Sonic Difference:

Reflexive Listening and the Classification of Voice

Jeff Donison
Communication and Culture
York University

Abstract:
Listening is not a passive practice, but an active response and construction of the exterior world. Attaching a physical or mental image to a sound produces a sense of reassurance in how we understand our environment and perceive our relation to others. However, although labelling voices with identity markers helps self-orientation, it can perpetuate false distinctions between "us" and "other" due to the voice's continually changing, multi-faceted sound and resulting meanings. Jennifer Lynn Stoever (2016) argues that "listening operates as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance in the shadow of vision's alleged cultural dominance" (p. 4). Listening does not dismiss racial essentialism, but culturally reconstitutes it. Difference exists, what matters is how we classify these differences. By philosophically theorizing listening, people may come to a better understanding of the different ways in which people interpret the world sonically. Sound studies scholars such as Nina Sun Eidsheim (2019) and Stoever (2016) have written on voice discrimination and how listening to sound in different ways can help address these discriminatory essentialist practices standardized over time. This article further articulates a two-stage reflexive listening practice toward an understanding of sound and voice as markers of identity through "pausing" (Eidsheim, 2019) and "listening out" (Lacey, 2013; Muscat, 2019). These two reflexive modes of interpretation can be used together to help challenge dominant listening practices grounded in Western thought and value and consequently encourage people to unmask their voices against listener expectations.

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Corresponding Author: Jeff Donison – jdonison@yorku.ca

Listening is not a passive practice, but an active response and construction of the exterior world. Attaching a physical or mental image to a sound produces a sense of reassurance in how we understand our environment and perceive our relation to others. However, although labelling voices with identity markers helps self-orientation, it can perpetuate false distinctions between "us" and "other" due to the voice's continually changing, multi-faceted sound and resulting meanings. Jennifer Lynn Stoever (2016) argues that "listening operates as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance in the shadow of vision's alleged cultural dominance" (p. 4). In a Western context, listeners judge voices linguistically and sonically based on their expectations grounded in cultural training, previous experiences, and familiar societal norms. For example, many listeners of Western audio broadcasting have come to expect a certain "White" sounding voice and vocabulary (Brice, 2018). In contrast, "other" voices sonically and linguistically are valued in relation to these Western, "White" expectations.

When using these terms of *listening* and *voice*, this article refers to how people interpret and value other people's voices, how people make meaning of others' opinions in person and through the media, and how listener expectations influence the voices we hear sonically and linguistically. This article examines how the sound of the voice has discriminatorily been valued and how listening to sound in different ways can help address these discriminatory essentialist practices that have become standardized. Listener expectations can cause speakers to change the way they sound and/or speak to conform to normative characteristics since the voice is alterable. By critically reflecting on their listening, people may come to a better understanding of the different ways in which they interpret the world sonically. This article articulates a two-stage reflexive listening practice toward an understanding of sound and voice as markers of identity through "pausing" (Eidsheim, 2019) and "listening out" (Lacey, 2013; Muscat, 2019). These two reflexive modes of interpretation used together can help challenge dominant listening practices grounded in Western thought and value and consequently encourage people to unmask their voices against listener expectations.

Voice and Listening

Our first act of listening is to the voices of people and objects (Ihde, 2007). Nina Sun Eidsheim (2019) argues there is an assumption that by locating voice, we can "know" the object or person we are hearing. Yet as many sound studies scholars agree, listening to voice does not allow us to truly identify its source or origin, even if we can locate its physical position (Pettman, 2017). In other words, "knowing" requires an examination beyond a surface encounter with sound itself to analyze its

social and cultural influences, how it came to be. Dominic Pettman (2017) notes, "You can never be sure of the [voice's] true source, and you can never be sure of what it signifies, even as you may feel you understand the signal within the noise" (p. 58). Pettman is referring to how humans interpret the world's sounds within a conceptual framework of a supposedly "universal" human voice. Listening within this confined framework creates a boundaried understanding of the world where people value certain sounds as signalling universal meanings, but that are actually culturally specific. People listen for sonic cues in the voices of others in the hope of understanding them culturally (Schaeffer, 1966/2017), but cues are contextual across time and space, and across humans and nonhumans.

