

Politics of listening: feminisms and community building

Lílian Campesato
Universidade de São Paulo
lilicampesato@gmail.com

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Abstract: In this work I intend to explore the issue of listening in regards to gender and music by discussing two projects in which I have participated: the collective Sonora: Músicas e Feminismos; and the work on 'conversation' and 'self-listening' conducted in conjunction with Brazilian composer and scholar Valéria Bonafé. In both of them I want to stress the connection between the idea of community as a space for the establishment of differences and the question of listening as an exercise of otherness.

Keywords: listening, feminisms, community building, politics of listening.

Políticas da escuta: feminismos e construção de comunidades

Resumo: Neste trabalho pretendo explorar a questão da escuta nas discussões sobre gênero e música a partir da reflexão sobre projetos que tenho participado: a atuação do coletivo Sonora: Músicas e Feminismos; e o trabalho sobre conversa e 'escuta de si' realizado em conjunto com a compositora e pesquisadora brasileira Valéria Bonafé. Neste texto busco conectar a ideia de comunidade como espaço para a formação de diferenças com a questão da escuta como exercício de alteridade.

Palavras-chave: escuta, feminismos, construção de comunidade, políticas da escuta.

Introduction

The idea of a listening policy is taken as a counterweight to the discussion that has developed on music listening since the second half of the 20th century. Recognizing the dimensions of listening policies implies understanding the contexts and conditions in which it occurs and the consequences it produces. Here, the idea of listening unfolds into different forms of listening that goes beyond the usual relationships between listener and music.

In this work I intend to explore the issue of listening in regards to gender and music. I will discuss two projects in which I have participated: the collective Sonora: Músicas e Feminismos¹; and the work on 'conversation' and 'self-listening' conducted in collaboration with Brazilian composer Valéria Bonafé.² In both cases I want to emphasize

¹ www.sonora.me.

² <http://www2.eca.usp.br/nusom/poeticas-da-escuta>.

the connection between the idea of community as a space for establishing differences and the issue of listening as an exercise of otherness.

I think of listening as a political act, a vital component of activism and community-building. It is an action whose consequences extend beyond the direct relation to sounds and that reflects the social conditions in which it is immersed. Here I want to stress the dichotomy between speech and listening as two sides of the same political process. While the former is associated with action -- the production of sound, the transmission of concepts, the imposition of ideas -- the latter is often associated with passive reception and understanding. To a certain extent, speech and listening are mutually exclusive: no one listens while speaking, nor is it permitted to speak when one wants to listen. The balance between speech and listening, however, is what helps to define a communication policy: when someone assumes the position of listener or speaker she or he is assuming a political position.

But, what does it mean to listen to the other? How can we listen to diversity? How do we build a transformative listening in a culture that favours hyper-individualization? Listening is also an opportunity to renounce the position of power and let the exchange of language and experience assume a central position. However, in a strongly institutionalized social structure like the one we live in, particularly in schools and universities, this space is often mitigated.

The process of constituting a community is part of a desire to create alternative social formulas. They can open space for the emergence of collaborative actions that unburden wills and needs, which are not covered by already consolidated structures. The sense of community is formed from affinities among its members and is often channelled into the solution of difficulties. Working in community means reconciling individual desires with the sense of collectivity.

Autobiography and narratives of ourselves

Before discussing the two projects that are the subject of this article - the Sonora network and the investigation of conversation as a method for expressing subjectivity - I would like to mention two works that illustrate different moments in feminists' movements in Brazil. They can help understand how the process involved in the

construction of narratives and listenings became fundamental to reveal the way communities articulate themselves through hidden layers of subjectivity. The first is the book *A aventura de contar-se: feminismos, escrita de si e invenções da subjetividade*³ (2013) by Brazilian historian Margareth Rago. The second is the occupation-book *Explosão Feminista: arte, cultura, política e universidade*⁴ (2018) by Brazilian writer and critic Heloísa Buarque de Holanda. These works are not concerned with listening, but they focus on building communities within feminism in Brazil. However, their approaches have helped me situate my own research within a broader understanding of the policies involved in the act of listening.

Margareth Rago (b.1950) is a lecturer at the Department of History at the University of Campinas, Unicamp. She is the coordinator of the Foucauldian Studies Group and an active scholar in the field of gender studies. In resonance with the foucauldian concept of "arts of existence", Rago's text proposes to investigate how to construct what she has called the "feminist arts of existence". Through interviews, a collection of testimonies and a compilation of autobiographical writings, Rago elaborates a particular method of research: a cartography of the trajectory of seven feminist women who lived during the dictatorship period in Brazil. Rago's proposal was not to simply gather these oral and written accounts in order to tell these women's individual stories, nor to create a possible history of feminism in Brazil. Nor was she willing to develop a particular history of the dictatorship period in the country. Although all these stories cross in their constitution, Rago's proposal was to show how it became possible to cartograph subjectivity itself through these self-narratives.

