

Covered Mouths Still Have Voices

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Introduction – On Mouths and Voices

The title of this essay is a political slogan. It borrows from the chant of medical workers in Greece who have been asserting that covered mouths still have a voice (“Και τα καλυμμένα στόματα βγάζουν φωνή”) since long before the COVID-19 pandemic began at the start of 2020. The slogan has become politically useful on wider scales since then. It was used as a rallying cry for protests outside the Greek parliament in Athens in the early stages of the pandemic; the annual May Day rally, for example, went ahead in 2020 despite measures to restrict public gatherings, with people masked and gloved and lined up exactly two metres apart from one another (organisers used tape measures and floor markings to set out positions for people to legally assemble). And more broadly, this slogan can be heard as a way of ensuring that political participation and forms of resistance remain possible – and possible even to expand – across a global landscape of lockdowns and restrictions, followed by the abandonment of these measures, and authoritarian policing in multiple societies that has criminalised protest under the guise of public safety measures while simultaneously leaving health services to collapse and people to die.

The essay takes this slogan as a jumping-off point – looking and listening outwards from Athens and Greece towards planetary forms of activism. I seek to think “covered mouths still have voices” as a means of understanding political techniques of vocality that have been retuned in pandemic contexts. This means hearing how people maintain movements and expand solidarities, but do so as communities of care: building methods of looking after one another while simultaneously building and articulating forms of political resistance. More than this, it means understanding how these methods converge, in the sense that looking after one another *becomes* a form of political resistance – in the face of state policies of enforcement and abandonment, and their effects that play out along lines of race, class, and gender.

This is no small task, of course. Here I do not attempt a full account of community practices of care or a social analysis of the pandemic. This is not an article *about* COVID per se. Instead, I keep my ears trained on voice as a technique of political life – in line with the aims of this special issue – and in particular on the relations between voice, space, and place that developed through forms of pandemic activism. My focus here is on forms of what I’m calling *vocal-spatial resistance*. Pandemic activism created (and continue to create) new spatialities of voice. On one level, this involves hearing how

people find ways to voice particular spaces and places, especially cities, contesting political hierarchies of vocality that have been tightened through the pandemic so far – or what activist and humanities scholar David Palumbo-Liu (2021) calls “speaking out of place.” On another level, it means listening to modes of resonance and relay, echo and antiphony, that *carry* voices from one place to another; particularly as a means of identifying shared struggles and relational solidarities that have urgently surfaced since 2020.

For sure, not all of this is new. These political praxes and processes did not begin with the outbreak of COVID-19 and the various state responses to it. But I argue that we would do well to listen to the forms of vocal-spatial resistance that have emerged – and are still emergent – as responses to these forms of pandemic governance and the particular moment in racial capitalism that they at once fit into, extend, and reconfigure. Here I sketch three ways of doing this, which make up the structure of the essay. I turn, first, to the work of displacing and what I’m calling “dispolicing” both the voice and the city: attempting to figure out how people contest the emptying of public space and simultaneously pluralise ways of representing – speaking and voicing – urban geographies. I then focus on ways of listening to vocalities that have developed through the pandemic, hearing how voices signal and sound out multiple forms of mobilisation. I close by outlining how this builds a global sense of voice: borrowing from work on relational geographies (particularly Doreen Massey’s 1991 writing on a “global sense of place”) that foregrounds the co-existence of multiple places within a single space and transposing this to hear how voices are relational, collective, distributed, contested, and how they exist within one another to build sonic cartographies of resistance on planetary scales.

None of this is an attempt to make grand statements on fixing the political dilemmas we are currently faced with. It is not an attempt to universalise or theorise or homogenise. It is more an effort to contribute to getting somewhere better than where we are at the moment, and to understand the roles and potentials of voices along the way. To do this, the essay speaks from a few perspectives. It learns from the political community that I am part of in Athens – both as a member of a refugee-led activist collective as well as broader creative communities in the city. It reflects on a collective art project I was part of in Athens that sounded the city’s political voices across the waves of the pandemic. And it thinks with writers on voice who have long been showing us how to hear spaces and struggles, attending to the dynamics of sound and silence, worldmaking and containment, belonging and unbelonging. From this, ways of hearing mouths and voices

emerge not just in terms of speaking and sounding, or only as forms of identity and agency, but as a gathering, a refusal, a resource, a navigational tool, a transformation.

