

Gendered Sonic Violence, from the Waiting Room to the Locker Room

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Gender, Listening, Politics



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This past August 2016, professional “pick-up artist” [Dan Bacon](#) caused a stir with his article “[How to Talk to a Woman Who is Wearing Headphones.](#)” The article was published on [TheModernMan](#), a site pledging to “make [a woman] want to have sex with you ASAP.” Bacon offers step-by-step “instructions” for pick-up artists to overcome the obstacle of being rendered inaudible by the music a woman might be listening to:

She will most likely take off her headphones to talk to you when you say, ‘Hey, how’s it going?’, but if she doesn’t, just smile, point to her headphones and confidently ask, ‘Can you take off your headphones for a minute?’ as you pretend to be taking headphones off your head, so she fully understands what you mean.

His article was criticized in articles that appeared in [The Guardian](#), [Washington Post](#), [Slate](#), and other news sites, which pointed out that Bacon and his followers advocated ignoring a clear visual signifier of privacy in pursuit of sex. Not only did Bacon feel entitled to a woman’s time, they suggested, but also to an audience. What Bacon insists is “two, [sic] normal human beings having a conversation” is in fact a belief in his unilateral right to be heard.

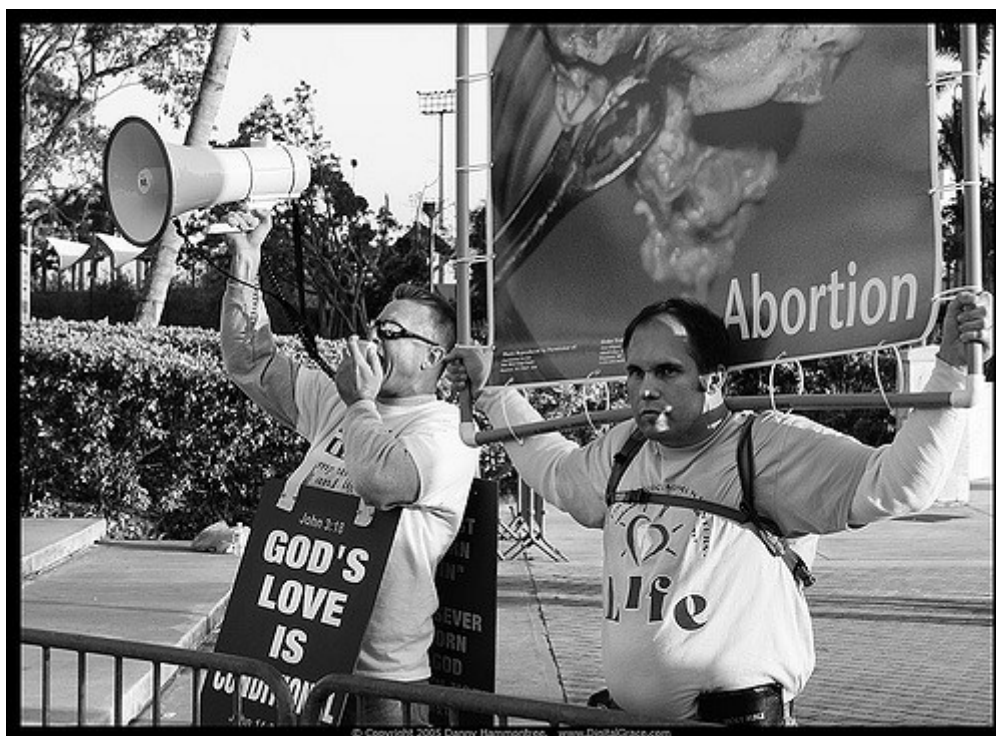


Image by Flickr User Chris Wolcott, Attribution 2.0 Generic ([CC BY 2.0](#))

I witness a similar gendered dynamic of forced listening each week outside of a women’s health clinic in New York, where I volunteer as a clinic escort. Evangelical protesters from a handful of churches line the sidewalks outside the clinic every Saturday morning during the hours that they know abortions have been scheduled (in addition to pap smears, screenings for sexually transmitted infection, prenatal care, transgender services, etc.). Escorts walk with patients down

the block to the front door. The sidewalk becomes a space of physical and emotional risk as protesters block the pathway with large, gruesome signs and their flailing limbs (at times physically assaulting volunteers and patients), as well as filming and photographing patients in the hopes of inducing shame.

