

# Towards gendered listening

## Questions, exercises and reflections.

-- Anna Raimondo --

Dear Listener,

Over the last ten years, I have formulated the following question through my artistic work and my daily life: what would be the epistemological, political and aesthetic implications of shifting from a gendered perspective to a gendered listening?

I am now sharing this question with you.

In order to think about a possible answer, I will ask you a few personal questions and propose some listening exercises.

You can, if you would like to, send me your questions, answers, and personal thoughts about the following reading/listening process.

Please feel free to write me at:

[info@annaraimondo.com](mailto:info@annaraimondo.com).

If you decide to do so, I kindly ask you to indicate the following sentence in the subject line of your email: "I am not making this because I know something. I make this because I don't know something and I want to learn what is possible."<sup>1</sup>

I am listening forward,

Anna Raimondo

## Question n.1:

### Where do we listen from?

Michel Foucault claimed the importance of making our place(s) of enunciation transparent when we interpret the world and when we produce knowledge in the question: “Where do you speak from?”<sup>2</sup>

By paraphrasing him, I would like you to reflect on our social, cultural, and gendered position as listeners.

### Where do you listen from?    Where do I listen from?

To help you answer this question, please start by replying to the following previous ones:

Do you define yourself as a man, a woman, a trans, queer or other?

Do you define yourself as black, white, or other?

Where do you come from?

Where do you live?

Are you a legal citizen?

Which social class do you belong to?

It is now my turn to answer the question I asked you. You are now probably wondering: Where do I listen from? I wish to answer this question from my own personal point of view as a feminist by referring specifically to the concept “situated knowledge”<sup>3</sup>, as conceived by Donna Haraway as a political and epistemological strategy, as a way (a need) to negotiate with the doctrine of “masculinist objectivity”.<sup>4</sup>

I define myself as a cis, white, European, Mediterranean woman. In more concrete terms, I am Anna Raimondo, born in Italy in 1981, based in Brussels since 2014, and feminist since 2008. I am able to speak different languages while fully embracing my very strong Italian accent. I am devoted to practices related to listening. You can define me as a sound and radio artist, a performer, a PhD student, a feminist daughter, a feminist partner, a feminist sister, a feminist friend, a feminist citizen and occasionally a writer and curator, too. The choice is up to you... When I listen, I try to be aware of my privileges and my fights. In resonance with the political claims, made by Françoise Vergès,<sup>5</sup> to decolonise white feminism, I feel an ethical need to look for a constant dialogue with other women, to recognise their fights, which could be different from mine. As an artist and radio activist, my concern is

Could you think of at least one political ideology you feel personally motivated by?

Are you a religious person?

Pick one or more social roles that define you in the best way possible:

Choose one or more social roles that others use to define you but you don't feel comfortable with:

Pick one or more adjectives about yourself you identify with:

to create short cuts between what/who we are expected to hear in different places and, more generally, to expand the contexts of listening. In a radio programme or in urban spaces, in a museum, a gallery, or in a taxi, I never give voice but I try my best to spread the microphone to as many different people as I can.

Ever since I started making radio programmes, clearly claiming my position as a feminist activist, people have been telling me that I was embodying a feminist perspective. These days, I want to explore how my gendered position **also** impacts the way I listen. Within time and in different contexts (domestic, professional, activist and artistic), I wonder how the construct of gender conditions the way I listen and how I produce listening in dialogue with my daily feminism(s).

Paraphrasing the author Donna Haraway, "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge (...) and it allows us to become answerable for what we learn how ~~to see~~ to listen."<sup>6</sup> I wonder how I learnt to listen, what the patriarchal system wants me to listen to? Could I, a feminist sound artist, help to deconstruct a gender binarism? Do I have « feminist ears» too? If so, what could I do with them?

## Question n.2: What is listening to you?

Write your first thoughts about what listening means to you. Do so without thinking too much. It can be a list of words, a series of actions, a series of adjectives, or situations. Write until you have filled the page.

## What is listening to me?

Listening is « to expose one's curiosity to the other ». <sup>7</sup>

« It is a condition of vulnerability in which we accept to be the « doubtful I ». <sup>8</sup>

Listening is not a practice of self-identification or reconciliation and consensus, but a practice in which making « oneself the background in order to foreground the position of the other ». <sup>9</sup>

Listening creates a space « where to agree to disagree ». <sup>10</sup>

To me, listening is to conceive the political and aesthetic possibility to unlearn, to deconstruct fixed categories and expose oneself to the vulnerability, opportunity and co- production of the not yet.

Listening is always an active practice. Listening makes me feel alive. Listening is a de-stabilising process that can sometimes give me vertigo.

## Meta-listening Exercises:

### Let us listen while speculating about the way we listen!

Please find a silent spot, ideally alone or with others who are doing the same exercises. You will need an internet connection, headphones or speakers, and a screen (a telephone, tablet) to scan the QR codes. Once the QR code is scanned, close the screen and close your eyes.

#### Exercise n.1: Listening to a drum player...

Imagine the skin, the muscles, and the arms of the mysterious drummer. Give this person a face and a body. Who are you imagining?



#### Exercise n.2: Listening to a voice...

Imagine the skin, the age, and the hair of this mysterious voice. Again, give this person a face and a body. Who are you imagining? In the first exercise, you listened to the piece titled « Drum Solo » by the American jazz and rock drummer Cindy Blackman Santana.<sup>12</sup> In the second exercise, you listened to the Moroccan musician Meriem Said, a woman who performs on the Place Jema el Fnaa<sup>13</sup> in Marrakech under the name of Said; a male name given to her by the other musicians who perform on the square and are traditionally all men. She is a woman in private who takes on the identity of a man as soon as she performs in the public space. Her voice, I think, synthesises in a very powerful way the gender complexity.