Displacing and dispolicing (the voice and the city)

I'll start by explaining why I have tweaked the slogan from "covered mouths still have a *voice*" to "covered mouths still have *voices*." Definitely this is not in any way to question or contradict the work of medical workers and political organisers in Athens and elsewhere. It is hoped, instead, to unsettle the idea that people, movements, communities, and places speak with and through a single voice. Political voices are not things that we simply have or do not. They are, rather, methods of asserting presence and imagining otherwise; of calling things into question and calling other things into being; they are mobile and migratory, plural and polyphonic; things that speak both individually and collectively and across languages. This first section seeks to re-hear the relationships between voices and places, between speech and space. And it does so by engaging both with questions of displacing – uncoupling voice and place and the notion that the two are tied together in some kind of clearly bordered geographical configuration – and with dispolicing – pushing against systems that enforce these (b)ordered geographies and simultaneously enforce the kinds of vocality that are possible in urban space. Certain voices, forms of speech and sound, have been violently suppressed through the pandemic, following the racialised logics of bordering and policing. But certain forms of vocal-spatial resistance have also gotten louder, and it is worth listening to the politics of both these processes.

Some examples from Athens to show what this sounds like. I'm part of a movement in the city that focuses its organising around techniques of voice. This movement centres on an organisation founded in 2018 by people from Damascus, Syria, who gathered a team of people from various backgrounds working in Athens – myself included – who share similar ideas on questions of citizenship, urban diversity, movement building, and the importance of creativities and culture to all of the above (Western, forthcoming). As the team was assembled by people of refugee background, advocating for refugee rights and rewriting narratives of displacement have been at the heart of our work throughout. This has meant building spaces of relation and communication between and across communities in the city, building modes of representation that reflect street-level forms of belonging, and building possible futures beyond marginalisation.

Since the start of the pandemic, this work has become at once more difficult and more urgent. COVID-19 arrived during a moment of border violence in the spring of 2020, when tensions between Greece and Turkey were once again transferred onto people

seeking to cross the border, and manifested into violence against people living in Greece with refugee status, seeking asylum, or otherwise racialised as non-Greek. As was the case elsewhere, the pandemic was weaponised into anti-migration rhetoric and policy as public health was conflated with national security (Tazzioli and Stierl 2021; Walia 2021: 10-13). This materialised into increased budgets for border security and “defence” – the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, visited Greece at the beginning of March 2020 and called the country “Europe’s shield” (Rankin 2020) – as well as the suspension of asylum applications for people arriving into the country. This was coupled with a continued degradation of health and living conditions for people of refugee background living in Greece. Movement in and out of the camps was restricted, and people were unable to follow guidelines on physical distancing due to overcrowding and inadequate facilities in the camps themselves (Tsavdaroglou and Kaika 2021; Tsourdi 2020). More generally, people seeking asylum were excluded from the national response to the virus, to the extent that their containment in the camps was positioned as a necessary measure to keep the rest of society safe (Kondilis et al. 2021).

Against this racist backdrop, it has been a challenge for our team to gather as a community in Athens, and on some level our work has shifted from organising events and documenting our actions around the city to devising interventions into Athenian publics, histories, and geographies. This is, amongst other things, an attempt to highlight how ongoing efforts to separate Greece from its Eastern Mediterranean geographies, to position Europe as separate from its neighbouring continents, and to turn the sea into a carceral space, are all based on ahistorical fictions. Our [Citizen Sound Archive](#) – a platform we started in 2019 as a sounding board for methods of belonging – serves as a storehouse of these initiatives, and follows this shift from documentation to intervention (Western 2023). Recent projects foreground geographical imaginations. A sound essay called “[The Movement Exists in Voice and Sound](#),” recorded remotely in lockdown in 2020, follows how revolutionary rhythms of uprising in Syria now reverberate into citizenship movements in Greece. A radio show called “[Relational City](#)” discusses the ways that multiple cities exist in Athens, based on old entanglements of cultures and people and on newer creativities developed through migration and displacement. A sound installation called “[Ασύρματος](#)” (Asyrmatos, meaning “wireless” or “radio,” is also the name of a neighbourhood in Athens) makes a sonic chorography of Athens and the Eastern Mediterranean, a kind of audio space-writing that relays convergences and contestations that circulate around the sea and into the city.

