

Border-Listening/ Escucha-Liminal

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Decolonial Listening: Sonorous Bodies and the Urban Unconscious in Mexico City

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English translation: Mónica López Rivas

Everything happens as if, according to an infinite surpass, but always oriented towards the horizon of seclusion, the eye and the ear were relieving one another in view of the unit that is expected. The sight waits for the ear that waits for the sight, and so, it continues to infinity, one punctuating or over-punctuating the other.

Peter Szendy, *Deep In One Ear. An Aesthetic of Listening*.

Above all, sound.

Then, space.

A consistent pair that makes the urban experience possible, these confer body and volume on Mexico City. The city always consists of both sound and space: from dimensions and reverberations to acoustic displacements and the senses—a discontinuous *topophony*.¹ However, the city also consists of a tangible historical sediment—the traces of the pre-colonial past, and the reinvention of tradition. Again and again: what does the past sound like? In sum, this experience is about the city as a sounding board, about a walk as an acoustic and visual lesson, and about intractable subjectivities.

This is an essay on decolonial listening.

1.

What could such listening be about?

Is it an exercise or a form of knowledge? To listen, one has to decolonize. But what exactly? Cultural studies have emphasized how our postmodern condition unfolds within a complex media ecology. The hegemony of cultural representation has long since moved from Europe to the United States. This transatlantic itinerary has created

¹ We understand *topophony* as “the sounds of a location”.

a new imaginary of North America, which has also been inappropriately turned into a metonym for the Americas as a whole.

Yet the Americas are plural force lines that converge in stories of resistance. In the arts, the humanities and social sciences, reflective questions have been raised regarding the epistemological division of the world that turns some into the objects of representation and others into subjects of knowledge. This division is known to rest on three bastions: patriarchy, capitalism, and racism.

The most relevant objection to such intersectional violence has certainly been the resistance offered by social movements, mainly by indigenous peoples against extractive and neocolonial logics. Before, progress; now, development. Such is the rhetoric of the capitalist Hydra and the storm that has poured over the peoples of Latin America, re-baptised in the Andes, with dignity and rebellion, as *Abya-Yala*.

2.

What is the *decolonial turn*?

While African and Asian Postcolonial Studies sought to understand the dynamics that accompanied the emergence of the states that achieved their independence in the 20th century through wars of decolonization in the Third World, the decolonial turn emerges in Latin America as a questioning of the *internal colonialism* that consolidated the *Repúblicas criollas* in the nineteenth century. For Post-colonial Studies, the *post-colonial* condition evinces the transition to a world order in which the exhaustion of imperialism compelled a critique of the cultural representations that metropolises have made about their peripheries. In contrast, the decolonial turn considers that, even when imperialism has historically exhausted itself, there remains a long-lasting *domination pattern* that has given structure to a modern/colonial world-system. In other words, it is impossible to understand Modernity without the *colonial wound*. Hence, in spite of the end of colonialism, the domination patterns that make up *coloniality* persist, and define the constants of injustice that constitute our world.

There are at least three genealogical lines that should be considered for such a political and epistemological project:

- 1) Academic: after the Latin American Subaltern Studies group in the United States introduced post-colonial discussions, a new group was formed of primarily Argentinian, Colombian, and Venezuelan thinkers who, following the lines of thought opened to inquiry by Aníbal Quijano, questioned the persistently colonial logic of Modernity. This led to the formation of the Modernity/Coloniality group that brought together Walter Mignolo, Santiago Castro-Gómez, and Arturo Escobar, among others.
- 2) Feminist: the debates of the Modernity/Coloniality group neglected the specific dimension of gender, which is key to understanding the domination logic of coloniality. Female thinkers who introduced the feminist perspective to the coloniality critique also showed the impact of patriarchy within Modernity. We can identify female thinkers as diverse as María Lugones, Rita Laura Segato, Karina Bidaseca, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Yuderkis Espinosa, Catherine Walsh, and Ochy Curiel, to name just a few.
- 3) Decolonization: in addition to academic-activist personalities, the reflexive paradigm of the decolonial turn is established within the historical struggles of decolonization, led by the original peoples of *Abya-Yala*, from Bolivian collectives to the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador* (CONAIE) through *Zapatismo* and the fundamental contributions on community feminism of Lorena Cabnal, Gladys Dzul and others. The struggles and resistance of indigenous peoples have been, in this sense, the true source of decolonization practices.

