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‘What could be Feminist about Sound Studies?’: (in)Audibility in Young Children’s Soundwalking

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Abstract

Sound methods, including soundwalking, are increasingly being used across the humanities and social sciences. Yet, while scholars are drawn to such methods for their potential to disrupt the ocular-centrism of Euro-Western knowledge frames, the interdisciplinary field of *sound studies* (from which such research draws) has been consistently critiqued for its uncritically white and masculinist epistemological emphasis. In this short essay, I draw together examples of four soundwalking methods: soundwalks, listening walks, phonographic walks, and audio walks. I explicate each, thinking with examples from my ongoing in-school doctoral research project, to suggest that a compositional attention to voice, music, and inaudibility might make audible those populations whose oppression is enacted through their very inaudibility. This essay has implications for educators and walking scholars, as well as for the wider field of sound studies.

Keywords

Soundwalk; audio walk; sound studies; soundscape

Hildegard Westerkamp (1974/2001) defines *soundwalking* as “any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment” (para. 1). Sound methods such as soundwalking are increasingly being used across the humanities and social sciences (Ceraso, 2018). Scholars are drawn to such methods for their potential to disrupt the ocular-centrism of Euro-Western knowledge frames (Daza & Gershon, 2015; Moten, 2003). Yet, the interdisciplinary field of *sound studies*, from which such research draws, has been consistently critiqued for its uncritically white and masculine epistemological emphasis (Nyong’o, 2014; Pinto, 2016; Vazquez, 2013). Additionally, it is troubled by its concomitant reification of sound technology (Steingo, 2019), and a generalisation of findings from European societal and cultural frames (Silverstein, 2019; J. Sykes, 2019).

For Alexandra T. Vazquez (2013), this epistemological emphasis is constituted by a masculinist interest in mastering the widest imaginable *sonic* field; Vazquez proposes ‘listening in detail’ to a smaller, specific range of sonic events rather than claiming audition over the whole field. Samantha Pinto (2016) narrates the emergence of ‘listening in detail’ in feminist sound scholarship, specifically as it relates to diasporic musical productions and their activation of “other fields of cultural production” (Jaji, 2014, p. 20). After Vazquez, Pinto collects four of these works—authored by Edwin C. Hill (2013), Tsitsi Ela Jaji (2014), Shana L. Redmond (2014) and Vazquez (2013)—as *una escuela rara*, a point of resistance to the sonic “anthological impulse” (Pinto, 2016, p. 179).

Concomitantly, publications that might be collected as Black sound studies (e.g. Henriques, 2011; Nyong’o, 2014; Weheliye, 2005, 2014), Black feminist sound studies (e.g. Eidsheim, 2019; Stoeber, 2016), and sound scholarship situated within or drawing from the global South (e.g. Steingo & Sykes, 2019) centre music and/or the voice. In emphasizing experiences of—or moments of escape from—white supremacy and misogyny, *una escuela rara* and other feminist, Black and Southern sound studies centre the anthropocentric *reception* (i.e. listening) and anthropogenic *production* of sound: specifically, of music (as diasporic cultural productions) and voice (through which racist/misogynist reception seeks to inscribe the *inessential* racializing/gendering assemblage as audible, *essential* traits). This differs from texts in the sound studies canon, which may seek to: flatten the sonic ontology between sources of sound such as voice and music into a less determined sonic field (Thibaud, 2010); and/or adopt a moralism that seeks to filter out anthropogenic sounds as noise (Schafer, 1977/1994); and/or minimise the anthropocentrism of listening by minimising the role of the listening/sounding subject.

Following these crucial critiques, I argue that sound studies’ interest in the mastery of a neutral, and so ‘identity-less’, *sonic* accounts for its occasional inability to hear marginalised experience; in effect, turning the attention of the ear (or the microphone) away from music and voice, and towards the sonic, relies on a universalist assumption that white aurality is capable of hearing whatever a neutral sonic might sound like.

In this essay, I think-with Pinto’s (2016) question “What’s feminist—what could be feminist—about sound studies, even when it doesn’t “take on” woman as object?” (p. 178). Thinking-with this question, I also ask: “What would a feminist sound studies *listen* to or for, when marginalization and oppression are achieved in part through making populations inaudible?” I think-with these questions in the following three sections specifically as they relate to four soundwalking methods. First, I discuss *soundwalks* and *listening walks*, wherein participants ambulate with an attention to sound. Second, I introduce (what I’m calling) *phonographic walks*, wherein participants create an electroacoustic audio composition during, alongside, or in response to their walk. Third, I discuss *audio walks*, wherein participants walk while listening to a pre-recorded electroacoustic composition. Between each section, I

explicate each method through a series of walks and compositions conducted as part of my doctoral research in an early childhood classroom in Leeds, UK. As an electroacoustic composer, researcher and early childhood teacher, I consider how soundwalking might centre marginalised voices through diverting attention away from sonic mastery, and towards voice, music and inaudibility.