Heloísa Buarque de Holanda (b.1939) is a writer and professor of critical theory of culture at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. She coordinates the Advanced Contemporary Culture program hosted by the same University, the so-called University of Quebradas project and the Women & University Forum. Her text *Explosão Feminista: arte, cultura, política e universidade* (2018) was conceived through an intergenerational listening process. When approaching a new generation of feminists, the author had to find a way that would live up to the collective and horizontal power of the multiple voices she

³ The adventure of telling itself: feminisms, self-writing and inventions of subjectivity.

⁴ Feminist Explosion: art, culture, politics and university.

wanted to address (voices coming from the streets, from social networks, from the arts). The result was what she called a "book-occupation."

Back in my time, the feminism I lived was different, it was academic, with structure and hierarchy. Current feminism is horizontal, a performative movement with occupations of streets and networks. It is collective, shared, bound by affection, without clear leadership or protagonism. These girls have mastered the technological tool, the Internet, and have managed to make themselves heard. They have managed to make others hear, for example, that 'no means no'. For over a year, I -- an old teacher -- I sat down to talk and learn from these electrifying young women. The [book's] idea was precisely to give voice to them, to contribute to give legitimacy to the importance of their interventions.⁵

Heloisa Buarque de Holanda goes on to analyse the character of political action among younger generations, pointing to its horizontal organization and the incorporation of personal values.

I see clearly the existence of a new political generation, in which feminists are included, with their own strategies, creating forms of organization unknown to me, autonomous, disregarding representative, horizontal mediation, without leadership and protagonism, based on the narratives of themselves, personal experiences that echo collective, valuing ethics more than ideology, insurgency rather than revolution. In short, another generation (2018: 12).

Both Rago's and Holanda's approaches and methodologies contribute to the construction of alternative stories. Each of them brings up new narrative forms, questioning traditional and patriarchal biases usually implicit in biographical records. Their work allow to understand how listening can play a central role in the constitution of contra hegemonic communities. In the following topics, I develop a reflection based on these two authors to situate two projects in which I have been personally involved.

Sonora: musics and feminisms

It is difficult to trace a historiography of a collaborative network like Sonora and this task exceeds the purposes of this text. However, I would like to point out that the discourses that constitute this historiography are constantly changing. The agents of this process seem to arise in different ways, such as personal contingencies, individual paths, but also in the form of organized political movements and specific struggles. In this sense, the emergence of a feeling of identification is particularly important, which sooner or

⁵ Interview to Juliana Sayuri for *Trip Magazine* published in the website *Geledés*: <https://www.geledes.org.br/explosao-feminista-heloisa-buarque-de-hollanda-faz-mapeamento-inedito-dos-novos-feminismos-em-livro/>

later is shared by these agents. In this sense, the emergence of Sonora network is in resonance with a series of varied movements and initiatives that have brought feminism to the centre of the national political debate. It is these agents and contexts that helped to forge the network. These movements are associated with what has been called the fourth wave of feminism and Sonora is inserted in this context.

Sonora: musics and feminisms⁶ is a collaborative network that brings together artists and researchers interested in feminist manifestations within the context of arts. Sonora started its activities in April 2015. At that time, the group had neither a name nor a defined strategy to guide its actions. We just had a shared feeling that we should be together and start something. Over time the group has consolidated and developed a series of regular activities. Sonora currently holds six regular actions: a Study Group, the Voices Series, the Vision Series, the Listening Series, the Experiment Series, and the Live Series. Besides these projects, Sonora has been developing other endeavours such as podcasts, meetings and symposiums. It is also worth to mention its political involvement in specific manifestations.⁷

Although most members of the group belong to the academic community (students, researchers, and educators), Sonora's actions are not part of the regular University activities. Therefore, the group depends on the voluntary engagement of the participants. As one of its members put it,

On the one hand, the work that Sonora does exemplifies several characteristics of feminist organisations as discussed earlier and, also, contributes to the production of feminist musicology and epistemology in the country. On the other hand, they also exemplify a typical example of unpaid labour, characteristic of being in the margins of the Creative Industries, of public funding and in the centre of the capitalist dismissal of non-androcentric work. In both cases, the evidence shows how much labour is done to ensure legitimacy and grounds for creating new (and adapting old) ways of knowing and practicing Sound Art. The network is not a start point but a result of a long journey of (unwaged) work, and time, invested by artists in their careers. (De Michelis, Vanessa. (2019): 9)

Since the first Sonora meetings, the choice of actions and activities were always defined based on the participants' wishes. This characteristic was fundamental for the

⁶ www.sonora.me

⁷ “Out with Temer” Protest, the letter “Children in ANPPOM”, a Thematic Symposium, the Encontro Sonora. More recently we started to create a Radio Sonora (a series of radio programs with works by woman, the Paineel Sonora (2018), the #re_exista campaign (to avoid Bolsonaro's election), to name just a few.

configuration of this network. Participants work through face-to-face meetings that are also transmitted via the Internet. Over the years, a very rich environment of weekly conviviality was created. Working within a community means reconciling individual desires with a sense of collectivity. Thus we were able to promote a political exercise of listening, speaking, and welcoming.