3.

In sum, *decolonization* is a political and reflexive act.

It is also a *sensitive* act.

We propose decolonial listening as an act of interrogation and sonic experimentation within Latin American cities, an exploration of their radical sounds and reverberant spaces: a work of *topophony* that deals with the sound of places and spaces. Decolonial listening is also a process of questioning and thought - a feeling-thinking that takes buildings, squares, streets and avenues, museums and monuments of the city as *images of thought*. This same process creates sonic montages to identify the *dialectic installations* that allow the exhumation of the *urban unconscious*, brushing history against the grain in an archeological exercise.

We want to *think with sound*, through the register of the *radical sound of Latin American metropolises*. Sound and music maintain a close relationship within the configuration of subjectivity and collectivity. Sound, from the idea of a *sonorous body*, is not only an aural experience, but is palpable, felt with the whole body through its vibrations (speech, as well as dance and choreography, as a study of bodies in motion, also participate in the sonar plane). This body challenges and questions us, it collapses the accumulation of certainties of the modern/colonial self. Music and sound are a way of experiencing ourselves (Frith 2003), and a way of asking ourselves *where* we hear the world from.

This means two things: first, that we do not seek the conformation of an aesthetic of listening, but of a type of poetics that is, deep down, always political. A *poetic-politics of radical listening*. In the Western tradition of philosophy, aesthetics is always a reflection that comes from contemplation, reception, and the enjoyment of art as a spectacle: something to be seen and judged. In contrast, poetics, as Boris Groys has pointed out, is the work of creative experimentation, of the reflective production of new worlds and forms of sensitivity (Groys 2014). We want to think about the radicality of the Latin American sound from the perspective of the production of artistic, philosophical and political experiences of dissent.

Second, when speaking of decolonial listening, above all we express a desire to think from the sound: the act of listening turned into a philosophical act of questioning. The act creates new diagrams of sound and spatiality—a heterotopia of the *topophonies* that allow cities to be interrogated and experienced as fields of acoustic and political experimentation and questioning.

You have to think with the ears.

How can this be achieved?

4.

Among the Tojolobales, there is a type of listening and enunciation from the collective “we” that does not participate in the Cartesian division of the modern/colonial world: its resistance and subversion are audible through listening and enunciation that does not draw distinctions between object and subject, between who enunciates, and who listens. Therefore, *what I hear, hears me*. Another example is found in the fandangos—magnificent celebrations that last days and nights in the states of Hidalgo, Veracruz and San Luis Potosí, where the sound is produced by a large body of *jaraneros*, *versadores*² and dancers that make up a unit that feels-thinks collectively. The *Santería*³ rites in Cuba have a collective dynamic where sound and music are fundamental; the history and knowledge of the people is passed on “otherly” (*otral*)⁴ through an antiphonic (question and answer) song. The chant enunciates the names and temperaments of the *Orishas*, also encrypted in the beats of the *Yoruba* drums that “speak”. These are examples of the collective construction of sound, origi-

2 *Jaraneros* and *versadores* are types of popular singers whose music mostly derives from the oral traditions of southern Mexico.

3 *La santería* is the Caribbean adaptation of the *Yoruba* religion from Nigeria.

