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Counterlistening

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Counterlistening

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1. COUNTERLISTENING is *listening against*: against unequal systems of power and uneven modes of exchange; against official and hegemonic narratives of events, histories, places, territories, groups, communities; against normative and dominant cultures of listening; against one's own habits of listening, including those habits that have been engrained through culture and that are entrenched through disciplining.

Counterlistening is undisciplined or even anti-disciplinary listening. It is anarchic, unbounded, and free. It reveals the holes and edges of listening bounded by discipline and predicated on disciplinarity. It disrupts, averts, subverts, and confounds disciplinary boundaries, revealing them to be porous, ductile, leaking.

Counterlistening is listening against empire—against those who maintain it and “for” those who are subjected to its spectacular violence.

Counterlistening is listening for the tremors that threaten unbridled state power; it is listening for evidence of the corrupt and criminal state.

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Counterlistening is subversive, dangerous, and self-sacrificing. It takes risks in seeking to hear what would or “should” remain unheard: what is ignored, concealed, or denied.

Counterlistening is listening in the margins. It is listening with those who are not listened to.

Counterlistening is speculative and futuristic. It is listening for possible other worlds and, through listening, manifesting those other worlds.

Counterlistening is shared, collective, and plural. It resists the concept and figure of “the listener” and the impulse to territorialize through listening.

Counterlistening is relational and situational. It is concerned with the social and political relations that listening both reflects and produces.

Counterlistening expands the limits of the listening body as they have been determined and reproduced through dominant traditions of listening (for example, scientific, cochlear, Eurological, formalist, or objectivist traditions of listening).

Counterlistening is informal, open, and corruptible. It eschews listening “in order to” analyze, define, determine, demarcate. It resists the fixity and stability of “an” analysis. It is listening that is dynamic, unstable, and destabilizing.

Counterlistening is listening against the tyranny of meaning. It is listening for plural and divergent meanings or for no meaning at all.

Counterlistening is anti-utilitarian. It is listening that may not have any use or use-value.

Counterlistening is listening against capture. It is attuned to histories of appropriation, extraction, and oppression that are enacted through the recording, classification, and measurement of sound. It understands the idea of objectivity in listening to be fallacy.

Counterlistening is listening against received histories and knowledges. It is listening to the gaps, the omissions, the absences, the erasures. It is anti-ontological in that it does not necessarily listen “to know” or to embody

or perform ways of knowing. It can be listening as a way of unknowing, unlearning; it can be listening as a way of dissolving knowledges.

Counterlistening is spectral, ghostly, haunted. It is listening as part of an historical continuum: as informed by and attuned to the past and its audible traces in the present.

Counterlistening is illicit, illegitimate, clandestine. It is listening outside the permitted frames and frameworks. It is listening to the taboo, the prohibited, the forbidden. It is furtive and fugitive.

Counterlistening is listening-as-critique. It does not need to be translated into text, sound, or any other medium to be valued or understood; it considers and asserts listening alone to be enough.

Counterlistening is listening-as-resistance; it is tactical, urgent, transgressive.

Counterlistening enacts, produces, and protects the right to listen.

2. We can trace counterlistening in the work of such practitioners, researchers, and activists as:

Lawrence Abu Hamdan, an “independent investigator or Private Ear” (Abu Hamdan) who listens forensically to crimes committed by states, state authorities, and corporations; and whose listening—including co-listening with victims of state and corporate violence—produces evidence of those crimes; and

Rayya Badran, a radio producer and translator from Beirut who traces the violence of the Lebanese state through the sounds it “deploys” during a mass uprising, sounds that are “just as consequential as their aim to squash, maim, and injure” (Badran); and

Mhamad Safa, an artist-researcher who works across sound, architecture, and the law, and who develops methods for listening to the long-term reverberations of traumatic sounds, including those that result from conflict, war, and state failure (Safa 2022); and

Louis Chude-Sokei, a writer, scholar, and acoustician who listens to contested histories and places—including histories of genocide and the sites where they are memorialized—and who asks, “What can we learn if we return to monuments and sites of memory through techniques of listening? What does history sound like?” (Chude-Sokei 2022); and

Hardi Kurda, an artist who in 2002 immigrated illegally from Kurdistan to Europe in a shipping container, bringing with him a small, concealed radio for the passage, and who says that “listening in that time of crisis was urgent, crucial ... a matter of survival, but listening was also creative, tactical ... [a] curious searching for something” (2022); and artists, technologists, and scientists who, in response to the sudden and marked growth of acoustic surveillance by states and corporations, invent technologies that resist and counteract the surveillant ear; and

Nicola Di Croce, an architect and sound artist who invites people to “attune to disturbance” as a way of engaging “the possibility of listening as a creative approach to otherness” (Di Croce 18); and

Christine Sun Kim, an artist who reveals the paucity of normative hearing cultures in engaging sound and listening as a person who identifies as Deaf, and who says, “I’m forcing our place into the histories of art and humanity by creating work. The more I create, the more we appear in history and the more the Deaf voice is represented”; and

Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, a sonic theorist who exposes the “sonic colour line” by examining how “race and racism are constructed from sound and maintained through the listening ear” (Stoeber); and

Anna Raimondo, an artist who invites queer, trans, minority ethnic, and poor women to share their experiences of cities and who creates sound maps of those cities that centre women’s voices, confounding dominant narratives of those places and of urban geographies; and

Catherine Clover, an artist who listens to and transcribes the songs of “unwanted” birds who are seen as pests (Clover 2022); who assembles human-bird choirs that seek a common language with birds; and whose work engages the violence of empire as it is encoded in birdsong; and

Listening With, an art and theory collective who propose listening strategies for “becoming with non-human others,” and whose scores extend the listening body to non-human and more-than-human realms, including, in one case, inviting people to imagine themselves “acting as an aerial” (Listening With 43); and

Melissa Van Drie and Carla J. Maier, whose manifesto on “rhythming” develops a critical listening practice that is “invested in thinking the plurality of worlds and the alliances between humans and non-humans,” and that seeks to contribute to “decolonial, convivial, and pluri-vocal epistemologies ... by listening *otherwise*” (Van Drie and Maier 1, 3); and

Nicole L’Huillier, a sound artist and technologist who, in the context of a planet “being drained by extraction, consumerism, and control,” asserts the urgency of developing “counter-strategies that yield polyphonic togetherness, rituals for collective resonance and attunement, as well as spaces to listen to each other” (23); and

the sound art collective Ultra-Red, who, in collaboration with George E. Lewis, Fred Moten, Nancy Nevárez, Samuel Sanchez, and the Vogue’ology collective, develop protocols for “listening to the sound of freedom,” asking:

IF the practice of freedom
is the organization of power
and the practice of listening
is the organization of a people

THEN what is the sound
of freedom
and how might we listen
to for within
that sound? (6)

and;

and;

and.

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