Soundwalks & Listening Walks

R. Murray Schaffer (1977/1994) distinguishes between: the *listening walk*, the practice of walking with an attention to the sounds of the space; and the *soundwalk*, which is typically scored and involves activities that activate both listening and sound. Both methods have long histories as methods of artistic and research practice and often straddle both (Paquette & McCartney, 2012). European composers, such as Beethoven, Elgar, and Satie, are frequently described as undertaking long listening walks in the countryside as part of their composition practice. Inspired by the rejection of institutional art of John Cage's seminal *4'33"* and the Dadaists' 'visits-excursions,' several soundwalking projects were developed during the 1960s. For instance, Ben Patterson's 1963 *Tour* calls for participants to be blindfolded and led through a space by a guide, emphasising non-visual sensory experience. In 1966, musicians Philip Corner and Max Neuhaus both began walking projects that attended to sound; Neuhaus stamped his work's title "*LISTEN*" onto participants' hands as a score before leading them on a soundwalk across New York, while Corner conducted a listening walk that instructed participants to listen "as if at a concert" (Corner, 1980, p. 7, as cited in Drever, 2009, p. 185).

Listening walks and soundwalks are also popular as research methods. Researchers consider soundwalking immersive (Adams et al., 2008), adaptive (Paquette & McCartney, 2012), creative and improvisatory (McCartney, 2016).ⁱ For example, Linda O'Keeffe (2014) conducted listening walks to explore changes in the soundscape as a result of urban regeneration in Dublin.

For Jennifer Lynn Stoeber (2016), white people position our audition as capable of hearing "universal, objective truth" (loc. 379). Amanda M. Black and Andrea F. Bohlman (2017) critique this pseudo-impartiality in the intention brought to much soundwalking; specifically, they argue that the method is unable to hear histories of oppression. Black, Bohlman and their students composed the soundwalk, *Beyond the Belltower*; consisting of nine walking scores, each inspired by archival accounts of institutional racism, the scores instruct participants to re-enact archival fragments, making audible accounts of "race, access, and violence within institutional history" (p. 18).

Explication 1: (Sound)Walking through Leeds.

The research project contextualised in this paper ran over fourteen months. The research site was a classroom in an ethnically, racially, and neuro-diverse, but economically deprived, primary academy in Leeds, UK.ⁱⁱ The wider project explored how neurodivergence is selectively noised in education settings, through a series of hour-long, weekly music/sound composition workshops. One of two Year 2 (age 6-7) classes of thirty children took part in the research. To ensure equity of provision, the second class took part in a similar series of music workshops, but without the research element. This also enabled children in the research class to easily withdraw their consent to participate in the research without missing out on participating in the Music workshop; they simply had to move between the research and non-research classrooms.

The school's curriculum topic for October and November 2018 is 'the local area', emphasising physical and human features of place. The teachers and I decide to include a series of local walks in the Music workshops during this period. This allows the Music workshops and the main curriculum to share a vocabulary, giving children an additional opportunity to practice using it. In preparation for the walk, we work with Pauline Oliveros' concept 'deep listening' as a *proposition*; propositions are conditions that speculatively shape the creative process (Manning & Massumi, 2014; Springgay, 2016). We do an extended deep listening activity in-class, paying attention to all sounds and sound-like sensations, whether they are "natural or technological, intended or unintended, real, remembered, or imaginary" (Oliveros, 2010, p. 78).

On a windy day, we complete a soundwalk around the block. We take blindfolds and ear defenders, which direct audition in different directions, both external and internal. We plan out a route around the school that includes three sites where we can pause so that children can alternate free-listening with wearing their ear defenders and blindfolds. The three sites are: (1) behind the school next to a housing estate, (2) next to a green hill, and (3) on the busy intersection next to the school's entrance. We stand in an elongated ellipsis. After the walk, we discuss the different sounds that the children heard. Some, I can recall hearing myself, such as a bus, footfalls, snatches of conversation, seagulls, and "Mr Shannon talking non-stop." Others were made audible by the ear defenders: tiny somatic sounds such as a 'burp' and a "heartbeat in my neck." Other sounds were speculative but 'realistic'—dog barks, a TV, an ambulance, "like a thunderstorm"—while others were less so—a gorilla. For Wahneema Lubiano (1991, p. 262, as cited in Schalk, 2018, p. 21), we are tempted when working with the 'real' to "accept what is offered as a slice of life because the narrative contains elements of 'fact'" (p. 20). Just as with the somatic, the speculative *soundscape* is no less real for its inaudibility.

