

# Listening to shadows skoosh

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*Crossing the Rackety Bridge Between Tantric Poetics and Black Study* is a collection of essays and poems in progress that attempt to bring together various strands of research. It opens with a discussion of Fred Moten's poem *hand up to your ear*, focussing on his image of a 'listening walk':

Come take a listening walk and admire your hand twisting. The listening is in watching how you move to touch in sounding, brushing up against your friend, to see how his position sounds to make the music we are making by moving the people moving around. [...] Do something with the sound like it's your friend [...].

Make a mix in violent rubbing till your work is gone. [...] This is how to make little works just walking down the street, collaborating with the hand you brush [...].<sup>[1]</sup>

Moten emphasises the sounds of sociality: the collaboration via improvisation that is paying close attention to your friend as you talk, creating music in moving together; walking down the street without getting anywhere

except getting lost in twisting, mixing, brushing hands. Moten sends me all over the place: to Catherine Clément's writing on syncope, and her description of the Tantric practice of loss of consciousness as a 'stroll outside the body';<sup>[2]</sup> and to Roland Barthes's fantasy of Living-Alone and Living-Together simultaneously, a social idiorrhymy according to which we might walk at our own pace and walk together, at the same time.<sup>[3]</sup> In a generous response to a section of this project, Will Montgomery sent me towards Hildegard Westerkamp and her soundscape compositions, which I heard as complementary to Moten's poetry in terms of listening to and recording the music that already exists; the rhythms, arrangements, and mixes of our everyday environments and worldwide entanglements.

After writing a sequence of poems in which I imagined 'crossing the rackety bridge' alongside Alice Coltrane, I decided to keep walking and to compose a series of speculative soundwalks. This decision was made in March 2020, in the context of a global pandemic and lockdown in the UK, and frequent admonitions to stay in to keep others safe. If I couldn't walk outside, I could walk in poetry, in which case, why stick to pavements, paths, fields, and coasts – why not walk through spirals, caves, divine ears, wormholes, vasculature? I didn't realise at the time, but the lockdown enabled me to sidestep the usual issues of walking as a body, in particular as a racialised and gendered body in the city or the countryside. To some extent, in these speculative soundwalks I leave my body behind. But – lockdown or not – many people cannot sidestep these issues and are denied the option of leaving their bodies behind. Walking as a racialised and gendered body is a matter of life and death for many people, as Black Lives Matter makes explicit, as sex workers resisting the so-called 'Walking While Trans' ban in New York make explicit. In her talk on 'Militant Care: Limits and Horizons', broadcast live on YouTube in May

2020, Hannah Black outlines a vision of utopia that is ‘a movement for homes’, centred around the question: ‘how are we going to make the world a home’? Black modifies: how are we going to make the world ‘a home that’s a safer place for wandering’?<sup>[4]</sup> She references Marge Piercy’s feminist sci-fi novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), which depicts a future free from racism, patriarchy, and violence, to the bewilderment of its protagonist Connie: ‘She imagined herself taking a walk at night under the stars. She imagined herself ambling down a country road and feeling only mild curiosity when she saw three men coming toward her.’<sup>[5]</sup> In ‘*Dichtung und Science Fiction*’ (1982), Samuel R. Delany analyses how a small detail in a novel – such as the ability to take a relaxing walk at night – can signify the social and materialist relations of its world – a feminist utopia.<sup>[6]</sup>

Now, let’s take a listening walk...

Listen: *Interruptions / Disruptions* (2020). Read its [counterpart](#).

Listen: *A Basket Woven of One’s Own Hair* (2020). Read its [counterpart](#).

I think of this commentary as the poems’ shadow, what they might sound like refracted through a mirror universe. This notion is mostly inspired by *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, but it also conveys how I felt when I watched Matt Parker’s art/doc series *The People’s Cloud* and learned about the history of submarine telecommunications cables.<sup>[7]</sup> As Parker explains, ‘not only is a data cable encased in an airtight steel and rubber manifold, it is buried deep on the ocean floor, only interconnecting with other networks that form the Internet at cable landing spokes, on remote, military controlled islands.’<sup>[8]</sup> Thinking about all those phone-calls, emails, chats taking place under the sea makes me feel as if I’ve been turned upside down, dunked, and expected to carry on with the same mission despite everything.

Hovering in and out of dimensions and substances, listening becomes feeding over water in Patrick Farmer’s description: ‘Pressure waves pass through the middle ear, disappearing into cochlea ripples like swifts gorging on insects of surface tension.’<sup>[9]</sup> Think of the line at the bottom of the page that divides the main body of text from its footnotes, the poem’s references like an all-powerful energy source that you have to bend down and squint to detect. In his notes on commentary as a mode of writing, Robert Kiely discusses humility and cosmological enterprise – one tries to read, study, analyse a text; to exhaust that text’s potential for offering references and interpretations; and to admit defeat before language’s intertextual infinity.

