

Performance Matters

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Caitlin Marshall, Patricia Herrera and Marci R. McMahon

Volume 6, Number 2, 2020

Sound Acts, Part 1

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075795ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075795ar>

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Publisher(s)

Institute for Performance Studies, Simon Fraser University

ISSN

2369-2537 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Marshall, C., Herrera, P. & McMahon, M. (2020). Sound Acts, Part 1: Calling Back Performance Studies. *Performance Matters*, 6(2), 1–7.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1075795ar>

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Sound Acts, Part I: Calling Back Performance Studies

Patricia Herrera, Caitlin Marshall, and Marci R. McMahon

Let's jam. If performance studies has been a slow dance with "how to do things with words" (J. L. Austin), then we assert that it's way past time to "do things with sound." Austin's performative never imagined the way subjugated knowledges of the body, movement, affect, and sound have been used by minoritarian communities to incite social transformation. We celebrate the long heard resonances of sound in performance studies with a two-part field-defining publication, privileging how the materiality of sound *acts* as a form of aesthetic and political possibility. We come together through the "call back," an intersectional antiracist praxis guided by Black and Latinx feminist destabilizations of white supremacy and its colonialist, racist, sexist, ableist, and transphobic manifestations. In decentring whiteness, we recentre BIPOC and disabled futurity and radical joy.¹ We conceptualize the call back as a citational method of doing and making knowledge collaboratively, with care and attentiveness to receiving, registering, and reflecting radical thought across distance, difference, and time. Calling back is a long-term ethical commitment to interrupting oppression through revolutions in sound.

Most of the essays in this collection are the product of more than three years of organizing sound and performance inquiries that riff on and with sound. We have engaged in continuous "call backs" with junior, emerging, and senior scholars at the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR), American Studies Association (ASA), Modern Language Association (MLA), Association of Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), and US Latina/o Literary Theory and Criticism Conference (LLTCC). These sonic exchanges culminated in a two-day symposium, *Revolutions in Sound*, at the University of Maryland (UMD) from February 28 to 29, 2020, co-organized by Caitlin Marshall and Iván Ramos. With an ASTR Collaborative Research Award and support from UMD and the University of Richmond, we came together to pump up (and keep up) the volume on the sustaining and incisive critiques levelled by women, LGBTQ+, Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and Asian American scholars represented in this first of two linked special issues.

At the symposium, we called back to antiracist luminaries whose works have been formative to our own development: Alexandra T. Vazquez, author of *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music* (2013), and Christine Bacareza Balance, author of *Tropical Renditions: Making Musical Scenes in Filipino America* (2016). Vazquez and Balance staged a keynote duet that enacted symposium co-organizer Ramos's concept of "listening together," a shared sonic practice that activates care and sustains affinities across differences. In his keynote introduction, Ramos mobilized us to listen together, calling back Vazquez and Balance as mentors who created the conditions of possibility for his research in queer and Latinx studies. The keynote duet and Ramos's introduction modelled an

Patricia Herrera is associate professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance, and in the American Studies and Women, Gender & Sexuality Programs, at the University of Richmond. She is the author of *Nuyorican Feminist Performances: From the Café to Hip Hop* (University of Michigan Press, 2020). **Caitlin Marshall** is a lecturer in Theatre History and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Postmodern Culture*, *Sounding Out!*, *Twentieth Century Music*, and *Journal of American Musicological Society*. **Marci R. McMahon** is professor in the Literatures and Cultural Studies Department at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and the author of *Domestic Negotiations: Gender, Nation, and Self-Fashioning in US Mexicana and Chicana Literature and Art* (Rutgers University Press, 2013).

attentiveness to the ethics and political commitment of the call back. As our convening unfolded against the brink of COVID-19, the concurrent pandemic of systemic racism, and the renewed visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement, calling back feels heightened and necessary at this moment.

Amid these enraging, traumatizing, and yet galvanizing moments, we found solace in renewed efforts to mobilize in a radical process of thinking and writing. The symposium was our last collective time listening together, and the sheer force of shared thought propelled us through this editorial process. The numerous Zoom calls, persistent text messages, Google document interactions, and email threads continuously called us back to the urgency of this work. Even when there were technological interruptions, the intrusions that occurred with the gendered impacts of pandemic labour, and the difficulty and pain of navigating bodies that moved through illness, injury, and childbirth, we found joy and pleasure in connecting and reconnecting. Despite many dropped calls (“Can you hear me now? . . . Are you there? . . . You’re frozen! . . . Can we reschedule? . . . I’m going to be ten minutes late! . . . What time zone are we meeting in? . . . Can we push this deadline?” . . .), we persisted and called back to our commitment to honour this work and one another.