**Reflections on the way we listen:  
How does our listening confirm our canons and our  
ideologies?**

When we are listening, we don't have clear references. We form what we hear. We belong to the same fluid and ephemeral space-time continuum. We become doubtful subjects.<sup>11</sup> In this condition, we have the possibility to either climb out of our a priori or activate our subjectivities, thereby giving new political and aesthetic forms to the heard. In so doing, we can reconfigure the real and articulate new questions rather than confirm, yet again, existing social, and often patriarchal, expectations. This refers to Judith Butler's claims that gender is a performative, ritual daily construction that achieves its naturalisation in the context of a body.<sup>14</sup> Focusing on listening, could we speak about it as a bodily gender performative practice where we repeat our frames of interpretations while trying to interpret the heard? Jumping out of the regime of the visible, or short cutting it through sound and the act of listening, we have the possibility to transgress the social expectations and create a gap in our daily gender performances. But what do I mean by transgression? « Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes. »<sup>15</sup>

According to Foucault, it refers to that which can uncover the limit that has been crossed. Hence, my hypothesis posits that the limits of patriarchal structures and its norms are susceptible to being challenged and exposed through the medium of sound and the process of gendered listening. How and when could sound transgress patriarchal structures and its implicit norms? How can gender listening encourage and reveal this process? Even if it can provoke, irritate and sometimes be illegal, transgressive sound (a voice, a real or fictional sound, a noise...) is not just a physical material, it is also a social medium through which to imagine a feminist possibility, to practically establish multiple sites of empowerment. In this way, listening could then contribute to produce the not yet. This could be quite revolutionary. So, while a group of Danish start-ups (Copenhagen Pride, Virtue, Equal AI, Koalition Interactive & thirtysoundsgood) in 2019 invented the first synthetic genderless AI voice assistant called 'Q',<sup>16</sup> to tackle gender stereotypes, I think that a genderless voice alone cannot defuse sexist reactions to women voices. I posit rather that

the very act of listening in and of itself provides a more effective way to counter sexism because it could take into account the complexities, the singular sites of enunciation, the unicity of each voice.

**As a kind of conclusion:  
«Sound makes the possible thinkable in  
concrete terms and invites the impossible  
to reinvigorate a political awareness and  
imagination »<sup>17</sup>**

I would like to conclude my intervention in the relation between listening and gender by mentioning the work of German artist Lorenza Böttner, and specifically her performance inspired by the Venus de Milo.<sup>18</sup>

In this piece, she performed as a trans armless woman, embodying the statue that represents the canon of women beauty. She stood on a podium, immobile and mute for a while, painted in white, performing a mimesis. The punctum of this performance was the moment in which, jumping down from the stage, she asked the audience: « What do you think if art came to life? » She gave voice to a statue that represents the ideal of feminine beauty, the woman-object, the represented body. In her work and in this particular performance, Lorenza has invented another body, another artistic practice of the gender, producing what could be understood as « gendered listening ». By embodying a canon of traditional feminine beauty, when the artist transformed herself in this sculpture, she gave birth to a radical critique of the role of art in the social normalisation of the white, cis-gender, valid and heterosexual body and voice. Lorenza Böttner injected a voice, her voice, a transgender voice, to this statue. I think this is a very complex and beautiful example of how sonic dimension can add and/ or short circuit the visible; how it can activate a listening that produces a new site of enunciation and a new production of meanings.

## Notes

- 1 Voegelin, Salomé. *Sonic Possible worlds*. London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, 1.
- 2 Foucault, Michel. *Language, counter-memory, practice. Selected essays and interviews by Michel Foucault*. Eds. Donald F. Bouchard. New York: Cornell University press, 1977.
- 3 Haraway, Donna. *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. *Feminist Studies* 14 :3 (1988) : 575.
- 4 Haraway, Donna. *Situated Knowledges*, ibid. 5 Vergès, Françoise. *Un féminisme décolonial*. Paris: La fabrique édition, 2019.
- 6 Haraway, Donna. *Situated Knowledges*, ibid.
- 7 LaBelle, Brandon. *Manual for the construction of a sound as a device to elaborate social connection*. Berlin: Errant Bodies Press, 2010, 9.
- 8 Voegelin, Salomé. *Sonic Possible worlds*. London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, 131. Blickford, Susan in *Ultra-red, The invisible seminar*. Bergen: Faculty of fine art, music and design, University of Bergen, 2017, 15
- 10 Blickford, Susan in *Ultra-red, The invisible seminar*, ibid.
- 11 Blackman Santana, Cindy. *Solo drum*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xsfg9SRgwEw> (Accessed February 1, 2020)
- 12 The Jemaa el-Fnaa is Marrakech's main square and the most important part of the medina of the Moroccan city. Here, inhabitants and tourists gather both during the day and night to have something to observe the various local artistic and musical shows taking place.
- 13 Voegelin, Salomé. *Sonic Possible worlds*. London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- 14 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London/New York : Routledge, 1990.
- 15 Foucault, Michel. *Language, counter-memory, practice. Selected essays and interviews by Michel Foucault*. Eds. Donald F. Bouchard. New York: Cornell University press, 1977, 34.
- 16 *Genderless AI voice assistant called 'Q voice'*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6g5KPkZjLU> (Accessed February 1, 2020).
- 17 Voegelin, Salomé. *Sonic Possible worlds*. London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- 18 Böttner, Lorenza. *Venus de Milo* in Lorenza Böttner' retrospective *Réquiem por la norma* in La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, Barcelona, curated by Paul B. Preciado, January-February 2019 : <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/lavirreina/en/exhibitions/requiem-norm/236> (Accessed February 1, 2020).