*A note on compulsively quoting others?*

*Sounds travelling through tunnels, the sonic continuum or wormhole – expand this notion*

I sometimes think of poems as carrier bags (after Ursula K. Le Guin), where I can collect and catalogue things that I’ve read, heard, and wished to remember or discuss with friends. In collecting and cataloguing these things, be they interesting words, or artworks, or scientific theories, or social situations, I might start to understand them. Or, as is often the case, poetic license inadvertently enables fictionalisation, mystification, and quackery. The piece of information that I include to ground the poem sends me freewheeling, for example, from telecommunication cables to a submarine dinner party, or from sound waves to the far-out theory of ‘mindons’ – ‘subtle particles of mind-stuff’ – that would enable telepathy if only we could channel them.<sup>[10]</sup> As Genly Ai tells Estraven in Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1967), ‘except in the case of the born Sensitive, the capacity [for mindspeech], though it has a physiological basis, is a psychological one, a product of culture, a side-effect of the use of the mind.’<sup>[11]</sup> My eagerness to consider the

politics of listening historically and scientifically threatens to tip me into a dream of relation, a vision of utopia. In 'An Intense Engagement With Everything', whose title references Moten, Patrick Farmer reflects on listening in terms of elective affinity: 'Thinking, this is like that, this corresponds to that, this is equivalent to that, this is that. A vibration.'<sup>[12]</sup> I'm not talking about similarity but about sending and the feeling of being sent.

*Elaborate on making similar vs sending (Moten? Correspondences?) You send me vs you will be assimilated...*

*Tantric metaphysics of sound – mention the theory of non-vibration via oscillation between existence and nonexistence in the Tao of Physics*

For example, the feeling of being sent between microorganisms and whales. In an episode of the podcast *Invisibilia*, marine microbiologist David Gruber talks about falling in love with pond scum, and about how hard it can be to share that love when most people prefer what he terms 'charismatic megafauna' such as whales.<sup>[13]</sup> Love aside, in terms of ecological crisis, the fact that people can see, hear, and relate to whales doesn't help to save them. Whales can sing in bestselling albums like *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1970) (produced by marine biologist Roger Payne) and star in blockbuster movies like *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), as their populations are threatened by noise pollution and the destruction of marine ecosystems. I am skimming the surface of this argument without irony when I say that scientists and feminists know well the limits of a politics based solely on visibility, audibility, and representation. This argument depends on imperceptible movements, connections, and co-voicings.

*Elaborate on 'this argument'...*

*Surface – discuss surface translations and homophony (surface more than surface in*

*poetry); theories of onomatopoeia; slippage between homophony and hydrophones?*

I want to write something that can send people between sounds, between scales: just over the surface of sentiment and down deep into the unknown; something that might set us vibrating between being and nonbeing, or the physics and metaphysics of sound. This commentary admits failure from the outset, from a combination of compulsions to over-explain (an especially bad habit for a poet), to contextualise, and to acknowledge every player in the orchestra most gratefully, through naming and quotation. In Le Guin's rendering of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* (1997), she writes:

To order, to govern,  
is to begin naming;  
when names proliferate  
it's time to stop.

[...]

The Way in the world  
is as a stream to a valley,  
a river to the sea.<sup>[14]</sup>

Thus, this commentary is concluded before having started, as if it never happened, now that you're back in the universe and no record shows you left.

*Conclusion: End like a bad episode of Star Trek, where a character from the mirror universe slips into the home universe without anyone noticing, and everything goes on as usual, despite the massive temporal disruption.*

*Other ideas:*

*Discuss Dhanveer Singh Brar's writing on the*

*racial policing of the experimental*

*Discuss Sarah Hayden's writing on 'teacher voice' and the acousmatic in pedagogical poetic environments*

*Discuss Jackie Wang's writing on oceanic [communist] feeling and listening*

*Elaborate on my resistance to 'aboutness' as a 'diaspora poet', which means making a noise in poetry that disrupts the message/information of the poem (in fact, the noise is the information...)*

**Cite this piece as:**

Ramayya, Nisha. 'Listening to shadows skoosh'. *The Contemporary Journal* 3 (February 02, 2021). [\[https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/sonic-continuum/listening-to-shadows-skoosh\]](https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/sonic-continuum/listening-to-shadows-skoosh).

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[1]

Fred Moten, *The Little Edges* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2015), 13–14.

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[2]

Catherine Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 159.

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[3]

Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

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[4]

Hannah Black, 'Militant Care: Limits and Horizons', 29 April, 2020, *The Lab*, 35:00, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbL\\_Pvg1ynQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbL_Pvg1ynQ).

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[5]

Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (Robinsdale: Fawcett, 1976).

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[6]

Samuel R. Delany, *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the*

*Language of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 166–167.

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[7]

Matt Parker, *The People's Cloud* (2016), <https://thepeoplescloud.org>

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[8]

Matt Parker, *Vibrating the Web: Sonospheric Studies of Media Infrastructure Ecologies* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Arts London, 2019), 102.

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[9]

Patrick Farmer, 'Soft Doors', *Zenopress*, 24 November, 2020, <https://www.zenopress.com/essays/soft-doors-patrick-farmer>.

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[10]

V. A. Firsoff cited in Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna, *The Tantric Way: Art, Science, Ritual* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 97.

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[11]

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: Ace Books, 1987), 212.

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[12]

Patrick Farmer, 'An Intense Engagement with Everything' (unpublished essay, 2020).

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[13]

Alex Spiegel, 'Two Heartbeats A Minute', *Invisibilia*, 10 April, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/809336135>.

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[14]

Ursula K. Le Guin, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way* (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1997), 39.