

Ears to the Ground: Socially engaged sound art as learning in process

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Braiding sound–listening–learning (encouraged by composer Pauline Oliveros) with critical consciousness (inspired by educator Paulo Freire), the authors led a location-specific, socially engaged sound art project in Rhode Island (USA). The authors describe a style of socially engaged sound art that approaches the object of art as a dialogic process of learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Artistic interest in intersubjective, participatory action projects with community constituencies has been slowly swelling in popularity since the start of the avant-garde moment of the 1920s (Bishop 2006). Echoing John Dewey (2005), this kind of art was not only marked by aesthetics but also by social situations of dematerialized, anti-capitalistic, art-life blurring projects. Artists began to focus less on object-making and more on cooperative dialogue as a relational aesthetic (Bourriaud 2002; Kester 2004: 13). In North America, the emergence of socially engaged art practice was inspired by 1960s counterculture (Students for a Democratic Society), the civil rights movement (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), second-wave feminism (New York Radical Women), and political theatre (Diggers; Yippies) (Finkelpark 2012: 7). As Allan Kaprow and Joseph Beuys inspired Fluxus (Veiel 2018), and Mierle Laderman Ukeles cleaned public spaces as art (Finkelpark 2012: 269), Pauline Oliveros – the classically trained composer, electronic music innovator, and outspoken lesbian – tapped into the relational qualities of listening through her style of socially engaged sound art practice (Mockus 2008).¹

By linking musical improvisation (Oliveros 2004) with methods of focused breathing and movement practice (related to Tai Chi and Kinetic Awareness), Oliveros

eventually established her connective listening practice for individual and group care. In 1970, reacting to gay liberation, gender inequity, feminist art, an emerging surveillance state, and the normalization of violence (through images of police brutality and the mass killing in Vietnam), Oliveros formed the San Diego-based, all-women's cooperative, ♀ Ensemble. The group performed *Sonic Meditations* at weekly meetings that Oliveros facilitated through text scores, journaling, and discussion (Mockus 2008: 37–88; O'Brien 2016).

Sonic Meditations are intended for group work over a long period of time with regular meetings. No special skills are necessary. Any persons who are willing to commit themselves can participate ... With continuous work some of the following becomes possible with Sonic Meditations: Heightened states of awareness or expanded consciousness, changes in physiology and psychology from known and unknown tensions ... These changes may represent a tuning of mind and body ... Music is a welcome by-product of this activity. (Oliveros 1971)

By performing queer kinship and feminist pedagogy of 'the personal is political,' ♀ Ensemble democratized music-making by way of challenging sexism and classism in Western classical music (Mockus 2008: 2). For Oliveros' ♀ Ensemble, music was not an object but a 'process of engaging bodies, time, and space' (ibid.). Oliveros uniquely redefined the materiality of sound (and the act of listening to it) as a catalyst for transformation in a process of dialogic learning. This process-oriented, sound–listening–learning braid positions Oliveros as an early facilitator of socially engaged sound art practice.²

²The following resources discuss how experiences and understandings of sound and listening extend across physical, philosophical, and cultural contexts of music, sound art, and life: Novak and Sakakeeny (2015) to understand how interdisciplinary practitioners have approached the movement between the material and metaphorical positions of sound; DeNora (2000) to understand how sound is enmeshed with the fabric of everyday life, character, social structure, and actions; Kim-Cohen (2009) to understand a reimagining of sound art that focuses less on the physicality of sound and more on sound's expanded, uncontainable intertextuality; Robinson (2020) to understand Indigenous, settler colonial, and white European perspectives of listening reorientated towards the act of reading as a way of listening; and Rose (1994) to understand how racial politics interfaces with sound and listening within the

¹Oliveros has been essentialized and tokenized as one of the 'marginalized identities' in the history books of electroacoustic music and sound art. Tara Rodgers, in her book *Pink Noises* writes, 'recognition of Oliveros is crucial and admirable, but her isolation has at times positioned her work as representative of an essentialized, "feminine" aesthetic' (Rodgers 2010: 13). We want to be very clear that our focus on Oliveros is not reduced to her gender (or other) identity/ies.

Oliveros, a long-time educator, led ♀ Ensemble as a counter-school that embodied Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization: focused critical consciousness that embraced social and political contradictions to take action against the oppressive elements in one's life (Freire 1970: 35). Sometimes adversarial, conscientization wriggles through models of negotiation to question processes of oppression, the cannon, and power imbalances between student and teacher. 'If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings,' writes Freire (1970: 61). The emergence of knowledge happens only through dialogic processes of action and reflection. This 'restless, impatient, continuing, [and] hopeful' human process of knowledge acquisition is the core catalyst for imagining a new reality with possibilities of change and transformation (ibid.: 53).