In the spirit of honouring, we call back to scholars whose works have been foundational to our own thinking about sound, yet whose centrality to the fields of theatre and performance studies has been pushed into the acoustic shadows reserved for critical race “specialty.” Our call back disrupts white supremacy and the ways it has sought to uphold while simultaneously sideline BIPOC, queer, and crip scholarship. Rather than claiming a new “sonic turn” in the academy, as such a framework signals an entrenched colonial-intellectual doctrine of discovery, we recentre the priorities of the field towards BIPOC, queer, and crip sonic knowledge and production. And while this special issue cannot decolonize the academy, it aims to decolonize knowledge as a site of social transformation.

We call back to trailblazers and mentors in the field, Cherríe Moraga, José E. Muñoz, Dwight Conquergood, Fred Moten, Daphne Brooks, and others, whose scholarship activated the analytic capacities of performance studies by tuning into sonic registers. Chicana feminist Moraga’s “theory in the flesh” (1983) activated the “personal is political,” returning the material body to a feminist agenda, challenging the amplification of white feminists’ voices above those of queer women of colour. Muñoz revolutionized performance studies by tuning in to the art and aesthetics of life within social stigma, queer of colour world-making strategies, and brown affect (1999, 2009). Moraga and Muñoz’s theories created avenues for ensuing critical work on sound and performance. Conquergood activated the field of performance studies with his attunement to subjugated body knowledges (2002). Often ignored, however, is his turn to Frederick Douglass’s listening hermeneutics to ground performance studies’ academic interventions. Also evoking Douglass’s *Narrative*, Moten’s groundbreaking work on Black radical aesthetics, *In the Break* (2003), hears Aunt Hester’s scream as evidence that “the object resists, the commodity shrieks” (2003, 12–13), positioning sound as an act of refusal and a testament to Black personhood and vitality. Brooks’s “sonic blue(s) face” (2010) uncovers and resists the racial mimicry of Black women’s voices, overwriting a history of white appropriation with a genealogy of Black feminist performance.

We call back to these Black and Latinx performance studies scholars, whose works have always already been doing sound studies, demonstrating how sound *acts*. Yet this work was kept outside formal disciplinary recognition in sound studies. In the rush to legitimize the study of sound *qua* sound, we witnessed the normalizing trend of sound studies as a white, able-bodied, masculinist, technological, and presentist enterprise. A flurry of formative special issues in the early aughts, along

with the groundbreaking online digital peer-reviewed publication, *Sounding Out!* (2009), pushed back against this hegemonic drift, reasserting the importance of researching critical race and sound. These special issues include *Social Text's* “The Politics of Recorded Sound” (Stadler 2010) and *Punk and Its Afterlives* (Brown, Deer, and Nyong'o 2013), *American Quarterly's* “Sound Clash” (Keeling and Kun 2011), and *Current Musicology's* “Race, Sound, and Performance” (Morrison and Gutkin 2012) and “Black Sound Studies” (Sylvain 2017). These publications created momentum within neighbouring disciplines for full-length monographs on sound and critical difference.² In performance studies, the publication of critical race monographs that centre sound as subjugated knowledge has expanded the field. Some of these foundational works include Vazquez's *Listening in Detail* (2013), Balance's *Tropical Renditions* (2016), and Ashon T. Crawley's *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (2016). These book projects and numerous essays in the field, many by junior and/or emerging scholars, mark a theoretical shift away from sound studies' prioritization of listening and reception and from the borrowed methodological tools of musicology, ethnography, and cultural studies.³

“Sound Acts” consolidates these trends and decisively scores new theatre and performance studies methods for *doing sound*. Doing sound shifts the sonic away from the auditory to emphasize that all sounds issue from vibrating bodies—whether those bodies are human, animal, inanimate, and/or abject/object. “Sound acts” as a concept calls back to the material body as a site of shared investment between sound and performance studies, putting the vibrating body back into the theoretical equation. This special issue claims that vibrating bodies *perform*, and that the sonic is a constellation of *acts*. Our attention to how vibrating bodies perform interferes with the longstanding philosophical schisms between audio and visual, and between action and reception. The authors in this special issue demonstrate how sound inaugurates bodies (politic) and power, and how bodies and power in performance produce meanings and significations for sound. We trace out the political vibrations of these bodies in performance to chart new registers for resistance, survival, critique, negation, and world-making.

