

You are tuned into a kind of harmony. In this podcast, we're looking to transcend the physical limitations of daily life. In each episode, we speak with a different practitioner who uses sound as a tool or method for connection, transcendence and healing. We're your hosts Julia E. Dyck and Amanda Harvey.

In this episode, we spoke with Jamilah malika abu-bakare. She's an artist and writer contemplating refusal repetition, dedication and intimacy through sound art, video, essay, text off page and or installation. Whatever the form, she centers black women with care and puts on listening before looking. By doing so both Jamila and the audience move towards their collective freedom. Her work has played or been shown from Sweden to LA and across Canada, including contemporary fields gallery, circuit Gallery, and Artscape. Her writing most recently appeared in Canadian art magazine, and her first curatorial project, AURAL ALTERITIES is on view at www.auralalterities.com. We were curious to speak with Jamila about her practice as a sound artist, writer and curator. We wanted to discuss sound as haptic and embodied material, and how care structures can be demonstrated through sound as well as listening to gain agency through systems of power.

Julia

Alright, so perhaps you can begin by introducing yourself and telling us a bit about your practice or practices.

Jamilah

My name is Jamilah malika abu-bakare and I am a writer and an artist. And I kind of understand those two things together when I use the words composition or text off page. So I think, you know, my sound art is a way to think about text, think about citation, think about quoting, you know, to think about the voices and the stories that I want to center. And, you know, sometimes I think about sound like collage, and I'm always really thinking about the subject of black women. So I'm putting together pieces that I collect over time, whether that's small pieces of writing, or whether that's small pieces of sound, that are always focused on the story of people who look like me. And centering those in a gallery setting, I think is really exciting, and special and rare. And also in a literary setting, also special and exciting and rare.

Julia

So to discuss a little bit more your work with sound. Yeah, you mentioned that you're often working with the subject of the black woman. And I wonder how you work with sound as an embodied material as a haptic material, how this relates to this kind of very embodied subjectivity.

Jamilah

So for me, I think about sound and listening less so much like a, an aural, in terms of like the ear, and this kind of cerebral processing as the experience of feeling sound through the body. So when I do like a listening meditation, I always start by saying to people, if the word hearing and listening feels

triggering, because maybe you're on the deaf or hard of hearing spectrum, think about feeling whenever I say listening you can you replace it with the word feeling because sound is felt through the body. So like one of my favorite sound artists is Christine Sun Kim, and she's deaf. I understand sound as something that touches and moves us in an embodied way. In like the way that bass is something you can feel. I think, on lots of levels you can feel sound as the way like bass kind of moves, but also in the way that you experience a sound and then you react. So that kind of inner reactivity, that awareness. And often, I do believe sound and listening practice are a mindfulness practice. And in this way, where if we're really listening for the quietest sound like the sound of our own body, breathing, our ears, and shoulders and neck soften. And I'm speaking from the experience of like, teaching, teenagers yoga, if I tell a teenager like, okay, focus on your breath, that's like a really tricky thing. Also the breath, you know, it goes in and out and in and out. And there's lots of change. But it just goes in and out. And in and out. There are pauses if you're getting more advanced, of course, but if I say to a teenager, listen, for the farthest sound, stretch your ears outside of the room we're in. Okay, see if you can hear next door, see if you can hear upstairs, see if you can hear outside on the road. And that is like a cue that keeps most of us more alert. But also something happens in the body where there's softening and letting go. Like I often start a sound talk with a short listening meditation. So people can really feel that, because I believe that sound can be abrasive, but that when we're doing the practice of listening, even if it's an abrasive sound, there's something about the quality of quieting down and tuning in. So like Alexis Pauline Gumbs talks about this, in this really great book. It's called underground. And it's meditations on ocean animals and listening. And she says that there's a transformative quality and quieting down and tuning in. I really believe that I feel like people are changed. And Nikita Gail is an amazing sound artist who talks about the audience as a site. And like a material and the sound touches them. You know, there's a beautiful piece of writing by this scholar named Tina Camp where she says I theorize sound as haptic and so like, I can see these examples, right, these examples of like, these black women, artists and scholars, and they talk about this, and I can also feel this one, I do my own practice. Right. So I'm reading from Tina Camp here, she says sound must be understood as a form of sensory contact. And it's an inherently embodied process. You know, and I think even just the use of the word process there, right, like, when we look at something, it just happens. And there's something about our primarily visual society that is like, it's very impersonal looking, even the preposition to look at, as opposed to, to listen to listen to, it puts us in relation. And there's something happening. There's like a back and forth between the sound and the receiver.