Braiding sound-listening-learning (encouraged by Oliveros) with critical consciousness (inspired by Freire), the following autoethnographic article describes a location-specific, action-reflection of doing³ socially engaged sound art with teachers, students, and community members. As we discuss, Oliveros and Freire explored world-building that rejected the contortions of the oppressive class who turn earth, people, and time into disposable objects of capitalistic domination. Following suit, our socially engaged sound art practice is deliberate about process over fixed product.

As a component of their experiential world-building, Freire and Oliveros wrote vivid invitations for humans, across spatial and temporal distance, to enter into dialogue with them. As an outgrowth of those invitations, this article corresponds in the same way: an invitation to students, teachers, and community members who are interested in doing socially engaged sound art, to witness some possibilities of dialogue in-process. The form⁴ of this dialogic article blends analytical and theoretical approaches with poetic and autoethnographic description. We weave our words, encountering fluxed questions of authorship, identity, representation, and remediation.

context of rap. These key resources – listing just a few – offer an expanded concept of sound (and the role of listening) as both a physical material (and process) entwined with metaphorical catalysts for transformation in everyday life.

³We use the word 'doing' from Richard Schechner's performance studies approach: being is existence itself; doing is the activity of all that exists; showing doing is performing – pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing; and explaining this showing doing is study and dialogue about performance.

⁴The form of this article is inspired by the interwoven writing style Michelle Kisliuk and Kelly Gross modelled when describing their experiences teaching and learning BaAka music; we have arranged this article like a conversation (Kisliuk and Gross 2004).

2. CONTEXT

Amid police brutality of Black Americans, a crumbling democracy, and just months before the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors (Erik and Elana)⁵ co-facilitated a class in Providence, RI (USA) at Brown University (hosted by the Music Department) called *Public Art in Sound and Listening*.

Elana, why were you interested in co-facilitating this class?

As a student of urban studies and music, I listen closely to art, justice, community, and place. When I walk through the contested site of Kennedy Plaza, Rhode Island's central bus hub, I often think about how the sounds there – preaching, laughing, drumming, shouting, bus rumblings – are politically coded. Kennedy Plaza's 'noise' has been the primary grievance cited by the Providence real estate developers whose years of lobbying and lawsuits recently succeeded when the state gave in and began to relocate the hub to someone else's proverbial backyard. Brown's campus is only a ten minute walk away, but the distance feels great. My seminar discussions meet in old brick buildings ensconced in greenery, surrounded by gates, and surveilled by our campus police force. Co-facilitating this class was an opportunity to 'do' the questions I have often wondered: what might a learning experience sound like that is sited elsewhere, that leans into the challenges – like the ones audible at Kennedy Plaza – of working towards reciprocal learning relationships with people outside our university 'bubble'?

Erik, the university has a need to identify you as 'the teacher' or me as 'the student', yet you are deeply committed to destabilizing these fixed positions. How do you reconcile this?

Within an institutional space that revolves around the banking model of education,⁶ I work to coordinate spaces of changing critical consciousness through action and reflection (and eventually aspiring to individual and group transformation). Of course this facilitation (to catalyze action) begins with leadership oriented by my position: an identity that was formed from a deteriorating public education system in Florida; an identity that witnessed his single mother practice resilience; an identity that watched his grandmother struggle with her position as a Holocaust survivor; an identity whose aunt taught him that the power of creativity takes care; and an identity that came to understand that cogitating on the nuances of confronting white supremacy is an evolving,

⁵Erik (as visiting assistant professor in music and multimedia) and Elana (as undergraduate teaching assistant).

⁶The banking model of education is a concept Freire used to critique education where teachers consider students as empty vessels to fill with knowledge. 'Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits' (Freire 1970: 58). The banking model of education reinforces oppression by foregoing critical, creative thinking to the ownership of knowledge.

never-ending task. My identity isn't reduced to these conditions, but they have an incredible influence on the direction of my teaching and learning (with leadership, coordination, determination, and objectives). One of my objectives in teaching is building pathways for students to break down my facilitation, evolve it, and recreate it based on the individual identity conditions and values in the 'room'. The art historian Claire Bishop said: 'What I like in [Paulo] Freire is his acknowledgement that even when you stress equality and transparency, so that the students are conscious of their historical subjects capable of producing change, you can't deny the teacher's position of authority. It is a fantasy to think that this authority doesn't exist' (Finkelpearl 2012: 210). Being transparent about my focus on evolving forms of co-intentional education, and also continuously discussing the contradictions of power relations between students and teachers, not only destabilizes fixed positions – and fantasies of egalitarianism in higher education – but it is an active tool in the unveiling of collective knowledge to make change (through action, reflection, and transformation).