4 A neologism that only makes sense in Spanish. It comes from the combination of two words: *otro* (other) and *oral* (e.g., “oral cultures”). It refers to the popular transmissions which integrate narratives from the Other, including the alterity in our own popular culture.

nating and generated from listening *within ourselves*, experienced through a sonorous body that generates symbolic representations and community organization. The work of a musical interpreter consists of being an intermediary between an *absent self*, its message encrypted on paper, and a possible listener within a random context. Interpreting is an active and constantly changing process, rather than the configuration of a specific work/identity. Listening to music consists of the articulation of a body of sound (encoded in the Cartesian plane of the musical score), within the body of the performer. This implies that the performer themselves becomes the space and territory of many bodies. Being an interpreter necessarily requires breaking the borders of identity, being a territory open to the world, its sounds, its words; that is to say, to be a person populated by many peoples. In Spanish, the verb *tocar* describes the action of making music, different from German’s *spielen*, or *play* in English, both equally applicable to the interpreter and to the machine that produces music. *Tocar*, by contrast implies a back and forth action, it is an inter-action—that is, an action that transforms what is played, and evidently transforms the player. In other words: *what I play, plays me*. Music is not what is played, but it is we who play ourselves from music. Music or sound (music’s raw material), in this sense, is the construction of a community space, of a “we” that allows us to play ourselves from a distance.

5.

What is an *urban unconscious*? Above all, how can we obtain one?

Suely Rolnik has taught us that the *unconscious* is not something that we have, but something that is produced: we produce desire, according to the connection of our desiring-machines with reality (Rolnik 2019). One of the great machines for capturing Latin American desire is the machine of colonialism: it encodes, segments and directs the routes of desire to the canons of whiteness—heteronormative and Eurocentric canons. It blocks the flows of desire. A *colonial unconscious* exists. How has it been consolidated? Let’s take a look

at the maps and cartographies;⁵ the design of Latin American cities has been the result of the process of military conquest and then, of colonial occupation. The application of European construction techniques to the soil of the Valle of Mexico, for instance, has had to deal with the historical presence of lakes, first draining and subsequently reconstructing them. The sinking of colonial buildings in the Historic Center of the city is an example of the problems of simply transferring Old World construction techniques to the cities of the New World.

In the 20th century, Francisco de la Maza described the history of the capital as follows:

Mexico City was founded by the Aztecs in 1325, and then rebuilt in 1521 by the Spanish. The builder Alonso García Bravo drew up the layout, following the Renaissance urban grid, partly because of his experience, and partly because the Aztec city was rectilinear. The blueprint circumscribed a small city with longer blocks from east to west - the path of the sun- and shorter blocks from north to south, a plan that is still fundamentally preserved. (De la Maza 1985: 7)

The city of palaces, as it was also known, was celebrated by poets and writers from its pre-colonial foundation. However, the record of its Spanish layout is still preserved, not only in the constructions that still stand in the first squares of the center, but also in the records of colonial visual culture—from the painted folding screens of the period we know what the urban landscape would have looked like. These folding screens are visual artifacts of great importance in the Valley of Mexico.

Despite everything, there remain vestiges and material traces—motifs if anything—of the pre-Hispanic buildings that have been absorbed by, and consequently are still present in, the colonial palaces of the city.

5 Cartography in this sense is not only a drawing of physical space, but a diagram of multiple fluxes of desire.

These ornaments, fragments and ruins have been *unconsciously* integrated into the city, and can be spotted here and there, scattered everywhere as vestigial remains of the colonial catastrophe.

