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Chican@ Literature of Differential Listening

By Lydia French

Abstract

This essay works at the methodological intersection of women-of-colour feminism and cultural materialist media studies in order to trace depictions of differential listening in Chican@ literature. I argue that the Chican@ literature of differential listening reveals alternative histories of listening to those offered in cultural materialist studies of sound reproduction media such as Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past*. Placing Chican@ texts such as Tomás Rivera's *... y no se lo tragó la tierra* and Pat Mora's *House of Houses*, I contend that Sterne's excavation of the discourses surrounding specific approaches to audile technique demonstrates how these examples of Chican@ literature, which trace alternative modes of listening, similarly unearth alternative discourses and understandings of the 'real' and, thereby, of what constitutes history.

Keywords: Chican@, differential consciousness, listening, cliraudience, fidelity, history

Introduction

When I was around seven years old, my mother Regina came home from work with a hilarious story. A white colleague, who had worked many years in law firms, yet who depended on my mother's expertise as a paralegal at the law firm at which they both worked, had asked her, "Regina, how do you know so much?"

Without skipping a beat, Regina replied, "Do you see these red dots on my forehead?" She lifted her bangs away from her forehead to reveal two small red freckles.

Her co-worker nodded.

"They're pretty dark right now, but you may have noticed that sometimes they turn bright red."

Her co-worker assented again, excited. Yes, she had noticed that.

"Well," Regina continued, "that's my Venusian mind-tap. See, there are aliens who come to me and plug a probe into my head here. When they do they fill my brain with knowledge and information. When these dots fade out it means I am losing the information, so the Venusians come back to plug me back in, and the dots turn bright red again. Now, whenever you see these two dots turn bright red, you'll know that's when the Venusians have restored the information I need."

Regina's credulous co-worker sat, amazed and dumbfounded. Her face said, "Of course, that explains everything". Indeed, she frequently deferred to Regina's "alien" expertise, and sometimes Regina had caught her looking for the colour of those red freckles on particularly stressful days.

Though when mom came home with that story we all had a great laugh at her co-worker's expense, I have realised in recent years how insightful my mother's story actually is. In reality, my mother wielded so much practical knowledge because she was—and is—an incredible listener. As a single, working Chicana mother, displaced from her home in New Mexico and migrating across the American South, Regina had developed what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "*la facultad*," "a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate" (Anzaldúa, 1986/1999, p. 61). Her powers of *la*

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facultad manifested in her ability to listen across tones and regions and to camouflage herself in different accents, each fitting a specific situation. My siblings and I, for instance, could always guess who was on the other end of the telephone based on my mother's accent; song-like Spanglish meant a relative from Albuquerque, a southern drawl suggested a friend from Arkansas, and an abrupt staccato indicated a lawyer or business-person with whom she was negotiating.

Regina had to survive in a predominantly white world, and she did so with an adaptability that, to some, could only have come from otherworldly sources. That is, because my mother's story of learning to listen for social survival is difficult to articulate, she chose to order her experiences as influenced from an alien and outside force. A master of irony and acutely aware of the social relations of power to which she was subject, she realised that a sci-fi story about alien knowledge plugs was more believable than the idea of her negotiating between her own internal sound and listening mechanisms and those she encountered in sound media. The irony emerges from the fact that she described a process of external-to-internal knowledge transfer while critically aware that her own knowledge formation and, indeed, her own subjectivity evolved from a much more complex negotiation between internal and external forms of listening.

And she is not the only Chican@¹ storyteller to recognise this complex listening practice that I call, drawing on Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), "differential listening." In the literature that I examine below, Tomás Rivera's . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra* / . . . *and the earth did not devour him* (1971) and Pat Mora's *House of Houses* (1997), the narrators describe creative and motivating listening practices that account for sound as both interior and exterior, a product of subjective consciousness as well as of material media and technologies. This Chican@ literature of differential listening underscores that both the subjective interior form of listening—clairaudience—as well as the audile techniques learned from various sound reproduction technologies are socially imbricated. Neither "the individual" nor the media are mutually exclusive categories in this understanding, but more importantly, neither are independent of their culturally- and historically-specific situations.

As such, Chican@ literature of differential listening brings to sound studies testimonies of experiential practices of listening that at once complement and problematise normative or dominant descriptions of audile technique. In so doing, these works reveal differential listening as a strategy for survival, resistance, and transformation that emerge creatively from de-colonial and oppositional subjects' engagement with sonic forms of discourse and ideological positioning.

Methodological background

The notion of differential listening depends on Chela Sandoval's insistence in *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000) that "no canonical Western thought is free of de-colonial effects" (p. 5). Strategically working from within discourse and ideology, that is, oppressed peoples seize on and manipulate the tensions, the cognitive dissonance, between dominant portrayals of the "real" and their own lived experiences through an enactment of what Sandoval terms "differential consciousness" (2000, p. 6). According to Sandoval, differential consciousness encompasses a set of interpretive strategies and technologies that comprehend simultaneously dominant discourses and ideologies, available strategies of resistance, and the networks of classed, raced, gendered, and sexed difference that underwrite both dominance and resistance. When enacted, differential consciousness mobilises actors to create coalitional bonds across lines of difference. For Sandoval, it requires a keen perception, an ability to sign-read, and a process of reorientation "that at once enacts and decolonises [subjugated citizens'] various relations to their real conditions of existence" (p. 54).