Authors in the first section, “Hermeneutic Loops: Disrupting the Audio/Visual Litanies,” call us back to performances that disrupt white supremacist dichotomies between the audio and the visual. In “Decolonial Echoes,” Iris Blake attends to the circular practice of the “echo” in the performance installations of Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore. The essay challenges Western epistemes and political ideologies that frame voicing and listening as discrete. Blake positions Belmore's “echo” as enacting a loop between these practices, restructuring the human sensorium and social relations in service of Indigenous sovereignty. Kristin Moriah's “On the Record: Sissieretta Jones and Black Feminist Recording Praxes” disrupts the audio/visual schisms by demonstrating the feedback loop between the sounds of text and the sounds of performance. Since there are no known recordings of Jones's voice, Moriah listens to the textual medium of the scrapbook to hear Black feminist vocality. Moriah argues that Jones deployed print culture to produce the sonic textures of her vocality and how her voice was heard. In Moriah's essay, material sound—the sound of text and the performing body—mediates the archive.

Similar to Blake and Moriah, Jade Power-Sotomayor, in “Corporeal Sounding: Listening to Bomba Dance, Listening to *puertorriqueñxs*,” explores the dialogic sounding performance between dancer and drummer. Drawing from her extensive knowledge and experience as a bomba practitioner, Power-Sotomayor argues that in order to understand the logic of dance, we must figure out how to listen. This Afro-Puerto Ricanx sonic movement enacts a fugitive freedom through the hermeneutic circular space between the dancer, the musician, and the participants. In Shannon Rose Riley's interview with band members Michael Grego and Travis of the performance/noisegroup ONO

(short for onomatopoeia), the members unpack the use of noise, poetry, and visual spectacle to make audible the silences of systematic racial violence. Through their live performance practice and the poesis of the interview dialogue, ONO calls back the spectres of the racial past to exorcise the haunting trauma of the present moment.

Authors in the next section, “Ear Training,” amplify the formal aesthetics and properties of sound-making practices oft-overlooked because structural racism, compulsory heterosexuality, and able-bodiedness position them as decidedly *unaesthetic*, *untechnical*, and *unvirtuosic*. Recognized as a formal technique in Western musical education, the “ear training” rehearsed herein offers new understandings of the technique through attention to Black feminist, crip, and Latinx performance practices. Masi Asare’s “Vocal Colour in Blue: Early Twentieth-Century Black Women Singers as Broadway’s Voice Teachers” establishes intergenerational Black feminist ear training techniques as key to a citational singing practice she terms “twice-heard.” Asare’s theory establishes a genealogy of vocal style from blues singing to Broadway belting, positioning Black female blues singers as the foremothers of Broadway’s signature sounds. Just as Broadway’s sonic legacy relies on disavowed Black women’s labour, modern drama has relied on queer and disabled subjects for self-narration. Megan Johnson’s “Sounding a Crip Aesthetic: Transforming the Sonic in Beckett’s *Not P*” explores what crip aesthetics *do* to drama. Johnson’s focus on crip performer Jess Thom reveals the dependencies of the avant-garde on marginalized queer, disabled, and gendered subjects. Thom moves beyond discourses of theatrical “accommodation” to reconstitute aesthetic possibilities for queer and disabled theatre artists, recentring the avant-garde around crip performance practices. We also hear the agentive work of ear training in Patricia Ybarra’s interview with Micha Espinosa. The interview calls our attention to Espinosa’s ear training as a Fitzmaurice Voicework practitioner and collaborator with the performance group La Pocha Nostra. Espinosa *trains* audiences to listen to laments, llantos (weeping and crying) and gritos (a Mexican guttural cry) as Latinx antiracist sonic sites working toward solidarity.

In the final section, “Ethics of Performance and Scholarship,” we pause to reconsider sound methods for ethical interactions with the past, power, and subjugated knowledges. This is a reminder that the call back is above all a critical, reflective practice toward justice and equity. In “Mourning the Nightingale’s Song: The Audibility of Networked Performances in Protests and Funerals of the Arab Revolutions,” Shayna Silverstein reveals how ethnography and digitized sound perform within a listening public. Silverstein positions the circulation of sound on social media during the Arab Spring protests as a performance process that makes audible and coalesces agentive social constellations. Katelyn Hale Wood’s “Listening Backward: Sonic Intimacies and Cross-Racial, Queer Resonance” uses queer and critical race theory to put pressure on the ethics of autoethnographic and historiographic practices. Wood, a white lesbian critic, “listens backward” to the sonic archive of the late Black queer comic Jackie “Moms” Mabley. Centring sound recordings, Wood contends, can produce queer sonic intimacies that also complicate cross-racial affinities between scholar and performer. Donatella Galella’s interview with playwright Lauren Yee and director Chay Yew of *Cambodian Rock Band* amplifies the ethics of dramaturgical work in a memory play with music. Using the fictional band The Cyclos, the play’s music calls back the traumatic memories of the Khmer Rouge. Counter to musical theatre logic that drives narrative with song, *Cambodian Rock Band*’s compositions revive lives and histories lost to genocide, enacting an ethical recalibration of the present to the past.

