

journal of visual culture



Sound Pools: Cultural Polyphony in Sound and Music

Camille Norment

Abstract

This article explores some of the ‘texts that have fled’ from cultivated sound and music through the conscious and unconscious strategic signifiers employed by musicians, shamans and artists. Written from the perspective of an artist with a music, performance and literary background, the author contemplates the workings of sound upon the mind and the body as explored in music, science, magic and art. These explorations are offered within a framework of sound spaces or ‘audiotopias’ – sound as physical, psychological and cultural places. Flowing centrally through the text is an argument that likens cultural polyphony in sound and music to genetic diversity in human evolution – the expansion of the gene pool. Recent theories in neuroscience claim that the creation and use of music by early humans is adaptive rather than a byproduct of language as was accepted by previous scientific arguments. The collection of all possible differences would constitute the sonic utopia, a task never to be exhausted and never complete. The author discusses how these notions manifest themselves in her own artistic production strategies as well as several other related socio-cultural examples.

Keywords

audiotopia • diversity • feedback • heterotopia • lullaby • transcendence
• voice

Where, I wonder ... is the shadow of the presence from which the text has fled? (Toni Morrison, 1989: 12)

There is a place, we’re told, that quiets the soul. Promising to engulf us in a bliss of harmony, it is the mind-sight of misguided dreamers, the promise of politicians, the place of perfection described by religions. One place, one voice,

journal of visual culture [<http://vcu.sagepub.com>]

SAGE Publications (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington DC)

Copyright © The Author(s), 2011. Reprints and permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalspermissions.nav>

Vol 10(2): 189–197 DOI 10.1177/1470412911402891

familiar and undisturbed, it is still and timeless and, as such, outside history itself. This place is 'utopia', a non-place, an ideal that cannot, by definition, exist as a physical location. Rather, it can only exist as a fabricated fantasy of the mind that *references* real social interaction. Utopia is fundamentally unreal.

We live in a material realm and must reconcile such ideals with the physicality of ourselves and the concreteness of our experiences. While a utopia is a space belonging only to the imaginary, a 'heterotopia' is a concrete and physical place. It is a place of *difference*, defined by the normalizing values and actions of the society that creates it. It is a space for placing 'other' people and activities, and is physically located 'elsewhere' in relation to society. It is the brothel, the jail cell, the summer camp, the honeymoon, or asylum. Alleys and nightclubs, washrooms, and segregated societies, these are the real, physical spaces of heterotopia.

Foucault (1986) cites one analogous physical plane that captures the body and physical space within a glass. Through its reflection, the mirror transports the viewer 'over there' into the unreal space. It makes visible in the glass, the body and space that is absent and, as such, the *reflection* in the mirror becomes a utopia. Yet, the mirror itself *does* exist and counteracts the position that the body occupies in reality, thus placing the body itself in a heterotopia with respect to its reflection:

It makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived, it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (p. 24)

The *Driftglass* series (2001–4) embodies this complication between real space, the physical body, presence and absence. When approaching at an angle, the on-looker sees an object hanging on a wall and registers it simply as a mirror. Passing by, most people turn instinctively to catch a glimpse of themselves in the mirror. It is at that this point that they become fully conscious of their act and stop in confusion. 'Where am I?' they wonder – their reflection appears as only a vague, ghost-like blur. They find themselves essentially absent from their own utopia. 'But I *am here*', thinks the baffled viewer, confirming his or her presence in the physical space by the recognition of that space reflected in the glass. All appears clearly reflected in the glass's image except for the body of the viewer itself. When approaching the mirror to get a better look, a sound reminiscent of microphone feedback emanates from the mirror and increases in volume as the body moves closer to the mirror. It is a reverberating sound that pierces like an alert, with layers of overtones swaying between consonance and dissonance that recall the sonic icons of magic spells. Negated by the image, it is the sound that affirms the body; the sound that acknowledges the presence of something real. When two or more people stand in front of the glass, each is reflected as a phantom amid clear visions of each other. Through this new gaze, each takes for his or her own, the reflected identity of the other; utopia is refashioned as difference. *There is something in the mirror, but it might not be you.*

Music, or the sonic, has a longstanding relationship with ritualistic practices of spiritual transcendence and possession of the body by supernatural forces. It has been thought of as a medium for communicating with the gods, equally as immaterial, equally as powerful. Appropriately used, sound would allow the spirit to leave the body and disappear into the utopia of the mind in the hope that it might alter, for the better, the incarnated body.