For me, it requires listening.

Like many critical studies of discourse and theory of its time, *Methodology of the Oppressed* invokes primarily visual metaphors in its excavation of the differential form of oppositional consciousness. The powers of differential consciousness, Sandoval writes, are "cinematographic: a kinetic motion that maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectators and practitioners" (p. 44). Its spatiality, furthermore, necessitates a cognitive re-mapping of "cultural topograph[ies]" (p. 54). For Sandoval, who stakes her analysis primarily on the theory-work of feminists of colour in the 1980s-90s^[2] and secondarily on movements in semiotics, poststructuralism, and postmodernism, the visual appears as the site of consciousness, and visual metaphors anchor our understanding of the play of difference in the methodology of the oppressed.

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The growth of sound studies, on the other hand, has productively challenged the emphasis on vision in both Western thought and its de-colonial counterpart. Indeed, sound studies itself represents something of a differential intervention in the primacy of the visual in intellectual thought more broadly. In recent works in the field, sound and listening are cast as sites of intellectual pursuit on a par with those of spectacle, image, and sight.³ Because of this intellectual bias toward sight (a bias that I believe is currently shifting as a result of growth of the audio-cultural field), one of the particular challenges such works have faced is the need to qualify sound and listening as 'real' objects of study. As I explore in this essay, overcoming this challenge has, in some cases, led to an emphasis on material and social forms of audile technique, understood as normative, that threatens to exclude or marginalise alternative audile practices. And yet, to paraphrase Sandoval, no canonical Western sound is free of de-colonial echoes (2000, p. 5).

From within the women of colour feminist movement, the need to articulate alternative listening practices is one that has been felt for many years. Feminist critics and scholars lament not only social invisibility but also their experiences of dominative listening practices as mis-hearings or non-hearings (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; Boyce Davies, 1995; Pérez, E. 1999; Sandoval 2000; Anzaldúa and Keating, 2002). Gloria Anzaldúa's essay 'Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers', for instance, calls attention to the interpenetration of social invisibility and inaudibility for women of colour writers. She writes, "our speech, too, is inaudible. We [are received as though we] speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane" (1981, p. 165). Invoking actors—the outcast and insane—against which normative political economies, behaviours, and voices are defined, Anzaldúa highlights how some in positions of power implicitly 'close their ears' to the voices of women of colour, voices frequently cast as unmeaning noise.

Similar to Anzaldúa, Carole Boyce Davies (1995) moves beyond Gayatri Spivak's (1988) question, "can the subaltern speak?" to pose the even more vital question of whether subaltern speech can get a hearing. "[I]t is not only the condition of silence and voicelessness that seems the most pressing at this historical moment," Boyce Davies argues, "but the function of *hearing or listening* on the part of those who wield oppressive power" (1995, p. 3). Calling for an "appropriate critique of the inability of the oppressors to HEAR," she encourages her readers to attend to the ways in which hearing and listening are articulated to social structures of power. "Just as in the transformation of silence into language and action, in Audre Lorde's words, there also has to be a transformation which links hearing with action," she argues (ibid.). That transformation, I argue, emerges from differential listening as an oppositional practice.

Though perhaps not in the way that Boyce Davies intended, Rey Chow's 'Listening Otherwise, Music Miniaturized: A different type of question about revolution' (1999) describes and theorises a specific kind of linkage of hearing/listening with resistant action that centres on distracted listening on a Walkman. Where, in describing dominative listening practices that over determine the voices of women of colour, Anzaldúa and Boyce Davies imply their own experiences of listening differentially without fully articulating how an oppositional listening practice might look, sound, or feel. Chow explicitly calls for "a history of listening—a history of how listening and the emotions that are involved in listening change with the apparatuses that make listening possible" (p. 474). Chow's own contribution to such a history is an examination of the twice-oppositional work that listening to Chinese pop music on a Walkman performs.

On the one hand, listening via a technological medium such as the Walkman faces the weight of a history of Frankfurt School cultural studies that decries pop music listening as "regressive" and passive in the face of the culture industry's onslaught (Adorno, 1991/2006, pp. 47-48). On the other hand, the listening agents in Chow's study also face the weight of a colonial and revolutionary history that romanticises and prizes the collective. The public soundscape in China, according to Chow, is one dominated by totalising articulations of Chinese nationalism. Listening to pop music on a Walkman, by contrast, underscores the subversive effects of inarticulateness and distraction within a private and embodied soundscape. These are the hallmarks of Chow's "listening otherwise": "it is always played on the side, as we are doing other things" (p. 474). In other words, by presupposing distraction, "listening otherwise" implies a dictated object of attention against which the listening agent actively resists.

