

A hybrid listening across totems and talking wires

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the artistic endeavor of perceiving and listening to our environment, with a specific focus on the atmosphere. To grasp this concept fully, it is crucial to delve into a hybrid¹ relationship that combines three dimensions of knowledge: situated,² embodied,³ and mediated.⁴ Being that audio is an ideal medium to merge these dimensions, a comprehensive hybrid listening approach emerges, facilitating a more attentive and engaged connection with the environment. The article places particular emphasis on the situated dimension of listening to the atmosphere, while recognizing its interplay with the other two dimensions.

To illustrate this perspective, the analysis centers around the painting "The Song of the Talking Wire" by Henry Farny (1904). This artwork serves as an allegorical portrayal of the clash between Indigenous and western worldviews, as perceived through Farny's settler⁵ perspective. Supporting this interpretation of the tension between these two cosmologies, insights into totemism from Hildegard Westerkamp and embodied technologies by Pauline Oliveros lend further depth to the settler viewpoint. To evaluate the notion of Indigenous listening depicted in the painting, The xwélmexw artist, curator, and writer Dylan Robinson's call for critical listening positionality⁶ proves significant in delineating the Indigenous perspective⁷ conveyed. Through this dual-sided analysis (settler and Indigenous),⁸ the article embarks on an exploration of diversified sound technologies as catalysts for a hybrid listening experience that nurtures a profound connection with the atmosphere.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recording technologies have been instrumental in understanding the changes occurring in our environment, particularly the transition from rural to urban spaces. For example, the World Soundscape Project has shed light on the significance of perceiving the soundscape of our atmosphere, among others, in geographical and ecological terms [4]. However, it is important to recognize that sound

recordings alone are not the sole testimony to these transformations. Other artistic mediums, such as literature and paintings, also offer valuable insights into the process of displacement brought about by the Anthropocene in the pursuit of progress. One such example is *The Song of the Talking Wire* by Henry Farny (1904). This painting, influenced by Farny's settler positionality, serves as an allegorical representation of the tensions and contradictions between Indigenous and western worldviews. It explores the act of listening through the human body, technologies, and cultural positionality, weaving together a complex narrative in a soundscape that evokes a multisensorial listening to the surrounding atmosphere.

To establish a meaningful connection between visual and auditory narratives on environmental listening, the works of Hildegard Westerkamp and Pauline Oliveros are recommended for a deeper exploration from a settler positionality in relation to Indigenous listening. Westerkamp and Oliveros are exemplary representatives for addressing ecological perspectives and their extensive engagement with themes of Indigenous listening in their practice and research [5]. Westerkamp's valuable insights into the settler perspective stem from her experiences with totems. She describes these encounters as displaced acoustic events that possess an intrinsic connection to their surroundings, encompassing both material and spiritual dimensions. Oliveros, on the other hand, offers a rich understanding of technologies as tools for expanding the human sensorium in an aesthetic manner. Her concept of Deep Listening aligns with this approach, emphasizing the resourcefulness of utilizing technology to enhance our perceptual abilities.

By examining the contributions of Westerkamp and Oliveros, the article connects the visual narrative from Farny's point of view to auditory dimensions explored by the music and sound composers, in relation to Indigenous listening. I reckon that both composers align through their

¹ As an inspiration to this approach, I look at the notion of *hybrid ecology* [1] by the artist and researcher Laura Beloff. This concerns primarily bio-arts practice as a merging of a diverse community of synthetic, biological and technological organisms interacting with each other and components of their living habitat.

² In the style that Donna Haraway refers to in her essay *Situated Knowledges* [2].

³ Also mentioned by Haraway in the same text, I read this as a non-verbal, intuitive form of empiricism that relies on one's sensory perception, and an affective encounter.

⁴ Referring to technologies related to audio: such as vibrational, transductional and weather sensing.

⁵ I follow Dylan Robinson's contrast between settler (foreign) and Indigenous (as in native) [3].