There's a fellow out in Montreal, his name is Martin Rodriguez. And he, he talks about sound as like an effective transmission, like a vessel, like sound carries me to you. And then I'm with you. There's something about sound that is, I think, this more intimate, personal, touching, feeling, process.

Julia

Wow, I think that's so beautiful that you say so then given if we're seeing sound that we're experiencing sound as something that is highly relational. And that can kind of permeate to what is at stake for you and considering the ways that sound and listening produce knowledge and how is it a way of knowing and itself? Or how could maybe listening be a way of knowing?

Jamilah

Okay, I have to say this, I have this little kind of work with the idea of sound and knowledge production. And I know it's like a popular academic idea. And I've tried to read Annie Goh's work and understand it better, because I think there's something there. But for me, I think sound produces not knowing. And I mean, not knowing in the sense of Bernie Glassman tenets of bearing witness says like practice of mindfulness. So the first thing you do is you don't know. And then you're bearing witness, and then through the bearing witness, you can come up with kind of a more skillful offering. Right and I don't know if it's like, quote unquote, a reaction I think a reaction happens faster. But okay, so what's happening? When we're listening, that isn't knowledge production. Toni Morrison writes this thing where she talks about, there's one point where she's talking about movies as opposed to language. And she talks about language as private exploration. And she talks about how in her work, she tries to write in a way that creates an other form of perception. I don't know, even the ways that like knowledge production, it feels to me like almost exploitive, or like capitalists doing right. And I think that putting something into use, like making labor, I think that this private exploration of an other form of perception is less steady. Then everything we bring to seeing, like the way that we see something, and no, is super colonized. All of the systems of power exist in the way that we see something and no. So Alexandra Healy is this great scholar, and he writes a lot about listening and blackness. And he says, when we analyze the role of vision, as it relates to the mechanisms of racism, sound emerges as a space where black subjectivity is not fixed by the look of white subjects, but is instead articulated dynamically by black subjects. So I think the thing about sound, not producing knowledge is actually really exciting, because then we can be more in a moment of private exploration, about what actually is coming up for me when I'm listening. I think when people go into a gallery, and here my work, they can't rely on some of the assumptions and tropes that visuality heavily relies on. You know, I've made two pieces of work called listen to black women, it's like, listen to black women, and then there's listen to black women again. And I think I might make a third. But I think this idea of going into a gallery space and being accustomed to all the ways that the female form, the woman, the feminine body has been, like just used an overused and abused in a gallery setting. And then particularly think about the ways that black women are, you know, the quote, is the mule of the world used and abused and overused in the world, that when you go in and you encounter voices, that you have less of that ground to stand on. And what happens is you have to actually think about, maybe notice what's coming up for you a little bit more than where you don't walk into a gallery room and see a bunch of pictures of black women, I don't think you do the same kind of private exploration and the same kind of noticing, as when you're, you're listening. So I think what it is, is sound makes me feel freer. And I think, because I don't have to show the body that might have a bunch of baggage attached to it for a viewer. By making the viewer into a listener, they can encounter that baggage and perhaps free themselves of that a little bit more. There's more space for me to feel free. And I think there's more space for the listener to get free to maybe notice like, oh, I recognize that voice. I don't recognize that voice. I feel this voice as insert adjective abrasive, as opposed to, you know, and I think just the practice of coming into a gallery and listening to a looping track of black women. I think maybe when that person goes out into the world, and they encounter a black woman, on the transit, or in their classroom or at their office, they got a little bit of practice to listen on their own. And I think what sound does, it doesn't produce knowledge, but it does give you the opportunity to practice and practice listening skillfully. I think that's really exciting. Because

the stakes there are huge. I think if we all were more skillful towards listening, like that listening is actually our doorway to care, and believing and feeling moved by an attending to each other.

Julia

Wonderful, thank you. I definitely now I can definitely see what you mean about listening. Actually, some of the beauty of listening is that it's actually not productive and use other relational skills. And private exploration is actually not at all productive under capitalist society. But the skill development is beautiful. So you mentioned already you're serious. These are pieces, listen to black women and listen to black women again. And so I wonder if you could elaborate a bit on this series, its concept, your process of creation, as well as the ties between listening and liberation.