Although it does not fulfil the same ends of prizing private individuality and disarticulation from the collective, differential listening is similar to Chow's "listening otherwise" in the sense that it continues to trouble the relationship between subjectivity and subjection through a specific understanding of how, historically, people have experienced sound. Whereas Chow underscores the deep irony of trying to apply a Marxist cultural materialism to a set of practices resistant to Marx's legacy in Chinese

nationalism, Chican@ literature of differential listening exerts an experiential discourse of listening that questions the bases of “realism” and sonic fidelity in cultural materialist histories/theories of sound reproduction and audile technique.

Responding, however unwittingly, to Chow’s call for a history of listening, Jonathan Sterne’s *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (2003) offers precisely what Chow seemed to request: a history of how people have learned to listen to the machines that make listening possible, framed in terms of the embodied techniques cultivated in response to those machines and the social networks they imply. Moreover, Sterne emphasises the need to rethink the history of sound and listening not as “something that happens between the senses,” thus rendering the senses themselves universal and transhistorical, but rather as an “entry into the history of the senses” (p.16). Sterne locates the universalising and totalising tendencies of theories of sound and listening in what he calls the “audio-visual litany,” a binaristic account of the biological, psychological, and physical differences between hearing and vision that serve as a basis for “a cultural theory of the senses” (p. 15). The audio-visual litany, Sterne writes,

idealizes hearing (and, by extension, speech) as manifesting a kind of pure interiority. It alternately denigrates and elevates vision: as a fallen sense, vision takes us out of the world. But it also bathes us in the clear light of reason (ibid.).

However, by taking the experiences of a specific set of theorists,⁴ as universally applicable, the audio-visual litany evades historical specificity and the kind of materialism that Sterne advocates.

Indeed, one of the problems with the audio-visual litany in particular and universalising discourses of the senses in general is that their experiential origins, in a specific historical moment and among a specific set of social actors, frequently remains unacknowledged. *The Audible Past*, by contrast, “eschews transhistorical constructs of sound and hearing as a basis for a history of sound,” opting instead to focus on sound reproduction media and the techniques of listening to which they have given rise (p.14). Since media for Sterne entails “recurring relations among people, practices, institutions, and machines,” his study of sound reproduction media involves a heavy reliance on the historical documents left by those individuals and corporations who invented, produced, and circulated the technologies themselves (p. 223). Because “[w]e make our past out of the artifacts, documents, memories, and other traces left behind”, Sterne excavates those for an understanding of how specific discourses of sound and listening became articulated to the machines as well as the listening practices (audile techniques) themselves (p. 19).

The Audible Past is now a seminal text in sound studies, but in order not to repeat the kind of universalising tendency that Sterne himself decries, we must recognise that Sterne provides a history of sound and listening, not *the* history. Indeed, though the manuals and advertisements that Sterne analyses do reveal specific discursive tendencies and historically- and culturally -conditioned listening practices, they cannot encompass the variety of listening practices that people actually applied to their soundscapes. I cannot imagine a text that could catalogue that immense diversity; however, literature offers an alternative kind of historical document that has the ability to express embodied techniques of listening within specific historical, cultural, social, and discursive frameworks. Using narrative fiction as historical document reveals alternative histories of sound and listening existing alongside those circulated in the ads, manuals, and epistles of the sound reproduction culture industry.

Collective clairaudience in Tomás Rivera’s . . . y no se lo tragó la tierra

The Chican@ literature of differential listening returns us to the question of sound’s interiority, though not casting it as a “pure interiority” in the way that the audio-visual litany does (Sterne, 2003, p. 15). To deny “pure interiority”, though, as a transhistorical quality or characteristic of sound need not mean that embodied, contingent kinds of interiority are not necessarily qualities of sound and listening. Indeed, differential listening describes the audile negotiation of a kind of experiential interiority in its attention to clairaudience. Clairaudience is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* as “The faculty of mentally perceiving sounds beyond the range of hearing, alleged to be induced under certain mesmeric conditions” (Oxford University Press, 2013). In this definition, first published in the *OED* in 1889, the term’s linguistic associations with clairvoyance connote a prophetic or extra-sensory perception traditionally maligned in Western thought and culture as superstitious or supernatural. Indexing Western thought’s association of the visual with the intellect. On the other hand, the word ‘imagination’ represents a special status of thought that clairvoyance does not compass, even though imagination is also a faculty of mentally perceiving visions beyond the range of sight.⁵

However, I want to emphasise that the mental perception of sounds, like the mental perception of images, works as a quotidian form of intellectual activity for dominative and differential listeners alike. In *The Soundscape*, R. Murray Schafer defines clairaudience as the “exceptional powers of hearing” that characterised religious figures and rituals (1977/1994, p. 11). But he also indicates that in an increasingly noisy world, there is a need to re-invoke a clairaudient talent for discerning between unmeaning noise and meaningful sound (Schafer, 1977/1994, pp. 11-12), a practice that requires listeners to perceive both noise and sound for their socially-inscribed difference. Chow, for instance, suggests that when listening to Chinese pop music on a Walkman, performers’ on-stage presence as well as their iconicity “become part of the technologically exteriorized ‘inner speech’ of the listener” (1999, p. 476). That is, the Walkman outwardly performs a resistant action (distracted listening) that manifests a clairaudient, ‘inner’ distraction that nevertheless remains inaccessible in Chow’s study.

