

"The Exercise of Listening also Means Listening to What You Read." : A Conversation on Silences and Presences in Racialized Sonic Space.

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“THE EXERCISE OF LISTENING ALSO MEANS LISTENING TO WHAT YOU READ.” A CONVERSATION ON SILENCES AND PRESENCES IN RACIALIZED SONIC SPACE

KRISTINA PIA HOFER — Tell me about your current artistic practice. What are you working on, and what does sound mean for this work at the moment?

DENISE PALMIERI — I am working on a few projects for other people as a performer, while I am developing my own research: connecting texts about decolonization, revolution, and feminism with my artistic practice. For me, this means trying to go through the body, with communication and interaction, finding out how these movements are reflected in my life, how they change me, and how I can translate or transform them into art. Every time somebody invites me to do something, I try to pull a little bit of my research – about the decolonial, about strength – into it. Sound, in my present work, is not so much about creating rhythm or melody, but about creating voice and language. In Vienna I am often confronted with racist language and attitude, against which I raise my voice. Last weekend, for example, while riding my bike, a car was driving by too fast and close to me. At the red light, the driver, a *white* man,¹⁾ tried to leave the car to confront me, but I blocked the door with my bike and told him through the window that he should be more careful, he could have run me over. He said that I was taking too much space. I told him that I needed to keep my distance to the parked cars. He told me: “Mir ist es wurscht, was mit Ihnen passiert” – “I don’t give a shit what happens to you.” This *white* person was coming for me, being violent, so I had to exercise talking back. I am a Brown person, and what is the history of such situations? Speaking with Grada Kilomba, the history is of silence.²⁾ Me and my ancestors were silent for too long, because of not knowing what to say, not having the strength, not having our voice. So I’m always going to say something in situations like these. I know I won’t change the ignorant person. But there were children present, and those children saw: if you stand against a Brown person, this person will talk back. They had a learning moment, I could see it in their interrogating faces. Their father figure was being irrational, while I was laughing at him and his lack of humanity. In moments like these, sound is about creating voice, and language.

1)

In this article, we follow Grada Kilomba’s use of italics and capitalization to mark out Black, Brown, of Color and *white* as racialized subject positions which are historically specific social constructs, rather than given ontologies. See Kilomba, Grada (2019), *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*. 5th edition. Münster: Unrast Verlag.

2)

Kilomba, *ibid*.

— When I perceive sound in my work, I am trying to understand this language that I speak, and how I speak, and to whom I speak, and then create music with it. For me, language and music always come with each other. I receive words through poetry, and music, for me, is poetry with melody. My main tool is making fun with them. Not everybody I'm talking to is ignorant, but my research on and interest in decolonization and postcolonial thought is a heavy matter, no matter who we are. As the scholar Marco Aurélio da Conceição Correa says: "The best response to *white* cynicism can only be Black mockery."³⁾ I start dancing, I start moving, I start mocking, and then I make a song. But the basis is creating a voice, understanding which is my voice, and how I can use it. And never missing an opportunity to have a stage, or a fight (laughs). However, if somebody invites me to *just* sing, I won't do it. I won't use a platform just to show myself. "How pretty I am! Look at me here on the stage, how good I can sing!" I don't do that.

KPH — I was about to ask you about the two different contexts. When you have a confrontation on the street, it's very clear that it's a serious situation, and that your use of voice is an immediate political act. I can imagine, however, that this immediacy transports less easily in a performance context, where your talking back is put on a stage, and where the medium of performance allows audiences to witness you speaking without feeling personally addressed. Audiences in Vienna are not always very diverse. The same holds true for the institutions that put on shows.⁴⁾ How do you work in this context with voicing, with sounding, to make clear: this is not just another spectacle? Where a predominately *white* audience, in a space dominated by *white* gatekeepers, can look at an artist of Color perform, without having to be accountable for the matters addressed in the performance?