Over and above a collection of essays demonstrating how vibrating bodies perform, this special issue is a sound act in and of itself. At the tail end of 2020, the world is facing crises of epic

proportions. The coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the fault lines of injustice and inequity, fascism competes head-on with democracy, and racial reckonings roil the status quo. If the scale of these catastrophes is new, the oppression and violence at their core are not. Sound acts meet such violence with transformative strategies for survival, restorative justice, ethical practice, and joy. Now more than ever, the vibrational politics of sound *act* as templates for the paradigm shifts demanded by this global Rubicon. Humbly, this special issue works toward such desired utopias with theories and methods for intellectual and institutional transformation.

This special issue attunes to the sonic as part of an antiracist and decolonial practice of recentring theatre and performance studies around BIPOC, queer, and crip knowledge production and aesthetics. Far from claiming all cultural production by minoritarian communities is sonic, and far from reifying essentialist trends upholding sound as liberatory, this special issue nevertheless maintains the sonic, redefined, is an undertheorized site of sustenance, refuge, and possibility. We sign off by emphasizing the “call back” as an invitation for joining together with care, compassion, and commitment to transforming the power structures and hierarchies that have devalued BIPOC, queer, and crip lives. This invitation resonates throughout this special issue, the reverberations of which we hope call you back as active participants to engage with the follow-up linked special issue of Sound Acts forthcoming in May 2021. In offering you sound methods and theories for jamming oppression, we invite you to continue the antiracist work of calling back sound to the material body and centring minoritarian knowledge production and aesthetics in your research, teaching, and mentorship.

Notes

1. Moved by antiracist movements, we take a cue from the [BIPOC Project](#) to centre Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour alliances, amplifying these communities’ shared histories of resistance against white supremacy. With the term, we signal the contributions of multiracial and multi-ethnic communities, including Latinx, Asian American, Pacific Islander Americans, Middle Eastern Americans, and others, in the shared fight against anti-blackness and Native invisibility.
2. When we began our own research endeavours, the undervaluation of scholarship on sound in performance studies led us to seek support from neighbouring disciplines. These projects and mentors include Jonathan Sterne’s *Audible Past: The Cultural Origins of Sound Production* (2003); Gayle Wald’s *Shout, Sister, Shout! The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharp* (2008); Dolores Inés Casillas’s *Sounds of Belonging: U.S. Spanish-Language Radio and Public Advocacy* (2014); Roshanak Kheshti’s *Modernity’s Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music* (2015); Jennifer Stoeber’s *The Sonic Color Line: Race and The Cultural Politics of Listening* (2016); Nina Sun Eidsheim’s *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, & Vocality in African American Music* (2019) and the *Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies* (2019), co-edited with Katherine Miezal; Dylan Robinson’s *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Studies* (2020); Julie Beth Napolin’s *The Fact of Resonance: Modernist Acoustics and Narrative Form* (2020); and Mara Mills’s *On the Phone: Hearing Loss and Communication Engineering* (Duke University Press, forthcoming).
3. See Iván Ramos’s *Sonic Negations: Unbelonging Subjects, Inauthentic Objects, and Sound between Mexico and the United States* (NYU Press, forthcoming). Notably, the following articles are formative to research on sound and performance: Jayna Brown’s “Buzz and Rumble” (2010) and “Tricky and the Bug: Dub, Punk, and the Abject” (2013); Caitlin Marshall’s “Crippled Speech” (2014) and “Sonic Redface” in *Journal of American Musicological Society* (forthcoming); Elías D. Krell’s “Who’s the Crack Whore at the End?: Performance, Violence, and Sonic Borderlands in the Music of Yva las Vegass” (2015); Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, “Reggaetón’s Crossings: Black Aesthetics, Latina Nightlife, and Queer Choreography” (2016); Patricia Herrera and Marci R. McMahon, “Oye, Oye: A Manifesto for Listening to Chicax/Latinx Theater” (2019); Patricia Herrera’s “A Sonic Treatise of Futurity: Universes’ Party People” (2020); Summer Kim Lee’s “Asian

Americanist Critique and Listening Practices of Contemporary Popular Music” (2020); Tavia Nyong’o’s “‘Rip It Up’: Excess and Ecstasy in Little Richard’s Sound” (2014) and “Too Black, Too Queer, Tolly: Why Little Richard Never Truly Got His Dues” (2020); and Megan Johnson and Moynan King’s co-edited issue, “Sound & Performance,” in *Canadian Theatre Review* (Fall 2020).

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