Both Schaffer’s brief discussion and Chow’s analysis highlight the significance of clairaudience for differential listening in the age of late capitalism. Just as Sandoval’s differential consciousness explores a juncture that “connects the disoriented first world citizen-subject . . . and a form of oppositional consciousness developed by subordinated, marginalized, or colonized Western citizen-subjects”, so my own theory of differential listening seeks to identify the intersections at which dominative discourses of sound and audition coincide with their de-colonial “effects” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 9). One such effect is exemplified in a Chicano *movimiento*-era novella, Tomás Rivera’s 1971 . . . y no se lo tragó la tierra / . . . And the earth did not devour him).

Tierra dramatises a form of listening that accounts for a community’s recognition of its members as ineluctably linked to the social and economic fabric of a nation as bodies in exchange, that is, as commodities. The novella is framed and punctuated by the experiences of a young, unnamed Tejano, a migrant labourer who, at the beginning of a “lost year” hears himself being called, but who, upon turning in response, “realize[s] that he had called himself. And thus the lost year began” (p. 83). The unnamed boy’s turn in response to his clairaudient hearing of someone or something calling his name initiates a process of subjectification that, for the remainder of the novella, is not comprised of a continued listening to a singular inner voice; instead, the narrator’s clairaudient listening is populated by the voices of others in the community.

The opening frame of the narrative is established, for instance, when the narrator’s “mind would go blank and he would fall asleep. But before falling asleep he saw and heard many things . . .” (ibid). These “many things” comprise the action of the narrative. Throughout *tierra*, Rivera’s play with narrative voice suggests that the thoughts, words, and actions that appear to be limited to individuals or small groups out of the range of sight or hearing of the young protagonist, are actually shared, heard, and experienced by him. His clairaudient hearing and thinking of the voices of this South Texas community call to him and rouse him from sleep into (political) consciousness.

Rivera most directly represents the silent potential of individual and collective thoughts in the vignette, ‘Cuando lleguemos’ / ‘When We Arrive’. In this piece, men, women, and children stand in a broken-down truck on their way from Texas to Minnesota on the seasonal migrant labour circuit. As the truck stops, the silence of the night tells them that the engine has burned up and that they will be stranded there until daybreak. In much the same way that the opening frame positions that brief moment between wakefulness and sleep as a moment pregnant with the stories that comprise the novella, so Rivera positions the silence and darkness of the truck as pregnant with the thoughts of its cargo. “[I]n the darkness,” he writes, “their eyes had gradually begun to close and all became so silent that all that could be heard was the chirping of the crickets. Some were sleeping, others were thinking” (p. 142). Again, although these thoughts belong to the people in the truck, in the context of the narrative, they seem to be shared with the unnamed protagonist; they form part of his still-drowsy and undefined clairaudience.

What we as readers are privy to in the text and what the protagonist hears clairaudiently are thoughts that evidence the passengers’ awareness of the liminality of their conditions. For some, this awareness alternates between sympathy and guilt. One woman thinks, for instance, of her husband:

Poor viejo. He must be real tired now, standing up the whole trip. I saw him nodding off a little while ago. And with no way to help him, what with these two in my arms . . . I hope I’ll be able to help him out in the fields, but I’m afraid that this year, what with these kids, I won’t be able to do anything. I have to breastfeed them every little while and then they’re still so little. If only they were just a bit older. I’m still going to try my best to help him out. At least along his row so he won’t feel so overworked. Even if it’s just for short whiles. . . . I just hope I’ll be able to help him. God willing, I’ll be able to help him. (p. 144)

This thinker combines present with future as she muses on the hope that her physical labour will benefit her husband as well as on the fear that she won't have the opportunity to help as much as she would like. These musings reveal her multiple labours as she works to balance the raising of the children with the labour of love for her husband with the additional burden of the stoop labour involved in migrant farm work.

Though other thoughts in the truck voice anger over sympathy, they still articulate that temporal edge between present and future. One passenger, for instance, first focuses his anger on his present conditions, thinking,

Fuckin' life, this goddamn fuckin' life! This fuckin' sonofabitchin' life for being pendejo! pendejo! pendejo! We're nothing but a bunch of stupid, goddamn asses! To hell with this goddamn motherfuckin' life! (ibid.)

Deciding that this will be the last time he puts himself in this position, he uses his anger at present conditions to move him beyond this liminality, to imagine what lies beyond the truck, beyond the road, beyond the seasonal migrant circuit. He decides, "As soon as we get there I'm headed for Minneapolis. Somehow I'll find me something to do where I don't have to work like a fuckin' mule" (ibid.). This incipient recognition of his own dehumanisation and the notion that he can move beyond it leads this thinker, like the others on the truck, to silently articulate his relationship to the socioeconomic conditions that seem to be keeping him in limbo, always "arriving and leaving" (p.145).