This notion, like a chant, conjures up the spirit of Sun Ra, a persona who spoke, practised and embodied the complex conflation of space, utopian non-place and heterotopic reality through his experimental music and philosophy on how to transcend life on earth. 'Space is the place', preached Sun Ra. 'The right note or chord can transport you into space using music and energy flow. And the listeners can travel along with you' (Foucault, 1986: 175). In the cosmos, we would find utopia and, through his music, we would travel along the path to get there.

Born in 1914 in Alabama, Sun Ra was forced to occupy the physical and psychological heterotopia of segregation and an overtly racist society. For many generations of black Americans, psychological torment and physical suffering had paved the way for attempts at emotional and psychological escape. From this evolved 'the Spiritual', music that channelled life's hardships into a communication with God, a music that, at one time, was inseparable from 'the blues'. There was a better place beyond the physical world but, as long as they remained alive, they were obliged to seek transcendence through song.

Plagued by the identity projected upon him by American society and seeking to associate himself with higher principles and objectives of mankind, Herman Blount went through many name changes before finally resting upon Sun Ra. The Sun was energy, consciousness and enlightenment, and 'Ra' he said, 'is the oldest name known by man to signify an extra-terrestrial being ... It's my vibrational name' (Szwed, 1998: 86). Using this name, he acknowledges the primal essence of sound, one that resonates like a mantra. In a name, in a sound, he found power.

Sun Ra fashioned himself as a prophet and sometimes even a god whose mission was to enlighten and elevate humanity through music. His philosophy of the cosmos combined the ancient religions of Egypt with Christianity, Judaism and Islam, numerology, etymology and a vast 'self taught' knowledge of history and philosophy. For Sun Ra, 'outer space' as well as the future, like music, constituted a utopia because it contained all possibilities; it was the space of the imaginary until consumed by the actuality of time, place and experience.

Sun Ra's 'ocean of sound' sought to create a utopia in the midst of the heterotopia of his reality. Music had to fight the chaos that surrounded him with a complexity of its own, and those who could learn its secret language could travel to new worlds – at least for a while.

Black poet Jean Toomer (1993[1937]) wrote: 'Music, however, though able to transport you into a different world, cannot keep you in that different world ... Once it is over for the time being, you slide back into this world' (p. 276). Once

the sound has ended, however long it lingers before fading away, so ends the place of escape that music constructed. We are left with the physical body in a physical world with concrete experiences and social identities. Sun Ra's utopia was typically created from and reinforced by the vast heterotopic networks of specific places, social identities and lived experiences. In spite of this and his deliberate reference to specific cultures, he sought to create music whose listening experience would be used to elevate societies beyond their obsessions with difference; ironically, while Sun Ra sought to promote music as a language of the universal, the music he created was itself born from difference. He sought to produce an objective music that would take the inner spaces of the mind into a utopic outer space, and yet produced a music that also pointed directly to the marginalizing experiences that created it in the concrete reality.

One could consider the inner spaces created by the music listening experience as 'audiotopias'. In *Audiotopia* (2005), Josh Kun explores 'music, race, and America' in a discussion that re-defines the musical utopian space as *not* derivative of notions of univocality, but rather of acknowledgement and acceptance of the heterotopic worlds that actually construct it. The audiotopia is a world, however intangible, that maps the concrete places that went into the building of that space. As a convergence of sound, space and identity, it is a 'node in a complex network' of cultures, genders, experiences and individual identities that intersect and are momentarily contained within the world of the sound (p. 3). Referencing conventional practices of cultural studies in the US, Kun deems the 'unification through sameness' attitudes towards music as a necessary tool of the nation-state towards assimilation, of 'making the unlike, "like", of dissolving differences into a constructed commonality of experience, history, and beliefs, of making family out of strangers' (p. 11). The audiotopia is a 'pool of difference', the meeting place where the heterotopic becomes utopic, but a utopia that is alive, moving and ever changing in its embrace of *difference* as construction blocks of the ideal. The richest utopia is built not by omission, but rather through the inclusion of all possible differences, a continuous process which cannot be completed and thus can never really exist.

