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Sound Acts, Part 2: Copresen(t/c)ing Vibration

Caitlin Marshall, Patricia Herrera, and Marci R. McMahon

Dear readers, if you are just tuning in to this ongoing jam session, we invite you to get (un)settled and listen to the frequencies tapped herein. You can always replay our opening salvo to sound and performance studies in [Sound Acts, Part I](#) or immerse yourself in the melodic lines of argument put forth in this second issue.

Since the last issue, there have been many changes: births, deaths, continued and new pandemics of systemic racism, conservative backlashes against critical race theory, the war in Ukraine, and the continued violent assault on reproductive justice and LGBTQ+ lives. The heightened vulnerability of bodies laid bare by the pandemic seems ironically to have produced an insistence on the manifold vulnerability of those always already in the crosshairs of power. This is the calculated effect of a neoliberal society charging full speed ahead toward “normalcy,” erasing white supremacy’s systemic realities (before anyone can notice).

In the first issue, we claimed that vibrating bodies perform and that the sonic is a constellation of acts. The digital presence of our current historical moment calls us to realize that sound acts—the performance of vibration—are social and therefore exist under specific material conditions. As the pandemic moved forward and our modes of coming together shifted online, we experienced time, distance, sound, and sociality differently. We came to understand the incredible potentiality of live digital performance and what it means to create in mediated real-time. Namely, as three friends and coeditors who have worked solely over Zoom in the past two-plus years, we understand at a molecular level that physical presence is not inherently more intimate than mediated copresence. We also came together with the authors of this two-part special issue on Zoom during the American Studies Association conference in November 2021. We have thus spent an enormous amount of time socially distanced and (by technical necessity) in a single stream sound. Yet we must acknowledge that even when live and copresent, what digital performances mediate is the palpable, cavernous space and time between bodies. On Zoom, we cannot yet produce live, synchronous musical theatre. It is not yet possible to speak simultaneously or in chorus with others, per a script’s direction. We can’t even sync up the familiar refrains of “Happy Birthday” without a delay, a lag, an echo of time that signals the space/time between our gathered, live, and copresent bodies. We are reminded of Masi Asare’s podcast, [“Voicing Across Distance,”](#) in which she explores how technology has altered our perceptions of time, sound, and distance as we experience sonic glitches, sonic tics, and lag times on Zoom.

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In this ongoing pandemic of cautious coming together with ebbs and flows of masking or not masking and hugging or not hugging, we recognize now more than ever that sound is an embodied act. In claiming sound as embodied, we recognize the fragility and vulnerability of bodies differently situated whose personhood, including their visibility and audibility, is constrained by hegemonic structures. When Asare urges us to “liv[e] in the space of that gap” between sound and body ([Episode 1](#)), she heeds us to pay attention to the effects of power that play out inequitably over differently situated bodies: deaf/hearing, incarcerated/de-incarcerated, homeland/diaspora, academia/grassroots, archive/lived past, individual/collective, and Indigenous/settled. The gap—one felt globally by a pandemic and failed governmental responses—is, for many, an echo of conditions that necessitate the routine mediation of space and time as a fact of daily survival.

As we have come to understand that the conditions of possibility for sound acts are fraught and fragile, we have learned new ways of attending to how vibrating bodies perform.¹ To transmit this new apprehension to you, our listeners-cum-readers, we ask in this issue: What is the nature of relation in vibrational performance? What can sound acts teach us about the work of relation and coalition, in daily life and in radical scholarship? How do sound acts work across distance, over time, and through mediation? What is the ontology of a sound act? Sound acts are techniques enabling performances to travel over geographic and temporal spaces that account for power and privilege. Our desires to *sound with* one another draw attention to the inherent sociality of sound as vibrational performance.

This whole issue scores the vibration of performance as an improvisational art of living and being with others. As we prepared this introduction, we re-read together out loud the works that anchored our 2020 *Revolutions in Sound Symposium*, which are reproduced herein: the keynote duet delivered by Alexandra T. Vazquez and Christine Bacareza Balance and Iván Ramos’s Introduction to the duet. It was so emotional to receive these works in person. It felt like sustenance or a parachute before the cliff of the pandemic. These works have continued a tether of life support over the past difficult years. Ramos’s concept of “listening together,” a shared sonic practice that activates care and sustains affinities across differences, amplified difference. More than two years into a pandemic, listening and sounding are tenuous and delicate collective processes, a web of performed relations that stretches across distance and time. We thank Iván for reminding us that the keynote speakers were great friends and that their intimacy was a significant part of their intellectual work.