⁶ One that questions how we might become better attuned to the particular filters of race, class, gender, and ability that actively select and frame the moment of contact between listening body and listened-to sound [3, p. 11].

⁷ In her essay "*Situated Knowledges*", Haraway cautions against the romanticization of marginalized perspectives while attempting to adopt their viewpoints, as there is a risk of idealizing the less powerful without truly understanding their experiences. She emphasizes the importance of being able to perceive from the margins and depths, but warns against misrepresenting or oversimplifying the realities of those in less privileged positions.

⁸ Dylan Robinson emphasizes the stratification between these two perspectives, and through cultivating an awareness of critical listening positionality, there is potential for engaging in alternative forms of listening [3, p. 51].

work with a *hybrid listening* approach, encompassing situated⁹ (feminist), embodied (ecological), and mediated¹⁰ (through sound technologies) knowledge.



Figure 1. *The Song of the Talking Wire* by Henry Farny (1904).

2. THE SONG OF THE TALKING WIRE

French artist Henry Francois Farny dedicated a series of works to depicting Indigenous people of North America engaged in everyday activities [8]. In this particular painting, we observe a hunter, rifle in hand, leaning against a telegraph post. In the background, two horses are pictured—one carrying two hunted animals, while the other stands nearby with an empty saddle.

The painting's title suggests an underlying animistic scenario that highlights the stark contrast between cultures and listening perspectives. It also hints at an aesthetic encounter embodied by the sound produced by telegraph's dynamic wires, stretching across the expansive landscape. These wires produce a humming noise reminiscent of aeolian sounds. The sound emanating from the oscillating telegraph lines is unique, as it is consistently amplified and modulated through the telegraph network integrated into the surrounding environment. This form of listening transcends the auditory realm and becomes a haptic experience, engaging our embodied senses to resonate with the encompassing landscape, and with the atmosphere.

Henry David Thoreau, in his work *Walden*, vividly described the aeolian harp-like sounds produced by wind currents interacting with telegraphic wires [9]. Media theorist Douglas Kahn proposes the convergence of aeolian and electronic energies, noting their resonance with ancient instruments and their premonitory and cosmological significance [11 p. 46]. Philosopher of ecology Timothy Morton references the aeolian harp¹¹ as a metaphor for the concept of ambient poetics, wherein atmospheric dynamics create a planetary-scale soundscape [13 p. 41].

Amidst the intricate interplay of atmospheric and technological dynamics, the hunter portrayed in the painting

displays a remarkable attentiveness to his surroundings. It is conceivable that he is deeply immersed in a ritual that establishes a profound connection with the environment, enabling him to engage in his hunting activities within this specific space. Nevertheless, it is of utmost importance to recognize that such interpretation and engagement arise from the settler perspective of the artist, Henry Francois Farny. The title of the painting itself carries significance, but its meaning may differ greatly for a settler compared to an Indigenous person. This highlights the influence of cultural perspectives and individual experiences in shaping our understanding of both the soundscape and its symbolic significance.

Within this context, it is pertinent to reflect upon the concept of sovereign listening put forth by Dylan Robinson [3, p. 62], which highlights the significance of recognizing distinctions in the act of perceiving the soundscape. Robinson offers a compelling example to illustrate this concept, and could fit to the narrative offered in this painting: for settlers, the soundscape may be associated with leisure, whereas for Indigenous communities, such as the man depicted in the painting, it is intertwined with vital subsistence activities like hunting, essential for their survival. It is worth noting that the man in the painting is depicted using a Western hunting weapon, which adds a layer of complexity to the scene and challenges the notion of neutrality.

Furthermore, this aspect prompts us to contemplate other potential forms of technological appropriation that may benefit the Indigenous man. Is Farny portraying this man as if he is considering how to leverage the telegraph line to his advantage? This distinction in listening positionality between settlers and Indigenous individuals underscores the diverse ways in which individuals relate to and interpret the auditory environment. It underscores the profound influence of socio-cultural contexts on shaping their listening experiences.