The indeterminacy of sound was a central focus for French composer and theorist Pierre Schaeffer who used the term "acousmatic" to refer to "*a noise that is heard without the causes from which it comes being seen* [original emphasis]" (p. 64). Mladen Dolar (2006) similarly states, the acousmatic voice is "a voice whose origin cannot be identified, a voice one cannot place" (p. 60). The acousmatic interrogates the assumption that any object's produced sound is unique to that object alone. Furthermore, the acousmatic is not only a reflection on sound, but also on the practice of listening itself at a particular moment (Kane, 2014). When scrutinizing a sound's origin, listeners must move beyond the physiological and towards the cultural since each individual's physiology does not have a history prior to its construction. Indeed, people need to be attentive to how an individual's voice carries symbolic meaning, how the individual's voice is culturally influenced to convey such meaning, and how the voice is interpreted to confirm or deny the individual's intended meaning based on the listener's cultural influences (Eidsheim, 2019). Therefore, if the voice is embedded culturally as much as it is physically, we may agree with Shaeffer (1966/2017) that the acousmatic question cannot be answered, that one's voice is the voice of all its predecessors it has encountered and does not uniquely belong to any one individual. In other words, although organs are tools for emitting voice, how people sound and how people speak are shaped by their environments culturally and the traditions carried by them.

Discriminatory Classifications

Recently, scholars have investigated Schaeffer's "acousmatic" theory by evaluating histories of racial and ethnic oppression through sound as a primary epistemological tool (Stoever-Ackerman, 2010). When listening to a sound without seeing its producer (e.g., through audio media), how can people identify the sound as belonging to that producer? If people can see the producer of the sound, how do they classify the sound itself if individual voice is not shaped biologically, but culturally?

Here, discriminatory practices occur in underexamined fashion, especially considering Stuart Hall's (1992) notion that race:

> is the organizing category of those ways of speaking, systems of representation, and social practices (discourses) which utilize a loose, often unspecified set of differences in physical characteristics – skin colour, hair texture, physical and bodily features etc. – as *symbolic markers* [original emphasis] in order to differentiate one group socially from another. (p. 298)

For example, Stoever (2016) illustrates that during the 19th century, slave advertisements contained linguistic descriptors of a supposedly "Black" voice, including the words "coarse" and "loud," which represented non-Whiteness. Opposingly, "White" voice is considered "refined" and "quiet." This racially discriminatory binary does not consider the cultural binds that enforce voice generally, like geographic region and education that can speak to the conditions and environments of different communities and classes. Instead, it focuses on essentialized listening that constructs a "Black dialect" presented as biological and applicable to all non-White humans. People map their listening experiences on others as objects, even at a distance. Similarly, "a listening subject is *comprised* [original emphasis] of auditory information processed through interactive and intersectional psychological filters" (Stoever, 2016, p. 32) that seek to distinguish the person's voice they are hearing. Eidsheim (2019) states that "the assumption that we can know sound, and that the meaning we infer from it is stable (and indeed essential), allows for the *projection of beliefs about people onto the sound* [original emphasis]" (p. 49). There requires a shift away from subject-to-object listening towards subject-to-subject positioning (Robinson, 2020). By doing so, people may then begin to examine not only how listening can perpetuate discriminatory classification, but also how such classification influences vocal production itself.

Masking Voice

A vocalizer's sonic response to a listener's previous valuation can evoke the vocalizer's "double consciousness." Referring to African Americans, W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/2007) defined double consciousness as the psychological process of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul ... One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body ..." (p. 8). In other words, double consciousness is the colonizing process where an individual views their own racial identity and social practice based on the perception they have of themselves and on their perception of how a dominant culture views them. Similarly, Hall (1992) notes,

"Identity arises ... from a *lack* of wholeness which is 'filled' from *outside us*, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by *others* [original emphasis]" (p. 287). People may alter the way their voice sounds in particular exchanges since listeners can discriminatorily associate intonation, accent, rhythm, and other oral descriptors with particular values (e.g., intellect) in a Western context.