DS — It is not the easiest thing. Sometimes you prepare a lot, and the audience doesn't respond, sometimes you don't read the audience. In my early works, I often used objects to physically separate myself from the audience. They could see me, but they couldn't go through me. In 2015, for instance, I performed my work *As Lived our Parents*⁵⁾ at Kunsthalle Karlsplatz, a venue that is a huge glass box. The curtains were open, you could see the street, but I had my back to the window, and a sculpture – a cloak made of plaster – at my back, so I was protected. It was a durational piece, people could come and go as they pleased. I sang and stopped. When people came over to me, I started to sing again, but then I stopped.

3)
<https://www.geledes.org.br/a-resposta-pro-cinismo-branco-e-o-deboche-preto/>
(18 February 2021) Translation from Portuguese by Denise Palmieri.

4)
For a report on Austrian cultural institutions in the late 2010s, see Hunter, Tonica (2019): Mapping Diversities: Notes on Austria. In: Louw, Kathleen (ed.), *Beyond Afropolitan and Other Labels: On the Complexities of Dis-Othering as a Process*. Brussels: BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts Brussels, pp. 17-26. The open access publication is available as pdf at: <https://www.bozar.be/en/activities/136895-dis-othering> (18 February 2021)

5)
<https://youtu.be/H8ip4XBpHjo> (18 February 2021)

And just sat. Now, I communicate much more with the audience. I direct my eyes and my movements towards them. Sometimes there is an exchange, and sometimes there isn't. Audiences in Vienna like to keep to themselves, they don't exchange a lot with you as a performer on the stage. They like waiting to the end, as if to say: "I will wait for you to finish talking, before I manifest myself." And even then, it's mostly reactions, like cheering – outbursts rather, not a real conversation. If you want an interaction, you have to pull it out of them, and that's not an easy thing. Sometimes I go for the intimate and individual, for instance, that a person can come to me and talk to me. People tend to come closer during durational pieces. Presently, I am interested in creating works that are very intimate, but show how I separate, how I draw boundaries, at the same time. For instance, I will perform at Freud Museum for the Sodom Vienna⁶⁾ series in October 2020. There, I'll have the opportunity to restage the 2015 Kunsthalle performance in a more intimate setting, without the sculpture as a shield. I am wearing a spiritual armor now, and it will show in this performance. Another example would be *Gorgonxs*, an experimental performance I conceived together with Naya Freire (Tieta Lux), Ivy Monteiro, and Mavi Veloso in 2019. We performed at the Austrian Association of Women Artists (VBKÖ),⁷⁾ in a space that is minimal in size. As we formulated for the description of the show, we are Brazilian Immigrant trans/gender non-conforming artists aiming to break out of the glass walls that the societal normative gaze imposes upon us.⁸⁾ The vibe we created was: "We are here, and you are there," and specifically: "You can look, but you can't touch." *Gorgonxs* was very aggressive in that respect. And it didn't intend to have the audience speak, at all. It was more like: "Now, *you* listen."

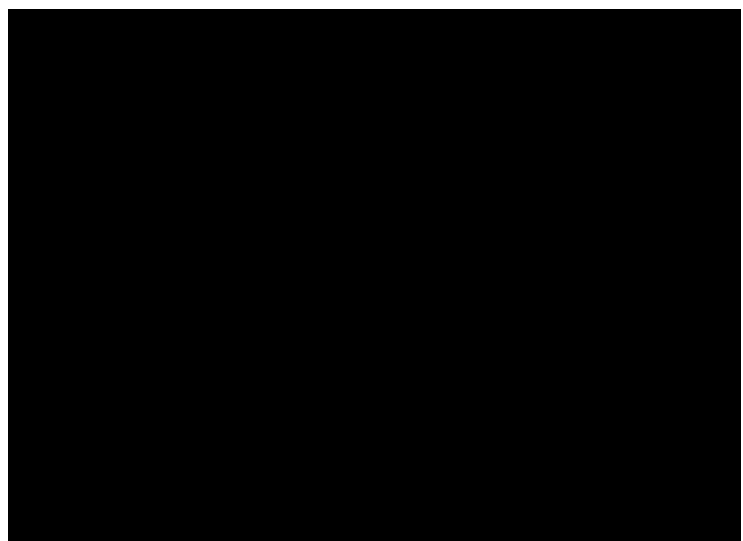
KPH — Talking about the possible relationships between listening, looking, and claiming space: some contemporary voices in sound studies keep investing a lot of hope into 'listening' as a practice that would allow humans to break out of the constraints of Western scopic regimes, and open up spaces for less hierarchical ways to engage with each other. You and I have had a lot of exchange on this topic, for instance, during an evening at Central Linz called *Radikales*