Phonographic Walks

A *soundscape* is a collection of sonic features that constitute a landscape (Schafer, 1977/1994). Features of soundscape analysis include: *keynotes*, ever-present sounds; *sound marks*, characteristic sounds of a place; and *sound signals*, which form the sonic foreground (Truax, 1978/1999). For Julian Henriques (2011), while visual experience can be written down or captured as a photograph or film, sound is "transitory" (loc. 200). Alexander G. Weheliye (2005) argues that phonographic practices attempt to register sonic events more permanently. As such, while soundwalks and listening walks *listen to* the 'transitory' soundscape, *phonographic walks* employ portable phonographic equipment so as to permanently *inscribe* the soundscape.

Phonographic walks can be subject to the same epistemic reliance on technology and mastery as the broader field of sound studies. In such scholarship, higher-end microphones are considered more capable of accurately inscribing a representation of space (Drever, 2002; Glasgow, 2007). Frequently, this leads to attempts to trim out the editorial and compositional processes—including the sounds of the recording individual (Wright, 2017)—in order to inscribe the neutrality of (white) researcher aurality: or, what Brett D. Lashua (2006) equates with the "objective, privileged, masculinist way of seeing and knowing" (p. 397) of the phonographic flâneur. Yet, the compositional element of a phonographic walk—or indeed a soundwalk or listening walk—is still apparent in the choice of walking route, as well as subliminally in the editing and compositional choices (Chapman, 2015). Westerkamp illustrates this point, playfully inserting spoken descriptions of the EQing she applies to her

phonographic walk *Kits Beach Soundwalk*, and so accentuating the composition and production processes.

Hill (2013) critiques the notion of the soundscape for the ways in which it ignores the auditory backgrounding and foregrounding of different populations. Writing on the Parisian *banlieue*, Hervé Tchumkam (2019) argues that the debilitation of populations is compounded through sonically backgrounding already invisible populations, rendering them inaudible. Yet, this inaudibility, which is beyond the capacity of even the most sophisticated phonographic technology to register in the soundscape, remains *audible*. Or, as Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes (2019) argue: “*That which exceeds audition is constitutive of auditory experience*” (loc. 503, italics in original).

Consequently, some phonographic walks have used compositional processes to specifically emphasise the experiences of backgrounded, inaudible populations. Ozegun Eylul Iscen (2014) explores how recent migrants make sense of new soundscapes during a phonographic walk; Iscen takes up Barry Truax’s (2001, as cited in Iscen, 2014) notion of ‘soundscape competence’ through participant’s recordings of (what Truax, 1978/1999 might term) ‘sound signals’. Lashua (2006) conducted phonographic walks with Indigenous Canadian teenagers: their soundscapes are complicated by including rapped lyrics that recount participant’s experiences of racism and homelessness. Sarah E. Truman and David Ben Shannon (2018) incorporate samples created during a long-distance walk along with lyrics and instruments into glitch-folk/electronica songs; their work considers passing, inaudibility, and colonial legacies in the British countryside.

Explication 2: Composition.

Teachers, children and I compose-with the walk and different propositions for several months. Two examples of the compositional methods we experimented-with follow.

I introduce the music production technique ‘sampling’ as a proposition.ⁱⁱⁱ I try to salvage samples that could be used in our electroacoustic composition from the recording made during our walk, but the wind made these mostly unusable. In having to source samples from original sources, I decide not to distinguish between the ‘real’ and the speculative. Children programme these samples into a MIDI sequencer as percussive compositions.

The taking-seriously of speculative sounds made us rethink ‘Mr Shannon talking non-stop.’ John comments: “in school, we talking English.” The ubiquity of English in school renders home languages as an ‘absent-presence’ (H. Sykes, 2016), visually including while audibly excluding. This inaudibility is constitutive of audible experience (Steingo & Sykes, 2019; Tchumkam, 2019), but cannot be registered phonographically without composition. Continuing to work-with the proposition of ‘sampling’, we incorporate home language statements into the work.

The composition can be heard in full via the link below. A written description is included for d/Deaf readers, and readers with sensory processing differences.

