

## The Trans Ear/(h)earing

**ABSTRACT** In this essay I offer a theoretical conceptualization of the ear in order to expand current debates surrounding embodiment and materiality within the field of sound studies. I am interested in how thinking trans about the ear—that is, understanding the ear as an organ of transition—demands a materialist shift to flesh to critique how the current paradigm of embodied listening promotes the human body as fact. Understanding embodiment only through the body as a recognizable category, which is the byproduct of the paradigm of the “embodied listener,” posits the Western liberal human body (read: white, able-bodied, cisgender) as exceptional, whole, and knowable. I argue that paying particular attention to (h)earing—the sensation of the ear qua flesh prior to entering the regime of cognition—develops a way to think trans about sound by not taking the Human and its body for granted. A shift to the materiality of fleshliness as a theoretical framework for the ear, how the ear has been appropriated as the metaphor par excellence for the human body in the study of sound and music, reveals how racialized, sexed, and embodied corporeality has been produced in our discourses. My offering of the trans ear follows Black feminist critiques of the Human, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis, to point to what a sensate of (h)earing might afford. **KEYWORDS** hearing, trans, ears, flesh, Human

We are told that listening makes us Human.<sup>1</sup> Yet listening,<sup>2</sup> the attentive perception of sound as a form of human cognition, reifies the Human as Subject in its production of the Western anthropocentric humanities. The human listener here is too often given a body without accounting for how it is always already inscribed by the logics of race, sex, and ability; my contention is not with recent work that has sought to understand constructions of race, sex, and ability in sound, but rather the more fundamental question of the listening subject in the first place—one that is predicated on a Human and its body. This essay, then, points away from identitarian questions such as “Who listens?” and instead asks “What (h)ears?” Is it possible for listening to be liberatory in this context? Any pile of flesh can respond to sound’s stimulus—Roland Barthes described “the physiological faculty” of hearing as “simple,” a basic response to indexable acoustical stimuli that equalizes human and nonhuman animals.<sup>3</sup> When sound studies discourse relies on Western liberal subjects to utilize human consciousness to listen for meaning, those of us who are unable to listen properly or to unpack the deeper codes of sonic meaning, or who are otherwise impaired or disabled (cognitively, physiologically, psychically) are not perceived or treated as Human. If the intertwined histories of slavery, settler-colonialism, cispatriarchy, and medical/pathological models of (dis)ability have disregarded many forms of life from the category Human altogether, how might we redefine listening as a practice (and sound studies as a field) to imagine, rather than exclude, forms of life that have been otherwise denied?

*Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture*, Vol. 4, Number 3, pp. 300–314. Electronic ISSN: 2688-0113 © 2023 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/res.2023.4.3.300>

Over the past decade, sound studies produced a logic of listening through the formulation of “vibratory matter.” Influenced by the philosophies of object-oriented ontology and new materialism, the concept of vibrational listening seeks to flatten subject–object relationships. Engagement with sound’s social difference and hierarchies of power—sound as language and as politics—is transcended through the analysis of sonic relationality: the collective vibration of bodies. However, I contend that flattening subject/object negates forms of human life that were never permitted to exist in Western liberal subjectivity in the first place, specifically trans life. By examining objects and organs that *resemble human life* without being afforded the social and legal rights to exist as such, we reveal the limit of the category of Human. In this experimental essay, I consider how formulations of the ear, and sensations in the flesh prior to entering regimes of cognition, are central to the practice of *thinking trans* through sound. I offer that *thinking trans* allows us to reconsider how flesh is rendered as an object apart from the category of Human, and that the trans ear (qua flesh) imagines the sonic without depending on the listening body.