6)
<https://brut-wien.at/de/Programm/Kalender/Programm-2020/11/Gin-Mueller> (18 February 2021)

7)
<https://www.vbkoe.org/home/?lang=en> (18 February 2021)

8)
<https://www.vbkoe.org/2019/07/15/gorgonxs/> (18 February 2021)

// Figure 1
Gorgonx premiere at VBKÖ Vienna, 14 August 2019. © VBKÖ. Photo: Rafaella Bieleesch



Hören, ‘Radical Listening,’ in October 2019, where we discussed the political potentialities of creating polyphonies, and listening to multiple voices, on a podium with our colleagues Veza Fernandez and Ricarda Denzer.⁹⁾ Would you like to share your take on these issues here too?

DS — I don’t see ‘listening’ in a sentimental way. First of all, ‘listening’ invites appropriation like any other form of art. Recently, I have noticed a lot of articles on sound and music that talk about Black artists, but the texts themselves are very *white*. A *white* friend recently gave me an article to read, and told me, “Look, I included a lot of people of Color!” But I said: “Wait a minute. You have a singer, an electronic musician, a DJ, and a dancer. But not a single academic of Color.” When every feminist reference you bring in is *white*, I have to stop and ask you whether you really want to do that. And I said to her: “We are still being objectified! This has to stop.” In her book *O que é lugar de fala?*, Djamila Ribeiro, one of the Black Brazilian feminist philosophers I admire, uses a term of the sociologist Sueli Carnero’s, “mulata tipo exportação,” to describe the kind of women that is acceptable for a *white* audience.¹⁰⁾ It is the Brown woman that the dominant group can export and socially and culturally appropriate. In a recent video, Ribeiro also tells the story that when she was going to Paris to give a speech, people asked her “Oh, so you are going to dance?” This is the perfect example for a racist misrecognition of Black intellectuals. Sueli Carnero argues that the relations built by the historical conditions of the Americas, that is, by conquest and *white* dominance, are still very present, and are reified in the dominant group’s default relationship to Black people in general, and Black women in particular. As Carnero puts it: “The social appropriation of the defeated group is one of the emblematic moments of the winner’s affirmation of superiority.”¹¹⁾ Next to domestic workers who serve ‘liberated’ women, Brown women who can serve as ‘muses’ or cultural objects are widely accepted today, because they affirm *white* superiority. As long as Black people only appear in the space of the stage, of entertainment, they do not threaten the established, racist social order.

— Second, I don’t believe that European academia can create an idea of community, or of a collective, in their texts. *White* academics, in every field, center too much on the individual researcher. It’s all about “*my* research, *my* research, *my* research.” It’s centric of their own work and their own establishment. It never looks outside. As I said, many texts I read that are based on *white* academics don’t mention a single Brown reference. I am fed up with this, because

9)
<https://www.gfk-ooe.at/event/radikales-hoeren/> (18 February 2021)

10)
Ribeiro, Djamila (2017): *O que é: lugar de fala?* Belo Horizonte (MG): Letramento, pp. 28–29.

11)
Carneiro, Sueli (no date): “Enegrecer o feminismo: a situação da mulher negra na América Latina a partir de uma perspectiva de gênero.” Available online at: https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/375003/mod_resource/content/0/Carneiro_Feminismo%20negro.pdf (last visited: February 18, 2021). Translated by Denise Palmieri.

so many of the work of Black activists and feminists is available in English, and if you don't mention a single one, I know that you don't know any of them. If you know *one*, you know plenty, because they talk in collective. They never leave one of them alone. They always talk about each other. Always. They never talk as an individual, because they know that the individual is not strong. They understand that the fight wasn't sustained by one person. Think about Adrienne Maree Brown's *Emergent Strategies*¹²⁾ – it's all about talking about other women that empower you; you don't go two pages without a woman mentioning a woman. This exercise of listening – it also means listening to what you *read*.