'Pools of difference' is a concept that has an interesting relation to human evolution and to the species' quest for survival through diversity. A large gene pool indicates extensive genetic diversity, which is associated with robust populations that can survive bouts of intense selection. Meanwhile, low genetic diversity can cause reduced biological fitness and an increased chance of extinction. The 'attraction to opposites' adage has a fundamental relation to the evolutionary process, but this instinct has been and is often suppressed as a threat to socio-cultural norms that aim to promote conformity and preserve the values assigned to socio-cultural groupings.

As we know, the role that sound and music play in this quest for diversity begins in the womb where sound provides the first and most developed sensory interaction with the external world. In this early stage, the sound of the mother's voice becomes associated with 'sameness' and all other sounds are subsequently processed in the differentiation between 'self' and 'other'. Later, the child's need to distinguish between the sonic signifiers of 'safety' vs 'danger' soon give way to

the developmental need for curiosity, discovery and his or her attraction to new things.

Archaeological artifacts long ago revealed that music predated agriculture in the history of our species but, until recently, most prominent scientists believed music to have developed as an artifact of language rather than as a necessary attribute of human development. The formation of language was considered 'adaptive' and music was seen to be only a 'spandrel', a functional by-product of language without any innate adaptive purpose. Music stimulated areas of the brain such as language ability, emotional reaction and motor control; it was pleasurable so it didn't die out. But, according to Harvard University's cognitive scientist Steven Pinker in *The Language Instinct*, 'as far as biological cause and effect are concerned, music is useless' (Levitin, 2007: 249).

The use of music in social bonding and cohesion, the defining of cultural spaces and communication with the supernatural were recognized as qualifiers to music's importance to early humans. However, Darwin also believed that musical development was associated with natural selection as part of human or paleohuman mating rituals:

Musical notes and rhythm were first acquired by the male or female progenitors of mankind for the sake of charming the opposite sex. Thus musical tones became firmly associated with some of the strongest passions an animal is capable of feeling, and are consequently used instinctively. (Levitin, 2007: 251)

This theory, though intuitively making sense, was not supportable until the recent mappings of human brain functions.

Due in part to advancements in neuro-psychology, early human music is now more widely theorized to have been used as a tool to attract the opposite sex, a 'peacock's tail' representing stamina, health and creativity. It was an indicator of intelligence and the ability to produce something different. From what scientists have learned about memory and music, today's 'earworm' may have initially served as the 'wooing song' of a paleohuman suitor, repeating itself over and over again in the mind of the desired so she would be well disposed to him upon his return. The association of music with reproductive ritual has an analogue in other species. Several bird species choose their mates on their creative ability to produce difference from a basic repertoire of sounds: 'the male who sings the most elaborate songs is typically the one who is most successful at mating' (Levitin, 2007: 265). For the average human, the peak reproductive years also parallel the peak of musical discovery, experimentation and obsession. Since the musical tendencies during these years are subject to following patterns of independence, or rebellion, they form an appropriate soundtrack to a body on the threshold of 'danger and delight', a body seeking to define itself through becoming and difference.

In 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken', Toni Morrison (1989) asks: 'Where, I wonder ... is the shadow of the presence from which the text has fled?' (p. 12). The

context of this quote was a discussion of the absence of marginalized cultures from the 'canons' of US literature. For me, it recalls the shadows of presence that inhabit the spaces of sound and music themselves – the audiotopic space. In much of my work, this notion of the shadow, trace or phantom has had a prominent conceptual and aesthetic realization. The unstilled, fleeing sounds, though they may be cast with a new text, are a haunting of cultural pasts and presents.

I reference this type of haunting in works such as *Driveby* (2007–8). In this series, disembodied presence is explored specifically through the illusion of the 'drive-by' car. The 'invisible' installation is based on the illusion that a car is driving past outside, pulsing with the heavy bass from an on-board speaker system. First, one feels the vibrations through the floor and architecture of the site. This heart-beat rhythm, as typically filtered through the shaking metal of the car body itself, increases as the phantom car approaches, and moves across the wall with a tactile trail of vibrating walls and floor. As the rhythm is felt by the body, the audio seeks to tease a collective cultural memory on the threshold of comprehension and then slips away.