Voice as a technique of political life, in these movements, means finding ways of being heard. Such practices push against entire systems of vocality and representation. In

contexts of forced migration, discussions of “refugee voices” have disclosed how notions of refugeeness have for a long time been coupled with practices of silencing (Cabot 2016; Sigona 2014). The work of anthropologist Liisa Malkki, to draw upon a prominent example, tells us how people of refugee background are positioned as “speechless emissaries” (1996) in the eyes and ears of humanitarian administrators and organisations – with lived knowledges and theories of displacement disregarded and replaced by narratives of victimhood and vulnerability. The result is that people are at once homogenised, stripped of histories and politics, and heard only as refugees. And are silenced, spoken for – or spoken over – by supposed expert authorities, which of course is also true in contexts of media and academia.

These political ventriloquisms amount to a denial of what Edward Said called the “permission to narrate” (1984a): the power to articulate and communicate histories and geographies, denied to Palestinians (as expressed in Said’s work), and true across innumerable instances of coloniality. We talked about this issue in our [“Relational City”](#) radio show, sharing thoughts on our efforts to find ways of voicing the city, based on the practices of emplacement and city-making that are excluded from mainstream media accounts. A point we dwelt on was language, and what it means to communicate as a team in which multiple languages are spoken, our conversations often moving between them. Partly this is to do with recognising, as artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha recognised, that “mother tongue is your refuge – it is being home” (1982: 45-46). That ways of being and belonging are intimately bound up with ways of thinking and speaking. And partly it is to do with developing political voices that enable us to speak both as a collective and as individuals, asserting the right to speak the city in multiple voices and languages. All of which is particularly salient in Athens, where questions of voice and speech, of democracy and political participation, have long been gendered, raced, and classed.

This is not necessarily a new insight. Writers on voice have argued that we need to be able to hear how a voice can be collectively produced and distributed across speakers, while at the same time hearing how individual people can have multiple relationships to their own voice as well as multiple voices (Kunreuther 2014). Often these plural vocalities are deliberately *not heard* in efforts to ascribe certain ideas of voice to certain groups of people and to restrict the kinds of speech that are possible as a result. This is a part of the “refugee voices” discourse, and it is also apparent in other contexts where marginalisation gets conflated with troubled ideas of authenticity. bell hooks tells us, for example, how in the southern United States, some forms of Black speech are perceived by white listeners as being more “true” than others – a form of racialised listening based

on *not* hearing how Black artists, musicians, and poets speak in and move between many voices. Or not hearing how people whose lives exist through multiple languages and voices “find it a necessary act of self-affirmation not to feel compelled to choose one voice over another, not to claim one as more authentic, but rather to construct social realities that celebrate, acknowledge, and affirm differences, variety” (hooks 2015: 11-12).

So the politics I am seeking to narrate here follows what hooks (2015) calls “coming to voice.” These are sonic strategies of refusal. Refusing hierarchies of voice that position some voices as being more important than others, and equally refusing being forced into ways of speaking constructed by colonial and white-supremacist imaginations (2015: 16). Instead, voice is something to be made and speech is something to be created. For hooks, “true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (hooks 2015: 8). The result is what she calls the liberated or even liberatory voice (2015: 9, 15): ways of speaking not determined by forms of oppression. Ultimately, coming to voice is a form of invention. As hooks puts it: “Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible” (hooks 2015: 9).

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We can think more about the spatial politics of this. Coming to voice and the right to narrate are spatial practices, and part of vocal liberation work involves finding – or building – platforms for speech within particular geographical contexts. This involves overcoming a set of assumptions that particular voices are tied to particular places, or that certain people are somehow the rightful owners and arbiters of speech in a given space; assumptions that can easily slide into a politics of blood and soil. These are sonic territorial traps (I’m drawing here on geographer John Agnew’s (1994) work on “the territorial trap”): forms of knowledge and ways of hearing that conflate space, territory, ethnicity, and identity. Very often this is tied to the nation and ideas of national identity, wherein voice and the ethnoracial construction of language are central to forms of statehood and governance (Rosa 2019). Or, as Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010) ask: Who sings the nation-state? In which the nation is restricted to a linguistic majority, and language becomes a way of asserting control over who belongs and who does not (Butler and Spivak 2010: 59).

