Towards Acoustic Justice

Brandon LaBelle

It is my concern to bring into question the issue of acoustics and the ways in which it can be understood to impact onto expressions of individual and collective agency. While acoustic design is mostly a professional practice contributing to urban planning, and the construction of specific architectures, such as concert halls or recording studios, I focus on understanding acoustics by way of the acts or practices whereby people modify and retune their environments or situations in order to support the movement of particular sounds. In doing so, such enactments contend with a given order of hearing, or what Roshanak Kheshti terms 'regimes of aurality' (Kheshti 2015: xix).

In considering such a perspective, I'm led to pose acoustics as a political question. If we consider acoustics as a range of material and social practices that condition or enable the movement of sound, and often in support of the articulation of particular views or desires, it can be appreciated how it impacts onto experiences of participation and emplacement, defining who or what is heard – whose voice may gain traction within particular places and in what way. In this sense, I highlight acoustics as 'the distribution of the heard' extending from Jacques Rancière's political theories, and how 'politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time' (Rancière 2013: 8*)*. As the distribution of the heard, acoustics is understood to contribute to what or who one

hears, and to the ways in which such hearing impacts onto processes of self-orientation, and how orientation may be defined according to the particularities of environments, institutional systems, and ideological leanings.

By way of a focus on acoustics, along with sound and listening, which includes the articulations and reverberations of voice, the vibrational and resonant movements of social ecologies, and the cultural and symbolic productions and presentations of music, relationships emerge and are given traction. Following such perspectives, sound is emphasised as a deeply relational medium, one that enables social connection, processes of synchronisation and desynchronisation, attunement as well as interruption, and that moves across hearing and feeling, listening and touch; from the consonant to the dissonant, the harmonic to the cacophonous, sound provides a compelling framework for probing questions of relational experience as well as social equality.

Acoustics, in this sense, is positioned as a critical framework for engaging a politics of listening and the differing imaginaries and ideologies that work upon listening habits. As Kheshti (2015) highlights, regimes of aurality call upon particular ways of listening, establishing or reinforcing certain meanings and understandings of 'the ideal listener' and how we take pleasure and support from what we hear. Yet, aurality is never so fixed, as one may equally find unexpected routes, or ways of hearing differently, tracing over or disturbing the acoustic lines placed before us.

By way of acoustics, a range of questions can be raised, such as: What kinds of material, spatial or social arrangements are made to facilitate the movement of a given sound? To support the articulation or reverberation of certain voices and meanings? In what sense does acoustics function to host shared desires, or to hinder their circulation? What acoustic forces or forms exist that enable one's own voice to resound within particular rooms or institutions, and that aid in struggles over recognition? And further, how is one situated within the acoustic economies and histories at play within specific contexts? In probing such questions, I argue for acoustics as the basis for considering

approaches toward social recognition and the making of collective worlds; acoustics as a path for reflecting upon the different forces at work in shaping the movements of people. In this context, acoustic justice is considered both on a micropolitical and macropolitical level, from the immediate ways in which questions of access, fairness, and ethical regard play out within street-level encounters, and further, to how acoustics participates on the level of law and governmentality, for instance in the courtroom or the classroom, by contributing to the rules of audibility and the norms that impact on how bodies are made to matter. Acoustic justice therefore moves across issues of architecture and affect, social equality and recognition, and is posed in order to engage how hearing and being heard are vital to a political ecology of mutual concern and civility.

1. Orientations: the psychoacoustic to the social acoustic

Understanding acoustics as a political question is based foremost on recognising it as both a material and social issue. On one hand, acoustics is understood as the physical conditions, the architectures and spatial arrangements, that facilitate and shape the reflections and reverberations of sound: acoustics as a question of the physics of sound, the material properties of space, and the physiology of hearing, and how these are applied to strategies of design (Grueneisen 2003; Blesser/Salter 2015).

Following this perspective, acoustics dramatically contributes to personal orientation as well as social participation, lending to how one captures a sense of belonging within particular environments. This includes appreciating how one synchronises, attunes, and aligns with others by way of what one hears and feels, and how bodily or affective experiences support forms of participation. From such a material and social base, acoustics is understood to affect experiences of hearing as well as that of sociality, to influence the relationships one may form and within which listening becomes more operative. This leads to considering acoustics as having an impact onto the politics of recognition and location, and subsequent articulations of forms of

life: acoustics as a politics through which struggles over recognition and rights, movement and access, belonging and participation are drawn out. From a micropolitical or street-level perspective, acoustics may be considered less as a professional skill or science, and more as the everyday practices or gestures that work at securing paths of orientation. For instance, the spatial arrangements and social scenes, the vocal articulations and verbal arguments, the technological systems and cultural expressions communities make in support of particular forms of life, come to position acoustics within the arenas of everyday experience and struggle.