In Frantz Fanon's (1952/2008) analysis on Black students travelling from Martinique to France's White metropolis, he argues that students do not carry their Martinique identity, but supplant it with a new cultural identity of the colonized land in order to be accepted. This notion of "acceptance" can be implanted in the minds of racialized groups by White-constructed, social conditions that classify certain sounds as "uncivilized," "savage," and inherently racial. Thus, "the usually raucous voice gives way to a hushed murmur. For he knows that over there in France he will be stuck with a stereotype ..." (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 4). For Fanon, because "Black dialect" was a weapon used by dominant cultures to insinuate racial sonics of colonized groups as uncivilized, out of place, and unmodern (Stoever, 2016), Black students would alter their voices to appear "civilized" in response to hegemonic, sonic protocols shaping racialized double consciousness. Fanon's (1952/2008) analysis indicates that individuals are forced into preconceived categories based on supposedly innate racial characteristics or they alter their voice, or mask it, to align with accepted sonic characteristics attributed to the dominant group. Listening places value on people's voices (Couldry, 2010) and can resultingly influence how people articulate themselves to align with "accepted" sonic characteristics that hold particular social and cultural capital.

People may be unaware that their listening practices are potentially discriminatory. As Schaeffer (1966/2017) argues, "The same physical signal reaches ears that we suppose to be identically human, potentially alike, but their perceptual activity, from the sensory to the mental, certainly does not function in the same way" (p. 88). People can hear the same sound but interpret it or place different value on it based on how they have, even subconsciously, been taught to listen. People can begin reflecting on how their listening influences their understanding of sound and voice as markers of identity by practicing "pausing" and "listening out," two reflexive modes of interpretation challenging dominant listening practices rooted in Western thought and value. "Pausing" is grounded in sound studies (Eidsheim, 2019) and refers to the voice sonically. "Listening out" is grounded in media studies (Lacey, 2013; Muscat, 2019) and refers to the voice politically. These two practices create a dual-pronged approach to listening where people initially remove themselves from valuing voice based on their previous encounters and cultural teachings, and then engage with voice afterwards from an openly political position.

Pausing

"Pausing" is a practice that Eidsheim (2019) argues requires people to question and interrupt listening practices that continually establish dominant narratives of sonic essence. Because naming is subjective when different cultures listen and label sound, pausing can help a listener develop an understanding of multiple meanings, or shed desire for meaning altogether and listen to sound for its own sake (Robinson, 2020). Stoever (2016) echoes this sentiment, arguing that one can use "silence as an opportunity to listen to others' listening, a metacognitive practice enabling new forms of listening and selfhood to emerge" (p. 69). Are there alternative ways to interact with the voices people hear besides naming and identification based on pre-existing expectations/interactions? If a listener withholds from trying to define the meaning and intention of a person's voice, this can allow the vocalizer to have their own agency, to be heard openly since "voice is not innate because we hear it according to the differences assigned by a given culture" (Eidsheim, 2019, p. 173). Simply put, pausing is a practice for reflecting on how people value certain sounds over others as "normal" in a region or culture and questions the desire (Robinson, 2020) for locating a distinct meaning from voice.

However, voices unarguably have characteristics lending themselves to regional identification. Dolar (2006) refers to accented voices, or vocal sounds that break away from the standardized tone heard as the ruling norm in a society, to argue that intonation and accent are important sonic characteristics for articulating identity in media interactions. Jacob Smith (2008) adds that accents are used for typing ethnic/regional performance. For instance, in Gloria Khamkar's (2015) study of post-war Asian community radio in Leicester, they compare how Asian migrants were historically represented sonically with how they represented themselves. "When ethnic minority communities become active producers, they themselves are in control, more or less, in portraying the real – and not stereotyped – image of ethnic minority communities" (Khamkar, 2015, p. 160). Khamkar concludes that community radio is a potential site of ethnic affiliation for racialized communities who hear voices that sound like their own. Accented voices are not biologically or racially determined, but are environmentally taught, yet in Western contexts, accent is often heard as having certain social and cultural value in relation to normalized Whiteness. For non-Western communities, accent can be a source of connection and community. Listeners can implement pausing to conceptualize accent beyond institutionalized, dominant representations by hearing how other people interact with voices without assigning Western values to sonic characteristics.