If we are to imagine an ear that does not listen, we must not mistake the human body as fact. The body is not a unit of measurement, but rather a fleshly assemblage that is established as an a priori mode of being through hegemonic white/cis/abled-corporeality. In transitioning, I deny the ordering of my flesh into that thing which I have known to call my body. My transition does not start or end with the unit of the body, however, nor its encoding as a listening subject. Yet I continue to reorder and replace my body’s flesh in order to perceive and be perceived in a sort of *transaural harmony*. I wonder if by thinking trans we might linger on the concept and practice (h)earing a bit longer, and disrupt a teleology that needs to incorporate sound into its episteme of perception, cognition, and logic. How might we *take notice of taking notice of* this thing we call sound?

If we are really always vibrating, a collective referent that often gets flattened to pure vibratory material, perhaps transness can help us think of ways to not take the bodily material we are given for granted. Thinking trans, for me, considers the production of assembling flesh—the labor of making a body Human. My late mother’s labor in November of 1998 that produced a male assigned at birth. The labor of my doctor prescribing me hormones. The labor of a Third World worker who produced the bra that I need for my newly formed breasts. The labor of an ear trying to hear her-self speak. The labor of an ear that is desperate to produce a her and a herself, a dialectic between the internal perception of self and the raced/sexed ear that (h)ears. In my exploration of the trans ear, I do not seek a pre-semiotic and pre-lingual sound. I want to think critically about how we have come to produce our object of study in sound studies by a certain teleological process that produces a certain type of Human/body/listener. I stick with the ear because it is in that flesh that our mythology of listening begins. In the mythos of listening, I search for a theory of the flesh that demands a renewed politics and ethics of flesh, and desire a sound studies in which the sensation of sound is not only taken seriously but opens a horizon for the radical ontologies of life that *thinking trans* affords.

“So let us be tender with one another,” writes Juana María Rodríguez at the end of *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, who wonders what might

happen if we “foster a spirit of vulnerability that cultivates the willingness to risk imagining otherwise.”<sup>4</sup> For Rodríguez, this “spirit of vulnerability” opens up the potential for “care that endures.” What we must endure is a recent resurgence of anti-trans State violence, neoliberal white- and rainbow-washing of trans/queer politics, and, as I offer through this essay, listening practices that are depoliticized under the guise of diversity, equity, and inclusion—a process accomplished through the flattening of subject/object relationships. When *all vibrations matter*, we forgo the risk of imagining otherwise and might leave behind those who could never become Human if we remain too eager to stick with our cherished listening.

I hope to model *thinking trans* not by defining the concept, but by feeling its contours through a sensual grammar unlocked by speculative writing. Experimental and intensely theoretical writing—I try to steer away from the pejorative adjective *dense*—can be painful to read. But as trans/queer scholars, we might ask ourselves what pleasure can be derived when we encounter challenging texts, and ask, “Yes, please, more?” I invite the reader to breathe into the confusion when the essay gets a little windy, and to find a way to take pleasure in endurance. Hopefully you will see the care I put into it, just for you. Like a complicated sexual practice, embrace the unsettling feeling of having to do something painful again and again—even if that means rereading a sentence after the poppers wear off. In the standard paragraphs in the delineated sections below, you will find a theoretical explication of the question of humanity and its relation to (h)earing. In the lines that follow, you will find a poetic reflection written in a more direct and reflexive tone. I have included two visual collages in the essay (which I do not attempt to describe as art) that assist in disembodimenting its structural integrity and slow down the reading of text. Overall, I have constructed the essay as a fleshly constellation that refuses to have a body itself, but rather, in its disparate forms, encourages us to read and engage with *thinking trans* as a theory of the sensate derived from reading the text.<sup>5</sup>

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Now, I would like to turn to thinking about how the human body is constructed in our current social order. For Hortense Spillers, “the human body becomes a defenseless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor.”<sup>6</sup> Spillers makes clear a distinction between the body and flesh, where flesh is “the zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brushes of discourse.”<sup>7</sup> Captive flesh, as a materialization of extreme forms of violence of the institution of slavery and the “suspension” of this flesh in its transit across the Middle Passage, precisely speaks to the ways in which Black bodies were made unhuman through this very process. By this, I mean that a consideration of the materiality of flesh centers the continual forms of captivity that racialized (and specifically Black) bodies are subject to that render them outside “human forms of life” in a rights-bearing liberal democracy. What interests me in thinking through flesh, not in metaphorization but as (trans)historical materialism, is how flesh remains adjacent to the construction of the human body as its lack and its wound. The viscera, as it is materialized as flesh, signifies the limits of

this human body, and by focusing on these borders, we might be able to rewrite the grammar of this very embodiment.