Connotations of the classic 'drive-by' bring to mind divergent imagery ranging from 'car pimping' and cruising to tension-filled imagery of drive-by shootings performed by 'gangsters' as well as the military. The work was inspired in part by the reporting of a war survivor who described the most frightening part of an attack as feeling the approach of the tanks before they could actually be seen or heard.

In *Driveby*, the sonic experience is captured and localized almost like a memory, a sonic keepsake alive with both a collective history and the tension of personal anticipation and, as such, offers a fleeting auditory glimpse into a densely layered cultural space. So many stories exist in a few seconds of abstract rhythm.

Swing Low is an audio sculpture work derived from the old 'Negro' spiritual, 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'. Through a dynamic sound-focusing system, the sound 'swings' back and forth across the room like a pendulum – or lynch rope. The disembodied and elusive voices present in the audio take on a phantom-like presence as they physically swing through the actual body of the listener. The voices momentarily take possession of and capture the body of the listener as subject in a historical narrative that maintains vast global relevance with respect to the continued and growing oppression of cultures and individuals worldwide. While present within the 'zone' of the work, the body of the listener becomes an object of the sculpture itself.

The audio content is built from recordings of a variety of people individually whistling the first two notes of 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot', the notes that represent the words 'swing low'. Each note was sustained for the duration of an entire exhale resulting in a slight strain in the voice followed by a deep audible inhale. These recordings are played through the moving sound-focusing speaker, at times individually, at other times as a call and response. The tones slip in and out of harmony and dissonance while simultaneously moving in and away from

the auditory range of the listener. The experience is both hauntingly beautiful and abrasively disturbing.

'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' is a song born from a tragic history that has had, and continues to have, an astounding number of vocal recordings, ranging from little-known groups and individuals to world-renowned pop singers all over the world. Ironically, 'Swing Low' also became the theme song for England's Rugby World Cup tournament. Though several persons are accredited with first committing the song to paper, it is generally acknowledged that it was created by a former slave whose name is unknown. The spread of this voice of anonymity to the voice of popular culture icons further enriches the ironic conceptual premise of the work.

As a musical form, whistling is often associated with a cheerful demeanour, or can be used to casually mark the passage of time. The body becomes an instrument as turbulent air is forced inwards and outwards through the resonant chamber of the mouth, with the sound being formed and moderated by subtle movements of the lips, tongue and teeth. These coded tones can be as concrete as a syntactic language or as evasive as a memory. In popular usage, a combination of as few as two notes are commonly used to express emotion, desire, beckoning and warning, with, at times, a purposeful ambiguity that has associated whistling with mystery and superstition.

Currently, I am quite taken by the ironic audiotopic histories of the lullaby. The lullaby is conceptually one of the oldest, most pervasive and most 'popular' forms of music. Because of its emotional intimacy, one might imagine early humanoids to have employed a similar version of the same song that was used to win the mate. What we do know, however is that the familiar sound of the mother's voice has a soothing effect on the child, and that children's music, whether it takes the form of a lullaby or a more playful song, assists in the child's ability to acquire language. The lullaby is said to have been 'invented', or perhaps rather accepted into formal musical tradition in England in the 1300s. This idea of the invention of the lullaby goes against intuition as well as the proven fact that the lullaby existed in cultures that had developed with little or no contact with Western societies, but is interesting when considering the etymology of the word.

Historically, the lullaby is innately a mother's song and inherently female. The origins of the name 'lullaby' are disputed. Some believe it simply evolved as a combination between a wordless tune sung as 'la la la' and an abbreviation for 'bye-bye' or go to sleep: 'la la bye-bye'. This theory of course, reaffirms a connection to its supposed 'invention' in an English-speaking culture. Another unproven theory is more interesting. In Hebrew legends, 'Lilith' is said to be the first wife of Adam, preceding Eve, the only wife actually mentioned in the Bible. Since she was created from dust in the same way as Adam, she claimed equality, refused to be subservient and was consequently renounced as a demon. As the legend goes, Lilith sought eternal revenge, becoming a succubus, impregnating herself with men while they slept and killing sleeping children. For protection, infants were given an amulet bearing the words 'lilith-abi', Hebrew

