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COMMENTARY

Special Section: Knowing by Singing

Knowing-through-Performing

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Music may be considered a form of “knotting,” as Ingold (2015, 18) puts it, in which “contrary forces of tension and friction are productive of generative outcomes.” Interdisciplinary approaches to performative ways of knowing have grown exponentially since Blacking’s (1973) ethnomusicological research among the Venda in the late 1950s. Studies in sound, sense, and performativity have flourished in a multitude of strands and contested positionalities. In a recent review of interwoven perspectives on sensorial research, Howes (2019) details the breadth of approaches to sensory experience, which range from “sensory models” of cultural interaction (Classen 1990; Howes 2005) to anthropological writings about fieldwork as “sensory ethnography” (Pink 2009) as developed through “sensuous scholarship” (Stoller 1997) and complex processes of “sensational knowledge” (Hahn 2007).

In this multilayered approach to sensoriality, scholars have continued to refine as well as critique analytic perspectives around the “sensualization” of the discipline. Tim Ingold (2011, 314, 316) highlights concerns with sensorial approaches that derive from a “representational theory of knowledge production” that have a tendency to separate the senses and lead to “closed sensory epistemologies.” Rather, he argues that researchers should attend to “the processes of social life” (326), and in particular, how affordances influence the perceiver, whereby perception is understood as an interlinked exchange nexus of relational experiences (see Gibson 1979; Ingold 2000). Drawing upon John Dewey, Ingold (2018) further analyzes how an engaged approach to “being-in-the-world” enfolds processes of “doing” into a wider sense of “undergoing” which incorporates a continuous renewal of experiences past and present.

Other scholars have elaborated various dimensions of ecological and perceptual processes in case studies of performance practices, including music and audition (Clarke 2005),¹ the sonic materiality of voice (Weidman 2014, 2015), the power of vocal vibration to create felt “atmospheres” (Eisenlohr 2018), and in kinesthetic, Indigenous, improvisatory and sonic research (Daughtry 2015; Downey 2002; Elliott and Culhane 2017; Magowan and Wrazen 2013; Svašek and Meyer 2016; Tamisari 2008).

The three articles in this volume take up a diversity of approaches to sound, song, and deaf experience with an overarching remit to reorient Western biases away from the authorial primacy of textual knowledge to *knowing-as-performing* in which performance dynamics may range from the habitual to artistic but in every case may be characterized as emergent, responsive, contingent, and attuned enaction. Two of the articles focus on techniques and histories of performing through sound and song as spiritual experience, while the third article attends to the challenges of being deaf through experiences of song-signing. Each article variously addresses themes of relationality, resonance, empathy, and access, illustrating critical exchanges between expressive and receptive processes of sounding-voicing and seeing-listening, whether as performer, listener, or sign-language user.

Stéfane Aubinet’s article begins by raising issues about how the Sámi yoik can invoke echoes of the past as well as present environmental relations by (re-)sounding presences of affect and connection between people, animals, and places in the Sámi landscape. Yoiking thus interweaves senses of historical and interpersonal co-presencing through song participation and receptive performativity, as those who share a repertoire are able to converse melodically with each other and invoke various beings. Yoiks are open to both genders and all ages, and each member of the community will have their own yoik. Thus, it is a form of honoring another to be able to sing someone else’s yoik. Distinct from Western concepts of singing, the rhythmic and melodic dynamics of the yoik are also inseparable from the sonic evocation of the powers that they refer to and are therefore recognizable by the animals themselves. As Aubinet notes, citing Ánde Somby, being understood by animals is actually “the ultimate applause you can get as a yoiker.”

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The all-pervasive power of the yoik is evidenced in the ability of the yoiker to sustain the deceased through the yoik and keep their memory and spirit alive. Empathy is also key to the ability to yoik an animal, the action of which is considered to be akin to being an actor, although the effects are considered to be viscerally impactful. As one yoiker noted, she would not yoik the wolf for fear of manifesting evil in herself due to its status as sometimes being associated with the devil among reindeer herders. It might be said, then, that skill in yoiking can highlight relationships with spiritual powers but that some yoikers seek to avoid danger unless they know how to handle their presences carefully. For others, yoiking animals gives them the opportunity to express their deep devotion and admiration for these creatures, thereby enlivening them even further in the yoiker's experience and imagination. The lyrics that sometimes accompany a yoik enable an intensification of the invocation of the yoik and are not considered to detract from it. Thus, while yoikers assert that language may be seen to be different from yoiking, they still incorporate song lyrics to accentuate the "presentification" of experience. Ultimately, the practice of yoiking is a practice of caring for others as for the environment. It encodes senses of history, family, and caring relations over time and allows for the networks of compassion to be extended outwards between humans and nonhumans. In examining the enduring presences of the yoik among Sami and their powerful effects upon listeners, Aubinet invites us to think critically about how we experience our interactions with these singers in the text. By extension, we might consider how deeply we attend to the evocative practices of writing and speaking in our own work.