By acknowledging and understanding these contrasting perspectives, we gain insights into the nuanced dynamics at play in the sonic landscape. It encourages us to engage in critical examination of power structures, technological appropriation, and the socio-cultural implications embedded within the act of listening. Ultimately, this recognition of diverse listening positionality fosters a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the auditory environment and encourages us to question and challenge our own preconceptions and biases.

By employing the notion of *critical listening positionality* and applying it to the themes and sonic imagery evoked by this painting, one can begin to contemplate the borders and boundaries that exist between the visually-originated ideas depicted, as in the painting, and its evoked sonic environment experienced by the subjective position of the listener. This invites us to consider the divergent perspectives and

⁹ Environmental Sound scholars, Sean Taylor and Mikael Fernström, proposed that “the Deep Listening work of Pauline Oliveros and the soundscape compositions of Hildegard Westerkamp [...] locate the listening body at the center of situated soundscapes” [7].

¹⁰ Media theorist Douglas Kahn notes that Oliveros's corporeal practice is bolstered by spiritual techno futurism...”. Also, that Oliveros’ idea of

“sonosphere runs deep [...] in the atmosphere from the momentum of the earth’s spinning orbit in the sun’s thermal influence and moves out through analogies and transductive intermediaries of acoustical and electromagnetic fields and waves” [7 p. 174].

¹¹ In my artistic research I have explored the theme of the Aeolian Harp as a metaphor of Environmental Sound Instruments [12].

interpretations that arise when engaging with different sensory modalities and the subjective positioning of the observer or listener within the atmosphere.

3. TELEGRAPHICALLY MEDIATED SOUNDSCAPES

Further interpretation of the painting brings forth a range of concepts, for example, the impact and meaning of transmission infrastructures like the telegraph and trains, which served as catalysts for Western modern technologies while intersecting with Indigenous spaces, including totems. Media theorist Nicole Starosielski, for instance, offers insights into the Western advancement of the telegraph line, perceiving it as a tool for expanding colonial control through signal traffic [12]. In this regard, The World Soundscape Project has denounced the impact of industrialization, technological advancements, and innovations reshaping the landscape of listening and the overall worldly soundscape [13]. This prompts us to reflect on the profound changes, beyond material and sonic transformations, brought about by these developments. For example, media theorist John Durham Peters [14, p. 48] considers the telegraph as a medium of communication that played a role in diminishing the spiritualist quest for messages from the beyond, instead reducing communication to intentional exchanges among humans.¹²

Together, these perspectives underscore the transformative nature of technological progress and its impact on communication, culture, and spiritual dimensions. What is more, the settler gaze of Fanny might see from outside the forthcoming decay of Indigenous spirituality led by the western imposition of these communication infrastructures.

4. TOTEMS AS ACOUSTIC EVENTS

Hildegard Westerkamp, describes totem poles¹³ as silent observers, attentively listening to the forest, ocean, wind, rain, ravens, frogs, and eagles [16]. She believes that totems contain within them the essence of their surroundings, expressed through their grand and silent structures. According to Westerkamp, each totem pole represents an acoustic event that speaks to those who are willing to listen, offering stories and voices to be heard. The Survivors Totem Pole, in particular, serves as both a witness and a catalyst for marginalized individuals to find their voice [17].

Westerkamp highlights the marginalization of Indigenous presence, including totems, within the Canadian societal landscape, despite enduring the destruction of their environments, languages, and cultural expressions for generations, Indigenous communities continue to possess deep-rooted knowledge¹⁴ on how to live in respectful harmony with the natural environment, its seasons, cycles, and rhythms [19]. Westerkamp's environmental listening approach invites us to engage in an exchange where sound becomes intertwined with politics, embodiment, and storytelling traditions. Her view of totems emphasizes their fundamental connection to their surroundings, encompassing both material and symbolic aspects. Considering that totems have been displaced into acoustically oppressive museum environments,¹⁵ one can still contemplate totems as spaces that foster kinship within natural surroundings while remaining accountable to their environment.¹⁶ But how is it possible to emphasize these values of profound connection with nature through a *hybrid listening*?