Scholars have used the term "accented radio" to engage with identification in particular media environments. "Accented radio" refers to a radio station's programming/content, or the opinions voiced, as well as the ability to understand a community based on the medium's aesthetics and the voice's sonic quality, including accent (Moylan, 2018). According to Katie Moylan (2018), accent articulates individual and group identity by sonically reflecting the heard voices of that community and region. The sound of the voice produces its own meaning of identity in addition to the linguistic content articulated, and has a distinct quality representing a particular ethnic community or regional affiliation. Accents have been evaluated culturally based on established social capital, where certain accents are given value over others. Yet when reflecting on listening to media texts, for example, people can start to hear the voice as "both structure and topic" (Moylan, 2018, p. 286) that facilitates identity through the narrative being told (or opinions expressed) and accented sound that reflects a region or environment. Here, voice is not valued on a hierarchy, but is instead heard as cultural expression in a particular context. Pausing to critically reflect on one's own listening practices of audio media like radio provides potential for understanding voice beyond the values people automatically assign based on their previous listening experiences and expectations.

Listening Out

Another reflexive practice is political listening, or "listening out." From a media studies perspective, Tanya Muscat (2019) notes that listening out is an active and anticipatory action to hear beyond sound to its political relevance and potential. Who is being heard and, perhaps more importantly, who is not being heard? Additionally, Kate Lacey (2013) states, "Listening out is the practice of being open to the multiplicity of texts and voices and thinking of texts in the context of and in relation to difference and how they resonate across time and in different spaces" (p. 198). Listening out is an epistemological shift away from the historical distinction between public and private listening. For Lacey (2013), media audiences are not passive consumers subsumed under a homogenous label. Rather, intersectional audiences can be politically engaged through the "freedom of listening" (Lacey, 2013, p. 177), or the ability to interpret what others say and how others sound in culturally specific contexts through media.

Listening out allows people to critique a supposed plurality of voices in the media since the listener registers what is being heard in relation to other voices. Instead of pausing to reflect on their listening practices, as Eidsheim proposes, Muscat and Lacey insist people listen openly to voices sonically and linguistically in media and scrutinize how these media representations have political connotations

for different listeners. Similarly, Tanja Dreher (2009) argues "that a redistribution of material resources for speaking is inadequate unless there is also a shift in the hierarchies of value and esteem accorded different identities and cultural production" (p. 454). It is not the existence of racial or ethnic identity labels that is an issue (Crenshaw, 1991). Rather, it is the values that people assign to these labels that need to be critically examined, as well as the systems organizing these values.

In their research on Black-owned-and-operated radio in Chicago, Catherine Squires (2000) states that:

> conversations concerning issues that are pertinent to the entire body politic are often considered relevant only to members of the class considered "typical" citizens: whites. In addition, the pool of experts consulted regularly by mainstream media outlets is predominantly white. (p. 85)

When enacting political listening, the listener seeks to understand why certain voices are presented over others, how people make meaning through sound and expression of these voices being transmitted, and how people can move towards shifting these institutional value systems and practices favouring and standardizing dominant, often White, middle-class groups. Shifting hierarchies of value are important in media engagement since "those who speak might all speak with the same voice, either through choice, coercion or the conditions of the marketplace" (Lacey, 2013, p. 177). Listening out helps people critically engage with how racially and ethnically marginalized groups voice themselves, rather than how dominant culture, facilitated through dominant media, tries to silence these communities or force assimilative cultural practices through standardized sonic and linguistic production. Lacey (2013) suggests that people should "listen out for otherness, for opinions that challenge and clash with one's own, for voices that take one out of one's comfort zone" (p. 195). Listeners can equally listen out to other auditory subcultures, like White supremacist groups transmitting discriminatory discourse, to openly confront narratives and better understand how these subcultures mobilize cultural communication.