Voice, then, is also a border – a racialised regime of belonging. And this resonates with Said’s work on imaginative geographies: those colonial systems of representation that exaggerate difference and distance, that produce symbolic territories and violent materialisations; an aesthetics of separation designed to keep people in their place (Said 2003 [1978]: 49-73; see also Gregory 1995). This is true in Athens, where our efforts to redraw relational geographies and to speak as citizens, despite most of our team not being recognised as such under Greek law, have been met with some hostility – both at a social level and within various institutions of the state. But it also generates possibilities for resistance, especially in urban space, which, following Asef Bayat, remains a “key theatre of contentions” (2010: 12). Cities are spaces of vocal and political improvisation, where movements and political creativities gather. Cities are spaces where borders extend and bordering practices continue, but they are also spaces of unbordering and of generating forms of political community and speech that can unmake borders within everyday life. The city itself, in the media and urban studies of Shannon Mattern, is a “transmission medium for vocality” (2017: 119). The city has speech. The city talks back (Sassen 2013).

If we bring all this back into pandemic contexts, we find two movements running in opposite directions. Going one way is what David Palumbo-Liu calls the “planned political silencing” (2021: 26) that characterises the broad project of states throughout the pandemic so far. In various global settings, state responses to the pandemic combine the emptying of public space, the repression and clamping down of protest, the criminalisation of forms of resistance and solidarity, and increases in policing and authoritarian forms of political decision-making under the guise of public safety and security (Hanieh and Ziadah 2022). The result is an ever-increasing difficulty to speak out and against repressive forces. Voice must here be understood as a resource – something that, as with other resources of wealth and power, could be equally distributed, but is instead being extracted, channelled upwards, and concentrated in ever-diminishing numbers of throats and hands. “The policing of bodies,” to draw on Palumbo-Liu’s essential work on the effects of the pandemic on political voices, “extends to the attempt to control the voices of people – some of whom are heard, and others not” (Palumbo-Liu 2021: 68). Of course, this policing follows lines of race and class. And the pandemic – far from being a great leveller, as was initially hoped in its nascent formations – has been an amplifier of inequalities, with some voices given ever-greater space and prominence while others are attenuated by the demands of racial capitalism.

Running in the other direction is an intensification of efforts towards liberated and liberatory voices. This can be heard clearly in the spread and expansion of what Engin

Isin (2021) calls “planetary movements,” as the interconnection of various global anti-racist, anticolonial, anti-austerity, and anti-gender-violence struggles has been brought sharply into focus by the pandemic, state responses, and the consequences of these decisions. Forms of relational solidarity – those galvanising forces that bring people together into coalitions of struggle – have grown more visible and audible (Vergès 2021). And it is through these practices that displacing and displacing the authoritarian bordering of voices really come together. Communities of care and struggle have set about reclaiming voice and rescripting public space, working against the forces described in the previous paragraph (Palumbo-Liu 2021: 52, 66). This centres again on the work of invention and imagination, an imagination that, for Palumbo-Liu, “rebels against the assignment of certain people to certain places, and the relations of power that reside in those assignments” (Palumbo-Liu 2021: 40). In response to vocal and spatial violence, people are inventing places from which to speak. And it is with this in mind that I turn more directly to the work of vocal-spatial resistance that animates this praxis of invention as a form of pandemic activism.

“You can hear these voices everywhere” (on vocal-spatial resistance)

In the summer of 2020, my friend and colleague Kareem al Kabbani and I recorded and produced a sound essay. Kareem – with whom I run the Citizen Sound Archive – was in Athens, where he lives; I was in Crete, where I had inadvertently gotten stuck that spring. We talked over the phone and we each had a recording device rolling nearby to gather up our voices. The piece, which we had been plotting and planning for some weeks, focused on the ways that voices carry uprisings and uprisings carry voices. We called it “[The Movement Exists in Voice and Sound](#)” – speaking and hearing the ways that sound gave life to revolution in Syria, and how that movement has itself moved across Mediterranean geographies and beyond. This movement at once becomes part of place-based struggles (Gilmore 2002) in Athens and enters into conversations between movements on planetary scales (al Kabbani and Western 2020). It was not long after the Colston statue had been pulled down in Bristol, and we were engaged in a moment of reflecting upon both the meanings and the prospects of our own organising.

At one point during the recording, Kareem spoke of how his younger sister had led a demonstration outside the Syrian embassy in Jordan, running through chants against the Assad regime with a crowd at once displaced from and simultaneously still part of revolution in Syria. He placed this moment into a global struggle:

You know, now, we are almost every country in the world revolting against racism, revolting against nationalism, revolting against bad political and bad

economic decisions. Let's see that. And let's also put with our way of thinking what happened with COVID-19, corona, which has also happened everywhere. Somehow, we are facing the same things around the world. Different injustice, different way of racism, different way of criminalism. This big movement, it comes and it shows that we are all one (al Kabbani, in al Kabbani and Western 2020).