Our class was funded⁷ by an Engaged Course Development Award from the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown and was acknowledged within the University's Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan because we dealt with issues regarding race, gender, class, sexuality, and inequality. Erik publicized the class to students using the following description:

This seminar is about public artmaking and critical inquiry through sound and listening. Students will come to understand how this mode of collaborative making is an evolving process of self-learning and community discovery. Students will form an artist collective and collaborate with particular people/places in Providence and Newport on projects that reimagine history, activate space, and remediate stories. Students will foreground the generative possibilities of non-normative forms (to take chances and embrace failure) and question structures of audibility and inaudibility (voicing and silencing), collision and resistance (to make dialogue, conversation, and community). The creative tools and methodologies will be contextualized with readings of everyday sonic praxis, site-specific art, storytelling, speculative design, social sculpture, and teaching community.

⁷Discussions about the funding structure we found ourselves in were an important part of the class collective's process. Brown has a \$4 billion endowment full of money that filters in through people such as Warren Kanders (who in 2019 stepped down as a vice chairman of the Whitney Museum of American Art after protests over his company's sale of tear gas). It was important for the class collective to use this institutional money to create a new reality. We felt strongly that our community collaborators be compensated for their time based on Erik's salary (as a visiting assistant professor) – which equalled roughly \$700 per community partner. However, Brown capped the amount at \$400 with no negotiations. Perhaps a trivial detail, this kind of transparency helped the class collective cross powerful borders of art/life, and it allowed the collective members a chance to address the issues revolving around students' vulnerability and lack of voice in institutionalized education.

Our class collective settled, with Elana, Erik, and a mixture of seven Brown and Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) graduate and undergraduate students: Andrew Javens, Aicha Soukab, Babette Thomas, Ben West, Frances Flynn, Seth Israel, and S.A. Chavarría.⁸ Brown and a good portion of RISD are sited on College Hill, a neighbourhood elevated high above the rest of the City of Providence. We met there weekly to organize our four collaborative projects occurring off the hill:

- A Fluxus-inspired performance that responded to resources in Providence Public Library's special collection on the 'problematic' public space, Cathedral Square.
- Interactive audio walks that remixed a historian's work on racial justice and reconciliation at God's Little Acre burial area in Newport – recognized as having the oldest and largest surviving collection of markers of enslaved and free Africans.
- A workshop in sound that focused on issues of gentrification, indigeneity, and spatial politics of a new centre for Community MusicWorks – who focus on free music education in Providence's 'under-resourced' neighbourhoods.
- An evening listening event at the feminist art space, Dirt Palace, that centred on the work of electronic music composer and inventor Wendy Carlos.

The week before our first collaboration, Elana suggested that we walk to the Rhode Island State House for a flag-raising ceremony that she was performing at with Mariachi de Brown. The event marked the 209th anniversary of Mexico's independence. We asked the collective to reflect on the dialogue we had been having (both in-person and

⁸The decision to name these collective members was a difficult one to make because confidentiality in the 'classroom' was a community agreement that we established in our first week together (take what you learn; names stay). However, as we re-mixed the experience into this article, across our first draft and subsequent resubmissions to *Organised Sound*, we emailed each collective member with a copy of the latest version of the article. As we got closer to the point of publishing, we asked how and if they wanted to be represented with their name. All seven members responded that they were excited to be named in this article. Simultaneously, we were grappling with questions of authorship: do we distinguish the different roles the nine of us had in making this article come together? As with most questions raised in this article, our understanding of how to engage this question of authorship is continually evolving. For now, we believe that this article emerges out of the experiences the nine of us had together during the period of the project (a semester), and thus could not have come together without everyone's presence. In fact, the article specifically relies on written and spoken comments from these collective members to illustrate the many kinds of ideas coming up for all of us at different points in time during the project. In collaging and adding additional layers of reflection/analysis to what happened in the class, our (Elana and Erik) position towards/role with the article is distinct, which is why we are named as 'authors'.

via our collective Soundblog⁹) as we walked there: how the canon is pervasive; how elephants listen with their feet; how Joseph Beuys said, ‘Anyone can be art. Anything can be art, especially anything that conserves energy’ (Veiel 2018); and how listening culturally, technologically, and/or corporeally is tied to moral, social, civic, psychological, or even spiritual well-being or decline (Chion 1990; Oliveros 2005; Rice 2015: 104).

‘An encounter with a “wrong place,”’ writes art historian Miwon Kwon, ‘is likely to expose the instability of the “right place,” and by extension the instability of the self’ (Kwon 2004: 164). As we turned from Angell St (named after Thomas Angell, c.1616–94, slave owner) and onto North Main, approaching the State House, there was – as Ben reflected – a disjuncture: ‘I felt out of place as it was not my culture being symbolically and literally hoisted into the air ... even though this is a public event, is it okay for us to be here?’

Feeling the anxiety of moving through a new public space as a group (related to ethics, class, heritage, and race), we witnessed a disruption on the stage in front of us: politician after politician awkwardly made scripted remarks about the American Dream as gusts of wind repeatedly blew over the auxiliary flag poles that flanked the stage outside Rhode Island’s legislative chambers. The symbolism of this mishap was represented in the back-to-back performance of both the United States and Mexican national anthems.