for 'Lilith begone'. Following this etymological theory, 'Lilith-abi' became 'lilla abi', which over time became 'lullaby'. One can imagine the Hebrew legend to have influenced the English proclamation of the term but, up to now, both theories remain 'unproven'. Regardless of origin, the ironies encapsulated in both histories are fascinating and disturbing. Following the Hebrew legend, the mother sings for Lilith to be gone, inadvertently qualifying her own submission and reaffirming her own association with 'woman as evil' in the hope of finding a living child in the morning. The child's possible death is inherently already a fault of the mother who, being female, has been cursed as both the giver and taker of lives. In the case of the English lullaby, the mother sings 'bye-bye', saying 'goodnight' but also 'good-bye' as she soothes her child into a sleep from which it may never awaken.

In the lullaby itself, one often finds an ironic contrast between soothing melodies and tragic lyrics. The sound is created for the child but, in the lyrics, the mother can express her own experiences. 'All the Pretty Little Horses' is one such lullaby. It is one of the most popular lullabies in the US and accepted as an 'American tradition'. It was written by a slave woman who was forced to take care of her master's privileged child while her own child lay alone and uncared for. The second verse of the song reads:

Way down yonder
 In the meadow
 Lies my poor little baby
 The bees and the butterflies
 Picking out his eyes
 The poor little thing is crying out
 'Mammy!'
 Blacks and bays, dapples and grays
 All the pretty little horses

'Please sleep now', we hear the slave woman sing to the master's child, 'there is another, less fortunate who suffers alone.'

Where this investigation will lead has yet to be seen. For now, I hear the songs, close my eyes, and enter into the perfect world of the song only to open my eyes again as the song ends, and look deeper into the complex worlds that created it.

* * *

There are sounds that one might call 'pure', inherent to nature and outside cultural manipulation. The chime, for example, rings a vibration of its inherent resonant frequency. However, it cannot make its own music. The striker's hand has a body, and this body has a cultural local which speaks to the body's desire to strike the chime and unleash its frequencies. Even the sin wave, the most

simple of all vibrations, while produced also by the untouchable forces of the universe, tells the story of the culture able to perceive, capture or reproduce it.

There are worlds within every song, every sound. This is the audiotopia, utopia through the composition of difference.

Acknowledgements

This article is edited and abridged from a presentation at the Sound, Power, Space LARM seminar, 14 June 2008, Stockholm.

References

- Foucault, M. (1986) 'Of Other Spaces', trans. J. Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16(1): 22-7.
- Kun, J. (2005) *Audiotopia, Music, Race, and America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Levitin, D. (2007) *This Is Your Brain on Music*. New York: Plume.
- Morrison, T. (1989) 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review* XXVIII(1): 1-34.
- Szwed, J. (1998) *Space Is the Place: The Life and Times of Sun Ra*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Toomer, J. (1993[1937]) 'Music', in F. Rusch (ed.) *A Jean Toomer Reader: Selected Unpublished Writings*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Camille Norment is an African-American artist who lives and works in Oslo. She holds Masters Degrees in Fine Arts and Interactive Telecommunications (a technology arts discipline) and has been a Professor of Art and Technology at Malmö University's School of Art, Culture and Communication in Sweden. Her multi-media art is concerned with the way the body is inscribed with meaning through its negotiation with its surroundings. It engages the viewer as a physical and psychological participant in her work, creating experience through architectural, optical illusory, sonic, interactive environments and objects, and drawings that are 'enlivened' by the presence of the viewer. The work employs a narrative logic that likens itself to magical-realism and science fiction while maintaining a minimalist formal aesthetic. While mainly concerned with aesthetic experience, the work simultaneously spans the thresholds of the social and the political. With an emphasis on manipulating the visual and sonic perceptual realms, Norment is occupied with the tensions created by contradictory sensory experiences. She often evokes the uncanny through her manipulation of common experiences, such as looking in the mirror and not seeing a reflection, or presents sensual experiences that seek to treat the entire body as a sensory organ, such as sound that can be 'seen' or felt by the body rather than heard by the ears.

Address: Møllergaten 34-B, 0179 Oslo, Norway. [email: studio@norment.net; website: www.norment.net]