For instance, in the church of Santiago, one can still see with the naked eye the remains of glyphs engraved in stone—part of the shrines and temples of the Mexica deities. It is well known that the cathedral in the center of the city was built with the ruins of the *Templo Mayor*, a place of worship for the gods Huitzilopochtli and the black Tezcatlipoca. The most identifiable case is a fragment of the snout of the god Quetzalcóatl, the feathered serpent, that protrudes from the corner of the building in which the Museum of Mexico City is currently housed. It was in no way strange that the Spanish used elements of construction and materials that were once part of Tenochtitlán. During the establishment of the viceroyalty, the Spanish nobility ordered the construction of various palaces that would serve as headquarters for the new overseas powers and, occasionally, as homes. The Counts of Santiago de Calimaya ordered the construction of their palace around 1536; declared a national monument in 1931, it would be acquired by the capital's government in 1960 and converted into the Museum of Mexico City, to be restored by Pedro Ramírez Vázquez. This majestic building would probably be the last manifestation of the baroque, before the rise of neoclassicism, and the eclectic style that the Frenchified city would later display. A two-story palace, without a mezzanine and with mixed decorations clad with *tezontle*,⁶ the main entrance arch is flanked by two columns with Ionic spires on each side. In 1826, the use by peninsular families of noble coats of arms was banned (Cf. González Polo 1997). The cannon-shaped gargoyles are therefore the final ornaments, completing the majestic style of the building. An element that breaks the order and the regime of colonial symbols stands out, introducing a peculiar dialectic into the general architectural disposition:

In the corner of the base a pre-Hispanic serpent's head is embedded "as if it emerged from the earth to support on its

6 Tezontle is a building material commonly used in prehispanic cities, with an appearance similar to European bricks.

immortal jaws, the burden of the viceroyalty.” in the words of Salvador Novo. We do not know with certainty from what age it stems, but the tradition that has been passed down tells us that it was stolen from the Aztec’s *Templo Mayor* in the 16th century, to serve as a foundation. Fray Juan de Torquemada recounts in his monumental work *Indian Monarchy* that it was noted in his day (late 16th century) how the figures of idols had been placed in the corners of the foundations in several of the most important houses in Mexico City, having been ordered broken up and disfigured by the Archbishop Garcia de Santa María in 1604. (De la Maza 1985: 36).

How is it possible that such a practice of construction has not been questioned? Is there something *unheard* there, something that has not passed through the filter of sight and hearing of the Mexican historiography? What does it mean for decolonial listening that a fragment, violently snatched from history, has been wrecked, inserted into the dynamics of the establishment of the viceroyalty and then, following the end of the colonial mandate, plays a part in the successive processes of modernization of Mexico City? What implications does it have for a city museum that a fragment, a ruin, serves as a pillar and support for the artistic and architectural works that are housed there? In what ways can we read this unexpected dialectic, in which Salvador Novo, the city’s gay chronicler *par excellence*, presents us with the mouth of the god as a chthonic power that, bursting from the soil in which it refuses to be buried, comes to bear the “burden of the viceroyalty” with its “immortal jaws”? Is this not an image too powerful to miss? The entire viceroyalty, in its ordering of the urban experience, stands on the ruins of the sacred elements of pre-colonial civilizations. What kind of immortality is it, in short, that occupies the ferocious jaws of Quetzalcóatl - henceforth, an earthly power that bursts forth, simultaneously supporting and devouring the colonial building?

Just as Jameson spoke of a *political unconscious* that resides in modern literature (Jameson 1989), we intend to speak of an *urban unconscious* that resides, concurrently evident and unattended, in the epidermis of Latin American cities. Walter Benjamin identified that the *unconscious*, beyond the theories of Freud, can also be learned and analyzed thanks to new technologies. Photography and cinema would have revealed to the Berlin critic the unexplored dimension of a *visual unconscious* in which the eye, trained by the technologies of reproduction and their stills, would discover something more than a *scopic drive* or a compulsive tendency to *see and watch*. With these visual technologies to help, especially slow motion and high-speed film, the eye would “learn” records of experience that would previously have been impossible (Benjamin 1969). In the same way, the city, conceived as an artefact of experience, is a laboratory that, when used from the perspective of decolonial listening, can open to us the record of the urban unconscious: the ruins that, dialectically interrogated, offer the possibility of listening to the *unsaid* and *unseen* in Latin American Cities.

6.