Sylvia Wynter takes the quagmire of the Human, and the way it has been constructed to perpetuate the objecthood of Blackness, and calls for a “rewriting of knowledge as we know it . . . [of] our now purely naturalized modes or genres of humanness.”<sup>8</sup> She asserts that the West has created a hegemonic mode of human being through discursive and storytelling practices (mythos) that actualize in biological matter (bios). Through the universalizing genre of the Human comes the pronoun of the referent-we, a fictionalized grouping of “equally” human beings that share responsibility in climate change, genocide, and other extreme forms of violence against the flesh of non-Human fleshly objects. What I seek to underscore in Wynter’s writing is that the formation of humanity as a distinct and exceptional category, and the body it possesses, is one that is always already biological, racialized, sexed, and gendered through the precise objectification (and objecthood) of flesh. The manipulation of flesh in order to construct a body that can “feel” certain identitarian positions—affects that work to suture psychic conditions (thoughts), biological effects (sensation), and systems of meaning (language)—is the working together of a quotidian and historical logic of the onto-metaphysical, psycho-affective-spiritual, and discursive qua lingual category Human.

*“Tell me it feels good”*

uttered into the ear of the other  
sharing glossolalic jouissance  
moaning in harmony

*“Do you like it,  
baby?”*

an ear pressed to their body,  
sensing every pulse, every shiver,  
every piece of flesh

My ear can feel you close to me,  
holding me  
taking a part of me with you  
in your ears  
as I let out a short gasp  
a part of me I hope you’re still holding onto  
in your ears

Ears getting wet,  
with sweat  
spit  
trans excrement  
filling with the tenderness of having a lover close

*Beg for it*

for flesh  
its vulnerability  
being held in a good fuck  
suspended in the flesh’s pleasure

What does that sound like?

how do we perceive trans flesh in ecstasy  
what are our ears doing?  
*fuck!*

*just like that*

*Right*

*there*

releasing the flesh to the other's embrace  
ears given over to this thing we call sound

How do my ears feel

this thing we call sound  
this thing we call transness  
this flesh that has been made a thing  
why do I surrender to it?

Can these ears help me not have a body I call my own

ears that long for the sounds  
of a good fuck  
of your embrace  
will you take my ears  
hold them for me  
just a little bit longer?

Will you hear with my ears

take in the sound of your daily life  
washing dishes  
stepping over curbs  
of loud bus rides  
the pop of a needle cap as you inject  
the long and sweet sigh before you fall asleep  
can you take care of them?

\* \* \*

While those of us working in sound are not necessarily practicing aesthetics, borrowing from aesthetic thinking might prove helpful when considering the radical potentialities that (h)earing might offer. The study of sound, in its inter- and anti-disciplinary forms, demands a wide range of methodologies for thinking through our object of study; creative practice guides many scholar-artists in working through the possibilities of the aural, computational and technical methods are useful to those intersecting in science and technology studies broadly and the history of recording specifically, and speculative approaches to scale offer insight into sound, space, and the environment. Of course, sound studies' methods can go on ad infinitum, as Jonathan Sterne, in *The Sound Studies Reader*, writes that "sonic imaginations are guided by an orienting curiosity, a figural practice that reaches into fields of sonic knowledge and practice, and blends them with other questions, problems, fields, spaces and histories."<sup>9</sup> This essay draws on aesthetics and psychoanalysis to understand the limits of the category Human in our privileged