This big movement – of globally differentiated yet connected struggles – also developed its own vocal politics. Kareem continued: “You can hear these voices everywhere – in America, in the UK – and this voice it turned to break statues, it turned also to looking more into history. The sound everywhere, it's travelling from place to place” (al Kabbani, in al Kabbani and Western 2020).

In this section, I want to listen to this voice and tune into some of its resonances. I will do so by engaging with the sonic politics of what development scholars Adam Hanieh and Rafeef Ziadah (2022) have called “pandemic effects,” that is, drawing out some of the meanings of vocal-spatial resistance as a specific set of responses to social and political developments since the start of 2020. And not responses in a straightforward sense – not simply cause and effect or call and response – but a voice that works as a kind of mobilisation when mobilities themselves are denied. A voice that anticipates as much as it reverberates, that serves as a pre-echo of political change.

The first way this works is through the *travelling from place to place* that Kareem describes. Voices move and carry more easily than people do, particularly in situations of lockdowns, border closures, and travel restrictions. Activisms have always migrated, stimulating solidarities and movements elsewhere, and this was evident in the uprising in Syria that Kareem narrates in the sound essay. In this movement, cities sang for other cities, and the occupation of squares and the mass performance of chants was central to the spread of resistance and revolution (Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud 2014: 210-221). Voices bounce between cities, shouting solidarities for one another, generating a feedback loop that strengthens itself with each iteration. These voices also bounce between movements in transnational configurations – famously in the case of the uprisings across North Africa and South-West Asia in and after 2011 – and these articulations make audible some of the theory that conceptualises this movement of movements (Said 1984b; Salem 2020).

These practices inadvertently became a kind of training for the art of assembly (Mossallam 2021) under pandemic conditions. The twin developments of more people

being spatially confined and the increased need to speak out against local and global injustices led people out onto the streets in specific locales all over the world. Political voices in the first year of the pandemic became, to paraphrase Kareem again, *a voice you can hear everywhere*. This links to one of Hanieh and Ziadah's pandemic effects: that the virus arrived into a time of "high levels of popular protest and widespread street mobilisations across numerous countries" (Hanieh and Ziadah 2022: 4). In the SWANA region, where the authors focus their analysis, people were again engaging in mass protests through 2019 and into 2020, and it quickly became apparent that the pandemic was a catalyst for increased inequality – "not simply a public health crisis in and of itself" (Hanieh and Ziadah 2022: 21). As Hanieh and Ziadah put it: "the core grievances that drove these movements have not disappeared but, rather, deepened" (2022: 21). In other words, the pandemic has served to galvanise and expand these movements and mobilisations.

We can add another point to this argument. Due to mass displacements and the development of new layers of diaspora over the decade preceding the pandemic, these movements are distributed across expanded geographies. Voices coalesce and movements speak from multiple places, a point we made in the sound essay: "Now Athens sings for Damascus, for Idlib, for Homs and for itself" (al Kabbani and Western 2020). And it is a point that we expanded upon, along with other members of our team, in our radio programme "[Relational City](#)," which described how movements are held and supported across migratory configurations, and how cities (Damascus, in this case) come to exist within other cities. Kareem again: "Athens now, I believe it's holding other cities. We are in Athens and we are free to express ourselves and express our city, to bring our city's feeling and our city's struggle. Athens is giving us this space" (SGYF 2022).

This relates to the second way we can *hear these voices everywhere*: the combination of specific restrictions and political repression in general that has marked the pandemic so far, has forced people to develop methods of distributing, sharing, and transmitting voice. People use voice and sound to carry movements when people elsewhere are no longer able to speak out. In the summer of 2021, a year after we recorded our sound essay, Kareem and I hosted a [radio show](#) that gathered a handful of sound artists and researchers (and friends) who were working on related questions in different geographical contexts (SGYF 2021). We shared pieces of our work, listening and thinking together about forms of vocalisation, sonic ways of being and knowing, and the roles of sound in movements of various kinds. During the conversation, Urok Shirhan – a very brilliant artist and researcher – raised the point that different forms of silencing exist and that these have multiplied during the pandemic.

