

In Quest of Equipoise

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“Let us undertake an ethnomusicology of tears. I am after the frequency of NDN grievability. My hunch is that the pitch interrogates itself, like a hymn. What I know: a primal shout is a counter anthropological event, though unsustainable as a performance of politics. Does futurity have a sound? Does agel-essness? What is a noiseless poetry? Utopia? When I fell in love, sound devoured itself—this is the hospitality of silence. Before Canada, there was an unfillable quiet. An ancestral chant not yet heard anew.”

Billy-Ray Belcourt, excerpt from “Fragments Ending With A Requiem”¹

“When silence is
Abdication of word tongue and lip
Ashes of once in what was
.....Silence
Song word speech
Might I...like Philomena ...sing
continue
over
into
..... pure utterance”

Marlene NourbeSe Philip, excerpt from “She Tries Her Tongue...”²

“If he who listens listens fully, then he who listens becomes he who understands.”

“As for the ignorant man who does not listen, he accomplishes nothing. He equates knowledge with ignorance, the useless with the harmful. He does everything which is detestable, so people get angry with him each day.”

Vizier Ptahhotep, excerpt from “*The Maxims of Ptahhotep*”³

It is said that the eye, and thus vision, is the window to the soul. If that is so, then the ear, and thus listening, must be the door or even the gateway to the soul. If we accept that the listening organ is the body, the body as ear, then that gateway becomes even wider. This detour in thought might be a way to understand what Jacques Attali meant when he wrote in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* that: “for twenty-five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible.”⁴

We have inherited a world crafted by people who have tried to see the world and who have tried to read the world. To say the least, it is this impossibility of listening to the world, listening to the lands, listening to the plants and animals, listening to people, listening to the voices of the waves that caress the shores, to the grumbling of waters, the impossibility of listening to the winds that carve the sand and the contours of the earth, the impossibility to listen to the murmurs of stones and hills and mountains that has led to the colonization of the world, the dehumanization of indigenous peoples around the world, the disenfranchisement of people, the appropriations of lands, and ultimately destruction of the environment. It is the European colonizers’ deafness towards the world’s voices that has led to the building of highways that have destroyed both human and animal settlements, communities, and nature, the building of dams that have displaced millions of people, disrupted local

1 Billy-Ray Belcourt: NDN Coping Mechanisms. Notes from the Field.

2 Marlene Nourbese Philip: She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks.

3 Cited in Christian Jacq: *The Living Wisdom of Ancient Egypt*, p. 76f.

4 Jacques Attali: *Noise. The Political Economy of Music*, p. 3.

ecosystems, created increased risks of flooding and landslides, among other. How else might one explain the discovery of over 1,000 unmarked children's graves and remains at former Indigenous residential boarding schools run by Christian missionary institutions in Saskatchewan, the Cowessess First Nation, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Nation, the Ktunaxa Nation, the Penelakut Tribe,⁵ and in many other places, if not through this impossibility to listen to the first nation people and their world? How else might we explain the killing of over 5,000 people in just four years in the 'anglophone' part of Cameroon by a neocolonial government that has been in place for over four decades and has done much to separate and to exploit its people, if not through this impossibility to listen to the plights of the Cameroonians West of the Mungo and their world? How else can we explain why, despite an ongoing war, Switzerland allows the Cameroonian president to carelessly spend/waste his country's money in Switzerland. As swissinfo.ch's Julia Crawford put it: "Reports in 2018 that alleged Cameroon's president [...] runs his country from a Geneva hotel raise questions whether official Switzerland can intervene in such cases."⁶ Further: "According to a report in early 2018 by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), the Cameroonian president has spent at least 1,645 days on private visits abroad since he came to power in 1982, and Geneva is by far his favourite destination. The Hotel Intercontinental in Geneva with its swimming pool and view of Mont Blanc is the residence of choice for the Cameroonian presidential couple." How does one explain Swiss neutrality in the face of a humanitarian crisis?

We have inherited a deeply disturbed and imbalanced earth, an earth that vertiginously rotates around its own axis, and desperately needs to regain its balance, its equilibrium, and to re-discover its rhythm. In one of his last interviews for *Unlimited Americana*, Halim El-Dabh discussed the way in which he worked with energy and vibrations, and how he materialized these with the instruments and the orchestras. He stressed that he wanted to express the energy that came from the frequencies of colors and to: "explore the relationship of color and art to sound and noise and elements of vibrations, to project them, to create a vibration that is positive and in line with the Earth's positive vibration. Maybe that's too much to ask for? You know, the philosophy of ancient

5 <https://www.livescience.com/childrens-graves-residential-schools-canada.html> (12.01.2023).

6 https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/who-foots-the-bill-_cameroon-s-biya--why-the-swiss-won-t-stop-his-geneva-stays/44644510 (12.01.2023).

Egypt says that everything in life, everything in the environment, has a feeling, and that's a whole different thinking process than our modern Western one. For them, the sun itself has feelings, and it can reflect back and forth".⁷ Halim El Dabh seems to state, both here and in other writings, that sound plays an important role in the tuning of the earth towards a positive vibration. He seems to insinuate that there might actually be something like a sonic healing that could happen if only we would readopt an epistemic frame, a way of being in the world, which understands everything that is in the world as an important part of that world and that are necessary for the earth to be, to breathe, and to be in balance. How do we listen to the feelings of the sun, the wind, the rocks, the waters, the worms, trees, and others? How do we activate their vibrations to strike a balance? How do we find equipoise — within and without?