definitions of listening. Performance studies scholar Leticia Alvarado defines the aesthetic “as a collision with the sensate—the activation of the sensorial realm—and the political world within which it is bound, honing in on the subjectivities that might emerge from this collision.”<sup>10</sup> What I am attempting to describe as (h)earing, or the ear’s function aside from the teleology of sound-hearing-listening, is precisely afforded by an aesthetics of flesh that attends to sound and the sensorial. My interest in aesthetics as method stems from the focus on the phenomenological orientation toward its object rather than (necessarily) a prescriptive rendering of the object’s quality (e.g., beauty, the sublime, or the work-concept).<sup>11</sup> This essay on the trans ear, then, is my attempt at describing a (trans)aural sensate that is committed to not being Human.

In a turn against “aestheticism,” Wynter demonstrates how a “deciphering practice” enables us to understand how certain culturally specific human forms of life are codified and naturalized in aesthetic forms. She articulates that “such a practice will reveal their rules of functioning rather than replicate and perpetuate them.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, the aesthetic is not taken for granted as a byproduct of human social relations but rather that which has a psycho-affective and biochemical (neurological) effect on the flesh that produces a certain Human (as) subject (and its corresponding body) within Western logics. A deciphering practice is that which undoes the process of the deconstruction (i.e., Derridean grammatology) in order to render the aesthetic’s effect in producing human life consciously alterable; this is ultimately a metaphysical practice akin to Sandoval’s meta-ideologizing that moves toward a differential consciousness. Of course, such a deciphering practice, and the types of methodological scrutiny required when engaging with aesthetic objects, might make one’s choice of object become an essentialized version of human life in the production of the exemplary object. To this point, I might add that the production of exemplary categories is on par with the metaphysical transubstantiation that deciphering and meta-ideologizing practices demand. Such practices, in my reading of them, are spiritual manifestations that Third World feminist writers, such as Wynter and Chela Sandoval, engage with in order to produce a mythos in which human flesh is altered and vulnerable to other forms of biological life.

Following the deconstruction of a given internal logic, which she articulates as working through its semiotic technology (akin to Derrida’s grammatology), Sandoval urges us to think further and consider the forces (colonial, imperial, racial, gendered, and otherwise) that produce its dialectic in a movement she calls meta-ideologizing, or “the operation of appropriating dominant ideological forms, and using them whole in order to transform them.”<sup>13</sup> It is important to stress that I am employing meta-ideology to do more than undo the conceptual logic that produces the human body and instead to work through the ideology—its political metaphysics—that enable the human body to remain as distinct in its sublimation to non-Human animal flesh. The ideological problematic that I am meta-ideologizing is the differentiation between the Human and its non-Human Other in the form of object, animal, and flesh—and how these all align within broader coalitional dispositions against the ideology of white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, ableism, and anthropocentrism.

\* \* \*



FIGURE 1. Collage of the ear in ecstasy, courtesy of the author.

I wonder if we might be able to spend some time thinking about (h)earing. By this, I mean that I want to be able to understand the ways in which flesh operates and is operated upon, what we demand from the ear in our teleology of sound-hearing-listening that is practiced in much of sonic thinking. When was the last time we asked the ear for permission to (h)ear? When was the last time our flesh gave consent to be subjected to the regime of perception we call and privilege as listening? This, to me, complicates recent arguments and debates within the study of sound about what I might call the vibrational turn that promotes ontologies of sound that often reduce it to its capacity and relation to the sonic qua aural. It is my intention to play with this housing of the sonic within the aural by seeking to understand the latter's role in fleshly life; by doing so the former is welcomed into alternative semiotics in which sound is not limited to any regime of perception, but rather that it is understood as that which has produced the logic of listening itself. In this sense, sound has always already been listened to by naming it as such; what we have not actually paid attention to as sound studies scholars is (h)earing.