KPH _____ That's a great way to put it.

DS _____ Right? How can I listen to you, and believe in you, if you just bring me one point of view? I understand that you are an individual, and I will see you as an individual – but if you don't represent a collective, why should I care about you? The individual is not the one I care about, it is not the one that represents change. This is what Patricia Hill Collins talks about in her 1997 text about standpoint theory.¹³⁾ Of course, the individual cannot be ignored, but you have to see the group that suffers something.

_____ There's this beautiful work of Shilpa Gupta's: *For, in your tongue, I cannot fit*.¹⁴⁾ It was one of my favorite artworks at Biennale Arte 2019 in Venice. It is a sound installation giving voice to the poets that couldn't speak in their time. There are poems in many languages on sheets of paper, and the sheets are pierced. Above the sheets, you see something that looks like microphones hanging from the ceiling, but they are not real microphones – they are speakers. They are hanging down, you can see their heads. You feel like you are invited to speak the poem that is written, but it's *not* for you to speak. It's not your place to speak. You have to bow your head, and *listen*. I was exploding when I saw the installation, it was so beautiful. There was this *white* guy coming in, talking into the speakers: "Hallo, hallo, hallo! Hahaha." And then he had to lower his head, and bow to the text. You *do* have to *shift* your *head* – not upwards, but downwards. To read, you always have to bend. It's brilliant. And it's from an Indian artist, a woman. I say, great! The artworks I like most are often from the *periferias do mundo*, never from the center (laughs).

KPH _____ It sounds like a too naïve implementation of 'listening' as a practice can be treacherous: just putting a bunch of people

12)

Brown, Adrienne Maree (2017): *Emergent Strategies: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Edinburgh, Oakland, Baltimore: AK Press.

13)

Hill Collins, Patricia (1997): Comment on Hekman's "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited": Where's the Power? In: *Signs*, vol.22, issue 2, pp. 375–381.

14)

<http://shilpagupta.com/for-in-your-tongue-i-cannot-fit-audio/> (18 February 2021)

together and making them listen at the same time does not automatically create situations in which communities are being rebuilt for the better. How does this awareness shape the listening spaces you create in your artistic work?

DS — You listen together only if you comment on it afterwards. But this is not an easy thing. I don't think it's even in our power to create situations of 'listening together,' as you call it. I think we can only bring, and we can hope. Think back to the confrontation I spoke about in the beginning of conversation: the child that sees the *white* man speaking to me, and me reacting, will know that when they open their mouth to say something to a Brown person, they will have to listen to a reply. We won't listen quietly. In other situations, people might listen together, but then still don't speak. The environment might be too intimidating. Think of our experience at Central Linz, which you mentioned earlier. The audience was not speaking. We opened up to them, it was intimate, we were smiling, we had drinks, and they still didn't say anything. And after the official event was over, they came to us to exchange email addresses. That is a need sometimes. To come out of this formal space, or to make a connection for the future.

— Speaking about community – I don't know. You don't create an idea of the collective, because the collective includes you. For a work that I will be doing for Reclaim Festival in October 2020¹⁵⁾ I am going to ask the audience to tell me stories about experiences in their lives that are in a collective context. We will be in the water, in the pool at Stadthallenbad here in Vienna. I will ask them to tell me stories that are associated with somebody close to them, a role model that is or was part of their lives. The work will be called *Humbling Exercise*. I am trying to better understand who we are, and why we feel so important. Because we're not. You're not the most important person in this world, although your papa and your mama tell you that, and for them, you probably are – but that's it. We have to stop looking at ourselves with this egocentric importance, because the important thing should be the collective. And you can only understand your collectiveness if you understand that you, as an individual, cannot be big by yourself. That's what COVID taught us.

KPH — How did the reality of COVID-19, especially the spring 2020 lockdown, impact on your work? What changed for your academic and artistic research into creating voice and language, when you had to physically distance from the world you usually engage with?

15)

Reclaim Festival 2020, too, had to be cancelled due to further COVID-19 measures taken after the interview took place.