The silence of thought rendered noisy in these pages prefigures the moment at daybreak when "the people [become] people," the moment when they begin to articulate their suffering, their plans, their expressions of their own consciousness of their shared conditions (ibid, p.146). As Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2003) argues, "Although these thoughts in the silence make evident the mutuality of their suffering, a communal consciousness of their material condition cannot emerge as long as the migrants' expectations of what they will do when they arrive remain isolated in the individuation of internal monologue" (p. 289). Only when they are shared and exchanged can their thoughts generate community.

Although their articulation of their conditions is shared among the group of migrant labourers on the truck only "at the moment of their collective speech about the possibility of what they might do when they arrive", according to Rivera's use of narrative framing, their thoughts are already being shared in the young protagonist's clairaudient hearing (Saldaña-Portillo, 2003, p. 290). The form of clairaudience through which the young narrator hears these voices and apprehends their impact on his own emergent political consciousness informs what Ramón Saldivar (1990) describes as *tierra's* Chicano realism. According to Saldivar, through formal innovation and attention to these characters' voices, Rivera actively manipulates the ideological conventions of American literary realism by explicitly linking his characters to "the stuff of South Texas social and economic history, lived out as the community of *la raza*" (p. 90). Indeed, "[i]n their very alienation and their sense of themselves as commodities to be sold, Rivera's characters come to apprehend reality as a process," a recognition that engenders the unnamed narrator's own re-cognition of the community, the collective embodied in the clairaudience of "Cuando lleguemos," as "an element in the larger ideological struggle between agricultural capital and social democracy" (ibid.). Rivera's, then, is a realism in which ideology emerges in and through the text's forms and structures rather than being masked by them.

One of these forms and structures relies on the dramatisation of a clairaudient collective that links the unnamed narrator's subjectivity to the social, political, and economic history of South Texas and the 1950s migrant labour circuit. This linkage occurs not through the narrator's ability to speak in or for the community; rather, it occurs through his mental perception of voices "beyond the range of hearing" (Oxford University Press, 2013), voices silenced by the very social and economic systems in which their bodies circulate. Yet by translating the act of silencing to the silence of the literary page, Rivera also recognises the possibility that silence engenders. As Saldaña-Portillo recognises, for instance, "through poetic speech, the subaltern is inserted into historical narration. This poetic speech is the language of subaltern silence" (p. 152). This recognition of the power of the poetic as "the language of the racialized commodity that redefines the meaning of silence as a rebellious reading of his or her own positionality," emerges in *tierra* in response to a clairaudient call (ibid.). Thus, at the end of the lost year, the unnamed protagonist "made a discovery" that "to discover and rediscover and piece things together. This to this, that to that, all with all. That was it. That was everything" (ibid.). In other words, he learns how to create, a form of poiesis, by joining together the voices and scenes that he has clairaudiently heard and imagined and inserting them into a larger history that demands to be heard.

Pat Mora's *House of Houses* (1997) similarly inserts a Mexican and Chican@ border community into history; however, Mora adds to Rivera's Chicano realism by grounding her novel in the ideological 'stuff' of the U.S.-Mexico border, but also by linking her family memoir to material objects and artefacts. Because some of these artefacts include songs played on home and car radios, *House of Houses* depicts a transitive listening practice in which listening to material technologies such as radio, effect and are affected by clairaudent hearings of silent/silenced voices.⁶ This transitive movement from the social interiority of clairaudent to the equally social audile techniques that characterise listening to sonic media networks, defines differential listening.

Listening 'wildly out of control': sonic fidelity and Pat Mora's *House of Houses*

Once we begin to examine literature that refers to and grounds its sense of realism in material technologies of sound reproduction, Sterne's (2003) history of those very technologies or their precursors and the audile techniques to which they have given rise offers a useful point of comparison. In particular, his analysis of the nature of sonic realism and the discourse of fidelity provides critical insights into the differences between dominative and differential listening practices as well as into how the forms of evidence we use to trace histories of listening impact our understanding of those same histories.

In his analysis of the discourse of sonic fidelity, Sterne traces the complex movement of primacy in listening to emergent audio media by suggesting that the discourses of "reality," "transparency," and "fidelity" are already encoded in sonic reproduction media (pp. 219-20). On the one hand, he argues, the discourse of fidelity as it relates to sound reproduction technology relies upon the existence of the technology itself. There is no relation of original to copy, he insists, without there also already existing the very possibility of a copy (ibid.). On the other hand, he maintains that the audile technique of listening *for* fidelity "is prior to the possibility of any 'faithful' relation between sounds" (p. 223). That is, among the social practitioners involved in the creation and dissemination of the new media, there was already an inclination to develop the sonic technology based on their own listening practices.

In early tests of the telephone, for instance, Alexander Graham Bell relied upon familiar and well-worn varieties of speech in order to determine the machines' ability to faithfully represent intelligible sound. Describing Bell's performance at the telephone's debut at the Philadelphia International Exposition, Sterne emphasises the fact that Bell himself was a "noted elocutionist" (p. 249). The implication here is that the early telephone's success was premised on listeners' ability to understand Bell quite well long before he ever spoke into the telephone; his speech is already recognised as perfectly intelligible and thus readily identifiable through the scratchy and imperfect transmission of the earliest telephone lines.