This raises a critical issue about how authors may generate senses of co-presencing among themselves as writers together with the participants and readers of a text. We might also consider how knowing-as-performing is an overflow of becoming between intertextual methods and techniques that summon participatory, imaginative, and intercorporeal affinities with the subjects of the text, as both presence and co-presence. In these evocations, authors and readers enter into a dialogue of mutual accountability for how they recompose the subject matter in the perceptual imaginary of sonic, musical, and spiritual (inter)action, as readers come to be moved by these intertextual evocations.

Aubinet's analysis also raises questions as to how readers might assess what is happening in the process of soundings in a yoik performance. What is being given to others through their sounding practices, in the inhalation, exhalation, and vocalizing of yoiking incantation? In knowing-through-yoiking, breathing, vocal patterns, and musical dynamics develop an enskilled continuum of muscular movements, which require fine adjustments to achieve appropriately tuned vocal and postural techniques to generate the most effective timbral and performative resonances. These immersive and productive bodily tensions in the art of singing become "knotted" together with an audience's attention to the extent that the subject matter of the song becomes inseparable from its expression in an "optimal experience" of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Carola Lorea takes up the question of flow in relation to practitioners of Bengali esoteric song by teasing out how the inseparability of knowing and experiencing is subsumed in bodies, breath, and psycho-physical practice. In early sessions with her teacher, she describes writing down the song texts slowly and through repetition, at the same time commenting that singing is about "*bhab*: a hardly translatable term, meaning emotion, mood, an ecstatic feeling, or a feeling of the divine." Despite scholarly efforts to escape textually privileged ways of knowing, ethnomusicologists and anthropologists often rely on script as a mnemonic catalyst to re-create sonic forms and to enhance greater oral/aural proficiency. Indeed, this tension resonates with my early experiences of being taught to sing by women in north east Arnhem Land. However, developing proficiency in critical listening-sounding-singing is fundamental to anthropological research in order to understand not just what is being heard but *how* it is heard as a "spatio-acoustic mosaic," as Feld's renowned account of rainforest birdsong in Papua New Guinea illustrates. When Kaluli describe the "dense, multi-layered, overlapping, alternating, and interlocking" texture of the rainforest and its evocation of human loss, a multiplicity of "insides," "underneaths," and "resonances" interleave to "lift-up-over-sounding" (Feld 1982, 86).

In moving beyond song repertoires, Lorea considers how sounds of singing "feel" in the body and, thus, how they can generate "sacred intentionality," whether in Baul or Matua songs. Although distinct philosophies of affective performativity shape Bengali and Sámi yoiking, in Baul song, as in Sámi yoik, tonalities resonate through and from the body, with curative potentialities. In the Baul context, transformation is related to sonic overflow, drenching listeners in its life-giving properties. These sonic effects emerge from cosmological and cosmogonic vibrations and reverberations in the two-sided drum and song of Brahma, interlinking seed as bodily substance with its sound and song.

To become adept as performer-listeners requires being open and ready to encounter new forms of world-making. Given that attention to sensorial experience can benefit cultural understanding, as well as academic practice, we might further consider how deep listening can variously assist decolonizing processes that remain otherwise muted in academia. Whose listening and speaking are implied in such processes and how might onto-epistemological shifts and the challenges they entail be understood without impinging upon others' "rights and interests" in drawing upon other forms of knowing (Nakata 2002, 283)? Recognizing the convergences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing requires responsiveness to constantly evolving and changing circumstances, rather than the replacing of one modality of knowing with another (Nakata 2002, 286). This situation of the rights of others is true too of the convergence between nondeaf and deaf community members, whereby the assumed "epistemic authority" of the former needs to be better aligned with the communication modalities of the latter, as Robinson outlines in her article "Knowing by DEAF-Listening: Epistemologies and Ontologies Revealed in Song-Signing."