Can I (h)ear me? Is the performative mode of address that the interior position of Alejandrina addresses herself as (I) able to use her own ears to engage in a form of recognition that gives the psychic/spiritual mode of being (me) the potentiality to sustain itself (life)? In Derrida's formulation of the ear in *The Ear of the Other*, the ear is primarily an organ of difference. "The ear of the other says me to me," he writes, where the constant reiteration of this performative mode of address to establish our bodies as individual and our own (I) must be reified in the other's ability to perceive me.<sup>14</sup> Being

“me” must be corroborated in the ear of the other in order to be understood as distinct as “me” and not “that.” Every time I utter “I,” I open myself to the possibility of failing as an “I” in the ear of the other, being mis(h)heard as nothing more than trivial sound, a reduction to pure vibratory material. Can the ears attached to the constellation of flesh I call my body be foreign to me, other to me, so that I can finally (h)ear me?

Again, I turn to Derrida to think through this question. “Hearing-oneself-speak” is a form of auto-affection that creates the unit of perception we describe as experiencing “I.”<sup>15</sup> In hearing-oneself-speak, the figure “I” comes into existence, an ontological aurality presupposed on the maintenance of “you” as a separate category. This dialectic is problematized when we consider how the hearing-oneself-speak necessitates an aural Other; (h)earing, therefore, is not possible to do alone; rather, it is one of the ways in which the psyche is constantly trying to fight for its own recognition despite its fundamental inability to do so. In this way, I am not sure that we have fully learned how to listen, yet. Might taking a moment to think about (h)earing, lingering—fixating perhaps—on the sensation of a flesh that does not consent to perceive, provide us a new epistemology of the aural? I would like to put the heard under partial erasure in order to consider how the ear operates as flesh, an ear that does not always consent to hear, listen, to be other.

The Chora, for psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, precedes evidence, spatiality, and temporality as a rupture and rhythm. All discourse depends on it and refuses it. The Chora is neither sign nor signifier, but rather is generated in order to signify. In terms of psychoanalysis, thinking through the choric is a theory of the unconscious in which we “read in this rhythmic space.”<sup>16</sup> As a reading practice (and not the text itself that is occupied in the Symbolic order), the choric sonority resembles what Roland Barthes describes as the pleasure of the text.<sup>17</sup> The Chora is a psychic manifestation of sonic flesh, of castration from the mother’s body and the subject’s inauguration into the symbolic order through the coming into the human body that Western metaphysics presents as the Lacanian Mirror Stage. Connection to the Chora, whether by refusal or embrace of its grammar, insists upon the relationality of individual human bodies, even if the yonic residue of the womb might remain on our ears. The Chora is the ear’s first excrement, of the separation of biological matter that is separate from this human body. As it lurks in the hum in the grammatical ordering of the Symbolic, distancing from the Chora, as a mode of abjection to produce the human body as legible, the logic of listening is formed. Human subjects distance themselves from the rhythm of the Chora, and the materiality of fleshly excrement, through pathologized structures of listening. This, I believe, is what motivates the current movement toward object-oriented ontology and “vibratory” new materialism within the study of sound in an effort to curb anthropocentrism. However, I remain unconvinced that this gesture—of reducing the human body and its subjective position in order to flatten sonic resonances to their vibratory potential vis-à-vis relationality—contends with the social and political material conditions of those who have always already been rendered as objects qua flesh. I disagree with the importance of ungrounding subject-object relations within object-oriented ontology in that flesh is always already outside the category Human, and those rendered as fleshly objects are predicated on the formation of the subject in the first place.