On the one hand, in various places through 2020 and 2021, as it became clearer how the virus was spreading, restrictions were placed on acts of collective vocalisation. In the Netherlands there was a ban on group singing, chanting, and shouting; in California there was a ban on singing in places of worship; in Greece there was a ban on live music once nightclubs, bars, and restaurants reopened after lockdown (Shirhan 2020a; Tsioulcas 2020; Ross 2021). On the other hand, increasing political authoritarianisms that have snuck in under the cover of the pandemic have led to clampdowns on gatherings and protests, as forms of political silencing previously associated with dictatorships take hold in a growing number of societies (very much including the UK, where I teach, where the Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Act 2022 is already being used to suppress multiple forms of dissent). Sometimes these two phenomena exist together, and, as Shirhan put it in a written piece from late-2020, “We are living in the Now Times, where there is a ban on singing, and only whispers are allowed” (Shirhan 2020a).

In our radio roundtable, she framed this as a series of questions: “What happens when you’re not able to voice what you want to voice? Can you give someone else your voice? Who can voice for you? Can that sound take place elsewhere if it can’t take place here?” (Shirhan, in SGYF 2021). These questions are important. They rearticulate Arundhati Roy’s always-relevant argument that: “There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard” (2006: 330). And they complicate fairly well-established notions of the problems associated with “giving voice,” asking instead how voice can be strategically shared under conditions of increasing carcerality. This, I think, resonates with Palumbo-Liu’s line on inventing places from which to speak, which here becomes not only about political creativities within particular places and spaces but also about building relational sonic cartographies to ensure that movements can still move and voices can still carry.

Shirhan’s own soundwork lends a critical and creative ear to these questions. Her piece “[Lovesong Revolution](#)” (2020b) is essential listening in relation to the concerns raised by this special issue, gathering together instances of songs, singing, and public speech that have triggered political change. What is particularly significant is that not all of these sounds are “explicitly political, expressing solidarity or speaking directly of struggle”; some are “political only implicitly – or ‘accidentally’ – politicised through their adaptation in contexts such as protests” (Shirhan 2020b). And equally significant is how these sounds speak to one another, moving in conversation across time and place. As she narrates in the piece, and has written about elsewhere (Shirhan 2020c), songs and

voices carry revolutionary struggle across ex-centric trajectories, particularly across geographies of the Global South. Examples she cites include the 1967 poem "Guevara is Dead," written by Egyptian poet Ahmed Fouad Negm and sung by Sheikh Imam, and the 1973 song "Santiago," composed and performed by Iraqi singer Jaafar Hassan in solidarity with comrades in Chile during the military coup of the same year (Shirhan 2020b; 2020c).

These are examples of voices being passed and carried, of movements gaining ground and meaning through listening to and being with movements elsewhere. They foreshadow the kinds of vocal politics we have heard during the pandemic. And this leads to the third way we can *hear these voices everywhere*, and the final argument I want to make in this section: pandemic activisms and vocal-spatial resistance are also a form of rehearsal. They are a set of practices – in every sense of the word – that continue to build towards possible futures. I use the word rehearsal here to deliberately invoke work on abolition, particularly the abolition geographies crafted by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, for whom "abolition is presence, which means abolition is life in rehearsal. Not a recitation of rules, much less relentless lament" (Gilmore 2019: unpaginated; also Gilmore 2022). Abolition and rehearsal are practices of hope – an ongoing process of collectively unmaking systems of coloniality and carcerality, those racist infrastructures of policing and bordering that foster and sustain various forms of unfreedom. Rehearsals for living (Maynard and Simpson 2022) and the kinds of vocal-spatial resistance they contain, conjure and summon other worlds, other possibilities and futurities.

Sound and noise have been invoked for their capacity to run ahead of societal change, to act as a prophecy or a herald (Attali 1985 [1977]; Harney and Moten 2013), doing decolonial work before the fact (Denning 2015). Sound travels faster than life. This is again a feature of Urok Shirhan's work, where the political imagination of singing a freedom becomes both an enactment and a promise: "Singing it, saying it out loud. Even if at first you don't believe it [...]. At some point it's happening. It becomes a prophecy" (in SGYF 2021). It speaks to another of Hanieh and Ziadah's pandemic effects: pandemic activisms are made up of non-linear temporalities, recuperating and validating earlier moments of struggle (Hanieh and Ziadah 2022: 21). And ultimately, borrowing Arundhati Roy's depiction of the pandemic as a portal – which we can either walk through "dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us" or "walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world" (Roy 2020: unpaginated) – these rehearsals are ways of keeping this portal open. Open enough for the latter imaginary to

be possible. Open enough for voice. For this, we need a global sense of voice, to which I turn for the final part of this essay.