On the one hand, the US anthem, ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ (a song written by a slave owner) (Brockell 2020), was performed with individual virtuosity to precisely voice the melody (which spans a difficult range of an octave and a fifth). The audience listened motionless and silent. On the other hand, ‘Mexicanos, al grito de Guerra’ (composed by a US immigrant from Mexico) was led enthusiastically. The performer on stage encouraged sing-along participation and dancing from the crowd. For us, the disjuncture between the performance of these two songs at the State House paralleled a sense of unease with the way the history of the transatlantic slave trade sits too silently under the fabric of everyday life (from the names memorialized on street signs to the composers lauded for their patriotic melodies). The process of perturbing the normative, whitewashed conceptions of place at the State House that day provided our first sense of what a critical spatial practice in sound and listening might be – which, as Gascia Ouzounian writes, ‘is concerned not only with the “composition” of acoustic space, but with the confluence of acoustic, political, social, and public spaces’

⁹The Soundblog is a digital repository of thoughts, questions, comments, and resources that the collective curated throughout the project.

(Ouzounian 2013: 89). Most of all, our collective realized the courage it takes to embrace feelings of discomfort and disjuncture in the public sphere and, as Babette put it, ‘to explore, lean into, and unpack it’.

In tandem, we noticed another rupture: that the historicity of sound art¹⁰ normalizes canonical, colonialist structures related to masculine dominance of permanence, fixity, collection, and invention (connected specifically to Thomas Edison’s sound recording apparatus) through superficial tropes of silence and noise (à la Luigi Russolo and John Cage). For instance, even though incredibly valuable to the avant-garde, Cage’s work (influenced by Zen) avoided illuminating the dialectic between recognition and negation of silence and the silenced (Rodgers 2010: 6; Gautier 2015: 186). He prioritized aleatoric modes of creativity that worked to eliminate intent, which could be read as a negation of identity (Rodgers 2010: 10). When this hegemonic aesthetic became a universal marker of sound art, it worked to alienate marginalized groups who have dealt with imposed forms of erasure and whose art was grounded by identity and activism. Tara Rodgers’s prolific book, *Pink Noises*, unpacks these complexities by disentangling the canonical history of sound art (via electronic music) through feminist intervention. Rodgers writes, ‘Sounds are points of departure to realms of personal history, cultural memory, and political struggle. At stake, on one level, are questions of who has access to tools and opportunities for creative expression, and how women artists are represented in mainstream media’ (Rodgers 2010: 5). Sonic interventions – such as *Pink Noises* – became a guide for our collective to unlodge fixed notions of power, positionality, and assumptions in our sound–listening–learning braid of action and reflection.

The flag raising laid a blueprint for how the nine of us would move collectively through countless more experiences throughout the semester, moments in which we would actively listen together to disjuncture as it played out – in spaces, in cannons, in educational models.¹¹ Many of these moments happened when we

¹⁰Please see ‘The Forgotten 1979 MoMA Sound Art Exhibition’ by Judy Dunaway for an overview of the history of sound art. Dunaway’s concluding questions are particularly important to our following discussion: ‘Does the evolution of the genre itself contain exclusionary behavior? How did opportunities denied to women and practitioners of diversity affect the trajectory of the form? How did interpretations of work that seemed ‘outside the aesthetic’ define the histories? Would broadening the definition of the form allow for a more accurate picture of the history?’ (Dunaway 2020: 40).

¹¹Listening communities of many types, often united through one particular sound – engines (Krebs 2012); music in detention camps (Cusick 2008); bells (Corbin 1998); the sonic colour line (Stoeber 2016); amplified calls to prayer (Lee 1999); the wolf howl (DeLuca 2016); or birds (Feld 1982) – form different contextually rich webs of meaning with competing interests and voices.

were on the way elsewhere: in transit; while waiting for someone to arrive. As an article that touches on art, justice, community, and place, we want to highlight several more moments that show our action–reflection as praxis. The first focuses on our time at God’s Little Acre in Newport, RI – an experience where we listened more closely to the silences of the past – while the second action–reflection focuses on our time with Community MusicWorks in Providence – a project where we worked to amplify voices into the future.

3. ACTION–REFLECTION ONE (SAY HER NAME)

I’m especially enthralled and overcome by concepts of manifestation through voice, and the birthing that takes place in the speaking of one’s name. Ann, Ann, Ann, Ann, Ann . . . Is that what she would answer to? Who has ever spoken her name? (Aicha)

Newport-based historian Keith Stokes told the class collective, ‘Slavery is how we got here, but it tells you little as to who we are as a people.’ Keith works to humanize, marking New England’s historical record with people buried at God’s Little Acre (recognized as the oldest and largest surviving collection of gravestones of enslaved and free Africans in the United States) (Stokes 2020). Paying close attention to the value of tuning into the silences in the archive,¹² the class collective worked with Keith to make interactive audio walks that remixed his work on racial justice and reconciliation.