Such a view may be further unpacked to recognise a series of levels or modes by which acoustics is operative. This includes engaging with the psychoacoustic, and the physiological and neurological experiences or conditions of hearing that greatly inform not only what one is able to hear, but additionally how those experiences nurture a form of auditory cognition and imagination – the psychoacoustic as nonconscious or unconscious ways of experiencing or relating to sound. Following the psychoacoustic, and the more personal status of hearing, we may consider the social acoustic and the dynamics of life with others; how acoustics, and the circulation of acoustic information, influences all types of social relationships – social acoustics as the exchanges afforded by way of sound and listening within given environments.

An acoustic model or framework further integrates the electroacoustic, as the mediations of distributed sound and the technological apparatuses that enable sonic diffusion, that 'point' sound in particular directions and around which social identities often gravitate, for instance in musical cultures. Finally, acoustic ecologies of human and more-than-human life allow for greater appreciation of acoustics as a critical ecological framework, which can assist in practices of care and sustainability. Through such an ecological perspective, a notion of the bioacoustic may be put forward to also speak toward the ways in which conceptualisations of *life by way of hearing* become politically operative, for example by the positioning or othering of the Deaf as being 'unable' to hear and therefore less-than-human (Bauman

2004; Ladd 2003).

These levels or modes are suggestive for elaborating how acoustics can be thought in terms of regimes of aurality, and how the establishment of sonic or acoustic norms become sites of contestation – to contend with the social or bioacoustic framing of what counts as 'good' or 'acceptable' sound for example (Lisiak, et al. 2019), or with the technological constructs that distribute sounds in particular ways to figure listening positionalities. In addition, identifying acoustics across a range of perspectives provides a framework for querying how individuals and communities construct paths of resistance, togetherness, and social consciousness by way of sound and listening. This may be found in a range of instances where people rise up to demonstrate against systems of oppression or injustice. Throughout the uprisings in Beirut starting in October 2019 for example, there appeared a constant reference to 'feeling unheard' on the part of ordinary people. Dubbed 'the open-mic revolution' (Battah 2019), the protests and subsequent assemblies organised in Beirut were consistently based upon upsetting a given distribution of the heard (as dominated by the political elite and related media channels), and can be appreciated as an attempt to reorient the acoustic or sonic norms that often define not only what one hears, but equally how such auditory experiences can meaningfully resonate to impact systems of governance.

Rather than a strict concentration on sound, and the punctuations or expressions it affords, acoustics brings focus to the material, technical, and social conditions that surround and that affect embodied and collective life, as well as the affective and political dynamics shaping one's situatedness. In this regard, focusing on acoustics – from sonic imaginaries to electroacoustic mediations – enables a range of critical and creative inquiries, which have at their center a concern for the ways in which one navigates and negotiates systems and discourses that impact onto defining a sense of place and participation. While expressions of sonic agency find articulation by way of the punctuated sounds one may make, acoustic justice is figured by considering the arrangements and configurations that allow for different types of

orientation, from social and political to bodily and communal.

To deepen understanding of acoustics as a practice, as an arena around which individuals and communities may work at particular identifications and orientations, I want to think through a set of acoustic figures, such as echo, vibration, and rhythm. These act as both material and figurative frameworks, accenting ways in which acoustics may emerge as a practice, or simply as an affective and gestural move.

Acoustics, as I'm posing, is implicated in the shaping of sociality, which is often about how one aligns with particular tonalities while disturbing others, giving way to expressions of agreement or disagreement, harmony or discord. For instance, we may appreciate processes of acoustic reflection, or echo, as a *sounding out* – a throwing or punctuation of sound by which to capture a sense of participation or belonging through all that may come echoing back, interrupting a given social order or helping in capturing affinities with others. Here, emphasis is placed on the practices or acts that seek to rework the distribution of the heard, to reconfigure regimes of aurality, in order to sound out particular routes and attune to others – to take up residence within a world reverberant with shared desires.

Along with reflection, and the critical and creative echoes by which one may capture specific forms of orientation, rhythm may be understood as an acoustic practice or modality, whereby the establishment of alignments or misalignments, synchronisations and desynchronisations, affords particular steps: the steps one may take, following in line with particular structures and languages, or beating back against certain patterns, systems of power, or temporal cycles by stepping-out or veering off-course. Such a view is elaborated by Stavros Stavrides, and his analysis of social movements within Athens following the implementation of austerity measures in recent years. Stavrides highlights rhythm, in this context, as 'creative responses to violent ruptures of time' that enable 'a constant negotiation with experiences of temporal discontinuity' (Stavrides 2019: 69). Rhythm thus works at a structuring of time and place, a channel of negotiation, for setting pace to one's own needs or hopes for the future; it articulates shared modes

of action through which social and political desires work at organised forms, enabling counter-moves and lending to how one may configure forms of support – spacings and timings particular to collective beliefs, rituals or gestures of care and resistance.