Listening out is an individual internalization but can be enacted during the communal act of media consumption. Fanon provides an example of this communal listening in "This is the Voice of Algeria" (2012). Fanon explains that listening to radio during the Algerian revolution was a communal effort to recapture the essence of the nation, or the characteristics that made Algeria what it was. Listening over radio allowed one to politically participate and follow the movement by listening to updates provided by the Algerian public rather than a small group of the political elite. As a form of listening out, Algerians listened to citizen voices and content that symbolically

spoke against the political censorship of national citizens themselves. Fanon's sentiment of listening as a national practice is reflected in Susan Douglas's (2004) work. Douglas (2004) notes, "Some modes of listening have helped constitute generational identities, others a sense of nationhood, still others, subcultural opposition to and rebellion against that construction of nationhood" (p. 8). Broadcasting forms a listening community sharing an experience and sense of self, especially in its use for revolutionizing or opposing those with dominant positions politically or who control media and thus, control who is being heard on national scales. The sound of the voice and the opinions expressed can be engaged with through pausing and listening out, which helps listeners critically consider what voices are being heard and valued in a region or culture and how they value these voices and opinions themselves.

A Combinatory Approach

I conceive pausing and listening out as complimentary practices that together offer a critical approach to reflexive aural engagement with voice. Pausing is the first step because it offers an interval before evaluating a voice sonically or politically based on cultural training and cultural value systems. Dolar (2006) states that "the silent listener has the power to decide over the fate of the voice and its sender; the listener can rule over its meaning, or turn a deaf ear" (p. 80). Here, Dolar is referring to the power a listener possesses when engaging with voice since it is the listener's interpretation that dictates what the voice means in that interaction. Until a response is made, and thus a meaning produced, the listener can value the voice in whatever way they wish. The importance of pausing is prolonging the evaluation of the voice to engage with it more thoughtfully and critically. However, as Lacey (2013) argues, "listening without political judgement is simply a communicative act; it is not an intrinsic political good unless directed towards the virtues of political judgement and action" (p. 197). In this way, pausing is effective in suspending judgement based on potentially discriminatory listening. Yet without listening out as an additional step, there remains a gap in political mobilization or activity.

Listening out is important after pausing to first critically engage with what is being heard, and then respond since politically "there is a point where truth has to be vocal …" (Dolar, 2006, p. 109). Responding after listening out as an anticipatory and political act allows people to engage with the voice sonically and linguistically. Pausing initiates reflection on people's interpretive framework and the cultural protocols that influence them (Smith, 2008). Listening out then establishes newer potentials for engaging with voice openly rather than ignoring unfamiliar or unappealing sounds and opinions. Just as Dolar (2006) suggests that the listener can

"turn a deaf ear" (p. 80), Lacey (2013) forwards that listeners "hold the responsibility not to close their ears to expressions of opinions with which they might not agree…. [T]here is also an ethnical responsibility for … listening out for voices that are unfamiliar or uneasy on the ear" (pp. 177, 191). Listeners are active agents addressed by an acousmatic voice, which is often transmitted through audio media. Listeners therefore possess great influence not only on how the voice is valued, but resultingly how the voice may be produced and transmitted in the future. Speakers can refuse masking based on new listener responses. In this way, pausing and listening out as a dual-pronged and reflexive approach to engaging with voice offers great power in suspending reactionary meaning making from culturally specific training and instead opening ears to a multiplicity of meanings, or listening to sound for its own sake (Robinson, 2020).

