

HEGEMONIC HUES:

THE PROBLEM OF IMAGINING FROZEN SPACE AND TIME

REAGAN PATRICK MITCHELL

Colgate University

Sound Curriculum: Sonic Studies in Educational Theory, Method, & Practice

Walter S. Gershon / Routledge / 2018

If all things vibrate, then all things have the potential to vibrate with all other things, both internally and externally, over history and time, space, and place.

– Walter S. Gershon, 2017, p. 49

There is also a continuing distancing, a parsing of events that, like the article on cnn.com, at once recognizes individual murders, on rare occasion such as this places them next to one another, and places those police killings in the context of an ongoing national pattern, all without placing multiple murders side-by-side.

– Walter S. Gershon, 2017, p. 191

I am always attempting to understand the variations of violent distancings in space and time that are imposed on communities through a series of refashionings, repurposings, reshapings, and reroutings. One powerful aspect I will elaborate on is how Walter's book helps the reader to confront and thus consider the violent distancings imposed through the conceptual freezing of space and time. While Walter's text is rich in many possibilities to inquire about these impositions created within time via distancing and gaps, one segment of the book I will highlight is situated in Walter's extremely vulnerable discussion in chapter 8 "Sound Art, Social Justice: Black Lives Matter." I would like to share with you an occurrence which happened in the class I taught in Fall 2017 at Colgate University titled "Theories of Teaching and Learning: Sonic Inquiry" in order to work through my thoughts on Walter's approach to time and space.

In “Theories of Teaching and Learning: Sonic Inquiry”, I had the privilege and honor re-read Walter’s text in the collective with my students. I attempted to strategically position Walter’s text to follow R. Murray Schafer’s book *The Soundscape* (1977/1994). I realized that for many individuals taking a course, focused solely in sound, post reading of Schafer’s text, a range of feelings rooted in the spectrum of confusion and inquiry would emerge regarding the correlation of sound to education. I attempted to situate Walter’s text as the proverbial resonate funky downbeat, ala Clyde Stubblefield and Boosty Collins, in order to land on, as James Brown would say, “the 1.” I envisioned the entrance of Walter’s text into this segment of the course as that build up to “the 1” and the resonant touch down of clap from the boom bap being when chapter 8 “Sound Art, Social Justice: Black Lives Matter” finally hits, as the arrival of “the 1.”

Upon assigning this chapter in class for the following period, I made the decision, along with the request and encouragement of a student via email, prior to the class session that we as class would sit and be vulnerable through listening to the accompanying mixed media composition, whereby Walter utilizes compositional techniques situated in editing and mixing of passages of Black lynchings in a collective with him improvising melismatic passages on the baritone saxophone. We as a class, during the following class period, sat and listened to the entire 10:39 piece. After a pause, I asked “what did you hear?” There was an extended pause and afterwards two younger White women, one after the other, raised their hands and broke up the heavy solemn reflective and reflexive moment of silence in the classroom. The collective of these two women’s responses presented them explaining how the piece was unsettling along with them both mentioning their attempts to find one point in the composition to settle in on in order to gain a sort of stable footing and focus. For both of these women finding that point, as they explained, dealt with them attempting to “find the voice of authority” in the composition. As I inquired about the meaning of the voice of authority, they both followed, explaining that the voice of authority, for them, was the voice of the news anchor. My question to both of them and the entire class following their statements was, “Why the anchor and not the witness, who happens to be a community member, calling 911 in response to the cops about to engage in the normalized terrorist action of lynching an unarmed Black man?,” as presented in the multiple recorded acknowledgements in the composition. I posed this question, not as one to be answered, or even to call out and/or put them on the spot, but rather as a point to sit in a reflexive space.

With distance from the class discussion, I still remain in that reflexive space. A space charged with inquiry around how formulations of the “voice of authority” is authored/co-authored and carried out through community and vice versa. With consideration of the rationales and/or rubrics, perhaps these ideas call forth Michel Foucault’s panoptic analysis and ruminations (Foucault, 1977/1995). Specifically, is the idea espoused in the class session around finding “the voice of authority” one which also calls attention to the collective meanings of how body is panoptically policed with attention to listening? This is an inquiry enlivened through Fran Huckaby’s response.