Elana, can you discuss the anxiety the collective felt prior to our visit with Keith?

The class collective was full of anxiety after we introduced this collaboration: a site of death, the institution of slavery, revising history, the normalization of violence and its dehumanizing affects, and positionality. Ben shared his particular position: ‘Of course this then brings me to the “elephant in the room” question about how a white, privileged, nineteen-year-old boy can “help” tell, or bring to light, narratives of a past very different than his own.’ As collective members voiced these important observations about positionality, we reminded the group that our goal was to work with Keith in a collaborative process of learning. Erik, this was reinforced by one of your facilitation pillars; that the critical/creative documents that the class collective produced were all considered to be blueprints (drafts, models, prototypes, layouts, or sketches). A ‘final product’ was always deemphasized in favour of dialogue as a process of learning. This focus helped care for collective anxieties related to

the never-ending and evolving process of learning about the American project of slavery.

Erik, how did you approach Keith about using sound as part of his humanizing practice?

Hip hop scholar Tricia Rose writes about sampling as ‘a musical time machine, a machine that keeps time for the body in motion and a machine that recalls other times, a technological process whereby old sounds and resonances can be embedded and recontextualized in the present’ (Rose 1994: 99). She writes about how this interconnection of Black culture through sound is a complex remix of a community’s understanding and memory of itself. Similarly, scholar Saidiya Hartman – whose work illuminates the voiceless, abject women in the archive of transatlantic chattel slavery – uses a writing methodology that remixes historical research, critical theory, and fictional narrative. Critical fabulation can both ‘tell an impossible story’ and ‘amplify the impossibility of its telling’ (Hartman 2008: 11). When I talked about these forms with Keith, he was inspired to think about how they might interface with his work at God’s Little Acre burial area in Newport. He was especially excited to find new ways to engage teenagers who visit the site. I suggested that our collective make blueprints that remix his work (in research, interpretation, and restoration) through critical/creative fabulation with a simple form of augmented reality, the interactive audio walk.

Inspired by sound artist Hildegard Westerkamp’s method of soundwalking (Westerkamp 2007), the artist Janet Cardiff developed the audio walk in the mid-1990s using portable sound playback technology for a private, mobile experience:

You are given a CD player or iPod and told to stand or sit in a particular spot and press play. On the CD you hear my voice giving directions, like ‘turn left here’ or ‘go through this gateway’, layered on a background of sounds: the sound of my footsteps, traffic, birds, and miscellaneous sound effects that have been pre-recorded on the same site as they are being heard. The virtual recorded soundscape has to mimic the real physical one in order to create a new world. (Cardiff n.d.: 15)

Like Hartman’s critical fabulation and Rose’s understanding of sampling, audio walks fashion superimposed narratives of fact and fiction at the limits of site-specific research and speculative sound design: stories are rearranged, contested points of view are put together in friction, imaginations question history, and time and space collapse. During our first visit to God’s Little Acre, Keith guided us on a tour of the burial grounds where he shared stories about the people buried there. The collective then split into smaller groups who had a week to produce a blueprint audio walk that focused on the stories Keith told us.

During the critical/creative week of making our blueprint audio walks, we paid attention to Keith’s work of animating history while maintaining a tone

¹²We use the phrase ‘silences in the archive’ after Saidiya Hartman. In her article, ‘Venus in Two Acts’ (Hartman 2008) she practices a form of writing called critical fabulation (discussed later) as a tool to write about the gaps and silences (absent voices and perspectives) in the archive of transatlantic slavery.

of incompleteness. As S.A. put it: ‘we must acknowledge that we will never know the full stories and experiences of enslaved people from the archive, even if we do feel a closeness or intimacy to them’. We kept thinking about Hartman’s question about looking into the open casket of the violences in the archive: ‘Do the possibilities outweigh the dangers of looking (again)?’ (Hartman 2008: 5). Sensitivity to incompleteness, the silences and violences in the archive, and the difficulty of confronting the history of the transatlantic slave trade was cared for most directly in Aïcha and Babette’s blueprint audio walk about Ann and Mimbo. The collective and Keith experienced this blueprint audio walk during our second visit at God’s Little Acre.¹³

Ann was of the Robert Oliver household in Boston and her mother was Mimbo. Mimbo could have been born in New England, but most likely came from West Africa. The Akan people of the Gold Coast frequently named their children after the day of the week they were born (Mimbo may be the day name for girls born on Saturday). We do not know why Ann has two headstones (one in Boston and one in Newport, RI). She died June 1743 at the age of two. Babette elaborates further:

We really wanted the listener to perceive Ann as alive, dynamic, and sentient, specifically through notions of play. We mixed in the very tangible signs of life of Ann’s burial marker, such as observations of the lichen [on her grave stone], of the fact that Ann, in the wake of slavery, finds herself still in motion, being split between Massachusetts and Rhode Island . . . We attempted to only focus on sonic cues that are rather universal to girlhood, as to not assume what we do not know about Ann and her life. We soundtracked all of this to the sound of Kara Walker and Jason Moran’s calliope,¹⁴ which is also somewhat evocative of a sense of play.