Pausing and listening out are also dependent on the listener's positionality, including their intersectional identities and the spatial and temporal contexts in which they engage with voice. Dylan Robinson (2020) suggests, "Like positionality itself, engaging in critical listening positionality involves a self-reflexive questioning of how race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and cultural background intersect and influence the way we are able to hear sound, music, and the world around us" (p. 10). Smith (2008) similarly argues, "The modern sound media have offered texts that need to be heard from these multiple positions, since the voice is always saying so many things at once – speaking of culture, identity, technology, and performance …" (p. 249). Robinson and Smith emphasize the need for listeners to question their assumptions when engaging with sound based on their positionalities influenced equally by their cultural environment and their previous experiences of hearing the world. Pausing and listening, although introduced in this article generally through a predominantly theoretical lens, can be further conceived and assessed in more specific temporal and spatial contexts, and across interactive environments and through various media moving forward.

Conclusion

This article has briefly reviewed how listening embodies discriminatory values and perceptions of the voice historically within a Western context. By distancing oneself from such value systems, listeners may begin to engage more openly with voices since there are a plurality of voices culturally influenced across temporal and spatial contexts. From a sonic perspective, although the voice is produced physiologically, sound is not biologically determined. Rather, the sound of the voice is culturally trained, representing not only oneself but the community and environment one is a part of. Although listeners may not be able to determine who

the speaker is when they listen to a voice, as the acousmatic suggests, they can begin to think about the voice outside of normalized cultural production and Western values. As Lacey (2013) argues, "Listening is the most fundamental mode of communicative reception, understanding and reflexivity …" (p. 20). Evaluating such cultural production through listening across time and space has been made possible through audio media capturing the ephemeral nature of the voice.

Pausing (Eidsheim, 2019) and listening out (Lacey, 2013; Muscat, 2019) are only two forms of listening presented in this article as potential practices for addressing discriminatory listening. To avoid a reconstituted mode of what Robinson (2020) calls "hungry listening," or "settler colonial forms of perception" (p. 2), it is important to note that there are many other potential forms of listening produced cross-culturally. Furthermore, to say that people should learn new ways to listen suggests that there are normalized ways, which have been Eurocentrically produced (Thompson, 2017). This article has aimed to address the Eurocentric practices of discriminatory listening and meaning making by suggesting two alternative ways of engaging with voice, though they are not *the* definitive modes. However, they do, at the very least, offer additional ways of thinking about listening as a practice. Firstly, pausing is reflexive for understanding people's own value systems shaped culturally. Secondly, listening out engages beyond surface encounters with voice sonically and linguistically and the institutions disseminating such voices. Together, both practices seek critical reflection on how people assign meaning to what they hear and how they can change these ideological meanings to help speakers resist sonic and linguistic masking in response to new listener expectations.

If voices are given certain value and are perpetuated by dominant institutions as a source of power and control, people may transform the way they sound or the language they use to align with preferred listener values and expectations. By doing this, certain sounds become normalized and taken as status quo, while others are deemed negative in their given contexts. Robinson (2020) argues, "As part of our listening positionality, we each carry listening privilege, listening biases, and listening ability that are never wholly positive or negative; by becoming aware of normative listening habits and abilities, we are better able to listen otherwise" (p. 10). By questioning and ridding their expectations through pausing and listening out, people may reflexively consider their own implicit biases and assumptions, which in turn can address how voice is valued in certain regional and cultural contexts in relation to their own positionalities.

Perhaps critiquing listening will help open more spaces for more people to speak where privileged voices are regularly heard since audience/listener

expectations will not be essentialized and commodified. This can resultingly influence a plurality of voices rather than a single, "accepted" voice traditionally favoured sonically and ideologically. I have presented a very broad and introductory task to voice and listening here. By first pausing, and then listening out to voice, people may begin to listen more openly for new understandings about the cultures behind voices in relation to their own subjective value systems. These understandings are not attached to race, and the values aren't organized based on biological characteristics, but instead, these understandings are focused towards sounds as cultural traces representing communities in specific places and times. In this process, people do not have to mask their voices to align with accepted expectations, but instead can voice themselves in ways meaningful to them and their communities.

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