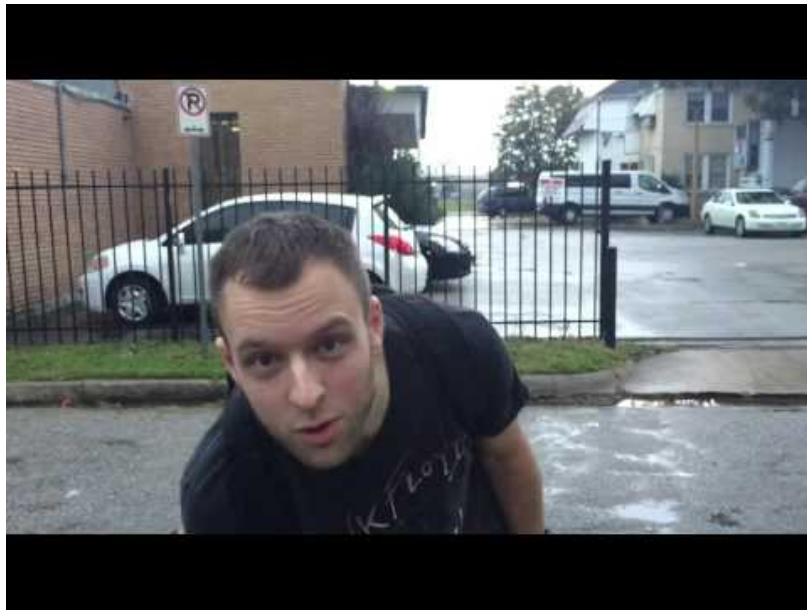
Among their most intrusive weapons is the scream, which male protestors direct at patients, nurses, doctors, volunteers, security guards, and passersby. While women are abortion protestors, too, they generally get relegated to note-taking, sign holding, and pamphlet distribution, almost never given the authority to “sidewalk preach” or scream. In my experience of listening to this masculine screaming, words lose all sense and become pure sensation. Some patients wince, most speed up their pace, a few burst into nervous laughter, and almost all are stunned into speechlessness as they experience what one volunteer calls “the ripping apart of silence.”



Anti-Abortion protest in Miami, 2006, Image by Flickr User Danny Hammontree, Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

During otherwise quiet moments, when nobody is walking down the sidewalk, a handful of men including a pastor and a high school science teacher pace the strip of sidewalk directly in front of the clinic entrance, preaching about sexual immorality and the “black genocide” taking place behind its soundproof walls. When a woman turns the corner down the sidewalk, they immediately begin to raise their voices. The men shout loudly as they attempt to chase women away from the door: “You don’t have to do this”; “Don’t be a murderer”; “You should have kept your legs closed.” The women and children accompanying these men plead in tones of pure desperation: “Your baby has a heartbeat at three weeks”; “You will regret it”; “Let us help you.” Volunteers chatter to the patients, trying to babble over the cacophony; the clinic has been

forbidden from broadcasting amplified sound, though Janis Joplin and other artists used to play from speakers at the entrance.



<https://youtu.be/Z42WLhu8Y1Q>

A sample of anti-abortion protestors' sonic technique, by Youtube user [ehipassiko](#)

At other clinics in the United States, protestors use amplified sound in violation of city sound permit requirements. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Catholic Church purchased the land across the street from the reproductive services clinic. Every weekday morning protestors gather there to sing, pray, and yell at cars and the patients getting out of them. Sitting in the midst of signs declaring “ALL LIVES MATTER” and “TULSA’S AUSCHWITZ,” a boombox faces the front door of the clinic and blasts Christian rock music. A clinic escort in Tulsa, who is also a Unitarian priest, described her experience with amplified sound in a sermon titled “[A Womb of One’s Own](#)”:

I stood near the driveway entrance where the protestors had placed a CD player blaring Christian music (which I happened to know) and so I stood near it and sang softly while they continued to shout. After about 20 minutes of shouting from afar, while I stood singing to the music, one of the protestors came near the CD player and began to pray for me—loudly. I stood quietly as he yelled a prayer for my misdirection, for my false prophethood, for my broken soul.

In Charlotte, North Carolina, volunteers track decibel levels on their phones in the hopes of getting the local police to issue a citation.