Jamilah

I'll start by talking about listen to black women. So the first version I made in my first semester during my MFA, oh, this is fall 2017. So this is like kind of before the uptick in like dei trainings, we've seen, you know, since the murder of a lot of black people by police. And so I think it was like a time when I was speaking the language of like, what is it to ask for more cultural sensitivity in the classroom, and people weren't actually picking up on it. And it was actually quite a hostile space. And I felt like no one was listening. And so I thought, oh, maybe I'll change my pitch tone register, like maybe I'll mimic as like, Oh, let me do mimicry. Let me just code switch. And I thought, Okay, let me check in with my friends and family, and I solicited a bunch of my friends, I said, please send me audio of you talking about talking, you know about the challenges about how hard it is like acrobats and contortionists, like just this talking, being really a challenge, being heard trying to negotiate people into listening, and all that audio, I got back, and I made it into a soundscape. I mean, I'll tell you, I was just really sad and lonely. And I just sat in the studio and listen to my friends and family chat about being in the same position. And I felt less alone. In that way. It was like really just a healing. For me, it was just really like a moment of solace and comfort, like a ball. And I made it, you know, and I kept showing it in different places and doing things like I would use speakers in a formation, like I would kind of create a, an inside and outside with the speakers and the wires. And then I, I made a space where the speakers were triggered by movement. So you had to kind of get behind a speaker to make it make sound. And I thought, you know, I collect sounds and and what I started to find was that sounds that I were collecting, were lining up with this first collection from my friends and family. When I say I collect sounds, I mean, like I sourced them online, right? So it's like found sound from YouTube interviews from speeches from readings. And I, I realized that these women that I didn't know so specifically those into black women, again, features the voices of Angela Davis, Keke Palmer, Julie black, azalea banks, and Amara La Negra, and Rihanna. And so I had all of these clips of them and and I have others. But I was like these women who have platforms, who have wealth, who have status position, way greater than my friends and family are encountering the exact same challenge. And they're talking about how hard it is to talk as black women. And so I thought, Okay, I'm gonna do this again. And there's something to me about how the two pieces kind of talk to each other, that regardless of like, class, you can be struggling in this way, as a black woman, to get people to listen to you. And I continue to make this work because like, you know, New York Times printed this article, the headline was, I felt like no one truly listened.

And it's about fibroids and black women in the healthcare system, and how that's a life or death situation. You know, there's several instances of black women dying in emergency rooms, because they're not being seen, and they're not being attended to. They're not being heard. And so for me, it's like, okay, like if I can ask people to listen, and then think about how they're listening. So sometimes I would mount those works with notebooks, and be like, a little book for listeners to write and like, When is the last time you listen to black woman? How does it feel to listen to black women? Like I'm really concerned, you know, and I think that these opportunities where people switch from viewer into listener, in a situation where they're listening to somebody who has an experience of being othered I think this is really important. I sent her black women because, you know, the Combahee River statement, this Like revolutionary a group of black women put together this statement, I think it was in 1967, I'll check. But they say, you know, if black women get free, everybody gets free. But I also know that there are lots of other people for whom listening could be like, we all have to listen more to disabled folks, we all got to listen more to trans folks, we all got to listen more to these people who are telling us things we don't want to hear necessarily.

I curated AURAL ALTERITIES with mostly black women and non binary artists and people of color Indigenous artists, queer, trans, like just asking people who are alive, whose work I think isn't getting enough ears. And in positioning, others, people who are othered alterity. alterity is like an easy way to think about all kinds of others, is to hopefully center these artists who are going to inspire people like them. Right, so I'm like, let me put this thing up. So that people have a resource. It's exactly what I wanted. When I was getting into sound, right? It's got some theory, you know, that's like, usually locked up away in the White Tower of academia, you know, it's got several resources, like practical references, points, people to all kinds of different work. And then it showcases is exhibits, eight really great, different kinds of sound arts, like a real range of possibilities, so that somebody could connect to the site and be like, Oh, wow, sound art is all these kinds of things from all these kinds of different people. When I first found sound art, I was introduced to this like canon of dead white men who were like, the figures of sound art, copy and paste, whatever these guys making, like actually really obnoxious work. I was like, Where are my people? You know, so I wanted to put out into this world to this thing, so that people who feel others who are like, okay, sound is a space where I don't have to show my face. Sound is a space where I can find refuge and like, hide, and still express and share. But I don't have to center this trope or trauma porn of my finger formation, whatever trap of representation, this visual body brings up for people, right? So it's like, maybe that person goes into a space and they do their own little field recordings. Or maybe they go into their own personal archive of their family. Maybe they record their grandma recipes or something, you know, that somebody would feel like, okay, sound artists for me, too. It's not just for these like sis white, male long and McQuade bros who mount these installations in the gallery that actually are like alienating, you know, so I put it out there to encourage other folks to find their sound. Sound art, sound healing.