The performance of relationality that Vazquez and Bacareza Balance’s duet offered was, and continues to be, instrumental in our conception of the call back. In our first issue, we defined “calling back” as “a citational method of doing and making knowledge collaboratively, with care and attentiveness to receiving, registering, and reflecting radical thought across distance, difference, and time” (Marshall, Herrera, and McMahon 2020, 1). As we recently revisited Vazquez and Bacareza Balance’s words—our own practice of calling back—we found greater nuance in our previous framework. More than a dialogue, which establishes the fundamental foreclosure of two or more individuals following the same script, a duet accommodates another’s vibration and validates multiplicity over the promise of dialectical harmony. A duet requires an improvisational arrangement of oneself vis-à-vis another’s vibrational presence. It draws attention to togetherness *because of* difference, facilitating radical possibilities for listening and readerly participation. Listening to the keynote through the filter of the past two years, we recognize calling back as an act that fundamentally unsettles the epistemological and ontological certainty of a listener through a practice of attending, ethically, to the specificities of another’s presence and the way they receive and reflect vibration. If “[c]alling back is a long-term ethical commitment to interrupting oppression through

revolutions in sound” (1), we realize that calling back does this by a commitment to a radical opening of self that, while laying open vulnerabilities, is importantly also a mode of survival.

Bacareza Balance’s words “I can never abandon my embodied knowledge” melded into our bodies and intimately called us back to the flesh as we crafted this opening (15, this issue). Our first special issue linked sound and performance studies through their mutual investment in material bodies (human or non-) and insisted on sound—the physical phenomenon of bodies in vibration—as sites of enactment (Marshall, Herrera, and McMahon 2020, 3). Two years later in the wake of tremendous global loss, we ask: What does it mean to call back those who vibrate in presence with us, even if that presence is not copresence or copresent? Calling back hails one to receive the vibrational presence of another and to find a practice of being with another even when that other is no longer in your present and/or corporeal presence. We feel another even when their vibration reaches us over Zoom, through the page, or across the great divide of death. And here we pause this jam session to presence the vibration of those who have passed in the intervening time, those whose beings still resonate with us:

*Ernestine
Vincenza Alessi
Maggie Alvarez
Phyllis Ama
Custudio Canares
Carmen Alivio Canton
Po-Hsien Chu
Donna Thompson-Coons
Marco Espinosa
Mary Louise Espinosa
Warren Fraleigh
Eduardo Alvarez Gastelum
Lucia Herrera
Miguel Herrera
Riad Ismat
Esteban Jauregui
Walter Johnston
Toño Morales
Kimarlee Nguyen
Luisa E. Padilla
Edward L. Robinson Jr.
Diane Rodriguez
Raúl Zamora*

In this issue, we recognize more fully the potential of sound to *act* over significant expanses of space and time. Sound acts decay but persist in their slow attenuation. Herein lies a central intervention of sound acts to our home discipline of performance studies: sound acts offer tools and techniques for attending more fully to the wholeness of embodied, vibrational presence as it resonates after the fact of a body’s dematerialization.

Vazquez and Bacareza Balance performed this calling back beautifully in their keynote, as they duetted not only to one another but also to their late mentor, José Muñoz. Muñoz is alive in their

duet, in their attending to and radical reflection of traces of presence. Their duet reminds us that the ethics of calling back are a radical, antioppressive citational praxis that revises the self through careful attending to another across and because of difference. Calling back unsettles knowledge formation within the academy and approaches sound acts not as sites of study, but as differential modes of intellectual being: calling back is a mode of feeling toward the production of questions rather than a production of knowledge. The current ways of thinking and writing about sound are Socratic, hierarchical, and polemic. Vazquez and Bacareza Balance warn against this extractive paradigm for newer scholars.² We too yearn for more improvisatory disciplinary relations that inform the whole stewardship of this issue. Sound, in all its complexity and analytic slipperiness, allows us to demand more from scholarship: tenderness, care, and friendship as embodied knowledge. This issue itself is an example of that embodiment. Like a trio of authors crafting a single voice, our writing practice unsettles our listening positionality and acknowledges our relations to one another. The Sound Acts call for papers, the *Revolutions in Sound* symposium, and the introductions of this two-part special issue came into being out of radical relation with each other.