Cities4Life breaking the sound permit laws. CMPD won’t write a ticket. pic.twitter.com/40wLCnKx6V

— QC Clinic Escorts (@QCCLinicEscorts) [October 22, 2016](#)

If, as Jonathan Sterne states in [The Audible Past](#), “listening is a directed, learned activity” (19), then women and gender-nonconforming people must learn the art of hearing but actively *not* listening,

of learning to direct one's attention elsewhere to ignore catcalls and shouts of abuse. Christine Ehrick points out that vocal sound is not only a signifier of gender, it's also [a signifier of power](#). To ignore a male voice yelling over one's own, or over one's headphones, requires a stamina that contradicts the expectation of female receptivity and submission; Bacon asserts that "most women are polite" and will take off their headphones when asked. Even as patients overcome their shock and put up a wall against the shouting, protesters and volunteers must perfect the act of directed listening, focusing on the commentary to take note of periodic death threats, bomb threats, and any other unusual comments in spite of the repetition of the preaching and aural abuse. They must also speak and listen guardedly to each other, as protesters eavesdrop on conversations between volunteers, hoping to discover their identities so as to shame and harass them in the public and professional sphere.

Anti-abortion protesters push their agenda through their conflation of the public and private, the internal and external, the oral and aural. They continue to yell even once the patients have made their way into the clinic, despite the fact that the waiting room is soundproof—silent except for the occasional murmured conversation, soft piano music, or cartoons. In his essay "[Broadcasting the body: the 'private' made 'public' in hospital soundscapes](#)" in Georgina Born's 2013 collection *Music, Sound and Space*, Tom Rice discusses the blurring of the internal and external in hospital environments, where patients must put on "mental headphones" as a form of "studied unawareness" (174). Despite the private, internal nature of illness, in hospitals there exist "threats to bodily boundaries and bodily control" (184). The right-to-life movement has capitalized on this blurring of boundaries since its 1984 film *The Silent Scream*. If their posters of mangled fetuses bring the unseen into the realm of the visible, their shouting brings the unheard into the realm of the audible as they give voice to these silent fetuses: "Mommy, mommy, don't kill me!"



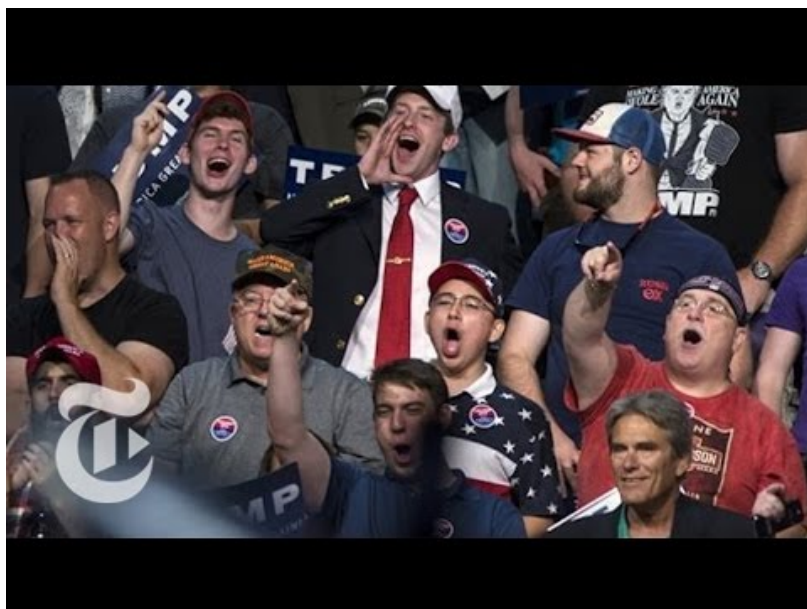
41st MARCH FOR LIFE RALLY in front of the US Supreme Court on 1st Street between Maryland Avenue and East Capitol Street, NE, Washington DC on

Thursday afternoon, 22 January 2015 by Elvert Barnes Protest Photography,
Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

When anti-abortion protesters gather in public spaces such as sidewalks, they affirm Judith Butler's claim in [Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly](#) that "if there is a body in the public sphere, it is presumptively masculine and unsupported, presumptively free to create, but not itself created. And the body in the private sphere is female, ageing, foreign, or childish, and always prepolitical" (75). The loudest protesters use their male bodies and male voices to assert their right to create sound and to be listened to by female ears. The masculine voices emanating from these presumptively male bodies stridently invade, interrupt, and attempt to shape private and prepolitical spaces, extending even to the uterus—what one would think would be *the most* private and prepolitical of spaces. At its most troubling, the loud, relentless insistence by the right to an audience translates to the desired ownership of non-male bodies. This desire for control—and its performative rhetoric enacted in the public sphere—originates in the absence of female bodies and voices, in the exclusively male private sphere of "locker room talk."