From the echoic sharing of sounds that aid in defining forms of orientation, to the rhythms that work at organised patterns and relational timings, acoustics emerges as a framework of agential practices, a base from which styles of movement, manners of synchronisation and social affinity, gain momentum. Additionally, vibration can be underscored not only as a particular energy passing through a given material, but equally one that may be deployed in support of forms of commonality, even hospitality. While echo and rhythm may afford processes of lining or linking up, vibration establishes an *ecology of feeling* that deepens states of intimacy and togetherness. As an ecology of feeling, an undulation of sense that all places contain, vibration impacts upon one's affective capacity to belong, or to participate within a given environment: to feel oneself as part of a greater gathering or ambient tonality. In this regard, vibration provides a means for drawing forth acts of sharing; one may work at nurturing an ecology of feeling in welcoming or facilitating communal efforts or bonds, conducting a fortification or 'vibrational defense' for what one may hold or produce in common (Goodman 2010). By way of the felt knowledges and shared intimacies gained through vibrational constructs and tonalities, from scenes of welcome to those of support, from a gathering of friends to the making of safe spaces, one may lean towards a certain consensuality and commonality, inflecting everyday life with an ethical or political tension over the right to be together.

From echo to rhythm to vibration, from interruptions to synchronisations to resonant togetherness, acoustics captures a range of practices or gestures that seek to modulate a given order or distribution of the heard. This includes posing acoustics as not only a question of sound and the audible, but rather, to understand sound and the experiences of listening in an expanded sense; how vibrational and rhythmic matters extend listening toward more tactile, affective and

relational groundings, supplying one with a bodily and social vocabulary or force for self- and collective-realisation (Farinati & Firth 2017). This is not to overlook how acoustics is also susceptible to less nurturing gestures or practices; how rhythm can be implemented to restrict and control, or how ecologies of feeling and affective tonalities can be instrumentalised in the market place, affording new ways of capturing profits. Acoustics is, in this sense, a powerful device; it engages the audible and the inaudible, what we hear and what we feel, granting forceful ways of impacting given social or political arrangements.

2. Queer Acoustics

Following this critical framework, I'm concerned to mobilize acoustics as the basis for contending with a politics of orientation; from the experience of hearing a specific event to the processes by which communities develop specific forms of being together – how some *find their way* by drawing support from the materialities and affordances of sonic experience, which include communicational, organisational, and affective capacities of acoustic acts, from the silences and noises, rhythms and vibrations that shape and inflect a sense of place and possibility. Acoustics may therefore define a range of processes around which bodily orientation and recuperation, cultural expressivity and negotiation, social navigation and construction are worked at. To listen therefore is not only to hear, but to also attune and detune, balance and rebalance the forms and forces by which one is figured as well as participates in the figuring of others.

In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed challenges the ways in which traditions of phenomenology may bypass the more socialised, racialised, sexualised and gendered shape and impress of the phenomenal; the objects and things, the architectures and rooms that surround us are never neutral, never only there for us, but rather, are made available through a range of highly situated, historical and social processes and precedents that work to establish the normative shape of what we may associate with and how (Ahmed 2006). For Ahmed, one's figuring in the world is thus always already defined by a set of dominant

constructs that are deeply material and spatial, coded and regulated, and that enable or constrain the particular grasp specific bodies may have onto the world around. One gains entry, or not, according to the availability of passages and pathways, and how they open for some more than others. In short, bodies are never only just bodies, but are already shaped by social, political and identity norms, which act to limit the phenomenal availability of things according to the social, racial, sexual and gendered specificity bodies and spaces carry.

> The lines that allow us to find our way, those that are 'in front' of us, also make certain things, and not others, available. What is available is what might reside as a point on this line. When we follow specific lines, some things become reachable and others remain, or even become, out of reach. Such exclusions – the constitution of a field of unreachable objects – are the indirect consequences of following lines that are before us: we do not have to consciously exclude those things that are not 'on line'. The direction we take excludes things for us, before we even get there (Ahmed 2006: 14-15).

Ahmed opens an important view onto how orientation is never freely found, but rather is shaped by established patterns and processes that bring one into certain alignments, or that make particular misalignments possible as well as dangerous. One is equally oriented by the world as one makes orientation for oneself. To orient is thus to be situated within space as well as within or against particular social and normative structures and systems. Orientation is a performative process, whereby one seeks support from the world around, and from the resources or things made available or not. One therefore *practices* orientation, which shifts as bodies shift, as one aligns or misaligns, attunes or disturbs, is welcomed or pushed out. This includes the ways in which some bodies are racialised, positioned by way of a dominant white world that defines how people of colour experience a relation to things and spaces, and what it means to be at home in the world. As Ahmed poses: 'If the world is made white, then the body at home is one that can inhabit that whiteness' (Ahmed 2006: 111). Being at home in the world, feeling as if things and spaces of that world are made available, is deeply influenced by race and its political orientations.