We acknowledge that the passage of two years since our gathering at the symposium and the accrued effects of being *in* and *with* the sound acts published here have, by necessity, shifted how we hear, perceive, and are in relation to the work presented in this special issue. In Part 1, our investigation of ethics offered up “sound methods for ethical interactions with the past, power, and subjugated knowledges” (Marshall, Herrera, and McMahon 2020, 4). Using the call back as an overarching intellectual schema, essays in that section deployed sound as a new modality to increase academic purchase toward broad social justice, actions that require scholarship to engage in a critical, reflective practice. Part 2 of our special issue calls back to the conceptual frameworks we inaugurated in the first issue: ethics of performance and scholarship, hermeneutic loops, and ear training. Here, we offer new ways to think about sociality and the performance of vibration under precarious conditions. Sound acts gathered herein investigate the vulnerability and fragility of bodies and how they manifest across shared times and places. Sound acts have always troubled these very assumptions about the fundamental philosophical linchpins of how we understand performance.

Ethics of Performance and Scholarship

It may come as no surprise that at this moment in our essay, we announce that every part of the introduction has been a meditation on the ethics of sound acts. Ramos’s “listening together” is instruction for being together and honouring relationships that thrive despite social distance and differential temporalities. His work improvises mentoring as a mode of intellectual inquiry, scholarship as a structure of care, and friendship as theory. In “Giving/Taking Notice,” Dylan Robinson explores his listening positionality in relation to the recording “Round Dance” by Cree-Mennonite cellist Cris Derksen on their album *Orchestral Ponwop*. Robinson’s methodology of “critical listening positionality” offers an openness to the multiple and shifting coordinates and axes of epistemic and ontological engagement. Going beyond the mere words of the recordings of Indigenous songs, he models a “listening-witnessing,” which pays attention to songs as “law, medicine and historical documentation and yet still songs” (28). Robinson’s work models how we have to witness ourselves in constant improvisation each time we see relation and negotiate our identities.

In their keynote duet, Vazquez and Bacareza Balance redefine listening as an intimate act driven by the embodied vulnerability of the global majority. They harmonize the soundtracks from their

shared homeland politics of Cuba and the Philippines. Describing their connected web of musical engagement, Bacareza Balance uses the term “colonial counterpoint” to identify the global reach of imperial projects in the “American Tropics.” She explores the structures of disidentificatory feelings that connect subjects through soundtracks that travel overseas and back across the transatlantic and transpacific pathways of diaspora (20). These colonial counterparts invoke the physicality of sound as it moves between listening and (re)sounding bodies. Writing on this sense of connection across distance, Vazquez calls back to Bacareza Balance’s notion of knowledge that resonates across generations. She describes the physical vibrations that travel between (re)sounding bodies and the feeling of “company,” of being in and with the presence of others even when they are not in shared copresence with us.

Vazquez inter-animates visual, musical, and performative sites across different temporal moments and geographic locations, listening to the violences underlying a textile, recording, and live music: a Nasrid Tile; the album *Lole y Manuel*, *Nuevo dia*, c. 1975; and the composition “Stride” by Cuban composer, conductor, programmer, and 2021 Pulitzer Prize–winner Tania León. Vazquez accompanies the synesthesia of colors from the Nasrid Tile with sound and movement, calling back the violence of the Muslim and Jewish evictions. She then turns her ear to the album *Nuevo dia*, knitting these sounds from one violent history to another. Through this imagined, inter-animated listening, Vazquez allows an emotional opening to capture the tiles reverberating the vestiges of historical violences, traumas, and beautiful moments across time.

Bacareza Balance excavates the ethics of embodied intimacies through popular music, emphasizing in particular Filipino structures of feeling and relation through sonic sutures across diaspora, generation, and American (neo)imperialism. Bacareza Balance captures the “world-making magic of community and music” by adopting a writing structure informed by “The Songs We Carry,” a 2014 project of critical karaoke with LA Music Center and Search to Involve Pilipino Americans (SIPA). Engaging with this form, she takes her readers to a 2019 Philippine Independence Day block party, sharing how the Filipino community affectively responds to Belinda Carlisle’s “Heaven Is a Place on Earth,” and other Manila sounds. She attends to the sounds that ground her students and reflects on the way Frank Sinatra recordings presence her father, singing along to “All the Way.”

Both Vazquez and Bacareza Balance call back to the presence of their teacher José Muñoz, instructing us to constantly seek *relation* because relationality is the fundamental activator of knowledge. However, they recast “interlocution” not as an extractive mode of relation, but as an unfixed stewardship, one that values fluctuations, improvisation, and inchoateness of performance that arise with vulnerability and fragility (and thus the necessity of mutual care) as a certainty and given. Here, sound acts are performances that bring bodies into relation and therefore, in that act, offer ways of creating different futurities.

