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GROUNDS

ON GENDER, VOICE,
LANGUAGE, AND IDENTITY.

FOR

POSSIBLE

ERRANT
BODIES

MUSIC

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Cartoon by Gonzalo Rocha



“THERE ARE NONE SO DEAF”

Translated from Spanish by NURIA RODRIGUEZ

ONE || ¹

In the cartoon by Rocha | vis-à-vis the small woman on the tribune | the speech scroll | takes up comparatively much much more space || It is a floating bulk | quite plump | judging by the cross-hatching | it purports to be her voice || A voice | that of Zapatista Comandanta Esther | at the Mexican Congress | on twenty-nine March two thousand and one | who during her address said || We do not come to humiliate anyone || We do not come to defeat anyone || We do not come to supplant anyone || We do not come to legislate || We come so that you can listen to us and we can listen to you ||

She also says || Those who are not here now | already know that they refused to listen | to what an indigenous woman had come to say | and that they refused to speak | so that I could listen ||

The repeated mention of listening in the speech is surprising || Surprising because as a rule listening is seldom mentioned | or at least much more seldom than the voice | in politics || She also says || I am an indigenous and Zapatista woman || Through my voice spoke not just the hundreds of thousands

of Zapatistas of the Mexican south-east || Millions of indigenous people from throughout the country | and the majority of the Mexican people also spoke || My voice | did not lack respect for anyone | but nor did it come to ask for charity || My voice | came to ask for justice | liberty and democracy for the Indian peoples || My voice | demanded and demands the constitutional recognition of our rights and our culture || And I am going to end my word with a cry ||

Going back to Rocha's cartoon | in the lower right-hand corner | below the speech scroll representing the indigenous word | Diego Fernández de Cevallos from Mexico's right-wing National Action Party | sticks his fingers in his ears | as if to stop himself from hearing || Rocha entitles the cartoon | there are none so deaf || The saying in full would be || There are none so deaf as those who will not hear || There are none so deaf as those who will not hear || What difference then between one so deaf he will not hear and one so deaf he cannot hear? || One of those we insist on calling deaf-mutes | as if in addition to not hearing | they also lacked a voice | and

were incapable of | for example | a cry ||

Despite the title | nothing in the cartoon is about hearing || It is about listening || About a political listening | and about a voice that | judging by the cross-hatching of the speech scroll | has body |||

TWO ||

It would be possible to put together a history or a story of the body of the voice | through discourses that have tried | in a single move | to exalt orality and denigrate the sign | of the sign languages | used by deaf people ||

To exalt orality as a basic trait and condition of humanity | as a vestige of life-giving breath | orality | that is immaterial | and accordingly analogous to thought | unlike the cumbersome materiality of the body of the sign ||

Cumbersome body infects and produces cumbersome body || If we were to replace orality with sign | and here I paraphrase | our vocal apparatus would atrophy | and we would soon start to suffer from the lung diseases | distorted shoulders | poor posture and ungainly carriage characteristic of signing deaf-mutes ||

This was spoken and listened to during the Milan Congress | September eleven eighteen hundred and seventy-eight | in which there was an attempt to ban the use of sign language | in schools for the deaf || So writes Jonathan Rée in *I See a Voice* | in which he also points out the absence of any deaf delegates whatsoever | at the congress ||

According to Boris Fridman-Mintz | the dogma of the Mexican government's educational language policy for indigenous peoples | has always been | to hispanicise is to integrate || Integration understood as a one-way operation | in which a person or thing

becomes part of something || A process affecting those who are integrated | but not that which they are integrated into ||

Similarly with deaf people | to oralise is to integrate || At the Milan Congress | deaf people | in lacking an oral voice | also lacked representation || Unable to affect | they had no voice in the political sense || As in the expression | to have a voice and a vote || Because the word | voice | presumably | refers to an oral voice | it can take on a political meaning and entail a vote ||

We do not associate non-oral forms of subjective expression | with notions of political representation || We do not say to have a sign and a vote ||

As such | it would be possible to put together a story of the body of the voice | looking at how the word | voice | if it is to take on a political meaning | must necessarily refer to an oral | supposedly immaterial voice ||

Ending the privileged relationship between the oral and the political | would perhaps open up the possibility | of giving | the voice | a body |||

THREE ||

In his *Lecture on an Acoustics of Sharing* | Brandon Labelle gives a political definition of listening as | to give one's ear | to give the body over || He also says of listening that is a position of not knowing || One that takes me away from what I know ||

As his is a listening that does not know | it is open to the knowing of the other || It is a listening that involves the body | perhaps in the sense of the feminist activist expression | *poner el cuerpo* | to give the body | or to put the body on the line || *Poner el cuerpo* invokes an image of presence and vulnerability || Of being there | sensitive | like a mem-

brane | and then being affected || Of being able to be affected ||

Perhaps | instead of the voice projected from the subject out into the world | as the quintessential political act || Perhaps a listening of not knowing | one that takes me away from what I know | that is able to be affected || Ultimately | a listening that has a body | a listening that is able to | poner el cuerpo ||

FOUR ||

What is represented when the voice is represented? || All or almost all synthetic voices are nationally identified | they are gender binary and of standardised emotion || No border voices or trans voices | no hysterical or disabled voices || This is one problem of representation | but there are also others ||