DS — Puh. I listened to Julischka Stengele talk at the H13 award ceremony¹⁶⁾ last week, where she said that for her, the lockdown was great, because she could really pause from being bothered all the time. I can relate to this. When you are attacked daily in the outside world, it can be a relief to be without the presence of others, who are inflicting pain on you. This made me think of a performance of Charlene Bicalho's and Jéssica Porciúncula's at the Museu de Artes do Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre: in June 2019, during their residencies at the museum, they raised a flag that said "Mate o branco dentro de você;" "Kill the *white* inside of you."¹⁷⁾ I read the slogan as "Kill the *white* woman inside you." It reminded me of *white* feminists who have so much space already, and still keep it all to themselves. The misconception is that *white* women would lose their space if they gave it to a Black woman, a trans woman, a woman different from themselves, to speak. They don't understand that they would receive ten times what they gave by moving over, and keeping quiet for a while.¹⁸⁾ I think the COVID situation really enabled people to realize how they have internalized this sort of racialized oppression, and gave them the chance to kill those harmful voices, inside of them, in their own space.

— I was already working on similar ideas before COVID. In one of my projects of 2019, I was questioning Internet tutorials. What is this virtual space that connects us? How will we take the responsibility that democracy has given us – to select from such a great number of options, and to question our selection? Who are we allowing ourselves to be taught by? Who has the right to tell me, as a Brown person, how I should shake my ass, go into a split, breathe in and out? With which power do they come into my life? And how do I let them in? These questions are especially important when the instructions sound universally empowering: "You can do it! Shake out what your Mama gave you!" – this sounds like you can do and achieve anything, in this neoliberal way, with hard work. But that's not what I get. For a Brown person, it's a fiction of a place, that we all have the same rights. The right to be listened to and to speak doesn't exist for all of us in the same way. The spring 2020 COVID lockdown, when the Internet became the only way to reach people, made me even more aware, so my artistic practice was inflamed with activism. BLM played an important role here too. We went to the streets as the system showed how it really worked, fighting against PoC and immigrants *even in this moment*, in the middle of a pandemic. I became very aggressive, very angry. I was trying to understand this moment, and activism helped me to not go crazy.

16)

Julischka Stengele won the H13 Lower Austria Prize for Performance in 2020 for her work BALLAST | EXISTENZ:

<https://www.kunstraum.net/en/Exhibitions/104-h13-2020-julischka-stengele>
(18 February 2021)

17)

<https://www.sul21.com.br/opiniaopublica/2019/06/o-bara-vai-ao-museu-po-de-pemba-poesia-e-performance-por-duan-kissonde/> (18 February 2021)

18)

As Djamila Ribeiro puts it, drawing on Audre Lorde: "Audre Lorde urges us to think about the need to recognize our differences and no longer see them as negative. The problem would be when the differences mean inequalities. The lack of recognition that we start from different places, since we experience gender differently, leads to the legitimacy of an exclusive discourse, as it does not raise awareness to other ways of being a woman in the world. This attention to what the author calls the evasion of responsibility of *white* women, for not committing themselves to change, can be understood as a lack of ethical posture in thinking the world from their places. The fact that they do not demarcate these places and continue to ignore that there are different starting points between women causes these *white* women to continue ignoring their duty in questioning themselves and, consequently, reproduce oppressions against Black women or against, as Lorde calls in the text, 'those that are not acceptable.' Those from their social backgrounds know that 'surviving is not an academic skill.'" Ribeiro, *lugar*, 30.

Translated by Denise Palmieri.