The familiarity and normalcy of Bell's voice not only aided listeners, but it also aided the technology itself. As Sterne makes clear, "By the use of clichéd and conventionalized language, early 'performers' of sound reproduction helped listeners help the machine reproduce speech. . . . what is truly fascinating is the automatic response of the speakers and listeners: to *help the machine*" (p. 251, emphasis in original). Thus, a prior audile technique, one that comprehends speech as familiar and recognisable to the point of cliché, served to aid the machines' representation of sound as more or less faithful to an original voice. In other words, a listener must be able to meaningfully recognise the original voice before determining whether its reproduction is faithful or not.

Beyond mere recognition, however, sonic fidelity is underwritten by a philosophy that represents reproductions as "debasements of the originals" (Sterne, 2003, 218). In longing for an audio recording or transmission, for instance, that reproduces sound as it would be 'live', Sterne suggests, listeners actually desire the disappearance of the sound reproduction technology. "From this perspective," Sterne writes,

the technology enabling the reproduction of sound thus mediates because it conditions the possibility of reproduction, but, ideally, it is supposed to be a 'vanishing' mediator—rendering the relation as transparent, as if it were not there. (ibid.)

In other words, by conditioning the very possibility of a copy, sound reproduction technologies created anxiety over their very mediation between originals, understood as 'natural', 'live', and 'real', and the copies they produced, understood as corrupted versions of the original and therefore inauthentic. For Sterne, the philosophy of the original-copy relation acts as a social mediator that actually conditions the development of sound reproduction media, thereby underwriting practices of listening for fidelity (p. 219).

As the machines of sonic reproduction began to circulate more widely, listeners had to continue

practicing and developing specific forms of audition in order to accommodate the machines themselves. Sterne notes, for instance, that “[e]ven the earliest experiments were a form of listening practice, and, while this listening practice extended the constructs of audile technique developed earlier in the nineteenth century, it also developed them in new and interesting ways” (p. 256). Sterne thus identifies the ways in which listeners were conditioned to ignore the sounds of the machine and, instead, to focus on the sound being reproduced. Listeners were instructed, in, for instance, advertisements and manuals for the new devices, to render the machine’s noise as ancillary and exterior to faithful sonic reproduction.

Because, for Sterne, media represent not just machines and technologies, but also the entire set of social relations that make the machines possible, the desire to render peripheral the noise of the machines parallels a desire to cast out the noise of the social relations that comprise the media network (p. 223). He says, “The sounds of the medium in effect indexed its social and material existence – the machine could stand in metonymically for the medium. Wishing away the noise of the machine then suggests wishing away the noise of society” (p. 259). Listening for fidelity in Sterne’s analysis thus provides another means by which listeners at the turn of the twentieth century could cast out problematic social relations, electing instead to hear that which is most familiar. Refusing to acknowledge either its own positionality or the social relations being silenced when the machines are ignored, listening for sonic fidelity (a practice that continues into the twenty-first century with the arrival of digital sonic media) nevertheless positions the ‘real’ within a particular set of sanctioned practices.

Sterne traces that realism in the manuals and advertisements that demonstrated how to use emergent sonic reproduction technologies. Though his treatment of media, including the visual and literary media of advertisements and manuals, is always positioned within the understanding that experience itself is always already “intensely social,” ironically, Sterne’s nuanced treatment of listening for fidelity itself privileges the representations of reality and experience found within the ads and manuals (p. 259). In other words, he seems to express a certain amount of faith in their realism. He writes, for instance,

One of the most common moves in twentieth-century American advertising is to “educate” readers in order to persuade them that the product being hawked is superior. This has been widely noted in ads for soap and other hygiene products. The same kind of logic was at work in advertisements for reproduction equipment—teaching readers to *listen* for fidelity (or at least a particular dimension of sound called *fidelity*) was the expressed goal. (p. 280, emphasis in original)

In returning the discourse of listening for audio fidelity to its social base, Sterne appears to assume a one-to-one correlation between the ads’ teachings and actual listening practices. This becomes most apparent when, noting the prevalence of white women featured as listeners in ads, Sterne claims, “[t]hese images of women participating in the sound-reproduction network are not metaphoric. . . . Rather, they are literal. The emergent media of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries grew alongside a whole class of women who were full participants in mass culture—and that participation was on an unprecedented scale” (p. 228). By this logic, the relative absence of Black, Native, Chican@, or Asian women or men as listeners would suggest that they were not fully participant in the growing mass media networks, a conclusion contested by vast historical evidence, particularly of phonograph usage.⁷

Sterne’s own faith in the advertisements’ effectiveness in representing a dominant audile technique is also undermined by his acknowledgement of alternative listening practices that grew out of the discourse surrounding sonic fidelity. He categorises forms of listening that attend not to the machine’s sound as exterior but instead to the scratchiness of phonographs or the white noise of radio transmission, as “audile technique wildly out of control” (Sterne, 2003, p. 272). Listeners “tolerating the radio’s noise in search of that tiny snippet of programming” had cultivated, in Sterne’s assessment, “too fine a sense of foreground and background [leading] listeners to discern sonic indices of non-existent distant events” (ibid.). In other words, these pathological listeners who had exceeded the ideological “control” of listening manuals and advertisements, had formed a cliraudent technique by attending to the machine’s noise rather than ignoring it in the interest of fidelity. Extending the analogy of the machine as metonymically representing social processes of new media, these listeners demonstrated a desire among some *not* to render social processes inaudible. Instead, these listeners, on the margins of normative listening practices as Sterne describes them, practice a form of audition that re-cognises reproduced sound as the dissonance between social noise and meaningful sonic experience.