In | Los Hombres Verdaderos | Carlos Lenkersdorf writes that | as an ergative language | Tojolabal | is characterised by the fact that | I quote | the execution and verbal description of certain events | requires a plurality of subjects | and the exclusion of objects of all kinds ||

A Tojolabal speaker does not say || I told you || But rather || I said | you listened || Instead of a subject with its verb and an object || Two subjects with their respective verbs ||

Likewise | in Tojolabal there is not just the spoken word or | k'umal | but also the notion of the word or language that is listened to or | 'ab'al || Lenkersdorf argues that these particularities gave rise to the political philosophy of the Zapatista movement | which the Tojolabal people are part of || For example | the notion of | mandar obedeciendo | to lead by obeying ||

To lead by obeying | might also be | to talk by listening ||

From the culture that runs through me | I cannot imagine the representation of a | listened voice || Like synthetic voices | we make our own voices realistic | insofar as realistic | implies a certain decoupling of voice and listening || When we represent the voice we do not represent listening || Probably because we do not think that the two are the same | or even that they enjoy the same status ||

Lenkersdorf approached the learning of Tojolabal as a deep listening practice || By teaching him their language | the Tojolabal people embarked on a mutually affecting process | that Lenkersdorf himself | in the Tojolabal manner | describes as follows || We cannot know anything | unless the subject to be known | takes over us | in our act of knowing ||

FIVE ||

Edison | almost deaf | bites the body of the phonograph || He says that the sound waves then come | almost direct to his brain || He says | I have a wonderfully sensitive inner ear || His deafness protects him | from the noises that dim | the hearing of ears that hear everything | he says || No one who has a normal ear can hear as well as I can ||

To promote his invention | Edison organised what he called tone tests || Live music recitals in which a soprano | for example | would sing alongside a recording of her own voice || At times the house lights were dimmed | and at times the performer stopped singing || All in order to make it difficult for the audience | to distinguish between the live voice | and its double ||

Tone tests were apparently invented by the American soprano Anna Case || One of her records was playing in a store when she walked in || and she started singing | a duet | trying to get her voice to

sound like the one on the record || In a counter-intuitive transference | as she sang she copied the texture | that the phonograph gave to the recording of her own voice ||

Around the same time | in the late nineteenth century | Alexander Graham Bell founded the Bell Telephone Company | to exploit the patent for the telephone || Two days later he married Mabel Hubbard | a student of his | who had been deaf since the age of five || Bell oralised deaf people | using a method developed by his father | based on the visual representation of the position of the speech organs || His mother had also been gradually going deaf ||

Bell did not let Mabel learn sign language || He used the profits from the sale of the telephone to support oralism || His influence strengthened the positions that were later laid down at the Milan Congress || Bell went so far as to write that marriage between congenitally deaf people should be forbidden | in order to prevent deaf offspring || However it was his hobby of livestock breeding | that led to his appointment to the Committee on Eugenics || An organisation that advocated passing laws for the compulsory sterilisation of people who | like the deaf community | were deemed to be | in Bell's words | a defective variety of the human race ||

The fingertips of both hands | the palms | forearm and feet of the operator | on the keyboard | wrist band and pedal of the Voder || The first electronic voice synthesiser | built by Bell Labs | New York World's Fair | nineteen hundred and thirty-nine || A telephone operator who | in her usual job | was at the physical centre of the exchange of voices | operating the switchboard at the telephone exchange || Now | sits in front of the audience | and types out the phrase | she saw me | without expression || The VODER's voice hisses || Now | in response to the presenter's questions | she adds expression to the

different parts of the sentence || Who saw you? || SHE saw me || Did she see you or hear you? || She SAW me || Who did she see? || She saw ME ||

She saw the house | this is a test || This is a computer vocal tract speaking | you are listening to the voice of a machine || Years later | these and other phrases were used to test the intelligibility of synthetic voices || The most famous of the commercially available voices | was Perfect Paul | used by Stephen Hawking || I am Perfect Paul | the standard male voice || I am Beautiful Betty | the standard female voice | some people think I sound a bit like a man || My name is Kit the Kid and I am about ten years old | do I sound like a boy or a girl? || Perfect Paul | together with Beautiful Betty and Kit the Kid | were the basic voice options for the DECTalk synthesiser | developed by Dennis Klatt in nineteen hundred and eighty-four | based on recordings of his own voice | that of his wife | and his daughter ||

Two thousand and thirteen || Stephen Hawking's daughter meets Dennis Klatt's daughter || She says || Laura | I have to tell you something | Perfect Paul sounds just like my dad || Is Perfect Paul based on your father's voice? || And she says | yes || Which therefore means that | my father is | actually | speaking with your father's voice || My father is speaking with your father's voice || And she says yes | he would be so thrilled | It's been such an amazing experience | for me to talk to you | about how your father's life has been transformed by my father's research | And I had never really thought before that my father's voice lives on || Your father is speaking with my father's voice ||

Your father | your father | my father's research | my father's research | your father's life | your father's life || How your father's life has been transformed by my father's research ||

My father is speaking with your father's voice |||

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