— I am often online, but I was barely active there, except for the eventual post about openings and premieres. But as a private person, I did not want to expose myself because I didn't feel comfortable – I wonder who does in a crisis like this. I mostly use the Internet to see if my friends are fine, to call them. To have philosophical talks, to cry together, to be human together. I returned to these intimate spaces, where we *really* exchanged. And I didn't feel the need to be a public speaker at the time, because there were better representers than me – for instance, Djamila Ribeiro. To get an idea how powerful and important her work is, just check out the recent interview she gave for Griot Magazine.¹⁹⁾ She has been writing about racism and Black feminism in Brazil for a long time, and I was following her work before COVID. When BLM exploded, she started posting even more, and voices like hers became more present. In Brazil, for instance, *white* comedians, actors, directors, sociologists, and social anthropologists – intellectuals and entertainment people who have a lot of followers – were giving their social media to Black people to post there for a month. I think it happened in the whole of Latin America. This was how BLM was reflected there. Listening to these brilliant voices, I understood that I needed to check whether I actually improved my environment by saying what I thought was so important to express. I was putting this question to *myself*. Just showing how pretty you can sing on stage, or how beautiful you can master a certain technique – that's extremely colonial. Art institutions in Europe were built on the aristocracy. If you don't have this context in mind, if you repeat oppressive speech and stereotypes, why do you think your speech is so important? I think that artists need to position themselves. And I am trying my best to position *myself*.

— I think that listening is an important part in this process, as an *active* thing. If you engage with listening to something so that it can *inspire* you, you are contextualizing permanently: who is talking, and how are they creating their content, their material? Now, with COVID in all of our lives, I really focus on the activity of listening, more than on seeing. I listen to podcasts, and even when I have a video on, I don't watch. I move away from the screen, and I lay back. I don't go multifunctional, I just – do the exercise of listening. And sometimes I write down some things that I hear, but when it really touches me I revisit it – I listen to it again and again. For me it's been such a digging, the listening. And I was thinking to myself: I need to build something. For when I have a stage again. I won't waste the opportunity. Because I know now how important the stage is, now that I lack it. Without the stage, the public doesn't

19)

<http://griotmag.com/en/aint-i-a-woman-djamila-ribeiro-on-social-justice-black-feminism-and-the-place-of-speech/> (18

February 2021)

see me. As a PoC intellectual, visibility is key, because we still lack representation – in this case, in the art scene.

20)

Ribeiro, lugar, 44.

KPH — What's your vision for taking the stage when performing is possible again without COVID restrictions?

DS — I am being invited for a lot of work now, because fat and Black is fashion at the moment. I take those jobs, I am not going to waste my chance – it might be that I stop being in fashion, and that I fall into oblivion again. My idea is to break stereotypes now. I am a very strong stereotype of my own culture – I, too, am “mulata tipo exportação.” And that's a stereotype I want to break. Again, I am taking my cue from Djamila Ribeiro, who explains that when there is some space to talk, for example, for a Black trans woman, how difficult it is for this person to be heard when she speaks about anything else than being a Black trans woman. How can she talk about economics, astrophysics, science, and philosophy, and be heard?²⁰⁾ I want to break this idea of a Brown person only being able to talk about how to samba, how to twerk – but *through* twerking. For me, the stage is a place to question your image in your mind, your idea of who I am. By reading me through my ‘phenotype’ – a fat, Brown woman from Latin America. The assumption that: you see that, and then you know me. And then I start showing you what I am, and you have a new reading of me, and then I show you that you are reading me, and you have a reading of yourself.

KPH — That sounds like a fusion of visual and audio strategies – you work with language, but by mirroring and putting up smoke screens—

DS —and layers.

KPH — So your suggestion to “listen to what you are reading” also shows up in your stage work. You ask your audience to listen to their own reactions of what they're being shown, and being told. You investigate the senses of looking and listening not by separating them, like many traditions in European sciences historically did, but by contextualizing them.

DS — There is no disconnection. And ‘contextualizing’ is a beautiful word. It makes me think of ‘text,’ ‘texture’—

KPH —textile, fabric—

DS — Yeah, it's a beautiful way. Contextualizing. I love digression, instead of getting to a point. I love going in different directions at the same time, and I appreciate this in other people's work too. I love the idea of humbling the listener – like in Shilpa Gupta's work, where the means of talking actually are a means of *listening*. As I said: it's important to look at yourself as who you are, so you can see yourself small, and you can understand the needs of the collective. This, for me, is what COVID brought us.

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// Image credits

Fig.1 *Gorgonx* premiere at VBKÖ Vienna, 14 August 2019. © VBKÖ. Photo: Rafaela Bielesch

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