Kelly Fagan Robinson takes up the thorny problem of access for those who are deaf and uncovers practices of exclusion that are unwittingly imposed upon deaf people by those who do not fully appreciate that sign systems are a holistic bodily engagement and not just a semiotics of signing. The article brings to the fore the nature of hearing prejudice and highlights the sensorial differences that occur in understandings of what listening and speaking-singing both entail for nondeaf and DEAF participants, and how they illustrate distinctive ways of knowing. It further

uncovers the political undercurrents of injustice that are embedded in the hearing population's treatment of deafness and reveals the need for a sensorial perspective centered on DEAF experiences in DEAF terms. For those with hearing impairment, an emphasis on the visual in terms of "reading" facial expressions in order to listen becomes heightened, as too does the ability to feel through vibratory responses. As Robinson explains, "tactile reach" extends the world of the deaf person to enable them to "listen better." Thus, the "reach" of song-signing must be better understood as going beyond the visual sign to the embodied relation between the sign and its significance in determining the nature of how ACCESS to meaning is generated.

Robinson distinguishes between the interlinked concepts of access and ACCESS, whereby the legalities of nondeaf access entails making suitable provision for deaf people, while DEAF modalities of ACCESS are about increasing the recognition of how communication takes place among the deaf to facilitate inclusion. Creating consonant relations between ACCESS and access can be difficult to manage in performance events. As Robinson shows, song-signing can create two separate domains of experience for deaf participants in music venues, such as when the appearance of the interpreter did not align with the aesthetics of the performance, thereby creating dissonance between the effects of the lyrics and the dancing. This sense of separation is exacerbated by the disjointed spatial location between interpreters and the stage, which can marginalize those using sign language and thus create an inequality of access to communication. There appears to be a taken-for-granted assumption about how a hearing-speaking epistemology of being-in-the-world is experienced by nondeaf people, and it has the effect of disempowering those who are deaf and who rely primarily upon visual-tactile expression, which can ultimately create exclusion, injustice, and marginalization.

These issues are important to address in the development of an anthropology of performativity, within which an approach to knowing-through-performing has begun to attend to how knowledge innovations arise in the "undergoing" of exchanges that reposition the experiential as being the "knot" within relationships rather than relying on the textual account over emergent processes. We are in an age where virtual reality and new digital media applications are growing exponentially, and these are equally challenging how we understand the nature of being human, inviting us to consider alternative modes of engaging with an experiential anthropology of knowing. In the last decade, collaborations between research-funding bodies have increasingly moved toward a critically reflexive integration of research questions and methodologies that span arts, humanities, and social sciences. The "reflexive practitioner," however, has long been a key concept in participatory arts and socially engaged research, where bodily knowledge has been the focus of co-learning, imagining, and co-creating (see, e.g., Freire [1970] 2005).

In parallel with virtual reality applications that are expanding the possibilities of ethnographic research, multimodal experimentation is generating a new performative interdisciplinarity. Ideas that might once have focused on specific artistic genres and techniques invite alternative thinking through and with diverse fields of inquiry, such as sonic arts, urban planning, public health, and conflict studies. Consequently, there has been a growing cross-fertilization of ideas that have prompted the relationship between sound, arts, and performance to be rethought. For example, by reconceptualizing the idea of color to become "a physical body and a sensorial environment," Brazilian artist, Helio Oiticica proposed a path to "transmateriality," the idea that ephemeral, transitory phenomena (anything between social actions and extrasensorial experiences) produce and leave material traces that refer back and point forward to similar events not any longer or not yet manifest" (Schneider and Wright 2013, 14). These kinds of resonances are visually and sonically evoked in the work of pioneering sound artist Bill Fontana's immersive installation *Shadow Soundings*, comprising live-streaming, recordings, and video footage of the 25 de Abril Bridge in Lisbon, Portugal. Exhibition visitors move freely through the high atrium space as large beanbags and cushions spread around the floor invite them to lie flat to gaze up at and absorb the light, sound, and traffic movements of the bridge.² Other sonic artists have taken advantage of intensifying aesthetic experiences in immersive audio-visual and virtual realities to draw awareness to ecological crises. For example, composer, Leah Barclay's "Listening Underwater" has highlighted conservation issues by making audible the sounds of previously unheard depths of waterways around the world.