A global sense of voice

If the previous section spoke to the soundworks and the sonic imaginations of friends and artists, this final section puts these ideas into conversation with writers of relational studies. I seek now to sketch a global sense of voice – tying the threads of this essay together and building a means of hearing political voices in ways attuned to the current political moment. This section takes as its point of departure a 1991 essay by geographer Doreen Massey, “A Global Sense of Place,” in which she sought to make sense of the politics of mobilities and the identities of places. Much of this essay centres on understanding the existence of places within other places, and here I attempt to transpose this into relational ways of thinking about voices – or a global sense of voice.

To summarise some of Massey’s main arguments: Her essay speaks to a moment when geographers and social scientists were concerned with the presumed increasing speed of circulation that marked late-20th-century globalisation. Swimming somewhat against the tide, Massey argued that many of these phenomena were not necessarily new, namely, that experiences of time-space compression had been felt for centuries by colonised peoples forced into global configurations of trade and exploitation (1994 [1991]: 147; see also Lowe 2015). Rather than being swept up in narratives of speed, mobility, fragmentation, and disruption, Massey saw an imperative to address the inequalities – what she calls “power geometries” (1994 [1991]: 149) – in access to movement and communication that marked the period of capitalist expansion in the 1990s. And this feeds into her analysis of place. Neither rejecting the ongoing relevance of place in relation to the increasing mobilities of people and things, nor entertaining reactionary calls to “recover” the original meanings of places through looking backwards and drawing boundaries, Massey instead outlines a sense of place that is heterogeneous, progressive, open, outward-looking, plural, multiple, and relational.

The famous passage of the essay depicts her adopted home neighbourhood of Kilburn in north-west London. Massey describes the neighbourhood as having multiple identities and argues that it must be thought of through an expanded set of histories and geographies. She writes: “It is (or ought to be) impossible even to begin thinking about Kilburn High Road without bringing into play half the world and a considerable amount of British imperialist history” (Massey 1994 [1991]: 154). This is what she means by a global sense of place: being able to feel the relations that make places what they are; not losing sight of the global injustices that have produced those relations and that

continue to underpin and undermine them; never falling back into forms of conflating space, territory, and ethnicity, but instead understanding places as *meeting places* (1994 [1991]: 154) – whereby places remain distinct due to their unique layers of history and combinations of social relations.

This may seem like old news, and certainly Massey continued to push our understanding of spatial politics through to the end of her career (see Massey 2005). But I latch onto the idea of a global sense of place here precisely because it gives us a way of thinking about relationality that remains extremely useful to the present pandemic moment. What happens if we think about voice in the same way? If we strive to hear how voices are also heterogeneous, progressive, open, outward-sounding, plural, multiple, and relational? If we think of how voices exist within other voices, connected to all the injustices of world history and all the efforts to overcome them? Some of this describes speech itself. There is always a relation between speaker(s) and listener(s), and we are always speaking and hearing from particular positions and perspectives. But hearing a global sense of voice does extra work on top of this.

Three ideas come to mind (and please treat these next couple of paragraphs as a collage of inspirations). The first derives, again, from Palumbo-Liu's study of voice as a "political, ethical, and moral instrument for effecting change" (2021: 2). Through forms of vocal activism, "we can imagine *belonging with others* – those who are also protesting in streets across the globe. In this sense, we are in the same place, and we are filling it with the same voice" (Palumbo-Liu 2021: 2 – original emphasis). The second speaks to how we approach organising around issues of social justice in ways that are coalitional and relational. I am thinking here of the argument put forth by Ruth Wilson Gilmore that we need to resist recapitulating to the idea that "only certain demographics of people are authorised to speak about – speak from or speak against – certain kinds of horrors [...] so white people are supposed to fix white supremacy and so on and so forth" (2020: unpaginated; see also Fred Moten paraphrasing Fred Hampton on the same point, in Harney and Moten [2013: 140-141]).

This is the point made by Katherine McKittrick in her vital work on Black geographies, depicting how "[p]art of our intellectual task is to work out how different kinds and types of voices *relate to each other* and open up unexpected and surprising ways to think about liberation, knowledge, history, race, gender, narrative, and blackness" (McKittrick 2021: 50 – original emphasis). The third idea comes from the great theorist of relation, Édouard Glissant, who writes with a planetary scope and details how the "histories of peoples who have been disarmed, dominated or sometimes that are purely and simply

disappearing but have nevertheless burst onto the scene of our common theatre, have finally met up and contributed to changing the whole representation that we had of History and its system” (Glissant 2020: 8). The pandemic is another moment where this common theatre is playing out, albeit in always-contested ways.