This was locker room talk. This was locker room talk. I'm not proud of it . . . This was locker roomtalk. Yes, I'm very embarrassed by it, and I hate it, but it's locker room talk. –Donald Trump in the third presidential debate, 19 October 2016

The stridency of the 2016 election cycle has revealed the gendered nature of public space and sonically blurred the boundaries between the theoretically public space of streets and the metaphoric masculine privacy of the metaphorical "locker room."



<https://youtu.be/R9YPYRaeTWO>

"Locker room talk" has been the term used by right-wing pundits—and the candidate himself—to excuse the recently re-played 2005 recording of US presidential candidate Donald Trump [bragging to radio and TV host Billy Bush about various sexual conquests](#): "I moved on her like a bitch";

“Grab them by the pussy”; “You can do anything.” Trump’s statement following the release of the tape in October 2016 emphasized a patriarchal delineation of space, in which male bodies are always safe and non-male bodies almost never are: “This was locker-room banter, a private conversation that took place many years ago.”

Trump’s insistence on a private space, in which men can talk amongst themselves with no consequences, reverses the dynamic outside of the hospital, in which the private is made public. It also further demonstrates the blurrability—and even portability—of private space, which white males arm themselves with and freely replicate in public spaces. Not only does such private “banter” affirm the assumption of the superiority of the male voice and the stigmatization of the female voice, it silences the voices of the women affected by Trump’s actions, while objectifying women-writ-large into currency exchanged between men. And indeed, [women’s prior allegations](#) were all but ignored by the press and the public until the release of Bush tapes.

We had to hear it from Trump’s own mouth to believe it.

In *Modernity’s Ear*, Roshanak Kheshti discusses the “feminization of listening” via sound reproduction and particularly the world music industry, which mythologizes the sound of the “other” in service of white female ears (27). Constructed in terms of a male heteronormative fantasy, the ear has come to resemble a vagina, “an organ to be penetrated by an active sonic force” (67). In this construction not even headphones—which ideally afford a visual signal calling for privacy *and* [the gendered privilege of uninterrupted listening](#)—are enough to shield non-male ears from the average scheming pick-up artist.

Kheshti’s arguments can be fittingly applied to gender-specific spaces of both the locker room and the abortion clinic. Male-asserted power dynamics of speaking and listening work to create spaces spaces that silence female needs, voices, and agency. In the public space outside the clinic, such practices deem women an ear for hearing patriarchal arguments against abortion, and in the private space of the locker room, objectify them as a vagina for “grabbing.”

The spatializing of power dynamics via sound has forced women to become versed in aural refusal, to keep our ears closed the same way we are encouraged to “keep our legs closed.” This aural refusal, however, all too often renders women silent in public, patriarchal spaces. Feminist initiatives like “Shout Your Abortion” and “Hollaback,” a movement to end street harassment, have given women voice within these structures of gendered sonic violence. The initial criticism faced by Hollaback, regarding [racism in their viral video](#), alongside the targeting of non-white women and couples outside the clinic, suggests that the intersectional dimension of listening in public needs further examination in hopes of reaching an understanding of what equitable public space would sound like. Ultimately, however, with these and other movements, women are asserting not only our right to harassment-free public and private space, but our right to create sound, to speak, and to be heard.

Featured Image: “Yell!” by Flickr User [Vetustense Photorogue](#), Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic ([CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

Rebecca Lentjes is an NYC-based writer and gender equality activist with plans to pursue graduate studies in ethnomusicology at Stony Brook University. Her work has appeared in VAN Magazine, Music & Literature, TEMPO Quarterly Review of New Music, Bachtrack, and I Care If You Listen. By day she works as an editor and translator at RILM Abstracts of Music Literature; by night she hatches schemes to dismantle the patriarchy.



REWIND!...If you liked this post, check out:

[I Can't Hear You Now, I'm Too Busy Listening: Social Conventions and Isolated Listening](#)—Osvaldo Oyola

[Gendered Voices and Social Harmony](#)—Robin James

[Vocal Gender and the Gendered Soundscape: At the Intersection of Gender Studies and Sound Studies](#)—Christine Ehrick