As evidenced in Mora’s *House of Houses*, listening beyond the confines of the ‘control’ of advertisers

and research and development teams can actually be an asset for those who manipulate sonic reproduction technologies as a strategy to transform alienation into belonging. Exemplary of Chican@ literature of differential listening in general, *House of Houses* demonstrates that depicting the development of a sense, in this case of hearing/listening, as hyper-development, non-normative, or “wildly out of control” (Sterne, 2007, p. 272) serves the same interests as depicting the voices of racialised, classed, gendered, and sexed Others as “outcast and insane” (Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 165). But the development of an audile technique that is oppositional, resistant, or transformative of the ideologies, out of which audio fidelity emerges, serves to clarify the actual bases of control itself. It denaturalises the historical trajectory of the ideological premises on which fidelity is founded, suggesting that there may exist alternative histories of audition in the age of sonic reproduction.

Indeed, *House of Houses* invites us to consider another possible history of audition, one that takes for granted neither the faithful representation of recorded sound or the possibilities entailed in hearing beyond the range of sound. Instead, the listening practice Mora describes is one located squarely within a border epistemology that understands temporal movement differently. Not interested in the kind of linear notion of history that underwrites sonic fidelity, Mora instead crafts a family memoir that has her long-dead ancestors sitting at the kitchen table or in the garden having tea with Mora and her own grown children. Time and presence in this memoir are not reducible to linearity or to concomitant binaries such as original/copy. The ‘real’, living, material world is not divided from the ‘unreal’, dead, or spiritual world. Instead, all worlds exist on the same temporal plane, which is also the plane of the text, of the story.

In poetically piecing together her ancestors’ stories, Mora doesn’t so much bring them into the present, a designation that fails to accord with the temporal logic of the memoir, as much as she carves out a *space* for their stories in history. As Crystal Kurzen contends, “[w]riting this text is a political act; Mora . . . allows members of her extended family to interact with each other in order to reconcile their histories with hegemonic narratives of American identity that systematically exclude their own lived experiences” (2011, p. 347). In part, reconciling this history relies on Mora’s own depiction of differential listening as a means of rendering audible the voices that have so frequently gone unheard or been actively silenced.

For instance, Mora’s act and depiction of clairaudience hails her ancestors into the space of the text. In one telling scene she pauses to muse over the role that El Paso, her home, has played in the lives of her family and her history. Here grammar breaks down as Mora pieces together images and sounds of the landscape: “Skies wider than oceans, a bare mountain that talks to itself . . . the clashings carried on currents of water and wind, of music and silence; music of old women dancing to melodies that come from their own mouths; silence of sunsets and moon risings” (p. 45). In this description, time, once again, is meaningless. The skies, the oceans, the mountains are as enduring here as the melodies played once upon a time. Mora’s clairaudience renders this space more historically valuable than chronology because it is in this space that the author hears “[v]oices weave through bare branches” (ibid.). She maintains at the end of this moment of temporal respite, “I write what I hear, my inheritance a luxury, the generation with time to record the musings of turtles, the poetics of cactus, the stoicism of stones, the voices from the interior of this family house, *la casa de casas* [house of houses]” (ibid.). This clairaudient listening motivates Mora to write, to tell the stories she hears, and to insert them into history.

After the section break that distinguishes this passage from the one in which she begins narrating the story of her maternal grandmother, Amelia Delgado, she begins insisting on dates: “Yesterday, January 31. At breakfast thirty-three years ago, January 31, 1962 . . .” (p. 45). Demonstrating the relationship between the border space that nestles the house of houses and her family’s own chronological history, Mora transitions from timelessness to a strict punctuality effortlessly.

That effortlessness, I suggest, is one effect of Mora’s differential listening strategy. For she not only, like Rivera, depicts the role that clairaudient listening plays in revitalising and re-embodying the stories of her family, past and present; but she also grounds those stories in the material world through the incorporation of Latin prayers, Catholic hymns, her mother’s piano playing, her Uncle Lalo and Aunt Carmen dating to the sounds of ‘Indian Love Call’ blaring from his car stereo, her father rising from the depths of dementia upon hearing his record player scratching out Neil Diamond’s ‘Sweet Caroline’. *House of Houses* urges readers to understand that relationship between the materiality of sound reproduction technologies and their own internal listening structures in the image of “sounds seep[ing] into a body or a house” (p. 71). The memoir suggests that alternative histories live in the transitive play between sounds clairaudiently remembered and those reproduced through sonic media. That negotiation between the spiritual, interior, or natural sounds of Mora’s clairaudience and the material,

exterior, and historicised sounds of, for instance, 'Song Sung Blue' (1972) opens up a space for alternative understandings of both history and listening.