Situatedness extends beyond the question of racial appearance as well, and the physical reading of the body; sexual orientation is equally made to matter within dominant heterosexual society, placing emphasis on the straight life that comes to cast other sexual behaviours and orientations as 'deviant.' 'To become straight means that we not only have to turn toward the objects that are given to us by heterosexual culture, but also that we must 'turn away' from objects that take us off this line. The queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant' (Ahmed 2006: 21).

Following these arguments and perspectives, Ahmed poses the concept of 'queer phenomenology,' which gives challenge to the seemingly neutral matters of worldly contact and how ideas of 'free movement' are defined (or assumed) by way of a white, heteronormative imaginary and ideology. In contrast, Ahmed captures how orientation is a question of 'lining up' – a 'falling in line' which is often derived by way of heteronormative ordering, where 'being straight' is often to 'straighten up.' And how black identities are made to negotiate the lines of a white order. In response, Ahmed mobilises a critical phenomenology, which can support the making of other alignments and movements. 'Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy. Queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world 'slantwise' allow other objects to come into view' (Ahmed 2006: 107).

I'm interested in following Ahmed, and what she emphasises as 'the work of reorientation,' in order to consider how enactments of non-normative worlding *queer* the acoustic, giving accent to the ways in which acoustic practices assist in processes of (re)orientation that upset the dominant tonality of a given place. Voices find resonance within certain environments according to the availability of particular acoustic matters – those who listen, or those things that invite one to speak or not, that acoustically welcome or support certain bodies and their sounds. The rhythms by which one moves are enabled or enhanced by material and social supports, while such rhythms may also

work to demand entry, seeking to bend or break the shape of a given situation so as to move differently, to give expression to an altogether different pattern. Acoustic orientation is thus never only about the material supports that enable the movement of a specific sound, rather it contributes to the establishment of particular acoustic norms, setting definition to what counts as 'good' or fitting sound – *fidelity* here must be underscored as political, forcing the question: fidelity to whom or what, and for what end? As such, acoustics is greatly informed by the normative patterns and values often defining spaces, contributing to what can be heard and where, who may speak or not, and what types of behaviour or identity find support within given environments. Here, it becomes important to question in what ways acoustics is racialised or gendered, sexualised or made to fit particular bodies and identities, according to assumed understandings of which sounds make sense where.

Writer and scholar Nina Dragičević offers similar lines of thinking through her research into the culture of queer communities (Dragičević 2019, 2017). Focusing on the social environments of bars in the city of Ljubljana, and the formation of the lesbian disco, she highlights how sound and music, listening and an overall acoustic dynamic, contribute greatly to supporting queer togetherness, particularly when speaking out loud may put one in danger. Rather, the articulation of lesbian desire partly turns upon a sonic axis, a queer acoustics, finding facilitation through the playback of particular music. Dragičević considers how, historically, the making of lesbian scenes within heterosexual bars (in the US for example) were greatly strained by an environment dominated by homophobia, which impacted on ways of socialising together. The playback of songs on a jukebox, for instance, came to assist in narrating otherwise unspoken communications, where potential partners may stand in or identify with singers, or those being sung to. Songs, in this sense, provided an acoustic affordance enabling the expression of lesbian desire, and importantly, for the construction and maintenance of a culture of queer life.

Extending her research into more contemporary situations,

Dragičević moves from the jukebox, and the strict territorialisation of heterosexual bars, to the live DJ and the lesbian disco. Within such spaces and scenes, lesbian desire finds greater traction by way of outright collective volume, a loudness that can 'act against oppression' (Dragičević 2017). From the jukebox, and the undercover flirtations enabling an articulation of desire and identity, to the DJ, and the collective volume of the lesbian disco, Dragičević captures a sense for the particular power of sonority in struggles and celebrations of shared identity. Finding orientation by way of such sonorities and expressions greatly affords world-making activity, that is, the making of a space and time that does not need to continually differentiate itself against heteronormative society. Rather, as Dragičević poses, the lesbian scene celebrates itself and each other, allowing for a deeply emancipatory and affirming togetherness.

Following Dragičević's work, a queer acoustics as I'm suggesting poses an interruption or distortion onto the heteronormative tonal shape of a place to allow for other resonant flows or vibrational constructs, other communal worlds; queering the acoustic may enable the retuning of a sonic horizon, surprising a given auditory arena with the rarely heard or with an altogether different reverberation. A queer acoustic may give support by upsetting the acoustic training and positionality informing how one hears or listens, to critically agitate or colour the particular leanings and learnings that affect what one is able to hear, and how that figures a sonic imaginary. In this sense, a queer acoustic might *strain* phenomenology with the noise of social conflict, the rhythms of particular identity struggles and desires, and the configuration of marginalised spaces and their histories, tensing given regimes of aurality so as to allow for the articulation of accommodations as well as resistances to emerge: to pose the work of acoustic justice.