This network has also carried out other projects focused on the mapping and study of Brazilian female-identified artists who work with music and sound. These projects are oriented towards an ethical mode of action that favours listening, the exchange of knowledge and the constitution of spaces for the emergence of subjectivities and affectivities. These actions aim to enable someone to tell him or herself, valuing personal memories and trajectories, and unveiling individual and collective poetics.

The conversation as a method for the self-listening emergence

In 2016, starting from a casual conversation between two friends we began a research process in which conversation itself became an object of investigation. The conversations took place between me and a colleague of mine, composer and researcher Valeria Bonafé. At that time, I had just become a mother and she was looking for a better job. Initially, we intended to use conversations to support each other. Gradually, we also realized that conversation could become a method for exploring our artistic productions. Eventually it developed into practical-theoretical research in which conversation itself was the main focus of study.

We performed several exercises that involved recording long periods of conversation that were later transcribed and analysed. This work was summarized in a paper entitled *La conversación como método para la emergencia de la escucha de sí* (2019). In that work we set forth an alternative method for presentation, reflection and analysis of artistic works. In the first part, we present the method –the *conversation*– and some reflections on it. Understood as a privileged space for the investigation of the *poetics of the self*, *conversation* is taken here not only as a medium for talking about an artistic work, but also as a place for the expression of ethical, aesthetic and political marks. In the second part we develop the exercise of conversation as a method for analysing two musical works created in 2015: *de perto* [closely], a work by my own, and

Trajetórias [Trajectories], by Valéria Bonafé. Both works emphasize a habitual regime of listening and provoke, each in its own way, what we call *displacements of listening*. Both for the elaboration of the method and in the discussion of the works, we have assembled a common vocabulary in which concepts such as subjectivity and otherness, habitual and unusual, familiar and the uncanny, were experienced. The article constitutes an initial exercise that could be understood as a *cartography of subjectivity* in the field of artistic creation.

As we state in the paper:

Listening has acquired a particular relevance in this process, not only because it appears as an object to be investigated from the chosen pieces, but also because it has proved to be a fundamental instance of our methodology. Listening was involved in two moments: during and after these initial conversations. During the conversation, real-time listening created a potential for *presence* that eventually modulated the *perception of the self*. After the conversation, listening in deferred time opened up a distinct listening dimension: an aural reunion not only with the narrative of the other, but again with listening to self as subject-listener-agent of a conversation. (2019: 52)

The conversation allows the subject to position her/himself to listen to someone or something else, and to assume marks. It opens a research field in resonance with a particular artistic practice. It also builds a critical approach to the role that objectivity and neutrality usually occupy in the discourses about art making, especially within the academic field.

During our conversation sessions, listening - to oneself and to the other - is taken as an exercise of care and access to the self. Through the exercise of self-listening, it becomes possible to experiment with other ways of inscribing one's own subjectivity, in the processes of musical creation and in the narratives we elaborate on them.

Difference and otherness

By presenting these two endeavours I seek to connect the idea of community -- as a space for the establishment of differences -- and the act of listening as an exercise of otherness. *Difference* and *otherness* are constant components in both mentioned instances. On one hand, Sonora constituted a significant network focused on feminists issues related to music, in which various actions establish a space for speech and listening based on collective articulations. Sonora promotes a sense of community from the regular

and extensive coexistence of its participants incorporating an ethical dimension of listening.

On the other hand, the project developed in collaboration with Valéria Bonafé explores conversation as an alternative method for presenting and discussing artistic works. For about a year, we talked regularly about our artistic and academic practices and about everything surrounding them. Eventually, we began to *talk* about the *conversation itself*, not as something settled and crystallized in the past, but as a process that we should reflect on as we experienced it.

Although they may seem too distinct to be placed side by side, these two projects should be understood as attempts to incorporate *difference* from *otherness* and to use the potentiality of collective instances to let subjectivities arise. I realized that in the extended time of *conviviality* (living together) and *conversation*, women perceive, express, visualize and understand themselves in relation to what make them invisible, but also in relation to their potentialities and their singularities. Both works propose an exercise of listening as action: it is a way to systematize the processes of listening to the other, listening to oneself, and listening to places. Ultimately, I am referring to an attempt to listen to my own listenings.

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