After our afternoon of listening to the interactive audio walks we created at God’s Little Acre burying ground, we headed to a local café for hot tea and a

¹³In addition to Aïcha and Babette’s blueprint audio walk about Ann and Mimbo, Ben and S.A. prepared an audio walk about Duchess Quamino (through a soundscape of cooking, they discussed her frosted plum cakes that earned her both freedom and the title ‘The Pastry Queen of Rhode Island’). Frances’s audio walk focused on the African diaspora through a bridge between the sounds of West Africa to the here-and-now music of Kendrick Lamar.

¹⁴The week prior to our first site visit with Keith we watched a documentary about *Katastwóf Karavan*, a steam-powered calliope made by Kara Walker and Jason Moran. Babette and Aïcha referenced this project in their audio walk about Ann and Mimbo. Babette writes, ‘Kara Walker’s work acts somewhat as a subversion or a counter-staging of a performance representative of the transatlantic slave trade in the U.S. While the pipes of the calliope stand as surrogates for the voices and songs for enslaved people in the U.S., the structure of the wagon itself stands for the industrial development that oppressed and exploited these individuals. This all occurs on the stage, or site, of New Orleans, in which enslaved people were sold and traded.’

period of reflection. Keith expressed to the collective that, ‘this form [the interactive audio walk] can engage audiences in ways that my work can’t’. We offered Keith an entryway into a mode of research transmission and storytelling that instigates deictic possibilities familiar enough to engage younger populations in a historical remix of the overheard. Keith, in turn, taught us how to listen to history with care and love. ‘The naming of the world,’ writes Freire, ‘which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love’ (Freire 1970: 62). In praxis, Keith’s infusion of love becomes blatantly clear: during one moment, he told us stories about visiting his relatives at God’s Little Acre burying ground with his grandmother as a young boy, and how he will be buried there next to them one day.

Critical/creative fabulation in a sound-listening-learning braid is – in Oliveros’s words – about ‘composing the direction of attention’. This is important to mention because Keith was adamant in naming the fact that Newport’s ‘brand’ (geared towards tourists) focuses on the Gilded Age mansions, music festivals, and yachting activities but passes right by the stories of the Africans buried at God’s Little Acre. S.A. and Ben’s interactive audio walk explored this perspective by highlighting one of the more noticeable elements of being at the burying ground: the sound of vehicles passing by. Keith told us that his daughter once said, ‘all these cars are rushing to come to Newport and they are driving right by to get downtown to have a good time and none of them probably recognize what’s going on here’.

4. ACTION-REFLECTION TWO (TRANSDUCING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT)

In understanding sonic art as it relates to land, how do we create work that connects one to a land, without reproducing structures of hegemonic power and dominance, but rather reinscribes them through sound? (Babette)

Community MusicWorks, a free music school for Providence youth, is about to break ground on a new \$10 million music education centre. For two decades, Community MusicWorks’s one-on-one classical string lessons, ensembles, and social justice leadership groups have been co-located in a small storefront in the city’s West Broadway neighbourhood. According to Community MusicWorks’s website, 84 per cent of their students are Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour, and the average childhood poverty rate in the neighbourhoods where their students live is 42 per cent – compared with 14 per cent across the entire state of Rhode Island. Sebastian Ruth and Kelly Reed, Community MusicWorks’s directors, invited our class collective to organize a workshop in sound in which each

member would propose a sound installation to honour the land and activate processes of dialogue about the site where their new headquarters will sit.

Elana, as a project concerning spaces, voices, and publics, our work with Community MusicWorks was textured by our class collective's previous study on civic engagement at Cathedral Square with Providence Public Library. Can you explain that experience?

Cathedral Square was once the religious and commercial nexus of the City of Providence; it has now transformed into a contested site of civic dispute. In the 50s, a new major highway was constructed only one block from the Square, and it cleaved the city in two. In the 70s, responding to years of deindustrialization and urban flight, the city commissioned the iconic I.M. Pei to redesign Cathedral Square, but funding ran out midway through. The City of Providence's vision of the plaza has been perpetually halfway-realized ever since. In 2003 the Providence Preservation Society declared it 'By far the most problematic of Providence's open spaces.' The *College Hill Independent* corroborated: 'Save for a few cars and a skateboarder sliding down the fountain's dry slopes, the Square is empty.'