3. Acoustic Justice

Acoustic justice is positioned to highlight the practices by which to rework the distribution of the heard, detuning or retuning the tonality of a place, and a given acoustic norm, so as to support the movements of

bodies and voices, especially those put at risk by appearing or sounding otherwise. For example, Lia García, a transgender artist working in Mexico City, argues that such risks are always already embedded in the sound of her transgender voice, which she refuses to modify (García 2019). Rather, through performances and workshops she utilises the 'ill-fitting' quality of her voice as an affective noise that may upset or destabilise a given sonic image, or norm of fidelity, to prise open a social framework where what counts as 'normal' is brought into question. As García suggests, in revealing the entrenched assumptions as to what identity looks and sounds like within dominant heteronormative society, she allows for others to 'transition' with her (García 2019). In this regard, the tensing of a given auditory norm works at reorienting listening and the affections it may support, to enable other auditory identities and identifications to resound. Such actions and tensions are never a smooth affair, but rather, are greatly marked by fear and violence, and the difficult challenges found in articulating marginalised identity.

Acoustic justice is a framework for understanding how one navigates the conditions of particular places, and how one may seek out and construct a path of (re)orientation, which is always related to struggles over belonging, of negotiating the social, political and performative figuring of oneself and others. The acoustic modalities of such acts, from the rhythmic to the vibrational, the loud to the hushed, often work to support the movements of a shared collectivity, emboldening the energetic and ethical figuring of communal determination by way of the unifying or sympathetic potentiality of the auditory. Such movements and experiences are often the socio-material basis from which communities or collectives acquire a sense for the possibilities of what one may compose within given environments or situations, extending from sonic warfare to acoustic welfare – from sonic force to acoustic support. And through which understandings of justice are played out in the everyday in terms of working at social equality.

Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos offers a useful guide for elaborating this position and view of justice, particularly through

what he terms 'lawscape' (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2015). The lawscape is posed as the intersection of law and space, a spatial turn within law that captures the sense in which law is distributed spatially, and how space is always already a question of law: the codes by which space becomes inhabitable, divided, contested, shared. If law is the *laying down* of rules, it inscribes itself onto a social body by delineating it, demarcating it, marking the ground as the territory in which law establishes itself ('the law of the land'). Importantly, for Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2015) the lawscape is a geography open to contingency, to the ways in which 'visibilisation and invisibilisation' as he calls it – the ontological shape of the lawscape – is continually at play, worked and reworked, articulated or contested. In the spatialisation of law, law becomes a ground and articulates more overtly its inherent relation to bodies and manners of living, architecture and the city, from national territories to daily geographies. As such, the lawscape grants a 'manoeuvring space' to how one may move through law: interrupting its codes, navigating its delineations, reorienting its ordering, modulating its visibilisation and invisibilisation.

My approach to acoustic justice follows from Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos' concept of lawscape, in so far as soundscapes act as a fundamental ground or arena (even auditorium) in which negotiations in and around audibilities and inaudibilities are figured. In this regard, acoustic justice makes a number of critical moves in order to extend listening as an action that forcefully impacts on the lawscape, and that can contribute to what Judith Butler terms an 'egalitarian imaginary,' (Butler 2020) as a horizon by which critical actions may be guided. Central to acoustic justice is understanding listening as not always being bound to the audible, or to sound only (and distinct from hearing, which is centred on the physiology of the ear). Rather, listening is posed as a fuller expression of attention, as a multi-modal, embodied power that enables a range of conversations and contacts, criticality and imagination. Such an understanding of listening is suggestive for approaching acoustics as the basis for greater relational attunements and resonant acts that can positively impact on the aspirations of communities.

Silvia Federici highlights our sense of being a living body as something that has been continually shaped by capitalism. 'Indeed, one of capitalism's main social tasks from its beginning to the present has been the transformation of our energies and corporeal powers into labour powers' (Federici 2020: 120). Transforming the body as a sensual power and labour force by way of a range of technical, mechanical, and scientific projects throughout the history of capitalism, from Taylorism and mechanisation to computational and genetic models that figure the body as so many atomised parts requiring regulation and management, for Federici indexes the constant need to reclaim the body. 'Our struggle then must begin with the reappropriation of our body, the revaluation and rediscovery of its capacity for resistance, and expansion and celebration of its powers, individual and collective' (Federici 2020: 123). To reclaim and celebrate the body is to honour much of its inherent power of sensing and knowing, moving and making, caring and loving; a deeply energetic, creative intelligence that, following Federici, is central in struggles against exploitation and the drive for a more egalitarian world.