The *zócalo* or central plaza of Mexico City, as in other Latin American metropolises, is a space for convergences and sound encounters. Its acoustic spectrum is so varied in frequencies, ranges, tones and rhythms that, should a musical taxonomist be faced with this cacophony, the general impression would simply be “noise”, “*el desmadre*” (a mess). However, from the perspective of decolonial listening, it is possible to articulate this riot of sounds as a framework of sonorous bodies reverberating in a space that reveals the complexity, diversity and the other stories of the region. Political slogans thrown into the air with a mixture of sadness and conviction, drums and dances that heal the body, broken violins without pitch, music of diverse genealogies, ranting street organs, laments, insults, announcements, whistles, horns, and on and on—acoustic bodies converge to populate the space, melding the border of their identities in the collective fabric of other stories.

7.

Decolonial listening would be that which is conceived from the collective complexity, from the “we”. The point is not just what we hear, but *where* we hear it from. This way of listening does not judge as the dilettante or critic does. To paraphrase Aimé Césaire, it does not cross its arms with the attitude of a sterile spectator towards life or work, nor does it enclose itself in an individualistic perspective. On the contrary, decolonial listening implies a “taking part in” and a “being part of” (experiencing oneself); it is a creative experience that is oriented not towards a way of thinking of sound (such as the method of dissection utilized in analysis and music theory), but about *thinking-sound*. This thinking-sound implies feeling and thinking collectively. The sound is then understood as a sonorous body (through space and time) that permeates solid bodies, inhabits and transforms them. Likewise, sound is encrypted memory; it is code, a telluric oscillation that affects how we are configured both subjectively and collectively, meaning that sound and identity are two things in continuous transformation. The sonorous body would be the acoustic materiality of a subject, of a community or of the world; that is, an extended body in the space that is put to action through sonar. In his essay *Humanity and Literary Capacity* (Steiner 1963), George Steiner writes that “reading well means risking a lot. It is allowing our own identity, our possession of ourselves to be impinged.” This observation, when transferred to the field of sound, takes on a sense of possibility and openness: “Listening well means risking a lot.” But what does it risk, what do we risk? We risk difference, identity, the border between the modern/colonial self and the community self. In another sense, we risk the experience of another, of being the other. Decolonial listening, for those who have not grown up in communal forms of organization but in the solitude of the split-self, would be in some respects schizophrenic listening—a way of experiencing sound through which one’s own border is violated in order to allow oneself the experience of the sonorous body of another, whether through music, shouting, words, or any other form. The “risk”, i.e., “what is risked” is clear, in that “we are, in reality, a complex combination of multiple subjects living together in a single body, subjects that are precariously situated in an imaginary unitary identity through the

narrative construction of such fictional unit.” (Vila 2002).

In her essay *La colonialidad de la teoría y el análisis musical en la universidad* (*The Coloniality of Music Theory and Analysis of the University*), Pilar Holguin proposes a reformation and critique of Eurocentrism in academic Latin American musical programs as a form of coloniality of in listening and sound. First, she proposes replacing “the dualism and dichotomy that marked modern Western thought: mind-body, subject-object or civilization-barbarism” (Holguin 2017) with a trans-disciplinary approach. Holguin also proposes collecting the experiences of listening and making sound of peoples marked by colonial difference, to take advantage of the individual student’s musical background as an active basis for listening and sound/musical conceptions, and a notion of aesthetics focused not on understanding a work, but on the subject’s experience of sound. Decolonial listening therefore implies an unlearning of the forms of Cartesian sound/musical analysis, in order to position oneself away from the multiplicity of factors that would impact on our ways of actively making and thinking-sound: multiple tempos, clouds of color, the multifarious polyphonies of cities (in a single corner a fandango, reggaetón, and Itzmeña wind band and a *sonidero*⁷ can coexist), towards the listening as a “we”. Mexico City and its zócalo are examples of the complex networks of sonorous relationships in Latin America that reveal another way of listening. To put it another way, “*el desmadre*” is a fortunate starting place from which to build another form of listening in the world.

7 *Sonidero* forms part of the popular street parties in Mexico City: the *sonideros* are a spectacular sound-system that plays all the popular repertoire, from Juan Gabriel to cumbias and salsas that people enthusiastically dance to through the night.

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