The ear, that organ outside the body  
that is not fully outside  
always caving in  
revealing an endless interiority

The cochlea looks like a conch, Fibonacci's dream  
a descent into the labyrinth,  
the warm womb of the interior  
seeking my Eurydice, her Khora

Sirenic

A "visible organ of the body"<sup>18</sup>  
marking a fleshliness  
a point of contact between you and i,  
the technology that bisects, opens up nos/otras<sup>19</sup>

The ear streeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeetches,  
reaching out to make contact with the other  
the author  
reader  
  
two ears, docking each other  
consuming each other  
*nos/otras*

Highly erotic, the invaginated ear assists  
"in the construction of an imaginary site of contact with *other* bodies."<sup>20</sup>  
the ear, an organ of desire  
used as a tool for lusting after the Other  
allowing for the ethnographic encounter  
a benevolent taste of the foreign

Oh let me taste you, Ear!  
let me pierce you  
i promise that i won't draw blood  
Insert a rod through you  
adorn you with gold, silver, or plastic  
Processes of trans self-fashioning  
brand you with the indexing of identity  
"is this there a gay ear?"  
let me be in you, on you, under you, Ear!

I use my ears in trans ways.  
I transly use my ears.  
My ears are trans ears,  
flesh separate from the body  
ears as open wounds of trans vulnerability  
I am transitioning my ears,  
maybe not with hormones  
but with new differentials

transing them by making them flesh  
 refusing the body that they were born in  
 trans ears that are ours as they are Others(?)  
 I am (h)earing in trans ways.

“the ear of the other says me to me”  
 the reader’s ear signs me  
 Alejandrina is here!  
 in your ear  
 and commits suicide by the supplemental order

the reading ear paces the text  
 forms the stanza  
 finds its rhythm  
 Puts the commas, where they need, to b, e

the ear is grammatological in its ravishing through the text  
 moaning, the reading ear pauses at certain points  
 finding the pleasure of the text  
 an overwhelming resonance, spatiotemporal delay  
 Interpellated through its tinnitus  
 an impasse of sound  
 the Master cannot be recognized because of his tinnitus  
 Unable to hear the Slave

A ringing that opens up the potential  
 for a differential consciousness  
 la facultad  
 to make my ears foreign to me  
 to hear my/Self  
 destroy her  
 become new in sound  
 with a political différence

But how do I make my ears foreign to me?  
 do i circumcise my own ear from me?  
 remove the fleshly exterior?  
 an open wound of flesh  
 our ears as objects to orient ourselves towards  
 but the cavernous interior will always remain.

Removing my ear would be the end of me  
 and you  
 as I sign you  
 make you . . . you

\* \* \*



FIGURE 2. Photograph of the author's trans ear, courtesy of the author.

What does the ear need, what does it desire? I wonder if in the fleshliness of the ear and its exposed invagination that renders itself as always open for the sonic's entry, we might find modes of radical vulnerability. What might it look like to give our ears up to this sound in a way that subverts the very process of its subjugation to it? I hope it does not seem that I am in any way totalizing sound as something that is overdetermined by its

relationship to its signifier; in fact, I want to emphasize that when I use “this sound” I am interested in the supplemental nature of constructing “thisness” in the first place. The signifier “sound” and its temporal enunciation “this” remind us that there is no inaugural sound to begin with, as to write “this sound” always already instantiates the absence of the writer by the supplemental order of writing itself. In this way, I am suggesting that we might give ourselves to being always already at a lack for words while simultaneously becoming disillusioned by the pursuit to capture the “thisness” or “soundness” of being constantly exposed to this sound in the ear’s vulnerable state.

What I am proposing is that we might consider moments of non-arrival in our orientation to the sonic object we describe as this sound. I dream of the radical becomings that take place in this being-with sound that (h)earing does for me. A sensation of the ear as flesh, trans flesh, *and the care I must have for it*. Flesh that has histories of imprisonment, rape, and violence. A flesh that demands broader coalitional work to end all carceral, state, and imperial violence. A history of captive flesh of those previously enslaved that has always already been outside the construction of the Human and the body it possesses. The flesh of Indigenous thinkers and healers, and the oftentimes lack of separation between the two, that has been rendered insufficiently empirical as a methodological strategy for being-with sonic objects in the transformational metaphysics that spiritual practices offer.<sup>21</sup> Disabled and debilitated flesh that is marked as societally deficient by structures that demand a body that can produce labor and surplus capital, of flesh that is slowly wearing down in the pursuit of the good life, of flesh that is being poisoned by lead water pipes, oil spills, smog, and climate change.<sup>22</sup> Flesh that is under assault in the necropolitical deathworlds of the borderlands. *Flesh that is a wound*.