In one segment, Huckaby utilizes Erica Meiners’s terminology the “violence of policing” to unpack chapter 8 further. One vulnerable point, of many, in Huckaby’s response, is when she states/writes “Not trusting these sounds in darkness, I opened my eye for the remaining minutes of the sound art.” It is the conceptual rocking between the phrases around students discovering “the voice of authority” and Huckaby’s “Not trusting these sounds in darkness” which caused me to inquire about the larger colonialist project which assigns tensions of non-intentionality to Blackness (Fanon, 1952/1994). I write these critiques as a reminder of how historically through ideological systems, i.e.- “The Enlightenment” to eugenics and so on, the perpetrators of colonialism have consistently assigned of monikers of sub-humanity to Blackness (Mills, 1999; Winfield, 2007). Resulting in the ideological dynamism which constantly reimagines, remaps, and re-embodies. Therefore, “the voice of authority” and “Not trusting these sounds in darkness” are essentially variations of a system of hegemony whereby sub-humanity is assigned to Blackness as a series of pedagogies around actions of policing through doubt and mistrust. Similarly, in how the prophetic, the speaking into existence, or radical reclamation of space, as seen with the Black church, there is an opposite to considering how the prophetic operates in relation to notions of speaking Black sub-humanity in to existence (Kelley, 2003). Which brings me to Chris Osmond’s inquiry of “What are the challenges of inviting students into a sonic interrogation of the world they find when they open to hear it—especially when regarded through the ears of implicit bias, institutionalized racism, and social justice?”

The aspect Osmond’s inquiry which is most resonant for me is what follows. Specifically, his continued inquiry into the whether the student might fall victim to points of reverence. Osmond parallels this with an example of the baby boomer generation’s progression towards fetish with the Beatles’ Sergeant Peppers album. The conclusion being the impossibility that no other musical geniuses would follow

however this example serves to articulate the larger issue of falling in the trap of being unable to listen and/or hear due to the lack of improvisational responsibility one or community utilizes in listening practices (Mitchell, 2018). The larger point I drew from Osmond's response was that the invitation to listen is one in which the community brings a series of political rootings and routings to the table (Wilson, Sandru, & Welsch, 2010). Listening, for the invited community, is simultaneously fraught with possibility and the problematic, scored through decolonialist and settler colonialist practices. Furthermore, the aporia of the discourse resides in an ungovernable dynamic binary between oppression and liberation which constantly maps and remaps itself upon the body through listening practices (Buck-Morss, 2009).

The richness of Huckaby's and Osmond's responses speaks to the broader premise as to the relevance of the imagination in listening practices. These imaginaries they speak of in reaction to Gershon's work challenge carceral statehood through posing what a world might sound like minus imprisoned ears (Meiners, 2016).

The collective realization which emerged, as a result of engaging chapter 8, along with the thoughts of Fran Huckaby and Chris Osmond was an awareness of how rigid constructs of time and space violently serve to freeze and create dramatic distances between events. Furthermore, rigid constructs of space and time imposed through various media outlets and controllers/editors of historical narratives, putting forth a metanarrative of progress when in fact the lynchings presented in this chapter occurred within 2-3 years of each other. Additionally, chapter 8 presents the violently stolen Black lives as those that made headlines with acknowledgement that countless other Black lives have remained unmentioned, unaccounted for and/or eventually forgotten by many while never having the chance to be remembered by others. Therefore, one major point I took from chapter 8 and the collective text in reference to frozen perceptions of space and time, was in understanding how the implications of rigidity in space and time equate to violence. A sort of violence exercised through rigid conceptualizations of space and time which create the illusion of lynchings of Black, Brown, Queer, economically disenfranchised, and the list goes on, bodies as a sporadic occurrence, when in fact as we read and reflect, several other marginalized community members have been attacked, murdered and/or gone missing. In closing, I would like to thank Walter for composing this chapter, and collective text, which does the work of reminding us,

the engagers, of the responsibility to be resistant, through putting forth the need to be engaged consistently in the process of collapsing rigid conceptualizations of time and space in order to be touched and moved to action by the resonances of those stolen lives.

References

- Buck-Morss, S. (2009). *Hegel, Haiti, and universal history*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburg Press.
- Fanon, F. (1952/94). *Black skin, white masks*. New York, New York: Grove Press.
- Foucault, Michel. (1977/1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York, New York: Vintage.
- Gershon, W. (2017). *Sound Curriculum: Sonic studies in educational theory, method, & practice*. New York, New York: Routledge.
- Kelley, R. (2003). *Freedom dreams: The black radical imagination*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
- Meiners, E. (2016). *For the children?: Protecting innocence in a carceral state*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mills, C. (1999). *The racial contract*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Mitchell, R. (2018). Improvisational responsibility: Derrida's call to play. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 32(3), 1-12.
- Schafer, R.M., (1977/1994). *The Soundscape: our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*. Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books.
- Wilson, Sandreu, and Welsh. (ed). (2010). *Rerouting the postcolonial: New directions for the new millennium*. New York, New York: Routledge.
- Winfield, A. (2007). *Eugenics and education in America: Institutionalized racism and the implications of history, ideology, and memory*. New York, New York: Peter Lang.