What I'm suggesting here is not what some might characterise as the magical realism of listening, though it does walk the line between the kind of "pure interiority" (Sterne, 2003, p. 15) of sound that we associate with 'magic' and the kind of empirical materiality we associate with the 'real'. Above all else, we have to recognise that Mora's experience of listening for her ancestors is as legitimate as the images of women using phonographs and notes and the memoirs of Alexander Graham Bell. It exists in an alternative history of sound and listening. Though some of the characteristics of sound and listening may appear to coincide with the audio-visual litany, Mora's listening experience resists the universalising and transhistorical tendencies of that theory; rather, Mora's differential listening is very clearly positioned in a U.S.-Mexican border context, and she strives throughout *House of Houses* to contextualise the social and economic conditions that ground her family's stories.

But neither is Mora's understanding of differential listening in keeping with Sterne's discursive analysis of sonic fidelity; the difference here is epistemological. Mora's understanding of the world is not in the same kind of linear-chronological terms that underwrite the philosophy of the original-copy relation. Listening for her ancestors' voices as well as to the sounds of media technology is not necessarily generative of writing; rather, it is iterative, telling a story that recurs again and again. Because of its iterative qualities, the history that unfolds in *House of Houses* calls more attention to the space in which its characters appear and reappear, a space to which they then lay claim, instead of to the question of origination or imitation. By thus questioning the very discursive basis for a listening practice that values sonic fidelity, Mora's depiction of differential listening also questions the very basis of our understanding of realism. An historical realism, such as Sterne's, that fails to account for either her family's alternative history or her own differential listening practice will only ever represent a partial understanding of the multitude of experiences and practices that constitute the 'real'.

Conclusion

Precisely that partial understanding of what counts as 'real' experience is what created the humour of my mother's Venusian mind-tap story. To unearth the coded, silenced, and unuttered experiences manifested in a story like my mother's may require an ear for irony. But attention to differential listening requires theorists to take seriously the varieties of audile experience represented in the testimonies of listening practice, whether those are accessible in letters, pamphlets, oral histories, or in de-colonial literature. De-colonial literature in particular provides access to histories of listening practice not necessarily encoded in the dominant texts circulating at a given historical moment. But engagement with de-colonial literary texts, whether realist or not, requires an understanding not just of the dominant discourses within which the literary text is embedded, but also the particular local political and cultural discourses at play within the work. Excavating the literary text for histories of listening means that the theorist, too, has to cultivate an ear for clairaudience and a practice of differential listening.

Instead of universalising from a particular privileged vantage point or focusing exclusively on mainstream representations of listening, the theorist must listen for the difference and dissonance between her own subject position and those represented in the text. The theorist of differential listening thus engages in a recursive process of social and political positioning and listening, listening and positioning. Ultimately, both the practice and theory of differential listening entail radical possibilities of social and sonic transformation.

Footnotes

1. When referring to the community known collectively as Chicana/Chicano or Chicana/o, I follow Chicana feminist theorists such as Domino Perez (2008) and Sandy Soto (2010) in using an alternative spelling, C-H-I-C-A-N-@. Chican@ encompasses both the feminine and masculine without the use of the slash. With the @ symbol connecting them, the -a of the feminine Chicana and the -o of the masculine Chicano are connected in a single motion that seems to gain momentum as it moves outward. This spelling also has the phonetic effect of sounding like "Chica - now" and the stylistic effect of appealing to Chicana and Chicano studies' position in the digital humanities. [↩]
2. The term "U.S. Third World women" was a term of self-identification used by the feminist-of-color writers, theorists, and activists who guide Sandoval's understanding of the differential mode of oppositional consciousness. Tracing the work of this particular group of women of colour, such as those who contributed to the collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), Sandoval (2000) recognises that these women felt excluded from both their

particular ethnic cultural movements of the 1960s-70s as well as the white women's movement of the same period (p. 43). This double exclusion led to the formation of coalitional bonds along lines of difference. Sandoval identifies this formation as the paradigmatic practice of differential consciousness. [²]

3. In addition to the works I discuss more fully in this essay, see, for instance, "Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies," a special issue of *American Quarterly* (2011) and "The Politics of Recorded Sound," a special issue of *Social Text* (2010). [²]
4. Sterne's primary critique is reserved for the Christian theological influence on Walter Ong's (1982) understanding of the relationship between orality and writing. [²]
5. For a fuller discussion of the association of vision with the intellect in Western philosophy, see Ihde (2007, pp. 6-13). [²]
6. In my broader study of Chican@ literature of differential listening, I examine such works as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1971) and *Almanac of the Dead* (1992), Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek, and Other Stories* (1991) and *Caramelo* (2003), and Nina Marie Martínez's *¡Caramba!: A Tale Told in Turns of the Card* (2004), all of which attend to forms of both clairaudient listening and sound-media listening. [²]
7. See, for instance, Weheliye (2005) and Troutman (2009). [²]

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Bio

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