Acoustic justice is about expanding upon listening as an extremely dynamic expression of bodily power, as a sensual and deeply transformative capacity by which to express individual and collective understanding and collaboration. Listening as a broader capacity to attune and attend, to hold and nurture, defend and debate, and which supports reflection and sympathy, compassion and care, for oneself and for others, and that greatly assists in contending with dominant and prevailing systems that make and unmake bodies. As Federici poses in her argument on the need to reappropriate the body:

> Our bodies have reasons that we need to learn, rediscover, reinvent. We need to listen to their language as the path to our health and healing, as we need to listen to the language and rhythms of the natural world as the path to the health and healing of the earth (Federici 2020: 124).

Listening is captured as the means by which to learn the languages of the body, to attune to its inherent rhythms as paths of power and knowing, as well as healing. Against the colonial legacies of modernity,

and conflicts over forms of life and the biodiversity expressive of a pluralistic world, listening is wielded as a capacity to contend with genealogies of capture and exploitive enclosure by explicitly forging a path – an acoustic frame by which to cultivate more considered approaches for being on the planet, which further entails a commitment to decolonisation (Vázquez 2012).

Such an egalitarian and planetary view finds a compelling articulation in what Cormac Cullinan terms 'wild law' (Cullinan 2011). For Cullinan, it is imperative that we radically adjust existing modes of Western governance – grounded in legacies of what Rolando Vázquez highlights as the modern/colonial order (Vázquez 2012) – so as to work at greater ecological sustainability and flourishing. By way of wild law, Cullinan makes the argument for Earth governance, in which understandings of the legal status of the human subject be extended towards the Earth community as a whole, shifting the anthropocentric basis of law and rights in order to support a bolder planetary order. Such a view finds support by referencing Indigenous understandings and cosmologies, especially the concept of buen vivir which played a significant part in the drafting of the constitution in the state of Ecuador in 2008, for example. The concept of buen vivir (or sumak kawsay) argues for an expanded understanding of 'the good life' or 'well-being' beyond the individual (and the concept of individual rights); rather, buen vivir, from an Andean cosmological view, understands well-being as a collective and planetary question and concern that exceeds the human. Integrated into the constitution of Ecuador, the 'rights of nature' come to appropriate liberal concepts of rights in the making of new constitutional and legal structures. As Vázquez poses, '*buen vivir* signals the borders [of the modern/colonial order] and it gives voice to the outside of modernity' (Vázquez 2012: 1).

Cullinan's (2011) 'wild law' takes guidance from the concept of *buen vivir* and aims to elaborate upon the rights of nature, as something that may productively guide Western systems of law in crafting more ecologically attuned policies. Importantly, Cullinan approaches attending to the rhythms and qualities of the natural world by way of

listening. As he envisions: 'If we want to participate fully in the dance of the Earth community we need to listen carefully for the beat and adjust our rhythm and timing accordingly' (Cullinan 2011: 137).

Following this rhythmic imaginary, wild law is suggestive for extending acoustics, as not only what may allow for nurturing human relations, as a social acoustic bound to communal effort, but equally as the basis for attuning to the more-than-human, the planetary, the elemental matters and bioacoustic forces of the ecologies of which we are a part. That acoustics may enable such a project has been greatly indicated through the legacies of acoustic ecology, and the work of soundscape music composition and pedagogy, in which questions of sound and listening, communication and acoustic feedback, support a larger perspective on the biodiverse health of environments (Schafer 1994; Truax 1994).

In this respect, returning to Federici's (2020) call for 'listening to the body' as a path toward health and healing, it is important to question in what way listening to the body takes place, or is given place, and how it may truly reorient larger systems and structures that situate oneself, or that impact onto the well-being of a greater social or planetary body. How do I listen to my body? If I understand my body as an acoustic chamber, as something to be heard, how does it give way to such listening, accommodating or resisting it? And in what ways is such listening challenged or undermined by understandings of listening, by one's own cultural background, or the regimes of aurality that shape or direct one's listening – that inscribe onto one's listening ability a set of ordering (and straightening) lines? Or by way of technology, and the electroacoustic systems embedded within environments, and that has always participated in defining listening's reach and abilities? Further, what might such listening generate or engender – how to carry this listening into the world and our communities, into the rhythms of planetary ecologies and the project of decolonisation? In listening to the body, wouldn't the body reveal itself as being constituted by both human and more-than-human vitality, as an ensemble of water, calcium, bacteria – a consortia (Margulis 1999)? And if so, does not

reclaiming the body entail hearing differently, by way of a posthuman or wild acoustics, unpacking the body as more- or less-than-human?