However, an intriguing tension arises between the profound spirituality associated with totems, as discussed by Westerkamp, and the techno-deterministic secularization of the telegraph presented by Durham Peters. It is worth noting that both totem poles and telegraph poles occupy spaces within the natural landscape. This raises the question: Could the telegraph have served as a material replacement that displaced totems in both material and spiritual terms?

By comparing telegraph poles to Durham Peters' analysis of towers as sites for listening and observation, we can explore the idea of towers as ancestral places of sound propagation, marking time and space. Durham Peters expands on the telegraph's significance as a transmission medium that perpetuates the tradition of sound from artificial heights [14, p. 234]. This perspective invites us to consider whether the telegraph, with its technological capacity and elevated position, symbolically assumes a role similar to that of ancestral towers, or even perhaps to totems.

This juxtaposition between the spiritual symbolism of totem poles and the transmission capabilities of telegraph poles encourages us to delve deeper into the complexities of cultural and technological shifts. It invites us to ponder the potential impact of the telegraph as a medium that altered the landscape and, perhaps, disrupted the traditional spiritual connection embodied by totems. By examining these dynamics, we can gain a richer understanding of how the telegraph may have influenced both material and spiritual

¹² In contrast to the secularization of western technologies, Robinson's critical listening positionality invokes the "(...) aural traces of history: echoes, whispers, and voices that become audible momentarily, ones that may productively haunt our listening as significantly as ghosts that linger (...) a decolonial practice of critical listening positionality actively seeks out (or allows itself) to become haunted."

¹³ The term "totem" originates from the Ojibwa word "ototeman," which signifies the kinship between individuals [25]. Totems are regarded as reflections of the human connection with nature, fostering a sense of unity and identification with an animal. This identification is sustained through the act of imitation, leading to an ongoing sense of unity [15].

¹⁴ In this context it is worth looking into the notion of Indigenous epistemologies by Rauna Kuokkanen to grasp the complexity of defining

knowledge, not only as ways of knowing and things known, but also to consider what gets defined as knowledge, who does this defining, and who benefits from the act of definition [18].

¹⁵ Robinson critiques the museum display of Indigenous belongings, describing it as focused on accumulation and prioritizing visual consumption. He highlights how the presentation restricts engagement with other senses, particularly touch, through the use of vitrines and glass barriers. [3, p. 69].

¹⁶ To this account, Robinson declares that "listening is perhaps always a listening through, or in relation with land (...) sound territory is constituted through lived experience of movement across our lands that came with hunting, travel to winter and summer village sites..." [3, p.53].

realms, perpetuating a tradition of sound in its own unique way. By exploring these perspectives, we delve into the intricate relationship between totems, nature, and human interaction, expanding our understanding of the dynamics of sound, embodiment, and cultural heritage.

5. INDIGENOUS LISTENING

Dylan Robinson illuminates the intricate nature of listening as an activity, highlighting its orientation towards the recognition of formal structures, generic features, or specific sensorial representations and characterizations. This emphasis on recognition poses a challenge, as it can flatten the richness of the sonic world that surrounds us, reinforcing biases and limiting our understanding. Robinson further argues that Western-settler recognition has been reinforced through musical and listening education, perpetuating colonial perspectives [3, p. 50].

Furthermore, Robinson's critical listening positionality proposes that an anti-colonial listening approach involves embracing uncertainty about what listening truly entails. By embracing new temporalities of wonder and allowing ourselves to become disoriented from the certainty of settler colonial positions, we open up space for alternative modes of listening [3, p. 53]. It leads me to ponder whether *hybrid listening* could offer the possibility of listening in ways that challenge and transcend colonial frameworks. Can it contribute to the practice of decolonial listening, where multiple perspectives are honored and new possibilities for understanding and connection emerge?