<https://soundcloud.com/davidbenshannon/walking-through-leeds-on-a-windy-day/s-9fgdH>

Audio Walks

The development of portable media devices, such as the personal stereo, gave rise to another type of walking/sound engagement: the *audio walk*. Audio walks follow a pre-determined path, during which participants listen to a pre-recorded electroacoustic composition

(Gallagher, 2015; Springgay & Truman, 2018b). Although touristic in legacy, with colonial approaches to land and population, some academics and artists have used audio walks to complicate the fixity of place (Saunders & Moles, 2016). Sounds already in the place combine with the recorded audio (Myers, 2011). For instance, Rebecca Conroy's *Walking to the Laundromat* (as cited in Springgay & Truman, 2017) guides participants through a full laundry cycle, while exploring themes of consumerism, the gendering of affective labour, and embodied precarity in neoliberal times. Sometimes a phonographic walk is repeated as an audio walk, with participants listening back to the original walk's electroacoustic composition. Michael Gallagher (2015) directed participants to complete a phonographic walk around Kilmahew, Scotland, before mixing the sounds into the electroacoustic composition *Kilmahew Audio Drift No.1*. Participants then repeated the walk as an audio walk, listening to the completed work and "fold[ing] the sounds of a place back into that same place" (p. 468). Janet Cardiff (as cited in Paquette & McCartney, 2012) narrates other sensory properties for participants to listen to as they walk.

Explication 3: (Audio)Walking through Leeds.

The project concluded several months later: In the middle of a heatwave in June 2019, we retrace the steps of the original soundwalk as an audio walk, pausing in the same places, but this time playing the completed electroacoustic composition through a Bluetooth speaker. Inserting the composition into the walked route transforms the speculative into the real and the inaudible into the audible, "emplac[ing] audible pasts" (Black & Bohlman, 2017, p. 1). This time, home languages, stimming,^{iv} the speculative, and the somatic are all as much a part of the soundscape as traffic and "Mr Shannon talking non-stop."

Conclusion: What would a Feminist Sound Studies Listen to or for?

In this essay, I have drawn together four different soundwalking practices—soundwalks, listening walks, phonographic walks, and audio walks—to illustrate how, through composition, soundwalking can pay attention to 'what a feminist sound studies might listen to and for.' For Therí Alyce Pickens (2019), uncritically turning to sound rather than vision will not, in and of itself, do anything: sound studies, oft-critiqued for its white masculinity, cannot be feminist because it takes as its object of study a neutral understanding of a mastered and master-able sonic field, silencing (i.e. excluding voice) and de-identifying (i.e. excluding music). And yet, for Pickens (2019), a critical attention to the sonic might make space for "community and (mis)interpretation" (p. 70). After Springgay and Truman (2018a), it is the political and ethical '(in)tension' (or lack thereof) brought to well-worn methods such as soundwalking that might problematise, or else become the problem. Like the scholarship within Pinto's (2016) *una escuela rara*, and those subsequent texts that I have suggested might run alongside it, an (in)tension to the (in)audibility of voice and music is central to a feminist sound studies. As Walter S. Gershon (in press) makes clear, there is already a multitude of feminist methodological approaches to the sonic in the work of feminist composers. I have suggested here that composition might be one way that soundwalking, and sound studies more broadly, might (in)tend to be anti-racist, anti-ableist, and anti-misogynist.

I invite you to complete the following *Choose Your Own Adventure*-style story, to check if your own soundwalking project is feminist.

1. My sound-walking project thinks-with and cites the scholarship and art of female, Dis/abled, Queer, Trans-, Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (Dis & QT/BIPOC).
If 'true' go to 2. If 'false', go to 5.
2. When thinking-with the scholarship and art of female and Dis & QT/BIPOC scholars and artists, my sound-walking project is careful not to draw equivalencies or conflate perspectives designed to account for the experiences of precarious populations.
If 'true' go to 3. If 'false', go to 5.
3. My sound-walking project audibly and compositionally centres the voices and/or music of female and Dis & QT/BIPOC participants.
If 'true' go to 4. If 'false', go to 5.
4. My sound-walking project is feminist.
OR
5. My sound-walking project is not feminist.

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ⁱ Walking (Pink, 2009) and wheeling (Parent, 2016) interviews ambulate through space.

ⁱⁱ 97% of boroughs in the United Kingdom are more privileged.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sampling is a music production technique whereby excerpts from other audio works, or original recordings, are used in a newer composition. Examples of sampling include recordings of trains in Steve Reich's minimalist composition *Different*

Trains, cash register sounds in Pink Floyd's *Money*, or the inclusion of a sample from Ruff Sqwad's *Functions on the Low* in Stormzy's *Shut Up*.

^{iv} Self-stimulatory behaviours, sometimes known as stimming, are repetitive movements that some Autistic people might engage in purely to enjoy the sensation. Examples of stimming might include jumping, hand-flapping, or saying the same word or group of words repeatedly.