Our ears might be able to perform “our” in a collective trans ontology when we consider the potentialities of being exposed to sound with or without our “arrival” to it in human bodies. Trans ears are those ears that are not committed to staying attached to our bodies. As open wounds, trans ears seek care in others, but more importantly, in modes of radical togetherness, transing the rajadura that bisects *nos/otras*. Ears that do not need to be your own, for they are both *nos* (ours) and *otras* (others), allowing for dialectical recognition and collective fleshly sonority. The trans flesh of the ear that denies them from entirely being our own highlights why we must pay attention to (h)earing as a way to liberate the object we orient ourselves toward. The flesh of the ear, in its vulnerable state, is also an object—one that exposes the limits of the Human construct, and the sound it so wishes to listen to. Trans ears and their acts of (h)earing present a strategy for being-with this sound in a way that demands care in the present to ensure that this flesh makes it to another day, which in itself is the disappointed hope of trans utopian potentialities in the emergency of the present.

I never wanted to watch someone die, so I didn’t. My mother had already been off life support for almost ten hours, and she was moved to a nicer room (this time with flowers!) than the ICU she had been in for almost a week. I told my aunt that she could accompany my brother as the second visitor who stayed after the 8 p.m. overnight shift. I told her I needed food, that I was happy with the goodbye I uttered quietly, holding

a cold piece of flesh that used to be a hand that held me, fed be, combed my hair, changed my earrings, spanked me—a hand that used to be my mother’s but was now just flesh. What I couldn’t tell her, what I couldn’t tell anyone that day, was that I never wanted to watch someone die, so I didn’t. The night before as I slept on the tiny ICU couch, making a call to a lover who was thousands of miles away and weeping with a mask over my face because there were COVID patients in the room next door, I could hear the sounds of a ventilator make my mother breathe as her lungs seized, desperate to fill that flesh I was supposed to call my mother’s body with air. We are told that the ear never closes, that we are always hearing, but I wanted nothing more that night than for her to stop hearing my sobs, that every time her lungs seized and the intubator forced oxygen down her throat her ears wouldn’t recognize the sounds of a daughter witnessing a body become flesh. The cyborg I laid next to that night was no longer a person I knew, the proud parent who months before watched me cross the stage at my college graduation . . . the last time I saw her in the flesh. I couldn’t stand to see this cyborg that lay beside me, to hear the forced breaths of a body that couldn’t do it on its own, a piece of flesh that could never be my mother. So, I woke up, stared at this flesh that was supposed to be my mother, and called my brother to say that this flesh was going to die that day and all I could do was stare at the anonymously crocheted blanket draped over it while I was supposed to hear a prayer for my mother that was supposedly still in this flesh. She was cold, and the blanket couldn’t do a thing. I never wanted to watch someone die, so I didn’t, and while I was eating a phone is pressed to my ear and I hear “It’s over.” ■

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#### NOTES

1. Throughout the essay, I employ the term *Human* as a proper noun to describe the production of the Human as Subject that dominates Western structures of power, modes of feeling, and theoretical limits. When Human appears capitalized, I am signaling the ontological supremacy of the Human (as Subject) within sound studies discourses. Otherwise, *human* is not capitalized when used as an adjective to highlight any specificities in human-speciated objects that are not entirely within the domain of the Human (i.e., human bodies).
2. Here I am making a distinction between listening as a form of (human) cognition and hearing, which I identify with the sensate.
3. Roland Barthes, “Listening” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 245–60.
4. Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 187.
5. Much like the text itself, and the trans ear that I construct within it, the essay comes together in the interstices of friendship, the academy, and trying to live as a trans person and young scholar, in being an *hermana*, a lover, a colleague—in what might happen if we make an attempt at thinking and feeling trans together. I would first like to acknowledge and thank the mentorship of my adviser M. Myrta Leslie Santana for guiding me through the research,