When we stepped into Cathedral Square, instead of a space made silent by urban renewal, we heard the Cathedral's bell tower ringing out as a group of volunteers distributed free warm meals to thirty or so people experiencing food insecurity. As we waded through the square's layers (popular presumptions, an archive of old photos and maps, and our here-and-now sitedness), we began to realize that the deep pursuit for which we locate (listen for) different possibilities of sociohistoric causes, contexts, and sensual qualities of sound is a path to nowhere and everywhere; complete and incomplete; whole and partial; deep and shallow.¹⁵ Inspired by Jack Halberstam's assertion that 'Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world', we composed a series of Fluxus-inspired text scores to further-activate this discursive site (Halberstam 2011: 2). Responding to the initial narratives of 'failure' related to hegemonic notions of success, we opened spaces in which unmaking and remaking could coexist in order to perturb the question: Cathedral Square is 'failed' for what public?

¹⁵Our approach is very much contextualized through Miwon Kwon's paradigms of site-specificity: phenomenological or experiential (How does an experience of an art object or event depend on the bodily presence of a 'viewing subject'? How does a work of art become part of, or restructure, the site?); social/institutional (What does a site teach us about social, economic, and political trajectories?); and discursive (What is a site? Can it be immaterial? How do 'non-sites' delineate fields of knowledge, intellectual exchange, and/or cultural debate?) (Kwon 1997).

Erik, now that we've delved into our time at Cathedral Square, can you share some context for how Community MusicWorks has approached civic engagement with Providence communities?

Despite Providence's self-proclaimed status as Rhode Island's 'creative capital', Providence Public School District offers virtually no arts programming for its student body. Community MusicWorks has filled the gap with their community studio in the West End and South Side neighbourhoods. Their style of art as civic engagement adopts the storefront model, an approach originally developed by Bill Strickland at his Manchester Craftsmen's Guild: an afterschool pottery studio in Pittsburgh which has put their doing on full display in the large street-facing window of their studio. People walking by see art as a community practice performed in front of them; many feel compelled to join.

As we considered how our workshop in sound might guide Community MusicWorks to elaborate on the kind of engagement that the storefront model gestures towards, we turned to Rebecca Belmore's socially engaged sound art project, *Speaking to Their Mother*. In response to the Canadian government's continuing colonial project (which had most recently manifested the previous summer, in the Oka Crisis of 1990, when Mohawk people resisted the town of Oka's attempts to construct a golf course on their land), Belmore created a giant megaphone for Canadian First Peoples to voice back to the land. In a film documenting the construction and first installation of the megaphone, Belmore walks through the Mohawk land that was deforested following the Oka Crisis: 'We don't know how to walk through this stuff, this mess. We want to run through this but we have to walk carefully and think about it' (Belmore and Beaucage 1992). By amplifying voices amid the change, Belmore's megaphone becomes what Julian Henriques theorizes as a literal and figurative 'transducer': the act of sounding, loudly, helps '[achieve] the escape velocity to leave the world of either/or and enter the world of either and both', a 'place between places and a time out of time ... thresholds where transition, transfigurations and rites of passage occur' (Henriques 2011: 469).

At the threshold between their old space and the new one yet to come into being, Community MusicWorks is now a 'place between places'. In this moment of transduction, new questions emerge: What does it mean to build a new, multicapacity building in an already-gentrifying area? How, in the process of building and marking the new space, can Community MusicWorks honour the richness of the West Broadway neighbourhood, from the community members who play in Dexter Park, one block from Community MusicWorks, to the Narragansett and Wampanoag people who have stewarded the land

for centuries? How can traces of the stories shared about this place live on once the new building is complete and in use? Our class collective wondered how Belmore's critical spatial practice in sound¹⁶ might guide our civic engagement with Community MusicWorks and inform the sound installation blueprints we would propose during our workshop.

On the day of the workshop, we sat with Sebastian and Kelly in Community MusicWorks's bustling central meeting room and looked out the east-facing window to glimpse the site where their new building will stand. Andrew and Ben, collaborating as a pair, proposed setting up a series of stations around the neighbourhood where passersby could record local stories; Seth sketched out a speaker setup positioned at the entrance of the new building that would play different remixes of these stories; Frances presented a reading of Community MusicWorks's mission statement, set to a continually changing sonic backdrop; Babette played for us an audio collage to nestle into the fluxed experience of learning a piece of music, practising, being in-process; S.A. described a 'walking meditation' based in trance music traditions of Indigenous futurists, and Aïcha introduced us to the listening loom:

weaveCMW [Community MusicWorks] seeks to engage the deeply communal, ancestral rituals tied to a loom, while serving as the living archive for CMW's transitional phase. How? By building a large loom where community elders storytell with/to youth . . . stories of the collective psyche of CMW, as a dynamic geography and community are intertwined within. (Aïcha)

Upon hearing Aïcha's proposal, Kelly remarked that the kinds of language we were using ('living archive', 'storytell', 'geography') and the way we framed these words as holding resonances in sound (e.g., voice, transduction) were new for Community MusicWorks. Channelling Freire's conviction that study, reflection, and action must be synthesized to form praxis, we discussed how the theoretical language of sound that we used in our proposals, prompted Community MusicWorks to imagine new modes of community action (Freire 1970: 47). With their storefront engagement approach, Community MusicWorks frames their space as a place of connection for surrounding communities. Our proposals helped Community MusicWorks add sound, not only as a material but also as a metaphorical tool to open

