://syntherjack.net/make-some-pink-noise-generator/.

Blind / Curtain *is a gift and blessing to the visitors who experience it. The installation, by Postcommodity, acts as a threshold for audiences to cleanse themselves of the outside world and prepare their hearts and minds. It is a physical and conceptual threshold for demarcating outside and inside, and acknowledging and reifying the spaces and artworks as well as the spaces and contexts between. It is aware of itself as a node of power—a determiner of space—a border. It is a membrane constructed of pink noise to consider the human dilemma that contains secrets, provides access, creates the illusion of privacy (prevents access), provokes surveillance, and embodies love.*

of artists all born in the 1970s and based in the southwestern United States, recognize that while sound has the potential to harm, it also has the potential to heal.

In Postcommodity's installation, motion takes on a pedagogical dimension. What can we learn by listening to narratives of self-determination? Can what you hear change what you see?

RC Two LRADs were mounted on rooftops of the Hellenic Armed Forces Officer's Club and the Athens Conservatory of music, two buildings surrounding the Lyceum, the site of the school of peripatetic learning. At the installation, audiences experience a shifting call and response hyperdirectionality of sound when walking around the ruins of the school. Postcommodity's feeling is that, as today we are witnessing the greatest mass migration in the history of mankind, we are in the potential presence of sixty million scholars seeking refuge.

CH This account of the sounds of Standing Rock was relayed to me by Raven who spent almost two weeks in the encampment. During that time, he recorded much of what he heard, including the women's "silent" protest on the bridge.

But what about the times when words fail, when silence takes over? During the noDAPL protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, water protectors staged a powerful action. With elders leading, more than one thousand women walked to the bridge over what is now called the Missouri River to occupy the only middle ground between themselves and the police and private security firms called in to "protect" the interests of the corporations involved. When they reached the center of the bridge, the women stood together in absolute silence. As John Cage's composition *4'33"* (4 minutes and 33 seconds) revealed so long ago, silence is never truly silence. Soon, other sounds were amplified for those who had gathered—the sounds of terror and surveillance. Everyone present could hear the constant hum of drones overhead recording every move, the buzz of the private security firm's handheld radios, and the metallic clicks of police as they readied their firearms and prepared canisters of tear gas. The authorities were prepared for the usual forms of protest, but not for this one. In the absence of words, the women

became another kind of critic, their silence a powerful affront to corporate abuse of power and the inability to think beyond the insatiable need for resources. The women's decision *not* to raise their voices, but to rely on their irreducible presence instead, became a destabilizing force.

Like those fearless women, art has a transfiguring capacity that allows us to hear in moments of silence, to open our ears rather than to close them.

"I have nothing to say and I am saying it"
—John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing," New York, NY 1949

"I can't breathe"
—Eric Garner, New York, NY 2014