Struggles over recognition and participation often find traction by intervening upon the conditions that define hearing and being heard, voicing and being responsive, sounding and listening, which regulate or inform one's attention and orientation with respect to oneself and others. It is these conditions that are of concern, and which leads me to understand acoustics, or more specifically, acoustic justice, as those things one does in order to make listening to the body and each other possible, and that one may carry further, to underscore the importance of hearing a diversity of views and life-stories within institutional and public settings as well as bringing attention to the voices and rhythms beyond human sociality. This includes questioning how acoustics is racialised, sexualised or gendered, positioning particular voices and persons in certain ways (Stoever 2016; Eidsheim 2015, 2019).

In this regard, it is important to articulate a critical acoustics, which can bring forward an interrogative view onto acoustics and its specificities. This includes arguing for an understanding of acoustic rights or reasons in order to open pathways for elaborating how listening in all its potentiality may be nurtured and made socially instrumental. Such a concern requires a consideration of the right to free speech, or the right of reply, as human and civil rights, and which dramatically entail an acoustic dimension. Through his concept of 'acoustic jurisprudence,' James Parker draws attention to the ways in which the operations of law, and the sites of legal work, for instance the courtroom, are fundamentally grounded in an acoustic or sonic framework. From understandings of the fair hearing to the pronouncement of legal judgment, Parker reveals an embedded 'sonic imagination' underpinning the formal arenas of justice. As Parker argues, acoustic jurisprudence is 'concerned with how law is lived, both in sound and by virtue of it' (Parker 2011: 964).

Following Parker's concept of acoustic jurisprudence, acoustic justice may address the importance not only of the freedom of speech, but equally that of setting the (acoustic) conditions in support of

such freedom. This includes arguing for a deeper engagement with listening as an essential freedom.[1] Is not the freedom of speech equally a question of the freedom of listening (Lacey 2013)? [2] As Vázquez argues, listening performs a 'critique' of the modern/colonial order by specifically supporting a *relationality* denied by modernity in which the arrogance of a universal Western voice forcefully silences others (Vázquez 2012). In what ways is listening constrained and undermined within institutional and public environments, and how might 'listening as critique,' as relational opening, be enabled?

A commitment to fostering listening can be articulated along a number of lines, such as the right to listen to each other, as the sharing and circulation of life-stories (King 2008), and which can help in attending not only to the said and the articulated, but equally facilitating concern for that which is missing, where listening acts as a creative 'holding environment' (Griffin 2016): listening as giving room for what needs to be said and heard. Emphasising greater engagement with listening in this way can also help move from nurturing human relationships, and elaborating a diverse public discourse, to acknowledging ecologies of human and more-than-human life in a sustainable manner: to support deeper attunement with a biodiverse planet (Tsing 2015).

Approaching acoustics as a question of rights or responsibility along these lines can also allow for greater concern for education, where listening as a practice, a skill, a history, may be enriched, for listening supports the capacity for empathy, understanding, affection, responsiveness, as well as critical and creative inquiry, and is essential within learning environments. This explicitly gives way to engaging a politics of recognition, and questions of cultural identity, social mobility, and institutional access, which includes contending with racialised or gendered acoustic norms and the affective economies at play within contemporary biocapitalism, which, as Federici suggests, are always instrumentalising the vitality of oneself as a situated body. How to attend to the ways in which bodies – some more than others – are stressed and strained by forces of exclusion and discrimination?

In what ways can such attention be sustained, made forceful within greater economies that fully capitalise on attention itself?

Acoustic justice may further work at considering the technological or medical approaches to 'hearing ability,' which draw out a bioacoustic politics – a politics contending with conceptualisations of *life by way of sound and hearing*, and thus to further address the issue of recognition by expanding understandings of language and voice to include the diversely abled, issues of translation and interpretation, and that attends to verbal and nonverbal, spoken and signed expression (Bauman 2008; Mills 2011). Finally, a focus on acoustic rights or reasons works on behalf of an acoustic commons, as the commoning that may position sound and listening as social resources in manifesting a radical ethics of openness.

From the micropolitical to the macropolitical, from questions of subjectivity, positionality, and the complex experiences of listening and social orientation, to issues of institutional access, structural and systemic exclusions, and what might be gained from bringing acoustic knowledges into the framework of education and ecology, law and government, acoustic justice works across a diverse range of issues and sites. The right to listen, as a counterpoint to the right to free speech, captures the necessity of turning toward what must be heard: the expressions often occurring outside or beyond the acoustic norm of distributed sound. In this sense, acoustic justice lends to the forming of gestures and practices – listening practices, wild practices, decolonial practices – that attempt to reshape the arrangements enabling such rights and reasons, and in doing so modulate the norms by which we may encounter and enrich each other. This includes bringing a critical view onto the issue of rights in general, and the importance of challenging state sanctioned recognition; rather, acoustics, and the arguments I'm making here, may support enactments of poetic world making that do not so much redistribute the heard, in attempts at having a voice, but lead to another form of the sensible entirely.