Alternative ways of bodily knowing also extend to the theater, where in thespianism an actor is taught to experience word and its sound at the very moment of its utterance, imagination, echo, and enaction, as actors become immersed in the potentialities of practice. Voicing is immanent utterance, where it is as "though for the first and only time those words are spoken" (Rodenburg [1997] 2020, xxiii). Similarly, ethnomusicologists and ethnochoreologists become adept in listening, responsiveness, and enskilling the performative body in instrumental, vocal, and dance genres that require relearning previously habituated music and dance practices. Moving from attending to the detailed precision of hand and arm gestures to foot movements that are subsumed in a precise flow of performance requires transformations of consciousness and bodily awareness that come to be absorbed into the activity over time. Yet, it seems that fewer scholars have adopted acting as an analytical modality of "sensual practical understanding" (Lindsay 1996, 201).³ Perhaps it is less that anthropologists and others are unwilling to learn from Western processes of acting than that acting creates a dilemma whereby the actor is subsumed within a character, generating an alternative relational frame with the audience and thereby becoming "what they are not in their own and others' eyes" (Hastrup 1998, 30; cited in Wilkinson-Weber 2012, 150). Nonetheless, the stage has offered significant opportunities to reflect upon how acting a character (that is simultaneously oneself and not self) can highlight shifts in virtuosic capacity and track between frames of experience and reflection.

Theater anthropology has its origins in the work of Jerzy Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre, which incorporated diverse cultural perspectives, and Eugenio Barba's International Theatre of Anthropology, which sought to find common principles of performance regardless of acting traditions (D'Onofrio 2018, 3). Peter Brook's International Centre for Theatre Research toured the globe drawing upon anthropological materials, such as Colin Turnbull's account of the Ik in *The Mountain People*, while director-performer Phillip Zarilli's approach builds on Richard Schechner

and Victor Turner, and he trains “actors in psycho-physical processes through Asian martial arts” (D’Onofrio 2018, 3). Since these pioneering efforts, contemporary theater has continued to refine and change its emphasis around acting processes and its integration of theoretical approaches. Some companies combine insights from anthropological performativity into acting as a mode of opening up ethnographic imaginaries for audiences. For example, *Manifesto Poetico* is co-directed by an international artist and anthropologist, Paige Allerton. Their dramatic trilogy, *Epic Borders*, held the second of its three projects in Northern Ireland in August 2019. Entitled “Belfast 1919,” it was hosted and produced by Patrick O’Reilly, artistic director of Tinderbox. Using “spatial dramaturgy” and the clever implementation of elastics in a “morphopoiesis”⁴ of space, movement, and interactions within and across borders, it traces political, historical, and conceptual processes of bordering and debordering.⁵

Northern Ireland is increasingly becoming a focus for developing large-scale, multimodal, participatory, and collaborative arts and performance works that deal with the legacies of conflict, intergenerational trauma, and peacebuilding. For example, “Sounding Conflict: From Resistance to Reconciliation,” a large AHRC/ESRC Partnership for Crime and Conflict Security Research Project⁶ hosted by the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute at Queen’s University Belfast, brought together musicians, artists, theater directors, curators, and sound artists with an interdisciplinary arts and social sciences research team drawn from anthropology, sonic arts, political science, and theater studies. By exploring creative and improvisatory responses to conflict transformation through immersive sound, digital storytelling, musical, and sonic arts practices, the research reveals the effects of sound and its affective resonances in a variety of conflict environments as it variously influences and impacts upon performativities of peacebuilding.⁷

To return to the problem of textual performativity, positioning improvisatory practice at the center of knowing has inspired some anthropologists to look for alternative ways to “bring words back to life” in “a joyful, playful spirit” (Singh and Guyer 2016). Singh and Guyer have adopted playful provocation through unusual juxtapositions of anthropological texts in order to help students discover and reimagine anthropological history. By engaging with “canonical ghosts,” they trouble canonical stasis and open up possibilities, “allowing them to mark us” (Brandel cited in Singh and Guyer 2016, 206–7). Malaby (2009, 210) proposes that such playfulness involves a disposition toward experimentation, which is “marked by an interest in uncertainty and the challenge to perform that arises in competition, by the legitimacy of improvisation and innovation that the premise of indeterminate circumstances encourages.”⁸ Indeed, a trend toward forms of improvisation and experimentation that dislocate texts from their relations of knowing demands further critical reflection upon the implications of “schizophonic”⁹ creativity between text, power, and performativity. However, beyond the nature of textual play with anthropological works, as Aubinet’s and Lorea’s articles attest, practices of (re-)sounding in Indigenous contexts require critical attention to the crux of historical relations between sound, power, and obligation.