Hermeneutic Loops

The “ethics of performance and scholarship” section troubles academia’s siloing of knowledge production with essays that offer relational and improvisatory modes of inquiry. In this same vein, hermeneutic loops tackle another pernicious divide within the academy: the seemingly intractable epistemic schism between what is included and not included in the historical record. Archives of vulnerable communities have often been neglected, and when they have been seen and heard, they have been entrenched in hegemonic carceral practices. Works in this section create hermeneutic

loop(holes) of retreat for enslaved persons in the archive and for incarcerated Indigenous and Black people. The works in this section replay sound's potentiality to generate strategies of fugitivity and freedom across time and space.

Danielle Bainbridge's essay traces the "aural fugitivity" of nineteenth-century Black enslaved performers, whose sound acts resist archival capture. In "Staging Aural Fugitivity through Nineteenth-Century Freak Show Archives," Bainbridge listens to conjoined twins Millie Christine McKoy, whose improvisational and ephemeral speech acts served as the catalyst for her 2018 performance piece *Curio*. Bainbridge's performance transmits the soundscapes of slavery for a twenty-first-century audience, highlighting the McKoys' soundscape of aural fugitivity as enfreaked performers before emancipation. Bainbridge's *Curio* offers a hermeneutic loophole of retreat from the seemingly totalizing power of slavery's archive. In this loophole, the McKoy twins' performance practices sound out a "conditional freedom from an all-encompassing archival capture" (38).

In "Surface Listening: Free Association in the Wooster Group's *The B-Side: Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons' A Record Album Interpretation*," Julie Beth Napolin investigates the Wooster Group's *The B-Side*—a performance piece that features Eric Berryman, Jaspar McGruder, and Philip Moore as they simultaneously listen to and sing an ethnographic artifact, the 1965 LP *Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons*. This album is a collection of work songs recorded in a segregated prison by a white ethnographer. Napolin's essay amplifies the album as a different, alternative set of ethical implications that imagines Black personhood beyond the carcerality of the "record." Through the group's embodied and mediated encounter with the artifact, *The B-Side* becomes a historiography of Jim Crow—era segregation, the sonic tradition of the Black Atlantic, and white American cultural appropriation and consumption. Napolin invites readers to listen to *The B-Side* as a singing "cure" for the violence and racial trauma played by the record—both the record of the Wooster Group's racial past through their enactment of blackface and the white supremacist ethnographic practices of *Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons*. The performance of free association that vibrates through *The B-Side* thus becomes a hermeneutic loop(hole) between past, present, and imagined future.

In "Listening to Country: Immersive Audio Production and Deep Listening with First Nations Women in Prison," Sarah Woodland, Leah Barclay, Vicki Saunders, and Bianca Beetson share their work with incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre (BWCC) in Australia. Led by an interdisciplinary team of four non-Indigenous and Aboriginal artist-researchers, the essay documents the team's creative collaborative praxis that produced "Listening to Country," a one-hour immersive audio work based on field recordings of natural environments requested by the women inside the prison. The essay shares the team's art-led process and meditates on the ethical implications of working in coalition with Indigenous collaborators across incarcerated and decarcerated (but still penal) colonial spaces. "Listening to Country" aspires to combat the traumas felt by incarcerated Indigenous women who experience separation from family, community, and Country.

Ear Training

The essays in "Ear Training" amplify the formal aesthetics and properties of sound-making practices often overlooked because structural racism, compulsory heterosexuality, and able-bodiedness position them as decidedly *unaesthetic*, *untechnical*, and *unvirtuosic*. The authors rehearse ear training by exploring the sonic, visual, and kinetic archives of popular culture by BIPOC, Latinx, Japanese, crip,

and feminist cultural producers. Authors in this section train our ears to listen to sound acts that position popular culture—whether through social media, material culture, television, or theatre—as spaces of refusal, resistance, and destabilization.

In “‘I’m A Stripper, Ho’: The Sonics of Cardi B’s Ratchet, Disaporic Feminism,” Karen Jaime attunes our ears to the sonic feminist strategies of refusal by Bronx-raised working-class Black Dominican/Trinidadian rapper and songwriter Cardi B. Listening attentively to Cardi B’s lyrical cadence, rhythmic delivery, and sartorial presentations, Jaime demonstrates that Cardi B unapologetically refuses the relegation of women to sex objects. Through sonic rejections of respectability, Jaime highlights how Cardi B champions women’s sexual agency, pleasure, and frivolity. Drawing on Brittany Cooper’s and Nikki Lane’s critical interventions on ratchetness, Jaime trains us to listen to Cardi B’s performance of her subaltern feminist subjectivities.