Acknowledgments:

This paper was developed in the context of the research project, Social Acoustics: Listening, Embodiment, Collaboration, at the Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design, University of Bergen. I'm grateful to my colleague, Professor Jill Halstead, for her collaborative sharing and critical dialogue, which has been essential to working through the question of acoustic justice.

Endnotes

1. While I am arguing for listening, and an overall concern for acoustic rights, it is important to consider experiences of deafness and how Deaf culture has had to grapple with 'audism', or the politics of 'audio supremacy.' In arguing for acoustic justice, I see deafness as an important issue, one that can both be addressed through an acoustic justice framework, as well as what offers a productive challenge to prevailing ideas of hearing ability. For more on this, see my publication *Acoustic Justice: Listening, Performativity, and the Work of Reorientation* (2021), especially chapter 4.
2. In her book, *Listening Publics* (2013), Kate Lacey proposes 'the freedom of listening' as a fundamental act that equally supports the freedom of speech and expression. She develops this argument in relation to questions of the public sphere, and the politics of media culture.

References

Ahmed S 2006 *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* Duke University Press Durham

Battah H 2019 'An Open Mic Revolution in Lebanon' *Al Jazeera* October 25 https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/open-mic-revolution-lebanon-191025150455130.html. Accessed March 10, 2020.

Bauman H-Dirksen L 2004 'Audism: Exploring the Metaphysics of Oppression' *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 9/2 Spring: 239-46

Bauman H-Dirksen L 2008 'On the Disconstruction of (Sign) Language in the Western Tradition: A Deaf Reading of Plato's *Cratylus*' in Bauman H-Dirksen L 2008: 83-99

Bauman H-Dirksen L 2008 *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking* University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis

Blesser B and Salter L-R 2006 *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* The MIT Press Cambridge MA

Butler J 2020 *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* Verso London

Cullinan C 2011 *Wild Law: A Manifesto for Earth Justice* Green Books Cambridge

Dragičević N 2019 from a lecture given at Sounds, Songs, and Politics, International Ethnomusicological symposium, Institute of Ethnomusicology, University of Ljubljana

Dragičević N 2017 *Med njima je glasba: Glasba v konstrukciji lezbične scene* Društvo Parada ponosa Ljubljana

Eidsheim N 2015 *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* Duke University Press Durham

Eidsheim N 2019 *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music* Duke University Press Durham

Farinati, Lucia and Firth, Claudia 2017 *The Force of Listening* Errant Bodies Press Berlin

Federici S 2020 *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism* PM Press Oakland

Fornet-Betancourt R ed 2012 *Capital, Poverty, Development, Denktraditionen im Dialog: Studien zur Befreiung und interkulturalität* 33 Wissenschaftsverlag Mainz Aachen

García L 2019 in conversation with the author, as part of the Dirty Ear Forum Q-02 Brussels

Goodman S 2010 *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* MIT Press Cambridge MA

Griffin F L 2016 *Creative Listening and the Psychoanalytic Process: Sensibility, Engagement and Envisioning* Routledge New York

Grueneisen P 2003 *Soundspace: Architecture for Sound and Vision* Birkhäuser Basel

Kheshti R 2015 *Modernity's Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music* New York University Press New York

King T 2008 *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis

LaBelle B 2021 *Acoustic Justice: Listening, Performativity, and the Work of Reorientation* Bloomsbury New York

Lacey K 2013 *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* Polity Press Cambridge

Ladd P 2003 *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* Multilingual Matters Clevedon

Lisiak A Back L Jackson E 2019 'Urban multiculture and xenophonophobia in London and Berlin' *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24/1: 1-16

Margulis L 1999 *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* Basic Books New York

Mills M 2011 'Do Signals Have Politics? Inscribing Abilities in Cochlear Implants' in Pinch et al: 320-46

Parker J 2011 'The Soundscape of Justice' 2011 in *Griffith Law Review* 20/4: 962-93

Parker, J E K 2015 *Acoustic Jurisprudence: Listening to the Trial of Simon Bikindi* Oxford University Press Oxford

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos A 2015 *Spatial Justice: Body, Lawscape, Atmosphere* Routledge London

T Pinch and K Bijsterveld eds 2011 *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* Oxford University Press Oxford

Rancière J 2013 The Politics of Aesthetics Bloomsbury New York

Schafer R M [1977] 1994 *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* Destiny Books Rochester

Stavrides S 2019 *Towards the City of Thresholds* Common Notions Brooklyn

Stoever J L 2016 *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* New York University Press New York

Truax B 1994 *Acoustic Communication* Ablex Publishing Corporation Norwood

Tsing A L 2015 *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* Princeton University Press Princeton

Vázquéz R 2012 'Towards a Decolonial Critique of Modernity: Buen Vivir, Relationality and the Task of Listening' in Fornet-Betancourt: 241-252