¹⁶In her chapter, 'Sound Installation Art: From Spatial Poetics to Politics, Aesthetics to Ethics,' Gascia Ouzounian explains how artist Heidi Fast facilitates participants' formation of a critical spatial practice, 'by asking participants not only to listen to their everyday environments, but also to create sounds in and through them, an act that draws attention to the "voices" of the places the participants inhabit and to their roles in constructing these voices (and by extension, places)' (Ouzounian 2013: 86).

dialogue, deepening and nuancing their civic engagement. The loom – which would produce a fabric of quotations (Barthes 1977: 159) – opened the possibility for layered voices to reveal the discursivity of Community MusicWorks.¹⁷

One day at the Community MusicWorks studios we asked, 'Why teach European classical music to students of colour?' Nicole, a teenage Community MusicWorks student who had spontaneously joined us, pointed out that it is less about genre and more about getting to *do* music. Nicole told us how learning and playing classical music allow her to *do* negotiating; to *do* individual and group growth; to *do* problem solving; and to interweave layers of institution, time, community, and place. Nicole reminded us that – as with Oliveros's ♀ Ensemble – music is a welcome by-product to community change and transformation in which sound and listening operate imaginatively.

5. IN/CONCLUSION

In the world Wendy Carlos brings us in, categories are no longer categories at all, but are compounding layers. As to be woman is to be machine and to be Black is to be queered. Wendy Carlos invites us to step into the fungible and the interchangeable and has paved the way for others to do the same . . . How can listening to her music become a way for us to come to know her, while also respecting the boundaries which she has set up for herself? Listening thus becomes a way of coming to know those we cannot know. (Babette)¹⁸

The old sky-blue minivan with which we travelled from site to site became an in between place: as we considered ambiguities of art/life, cyborg/human, and right/wrong on the way (t)here, we synthesized our collective voice. Driving back up College Hill after our last meeting with Community MusicWorks, a conversation emerged about the post-human position and Donna Haraway's famous statement: 'Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves . . . it means both building and destroying

¹⁷Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the construction of Community MusicWorks's new building has been put on hold. Sebastian and Kelly said they will be revisiting our sound installation proposals and workshop notes when construction resumes.

¹⁸Our fourth collaborative project – which we hope to elaborate on more fully in a future article – connected our identities with Wendy Carlos (the Grammy-award winning electronic music composer and Brown University alumna 1962) and the Dirt Palace (a feminist, non-profit live/work arts space in a re-purposed library in Providence). Our evening performance that we organized, entitled 'Letters to Wendy', explored magical realms, narratives, and speculative fictions where 'the unknown and otherworldly is imagined, engaged, and embodied' (Kheshti 2019). We mention this here to mark this collaboration as one example of a sonic imaginary where the class collective veered away from dialectical positions and normative conditions.

machines, identities, categories, relationships, and space stories' (Haraway 1991: 181). This was one of our frequent in-between conversations in motion that marked a synthesis; the veering away from the dialectical positions and normative conditions that have become imprinted on everyday life, bodies and objects. When the relational qualities of sound and listening (Oliveros) with critical consciousness (Freire) enters the mix, we arrive within a sonic imaginary. As artist/scholar Salomé Voegelin writes:

The possibility of a politics of sound is the possibility of a politics of the incomplete, the unfamiliar, the unrecognizable and the unheard; that which we have no words for and that which is incommensurable in relation to current norms, but which presses through a naturalized reality, and impresses on us the need and courage to listen-out for alternatives within. (Voegelin 2018: 35)

For now we pivot to another possible place of incompleteness.¹⁹ Echoing Oliveros, Xander, one of our community collaborators, waved bye to the collective one day, saying, 'keep your ears to the ground'. This aphorism calls out to Oliveros's most well-known sonic mediation: 'Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.' The goal of this impossible instruction – like our class project – is unmistakable: to awe human beings into sonic imagination as a process of knowledge acquisition. The slivers of life expressed in this article share shapeshifting possibilities in plural sound and listening that are, as Freire writes, 'not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection' (Freire 1970: 61). We mark our weaving call and response as socially engaged sound art; we dialogue in a process of transformation to create our unique reality of learning.

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- ¹⁹In speaking about her counter-school as art project, Cátedra Arte de Conducta (Behavior Art School), the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera said: 'From my perspective, the way to look at failure or success of the school is through what happens after the member leaves. The work of art is the process of the school, but the result is another process that starts after they leave here' (Finkelpearl 2012: 195). Holding tight to the space between failure and success, the project we discuss here continues to resonate in our lives. For example, in a recent email exchange, Ben wrote to us: 'I can feel the experiences we shared together breathing onto the way I have comported myself towards the world the last year and a half.'
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