If we put these three ideas together, the sonorities of a global sense of voice come into earshot. These are vocalities that allow people to speak together across geographies and histories; that don’t get trapped in identity politics and echo chambers; that allow voices their specificities based on their particular “constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (Massey 1994 [1991]: 154); that afford collective speech against coloniality and carcerality; that hold onto the thought that the pandemic might still become a moment of global justice in a long history of moments of global justice.

For this to happen, it is necessary to hear how this sense of voice rings out into a retuned soundscape. Through 2020 and into 2021 I was part of a project called “[The City Talks Back](#),” which brought together a group of sound artists and researchers to collectively listen to and, in turn, re-sonify the political voices of the city of Athens (Kostourou and Bingham-Hall 2022). What started out as a seemingly straightforward, though very exciting, plan – to think together through a series of residencies and produce individual works that chimed together through shared themes – was completely transformed by the onset of COVID-19 and the changes to urban life that came with it. Plans for research and recording were overhauled; ditto with our imagined and eventual outputs. The city sounded different. At the start of the pandemic and through its early lockdowns, much attention was given to how cities had gotten quieter, which generated discussions of the environmental and health benefits of quietude (e.g., Sims 2020). But much of this conversation framed these benefits as universal without paying much mind to questions of history or culture.

One important corrective to this was offered by Shannon Mattern, who details the ways that COVID-19 reshaped the soundscape and retuned our hearing while also detailing how this fits into a much longer history of constantly revising the way we listen to the city. For Mattern, for at least a century “our aural capacities have been growing in the direction of urban surveillance and public health” (2020: unpaginated). She makes the point that the kinds of machines that have been designed to listen to cities and to monitor their impacts on health have built-in racial and gender biases and serve to

further increase inequities in care, in medicine, and in the provision of urban services like housing. Quietude, in other words, has a politics. And the imposition of certain sound cultures – in western cities at least – as being healthier or more “correct” than others, speaks always to particular interests of race and class.

What Mattern proposes as a model instead is the polyphonic city, “which contains many distinct ways of sensing and knowing” (2020: unpaginated). This, I would argue, is another aspect of a global sense of voice – an aural equivalent of Massey’s depiction of urban pluralities. We explored this theme in [“The City Talks Back”](#) and in the [piece produced by our organisation in Athens](#), with one member of our team – Christina – engaging the city directly in conversation. “We could say that communication with the city is a matter of interaction,” she states. “If we don’t talk to the society, how will it hear us? If we don’t talk to the city, how will it talk back?” (in SGYF 2020). As before, voice is something to be made, and speech is something to be created. And the city itself is reclaimed and remade through a polyphonic mode of distributed speaking and listening (Mattern 2020).

Which brings us back, finally, to what a global sense of voice means for questions of belonging. Throughout this essay I have sought to hear forms of speech – talking back, coming to voice, permission to narrate, and more – as a means of vocal-spatial resistance, something that is creative and collective and that invents new spaces and sonic cartographies. I will close by arguing that noise and dissonance are necessary parts of this process. Engaging one last time with Palumbo-Liu’s idea of speaking out of place – that is, “breaking the hold some people have on some places” (Palumbo-Liu 2021: 21) – it is necessary to reposition noise not as a nuisance or a pollutant but as something that is also a resource. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten speak of the “joyful noise of the scattered” and the “open song of the ones who are supposed to be silent” (2013: 118, 51). These are further instances of the liberatory voice – methods for unruly forms of belonging that refuse to be cowed into silence.

Noise, following Moten, works as an appeal – to ourselves and to one another – creating collectivities and demands (in Harney and Moten 2013: 135-136). It is part of the timbres of a global sense of voice. It is necessary for global struggles and solidarities. As Shirhan asks, speaking of the suppression of voices through the pandemic: “Could this ‘noise cancellation’ defeat a collective presence altogether?” (Shirhan 2020c). Which reminds me of another line from Edward Said, who, in depicting the lives of Palestinians under conditions of settler colonialism and exile, wrote that “our voices are prevented from reaching each other” (Said 1986: 19). As this pandemic continues, the collective

task is to make sure that people living everywhere under conditions of colonality and carcerality can speak and be heard. And to know that covered mouths – whether literally covered with masks or figuratively covered by the grasping hands of dying imperialism – still have voices.

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