Julia

So I feel like in contrast to the canon of sound art, or yeah, this alienating installation, be like your work really demonstrates the urgency of listening and like makes that very clear. Which makes me also think

about care how listening listening can be an act of care. How can creating sound art be an act of care how curating this exhibition, or working with archival processes can be these processes of care?

Jamilah

Take not Han said listening, lessens suffering. And I think we all know what it feels like when we're listened to how good that feels. And how affirming that is. This is great DJ Bambi out of Toronto who tweeted this like in the end it's not privileged but our inability to really listen to others that makes us uphold these wack and unfair systems we were born into. Like I think listening is felt, you know, and not being listened to is felt as neglect and being listened to is felt as care. You know, listening to me is that bearing witness, it's that attending to and it can be uncomfortable, and it can make us sit with discomfort. But the sounds this moment to moment awareness that we're developing to like stay and listen and quiet down and tune in. I do believe that that is care, it's care for me. I use the word refuge as a way to describe sound and sound art. And I think there's a reference of a loophole of retreat. This is like a slave narrative reference, this runaway slave was hiding in a garret, which is like an attic, rooftop. And I think that a lot of black women artists right now are just met on a conference by that name by Simone Lee is a an amazing sculptor to sit in and talk about where we find freedom and feel free. And so like, I think, for me, it's a sense of care. And then for others, I think they get to develop a sense of care for people they don't necessarily interact with. You know, I think it's hard to think about caring for people who you can't listen to. Right, like, I don't think in an interview with Brene, brown Tirana, Burke, the founder of the me to movement, she said this thing, like, if you can't hear me, you can't see me. Like, I even think that listening helps us see, you know, and in that quote, Tirana was talking about, like, you know, like screaming, and being, like, appearing as silence almost like, you know, if you can't hear people's cries, you can't see them at all. So I think sound is really this entry point, to negotiating our own discomfort, you know, to attending to someone else, someone different from us, even when it's unpleasant, and to staying in connection. And I think when we start to listen, we can see, I think we can believe there were these refrains. In the past few years after Trump was elected people were like, listen to black women, because that vote had been staunchly democratic, right. But then, you know, with the our Kelly trials, people were like, believe black women. You know, and I think those two things, listening to and believing are things that connect, listening to, and caring for are things that connect, I think listening is really, it's a starting place, that's like, pretty easy to listen, you just have to be present. You don't have to respond. You don't have to act like you just sit and listen. Think so often in conversation and physically che like we're not listening to each other. We're thinking about what we'll say next. But when you make a sound art, there's no space to reply. But maybe you listen to the sound art, you leave the gallery, and you're kind of thinking, you're like replying and you're responding and you're remembering and those sounds kind of loop and stay with you, I hope is what I hope you know, that something later will remind you and you'll think like, in a way that is different than if you were I have a conversation. We start listening at 26 weeks in the fetus. Hey, I'm totally like pro abortion. You know, like I don't I'm not saying this anything like fetus is precious. I'm just saying it's something we've done for even before we were like in the world, I think it's something that connects us into our body that connects us into feeling and it makes us more sensitive.

Julia

Definitely, so we've discussed the ways that sound can kind of help to escape or get out of this trap of representation, and about how it's so much a different space than the visual realm also mentioned about how hearing someone helps you to see them truly so I wonder how we can use sound or listening to gain visibility or agency to cultivate power against systems which repress categorize and to humanize.