Let us drift into that space called the cochlea, to that portion of the inner ear that looks like a snail shell. The cochlea is important as a space of translation. In the ear, the cochlea receives sound in the form of vibrations, which cause the stereocilia to move, and the stereocilia then converts these vibrations into nerve impulses which are taken up to the brain in order to be interpreted. It is this translation, from the physicality of vibration to the neural impulse, that makes the cochlea special. In general, the inner ear, to which the cochlea, vestibule, and semicircular canals all belong, is responsible for hearing, for balance, and for equilibrium: equilibrium with respect to the movement of the head in relation to gravity — static or gravitational equilibrium, and equilibrium with respect to the movement and acceleration of the head horizontally, vertically, and in rotation — dynamic or rotational equilibrium. To think of the cochlea, literally and metaphorically, in relation to museums, is to imagine museums and sites of arts and culture as spaces of and for rituals of transmission, of transformation, of translation, of transcription, and of the transfer of both epistemes and ways of being in the world. In such spaces, artists, activists, scholars, curators, and cultural workers of all kinds conjure sonic, textual, objective, subjective, and performative spaces that think of the museum as a cochlea, as a threshold, as an interface, as a medium that does not primarily separate, but rather connects the outside to the inside and makes the world in which we find ourselves intelligible through sound waves. At the crux of this proposal is an effort to facilitate spatial, performative, affective, and sonic paradigms that could enable a balance, an equilibrium, and a rhythm in

7 <http://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2017/6/1/unlimited-americana-a-conversation-with-halim-el-dabh> (12.01.2023).

the world in which we live. Listening is a practice. It is also true that listening can be extractive — especially in a (settler) colonial context —, but how can listening collectively — to each other and to other existences — be a practice of solidarity? How can listening be the ‘solid’ in solidarity?

In the section on “Resurgent and Sovereign Listening” in his seminal book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Dylan Robinson poses a few very important questions about the politics of both listening and listening otherwise: “But what about Indigenous listeners? What politics of listening might we Indigenous listeners reorient ourselves toward to affirm our political aims and center our epistemological and cosmological frameworks? How might Indigenous people affect resurgent listening? [...] What does it mean to engage in resurgent forms of reading, looking, and listening from our various Indigenous perspectives?”⁸

While Dylan Robinson’s very crucial questions are oriented towards and situated within Indigenous peoples’ realities, they are very welcome within non-Indigenous circles, especially among peoples that share histories of disenfranchisement, subjugation, and dispossession. What frames the politics of listening, what guides the re-centering of the epistemological and cosmological frameworks of such people is, on the one hand, the refusal to find their histories and memories only in those spaces prescribed by the disenfranchiser and subjugator, and to purposefully seek and cultivate their memories from and within other spaces on the other. Thus, when Derek Walcott asks in *The Sea Is History*:⁹ “Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? / Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,” instead of the response — as right as it might be — being “in that grey vault. The sea. The sea has locked them up. The sea is History” we could actually also respond “in that grey vault. The sound. The sound / has locked them up. The sound is History.”

This proposal for an attentive museal practice indirectly builds upon the research, proposals, and disruptions exploring sonority and performativity conceived for ‘documenta 14’ within the project *Every Time A Ear di Soun*.¹⁰ This proposal, for an attentive museal practice, invites the historicity of the audible to be investigated by listening to and sharing the (un)-lived experiences and conditions and the nuanced states of the various worlds that we inhabit. This is an invitation to both create and inhabit sonic spaces within which new worlds can

8 Dylan Robinson: *Hungry Listening. Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*.

9 Derek Walcott: *The Sea Is History*.

10 See <https://www.documenta14.de/en/public-radio/> (12.01.2023).

be imagined. After all, when Maya Angelou writes in her seminal poem *Human Family* that “[...] I note the obvious differences / Between each sort and type / But we are more alike, my friends / Than we are unlike [...]” it is not to say that we have to forget and move on, it is not to say that we have to naively forgive and to move on, it is not to blindly say that we are well, and therefore must let bygones be bygones, but it seems that she is saying that at this juncture, despite the odds and our many differences, we need to listen to each other, need to listen together, we need to act in solidarity, we need to create sisterhoods, and be in alliance in order to survive — not a navel gazing, anthropocentric survival, but a collective survival of all species: living and nonliving — “we are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike”.¹¹ In vibration, in motion, and in equilibrium. This proposed museal practice of the embodiment of sound is an invitation to think about how sound creates and accommodates both psychic and physical spaces, and how a synchronicity emerges and reigns between bodies, places, spaces, and histories through sound (not as causality, but as bond). It is an invitation to reimagine the museum as a space of listening, performing, discussing, and reflecting on technologies of hearing and listening as possibilities to find equipoise.



11 Maya Angelou: I Shall Not Be Moved.



Figures

- 1) Jihan El-Tahri, Weaving Connections, in the Exhibition “HERE HISTORY BEGAN. TRACING THE RE/VERBERATIONS OF HALIM EL-DABH”, SAVVY Contemporary, 20/03–09/05/2021. Photograph by Raisa Galofre.
- 2) d14 Radio Program, SAVVY Contemporary/silent green Berlin, 2017. Photograph by Mathias Voelzke.
- 3) d14 Radio Program, SAVVY Contemporary/silent green Berlin 2017. Photograph by Mathias Voelzke.