

Responses to Previous Issues

“The Pleasures of the Ear: Toward an Ethnography of Listening”

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Abstract

Collection and research on expressive culture had its beginning in scholars' deep and often emotional and sensory attraction to folk song, narration, and craft. Writing and print were the customary 19th-century media of learning and communicating knowledge, and the growing scholarly habit of screening out emotional vocabulary further impoverished our understanding of the sensory and sensual totality of experience. While students of culture have long since begun to critically examine their fields' legacies, the more intimate, affective linkage between burgeoning scholars and their disciplinary subject has not been fully considered. It is this implicit attraction and its marginalization, if not disappearance from scholarly purview, that contributed to the equal marginalization of sensory experience, affect, and emotion from ethnographic work. To comprehend the marginal place of what I would like to term an “ethnography of listening” (as one example within a larger ethnography of sensory perception), this essay sketches the implications of the successive exclusion of sentimentality and sensuality from scholarship concerned with folklore, before turning to a discussion of why such marginalization is increasingly untenable and how ethnographers are beginning to recover sensuality and corporality as a vital part of understanding expressive culture.

Response

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“Listen!”—a traditional framing device for countless forms of verbal expression, and as it happens, an appropriate admonition to readers of this fine essay. In “The Pleasures of the Ear: Toward and Ethnography of Listening,” Regina Bendix claims our attention with a voice both seductive and urgent. She stands in worthy succession to Hermann von Helmholtz and Ernst Mach, whose nineteenth-century experiments in sensory perception laid the groundwork for an ethnography of listening.

Bendix offers here an introductory fanfare, not a final “word.” She invites us to examine both the historical implications and consequences of the tension between listeners’ delight and investigators’ objectivity, corporeality and textuality, in our ethnographic disciplines—and then calls on us to transcend these distinctions in our own work. I find irresistible the succinct summary of “reception, writing, and rapture” offered by Donald Brenneis, offering up a new primer to replace the old alliterative trilogy of “three ‘R’s.” I have only a few comments to add to his excellent response, suggesting a few further areas of pursuit—a kind of desecant to Bendix’s melodic line. First among these areas is the role of listening in relation to the supernatural, especially the numinous. This property of sound is intimately related to the affective power so movingly adduced

by Bendix, but deserves attention in its own right. The special authority of the voice is embedded etymologically in the very language of devotion: the English term “obedience” derives from the Latin *ob audire*—“to hear while facing [someone].” Comment in this area extends from Walter Ong’s virtual theology of listening to cross-cultural investigations of auditory hallucination.

A second area for further investigations is the metonymic relationship between voice and memory. Recollection as an act of listening is an image that pervades all levels of discourse in Western and other cultures, and powerfully informed much of the work of early Romantics cited by Bendix, such as Herder, von Arnim, and Brentano. And finally, what of the ethnographic implications of technical means of recording, both as media that have modified perception of sound in itself, and as tools that have transformed especially the disciplines of folklore and ethnomusicology? Glossing Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s pithy observation “the tool is the topic,” Bendix remarks that “the technologies available to us as researchers have fundamentally shaped the way in which we are

able to conceptualize our discipline’s subject.” These technologies have likewise fundamentally shaped the subject itself, certainly in those areas relating to the acts of listening, speaking, singing; perhaps feeling and recalling as well.

In *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography*, I addressed the above issues in a cursory fashion, with some discussion of the history and sources pertaining to them (see esp. 27-88). I am delighted to return to these questions in this excellent article and in Donald Brenneis’s elegant response. In closing, I can do no better than to repeat the tried and true formula with which I opened, asking readers, for the sake of the discipline and for the sake of the work of each of us within it, to please listen—and listen well.

Work Cited

Erika Brady. 1999. *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography*. Jackson, MS: The University of Press of Mississippi.