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Introduction to Keynote Duet

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Introduction to Keynote Duet

Iván A. Ramos

As Caitlin Marshall and I began conceptualizing the shape of the in-person element of the symposium, we almost instantaneously landed on who we wanted to deliver the keynotes, as well as a format that would capture the spirit of intellectual camaraderie we hoped to produce. We thought that there could be no better way to upend the format of the keynote talk than asking our speakers to enter into conversation together, what we called a duet. Christine and Alex, perhaps as we hoped, exceeded our wildest expectations and delivered a keynote duet that was both intellectually rigorous and deeply moving. As Balance and Vazquez mention in their own preamble, this was the last opportunity many of us had to be together in person before the global COVID-19 pandemic hit. I could go on about how that final moment of being together helped sustain me in the year and a half that we could have never imagined was coming, or the bittersweet reality that this event would be one of my last times on campus at the University of Maryland before starting my new position, but for now, I can only celebrate that their generous duet can be shared with the rest of the world with these words that I was fortunate to share to introduce our speakers.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that I owe much of my relationship to the field of sound studies and, in fact, the ongoing trajectory of my own scholarship at the intersection of sound and performance studies to the work of Alexandra Vazquez and Christine Balance. In what feels like a lifetime ago, I was a graduate student struggling to write a dissertation prospectus, drawing out the process over months while looking for the key piece that would allow me to articulate how exactly I would approach my objects and wondering if a coherent argument would ever come together. I knew that I was engaging with an emergent field called “sound studies,” and although the field had by then produced its first few canonical texts and even an invaluable anthology edited by Jonathan Sterne, I wasn’t sure if my project was “sound studies” enough. Even as the field was still taking shape, it was recent enough to generate scholarly suspicion from many quarters. Would sound studies continue to find its place in the academy, or would it turn out to be a passing interdisciplinary fad? And even beyond the distrust that tends to follow burgeoning fields of inquiry, I wasn’t sure if my collection of sonic objects fit among the earliest major books and essays in the field, which felt overwhelmingly white or at least disconnected from the Mexican and Latinx context that my work engages with. On top of my uncertainties about sound studies, I also wasn’t quite sure where it connected with my intellectual home, performance studies, as I wondered if managing two interdisciplinary fields would eventually damn me to accusations of being too broad, too ungrounded, perhaps not serious enough.

I laboured over that prospectus to the point of exhaustion, at one point scrapping it altogether in favour of directions that, although less exciting, at least felt more grounded. But as the drafts accumulated and I got closer to surrendering, Alexandra Vazquez’s *Listening in Detail* was published. I remember reading it over a couple of sittings, struck with the excitement of a young scholar who suddenly found a spark of recognition that in turn opened a whole new world. Here was a book that brought together my many fields, the model that I had been searching for. My dissertation was now possible, no longer lost in the wilds of uncertainty. “Listening in detail” captured the thing that I had been chasing, a methodology that, although equally rooted in performance and sound studies,

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exceeded their disciplinary boundaries to explain the experience of listening that I knew intimately but had failed to find a name for. Not only that, “listening in detail”—the book and the concept—emerged from the specificities and the quandaries of transnational Latinidad. After all my searching, I had before me, all of a sudden, a version of sound studies that could include me. Vazquez’s intervention felt so revelatory and urgent that I wanted to shout it from the rooftops, which led to getting over my fear of publishing and completing my first publication, a review of *Listening in Detail* in *E-misférica*.

In the spirit of Vazquez’s careful and rigorous attention to the power of the detail, I particularly remember feeling hailed by the final chapter and her mention of a care package that a friend had sent from California, which led to a reflection of the bonds produced by listening together across difference, in this case the ways in which sonic gestures allowed the “cold war kids” of the Caribbean and the Asias to find affinity, perhaps a sort of recognition, that exceeded the confines of history and geography. That package articulated the boundedness between sound and care that had first led me to my project but whose sounds remained faint.

That package, I found out soon after, had been sent to Alex Vazquez by Christine Bacareza Balance. I was living in New York at the time, and I had heard of a legendary friendship they had forged during their time at NYU as students of José Esteban Muñoz. But what I could never have anticipated when I first read that chapter is just how much this personal and intellectual bond would extend in even more unexpected ways to myself and my work until I read Balance’s *Tropical Renditions*. I had a book that captured the unruliness of listening, the way it exceeds the certainty of identity, and its resistance to becoming folded to national or ethnic scripts. “Disobedient listening” accounted for how minoritarian subjects, in this case Filipino musicians in the diaspora, use sound and music to stand up against the constant onslaught of state violence. In the years since, I have remained especially indebted to Balance’s deft and caring critique of the demands that “authenticity” makes upon subjects who live between nations, worlds, and genres. This argument, Balance’s powerful defence of inauthenticity, which she frees from negative associations and sees instead as an aspirational method and way of being, has sustained my writing. As someone whose rejection of nationalist and identitarian sonic scripts has always come with accusations of being a “bad” Mexican subject, *Tropical Renditions* invited me to embrace this accusation and assured me that by doing so, a new critical language of refusal to the norms of identity could emerge. Disobedient listening offers a capacious soundscape that understands how those of us who fail to be beckoned by the fiction of belonging end up finding other homes in other worlds, brought together by forms of listening that we come to invent together. I can only begin to articulate here what a radical act of generosity Balance’s book has been for me in moments of uncertainty as I walk around the edges of unbelonging.

If this brief introduction risks the solipsism of entwining the critical interventions of these two scholars to my experience of them, it is because I remain firm in a conviction that the best scholarly work moves beyond conventions of distance, opening instead new directions for understanding our place in the world, making sense of the difficulty of subjectivity toward something more capacious, a place where intellectual rigour and the experience of selfhood become inseparable. In that spirit, I close and make way for the beautiful intervention in the following pages by acknowledging that beyond the intellectual domains Alex Vazquez and Christine Balance have made possible, I have also been incredibly fortunate to know them as two of the most generous and caring interlocutors and mentors in what often feels like the solitary project of a scholarly career. Over coffees, drinks, and sometimes brief and sometimes extensive chats across hallway encounters at conferences and

beyond, Alex and Christine have also modelled for me what it means to extend the work of listening together beyond the page and toward breaking down the institutional walls of the academy. In other words, I want to thank them not only for their work but for all of the times when their attention has taken the form of simply and sincerely asking how things are going and the generosity of extending their friendship in both personal and professional realms, a generosity I know they have offered to so many others who have followed the paths they have carved through their work and mentorship. This duet is our dream come true. Thank you, Alex and Christine, for showing us how the revolutionary dreams conjured by acts of listening (and thus being) together, even when faint, allow us to glimpse into the horizon of a world yet to be.