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 link- age 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 corporeality 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 des- cant 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 En-
glish term “obedience” derives from the Latin ob audire—“to hear while fac-
ing [someone].” Comment in this area extends from Walter Ong’s virtual the-
ology of listening to cross-cultural inves-
tigations of auditory hallucination.

A second area for further investiga-
tions is the metonymic relationship be-
tween voice and memory. Recollection
as an act of listening is an image that
pervades all levels of discourse in West-
ern and other cultures, and powerfully
informed much of the work of early Romants cited by Bendix, such as
Herder, von Arnim, and Brentano. And
finally, what of the ethnographic impli-
cations of technical means of recording,
both as media that have modified per-
ception of sound in itself, and as tools
that have transformed especially the
disciplines of folklore and ethnomusicology? Glossing Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s pithy observa-
tion “the tool is the topic,” Bendix re-
marks that “the technologies available
to us as researchers have fundamen-
tally shaped the way in which we are
able to conceptualize our discipline’s
subject.” These technologies have like-
wise fundamentally shaped the subject it-
itself, certainly in those areas relating
to the acts of listening, speaking, sing-
ing; 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

the Phonograph Changed Ethnog-
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