In “The Right to Remain ‘Silent’: Deaf Aesthetics in *GANGSTA.*,” Aidan Pang analyzes the 2015 Japanese anime series *GANGSTA.* (ギャングスタ), demonstrating how the show creates a flexible representation of deafness outside binary constructions of able-bodiedness and disability. Pang contextualizes the significance of the Japanese anime show’s representation of deafness via the “third ear” (Kochhar-Lindgren 2006) against Japanese television’s typical representations of disability within Western models. Pushing against audist conceptions of deafness, Pang analyzes how the anime series trains audiences to register deafness as a socially constructed relationship between character and audience.

Eddy Francisco Alvarez Jr.’s “Embodied Collective Choreographies: Listening to Arena Nightclub’s Jotería Sonic Memories” calls back the aural experiences of queer conviviality as youth dance their heart out at Arena, an iconic Los Angeles nightclub demolished in 2015. Using queer oral histories, ethnographic interviews, archival material, social media content, and performance analysis, Alvarez Jr. enacts jotería listening as a practice that trains the “ear” (and the whole body) to document and archive what the sound acts of queer nightlife do to dancing bodies, choreographing ephemeral moments of queer Brown euphoria and freedom. Arena’s sonic memories, as Alvarez Jr. argues, are embodied forms of knowledge—whistles, foot-stomping, and clapping—that archive jotería life, queer histories of the city that have been erased, forgotten, or razed.

In Mariel Martínez Alvarez’s interview with Nelda Castillo, the director of the Havana-based theatre company El Ciervo Encantado, she listens to the embodied and sonic practices of the theatre company that expand our understanding of Cuban identity at different historical moments of the island. The company’s pieces *Departures* and *Arrivals*, based on personal testimonios, train our ears to listen to not only the stories of different generations of Cubans who left the island—and keep leaving—but also to stories of resistance and belonging. El Ciervo Encantado’s methodological approach to sound amplifies noise and sonic dissonances as beautiful, harmonic, and proper. Their work is focused on the relational and the fragility of performance, allowing for the possibilities of sound to capture the multilayered experiences of violence, memory, and belonging in post-Soviet Cuba.

Conclusion

For all the vibrating bodies evoked heretofore in this introduction, sound acts and calling back inaugurate a copresence and copresent despite (or in the midst) of death, disease, and disability, of

gentrification, of transphobia and homophobia, of anti-blackness, of respectability politics and misogyny, of inhabiting neoimperial spaces and spaces of exception, such as prisons or reservations/reserves, of the silencing power of enslavement, and of the archive. It is also, of course, a political necessity when doing the work of antiracism and social justice to point to the joy, the revolution, the alternative, and radical worlds of global majority sound practices. This is to say that even before the pandemics of 2020 and their aftermath, sound acts always already call back and riff across power's rifts of distance and time. Sound acts call back against power's grain and model a promiseful being together in the face of beings' extinction.

This jam session started over five years ago, in January 2017, as a tentative coming together of three kindred spirits who gravitated toward sound. Listening together takes sustained, long-term commitment: no surprise since ethical antioppressive practice requires the time to forge deep relation. Calling back is and has always been a long arc. But this is not the end: we leave you, the listener, with the work of jamming oppression with the resilient tools of calling back sound acts.

Notes

1. In 2021 and 2022, for instance, we have seen an unprecedented wave of new and revived work on Broadway either by Black creators or that dramatized Black life: the 2022 Tony Award–nominated *Paradise Square* (Natha Tysen and Masi Asare); *A Strange Loop* (Michael R. Jackson); *Kimberly Akimbo* (Jeanine Tesori and David Lindsay-Abaire); and *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide* (Ntozake Shange, choreographed by Black choreographer Camille A. Brown), among others. The infrastructure to support and sustain the ongoing production of Black art on Broadway is fragile, however, due to the structural racism of the theatre industrial complex. Even as we want to celebrate these Black cultural productions, we note the structural vulnerability of the Black cohorts that brought these works to the stage.
2. Dylan Robinson, in his essay in this issue, “Giving/Taking Notice,” also argues against extractive, settler paradigms of knowledge production.

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