6. DIVERSIFIED SOUND-TECHNOLOGIES

The preceding discussions shed light on the profound significance of *The Song of the Talking Wire* as a powerful demonstration of *hybrid listening* intertwined with an Indigenous spiritual positionality. This unique perspective allows for a deep and meaningful engagement with the ethereal voices carried by the wind through the telegraph line, evoking a haunting presence that deeply resonates with the listener. In this immersive experience, the atmospheric processes at play are embodied in a profound and multifaceted manner, forging a profound connection between the individual and the surrounding environment.

Furthermore, the concept of *hybrid listening* I associate in the painting suggests pathways for attuning ourselves to the atmosphere. In my own artistic practice-based research, I explore multi-sensorial experiences in relation to atmospheric processes. This exploration has led me to delve into tools, objects, rituals, and narratives that uncover a rich sonic landscape infused with deep-seated symbolisms, meanings, and narratives about nature. By combining artistic exploration with scientific knowledge about

atmospheric processes, I aim to create a holistic understanding of our sonic experiences.¹⁷

Following the approach of Westerkamp and Oliveros towards technology, my proposal advocates for seeking alternative and diversified approaches to engaging with sound technologies. My explorations are focused on culturally situated and embodied manifestations of environmental sound technology, such as in ancient technologies manifested through digital instruments, and computing interfaces for sound creation [22]. These manifestations, rooted in the global South, offer resistance to the dominant adoption of Western technologies. Additionally, the concept of Diversified technologies [23] put forth by philosopher of technology Yuk Hui encourages us to consider specific sociocultural contexts in the development of technology outside the framework of Western modernity. Hui suggests that exploring art and scientific experiments can reveal new sensorial dimensions beyond the utilitarian manifestations of technology.¹⁸

7. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I delve into the concept of hybrid listening as a means to integrate three dimensions of knowledge within the realm of artistic research in environmental sound. By emphasizing the situated dimension, I thoroughly examine the socio-cultural and political aspects that are intricately linked to the act of listening. The painting *The Song of the Talking Wire* serves as a compelling case study, allowing for a deeper exploration of the complexities that arise from the intersection of these dimensions. This examination is approached with a dual understanding, considering both settler and Indigenous perspectives. Recognizing the value of both perspectives is essential in fostering alternative ways of listening to nature, as it prompts us to become aware of the settler bias that often shapes our listening experiences at various degrees of relation to the environment.

In addition to intertwining perspectives, the incorporation of a multi-sensorial approach to listening is seen as a pivotal element. Engaging in a comprehensive sensorium enables us to fully immerse ourselves in the sonic experiences intertwined with atmospheric processes. For instance, the embodiment of telegraphic sounds serves as an agency that resonates deeply with our innate connection to nature. Similarly, the concept of totemism and the eerie voices emanating from the aeolian soundscape demonstrate the profound impact of sound on our perception of the environment.

Further exploration in this field could investigate how diversified environmental sound technologies can effectively cultivate an attunement to the atmosphere. For instance, Kate Galloway's insights highlight the importance of creative utilization of environmental sound and raise ethical considerations, particularly in the realm of sonic extraction [24].

¹⁷Similarly, artist and researcher Juliana España Keller propose an interplay within Sonic performance with *Vibrant Matter of Voice*, *Deep Listening*, and *Somatic Movement*, striving for an "understanding between

humans and nonhumans, to achieve a sense of becoming and attuning to the sonic relations of transformation [28].

¹⁸Some of the methods of Deep Listening resonate with this thinking, as it is founded in the epistemology of the non-rational [21].

Soundscape practitioners navigate complex negotiations when extracting sound, both in material and symbolic terms. By incorporating these perspectives and engaging with diverse approaches, we can expand our understanding of hybrid listening and contribute to a more inclusive and decolonialized sonic landscape. By embracing a decolonizing aspiration from a critical listening positionality, we have the opportunity to contribute to the creation of inclusive and equitable sonic landscapes. Such endeavors hold the potential to reshape our relationship with nature and foster a deeper appreciation for the diverse ways in which we engage with and listen to the world around us.

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