Nonetheless, the improvisatory value of playfulness is its potentiality as “a vital life-force and performance practice that animate[s] and activate[s] diverse energies of inspiration, critique and invention” (Heble and Caines 2015, 2). In their series *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict*, Cohen, Gutierrez Varea, and Walker (2011, 6) illustrate these potentialities in their concern to enhance sensorial “reciprocity between perceivers/participants and the forms with which they are engaging” (emphasis in original). They do so by attending to the ethical complexities of production processes that are context-sensitive while seeking to respect difference and recognize the vulnerabilities of sounds, images, and acts of expression and the rights that they entail. They follow Lederach’s (2005, 5) call for practitioners to “venture into the mostly uncharted territory of *the artist’s way as applied to social change*, the canvases and poetics of human relationships, imagination and discovery” (emphasis in original). This process is based on four elements, placing relationships at the heart of practice and recognizing “interdependence,” “even with [one’s] enemies”; “cultivating paradoxical curiosity” around contradictory positions; generating creative space through openness and inclusive disposition; and “risk-taking,” since “peacebuilding by its very nature . . . requires a journey guided by the imagination of the risk” (Cohen, Gutierrez Varea, and Walker 2011, 11–12). A growing arena of interwoven artistic, performative, and indeed anthropological research collaborations have gained momentum, stemming from principles of participatory action, producing further questions about multisensoriality, the purpose of artistic facilitation, the types of encounters generated, and the effects of different spaces in which practice-led arts are performed and located.

A common quest that continues to perturb academic research is “how to produce different knowledge and how to produce knowledge differently” (Lather 2002, 200). Even as researchers discover more effective processes for exploring perceptions of empathy by creating inclusive spaces and opportunities for voicing, empathic recognition does not in itself address inequalities or power imbalances, as we have seen in F. Robinson’s critical analysis of deaf song-signing. This commentary would not be complete without some reflection upon these changing times, where forms of bodily knowing that anthropologists have come to analyze so deeply are now also under threat. As sound “manipulates” and “modifies” how we come to hear affectively, so too are its rapidly shifting and altered “atmospheres” (Eisenlohr 2018, 40) leaving reverberating impressions across the globe. Given COVID-19 resonances, it remains to be seen how and to what extent bodily disentanglements and sonic disruptions are impacting the socio-somatic dynamics of knowing-through-performing. Furthermore, we might ask how these moments of embodied crisis can generate increased awareness of the social and ethical issues facing Indigenous, deaf, disabled, or conflict-torn societies, how they impact intergenerational flows of knowledge exchange, and in what ways they lead to new forms of digitally mediated empathic entanglements.

NOTES

¹ Clarke (2005, 6) notes that since 1979 there have been various studies of ecological approaches to auditory perception and to music.

² This installation won the 2017 best Museum Architecture of the Year award for impact.

- ³Some notable exceptions include Erwin (1999) in a Chinese TV series, Barber's (2003) participation in Yoruba plays and TV dramas, and David's (2010) analysis of actors, which included taking acting classes (Wilkinson-Weber 2012, 149).
- ⁴Tamisari (2004) explains morphopoiesis as "a generation of forms that are brought to presence, a doing through shaping and movement, a form that manifests itself."
- ⁵See <https://www.manifestopoetico.com/belfast-19-19>.
- ⁶The project runs from 2017 to 2022.
- ⁷See <https://www.soundingconflict.org>.
- ⁸Malaby is citing Huizinga's analysis of playfulness in game theory.
- ⁹Murray Schafer (1977) refers to the splitting of sound from its source, which has the potential to cause confusion between the sound and its imaginary when a sound has already become associated with a soundscape.

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