writing, and publication process along with Jamie Arangure, founder and CEO of Proyecto Trans Latina for the encouragement and support. I would like to thank professors Amy Cimini and Sarah Hankins at UCSD for their feedback through many drafts of the essay and encouraging me to think creatively and critically. I am grateful for the friendship of my queridx Hermán Luis Chávez and their unrelenting patience with me as I went through the highs and lows of the writing process. And, of course, to the amazing team at *Resonance* for helping this essay get to where it is, especially Charles Eppley for the invitation to include this essay in the queer sounds series and Laura Kenney for the careful edits. It is my contention that we can imagine a form of scholarship in which we say it's okay that we didn't do this alone; I might have written the words on the pages that follow, but they wouldn't have gotten there if I didn't have a trans life in which a community got me to the writing desk in the first place.

6. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67.
7. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.
8. Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 18.
9. Jonathan Sterne, "Sonic Imaginations" in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (London and New York: Routledge 2012), 6.
10. Leticia Alvarado, *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 6.
11. This essay is heavily influenced by queer/trans of color and psychoanalytic aesthetic theory such as Alvarado, José Esteban Muñoz, Hentyle Yapp, La Marr Jurelle Bruce, Jillian Hernandez, michá cardenas, and Darriek Scott, who are interested in how our orientation toward the object, through a politicized, (psycho)affective sensate is imbricated in circulations of power.
12. Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice," in *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mboye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 261.
13. Chela Sandoval, *The Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 82.
14. Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Christie McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 51.
15. Here I paraphrase Derrida's *Voice and Phenomenon*, where he writes that hearing-oneself-speak "is an auto-affectation of a unique kind. On the one hand, it operates within the medium of universality; what appears as signified therein must be idealities that are *idealiter* indefinitely repeatable or transmissible as the same. On the other hand, the subject can hear or speak to himself and be affected by the signifier he produces, without passing through an external detour, the world, the sphere of what is not 'his own'" (78). Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010 [1967]).
16. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 26.
17. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 11.
18. Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 51.
19. Gloria Anzaldúa offers a unique psychoanalytic construction of social subjectivity with *nos/otras*, derived from the Spanish word *nosotras* (us), bifurcated by a *rajadura* (slash), marking *nos* (us) and *otras* (other, feminine). She writes that "La rajadura gives us a third point of view, a perspective from the cracks and a way to reconfigure ourselves as subjects outside binary oppositions, outside existing dominant relations (79). Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz*

- en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. Analouise Keating (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
20. Roshanak Kheshti, *Modernity's Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 55.
  21. We might learn from scholars such as Joyce Green, who describes Indigenous feminism as “inextricably bound to the experiences of Indigenous peoples with colonialism, with its legitimating ideology of racism and white privilege and with the oppressive reality of the contemporary settler state that is induced with the ideology and thus enacts it in culture and policy” (4–5). To implicate Indigenous flesh in this hailing is to consider how it learns from the very lands it has been alienated from in the last 500 years of colonization, *and yet*, how Indigenous thinkers have been able to understand how gender oppression (including transphobia) is directly tied to the theft and exploitation of Indigenous lands, whose people have developed sacred responsibility to it. Joyce Green, ed., *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2017).
  22. Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer highlight how disability, as an analytic framework, offers a mode of knowledge production, extending the possibilities of crip theory by employing what they describe as *cripistemology* (which was originally coined by Lisa Duggan) as a strategy to “challeng[e] subjects who confidently ‘know’ about ‘disability,’ as though it could be a thoroughly comprehended object of knowledge” (130). When thinking through flesh, considering the *cripistemological* allows for critiques of normative embodiment that produce the quagmire of the Human. Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, “Cripistemologies: Introduction,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 127–47.