Jamilah

I mean, I collect sounds with immense care, even when I'm like editing clips, I'm practicing kind of care, I think about why I'm putting things next to each other. For me systems of power are something I try to interrogate within myself. You know, I think about the ways that I have power, and the ways that I experienced power, the ways that I witnessed power. And I think that it's a practice to continually notice, and then to think about ways that I can intervene. And I think that it's always risky and uncomfortable to intervene. But when I can make soundscapes, and they can show in the gallery, that's like the safest intervention towards other people, learning to practice noticing power, and stepping in whenever they can. Right. So it's like, if you come into the gallery and you hear listen to black women, or listen to black women again, then maybe you will have an exchange in the future with a black woman that will be shifted more towards her freedom. I don't think that in a real in a setting and like real life, if I see a black woman in distress, or in a situation where I'm like, I don't know, maybe she could use my help. I say, Hey, you good. That's, that's my practice. Because I don't want to assume, you know, and like, things are complicated. And I know that people know what they need best. And so I say, Hey, can I help you, you know, and then I try to do what they ask or they respect that they don't want to help. But that's like a really practical thing that I practice that I do. Because if I think about the way systems of power are pervasive and global, I get a little lost. But I do know that when somebody across the world logs into oral all charities that they'll have this like, really cool experience, and maybe sit with over time and think either the like, feel heard, feel a sense of connection, or inspired. And I hope that their response goes on to shift us towards freedom. The way that I understand black women's freedom, as connected to everyone's freedom is like why I'll always continue to make work about black women. Because I do I do believe that when we start to think about gender, and race, disability, justice, and workers rights, and all these things come from that, you know, I think trans black women have so much to teach us and that when we really start to just listen, I think sometimes we can do a kind of voyeurism when we listen, maybe, you know, maybe you're like, watching some show that's like really sensational. Like P Valley. Like, really, you know, people are like, I never interact with strippers or something. So like, let me watch this thing. But it's like, what if you like, sat down and like, listen to a stripper talk for an hour, like pay attention, pay attention, you know, to something you might sensationalize. But with your ears, if you stop watching, and you start listening, and then you start being really intentional about who you're listening to, you could change your life, and then you could change other people's lives. I don't know sometimes to me, I'm like the archive is a place of death and stuff. And I like to use the word collection, I don't know, which maybe has like a weird gallery undertone. But it's like, more to me like your quirky, idiosyncratic personal obsession, right? So like, collection of stamps, or whatever your little thing is, right? And it's like, I have files and files and files and folders and folders that have nomenclature that

only I understand. I see the kids on tick tock doing this thing that I think is collection right now. They say can you make this a sound? And I think that's so interesting, like they want to reuse the sound, the audio, right in all these different contexts. I think there's something really interesting happening there with young people and understanding sound as this thing That relates us, that connects us that like I can understand this feeling through this audio, I would like write a whole dissertation on like, what are the kids talking about? Can we make this a sound? What's that about? Because sound will connect us?

Julia

I'm definitely going to look into this. I'm also not on Tik Tok. How can you make this a sound? Wow,

Jamilah

I have a million screenshots of this because they comment, please make this a sound, you know. And so if they're asking for that audio to be kept in a way and circulated, and that's really interesting, that's really alive, and connective, and responsive and relational. And I think that's what sound can do.

Julia

Beautiful. Okay, well, then my last question is a very abstract one. So through sound, what is hidden? And what is revealed?

Jamilah

Yeah, I love this question. I used to be in a band, we used to wear huge costumes, and paper mache masks and face paint, and we project video, we would obscure ourselves almost completely. So I think what is hidden is me, I get to hide. For me that safety. I think there's lots of ways that people have done this kind of like, experiment about like how people receive black women and their faces and read them as angry when they're not. When I get to hide, I hopefully get people to kind of key in a little bit more to what they feel when they just listen, as opposed to what they might assume or misunderstand when they see. And I think what is revealed is them is the listener. And I think that they get to notice without me putting myself in like any kind of danger, right? without me having to like, actually interact with some of their assumptions and baggage. So it's like, I'm safe. I hide, and they get to notice, and maybe maybe that realization is like a quick one. Or maybe I'm just planting a seed and like 30 days later, or 30 years later, they're like, Hmm, I'm not really listening, creating a safe place for me in the gallery and black women, it means like removing our image, and what happens to like a person who goes to a gallery, who is so accustomed to just like seeing form, and curators, and gallerists who like put price tags on everything and value and how it will accrue and grow over time. This oil on canvas. Right sound doesn't do any of that. You can't buy it. Well, you could you know, people purchase stuff. Rarely, but

like, it's not that same kind of marketable, modifiable thing that's happening. And it's to me, that's like super exciting.

Julia

Perfect. Thank you so much Jamilah, it's really a pleasure to hear you speak. And I think it's very important what you say, before we finish is there anything else you wanted to mention?

Jamilah

I think I just like for people to check out auralalteraties.com and I right now am mothering. So I have a small child and I just feel like I'm trying to put together and well manuscript about sound and blackness and freedom. But you know if anybody knows a publisher, i'd be interested. No, I hope people really take the time to listen and to feel into what they hear and to notice what is revealed when they listen.

Amanda

Jamilah's piece is titled listen to black women again.

a kind of harmony is hosted and produced by Julia E Dyck and Amanda Harvey, with the generous support from the Canada Council for the Arts. This episode was edited by our production assistant, Laura Dickens, with mixing and mastering by Evan Vincent, project management by Christian Scott graphic design by mutual design. A huge thanks to all of our contributors for their generous involvement in this project. If you'd like to support this project and what we do, please follow us on Instagram, or subscribe to our Patreon