Pauline Oliveros and Deep Listening. Sound Art Strategies for an Ecofeminist Knowledge Construction

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Abstract: American composer and accordionist Pauline Oliveros developed two fundamental principles that became cornerstones of post-war sound experimentation. In her theories and musical experiences, she advocated a particular approach to mindfulness based on deep listening, a meditative practice that aspires to sonic awareness, promoting mindfulness of sound to motivate personal and social consciousness.
This study aims to promote an understanding of this type of attitude as a methodological framework for socio-cultural action and cooperative experimentation, incorporating a diversity of voices and attending to the specific characteristics of their situated realities. This sensitive approach is rooted in an intersectional and ecofeminist perspective that recognises the interdependence and eco-dependence of all beings as part of a reality characterised by indeterminacy.

Keywords: Deep Listening; sound art; ecofeminism; intersectionality; participation.

Introduction

Pauline Oliveros was an American accordionist, composer, and pioneer in experimental and electronic music. Born in Houston, USA, in 1932 she developed throughout her career two fundamental principles of sound experimentation that served as cornerstones for the electronic music created in the post-war period. Her career would be defined by a visionary compositional talent, technological innovation, and a humanitarian perspective, which continued until her death in 2016, emphasising the importance of listening and how this can influence and broaden the community. With a firm belief that, through their art, artists have a responsibility to bring people together, she built an incredible world-wide community during her life. In the artist's own words "I never tried to build a career, I only tried to build a community" (Weintraub, 2023). This ambition would inspire boundless creativity within her community in Kingston, New York, and amongst the world-class musicians with whom she regularly

collaborated. She had to overcome many obstacles placed in front of her by 1950's society, just for the fact of being a woman who identified as queer, which reinforces her commitment to listening and understanding.

The meditative practices based on Deep Listening, developed by Pauline Oliveros, set a precedent for contemporary sound creation (see Fig. 1). Considering its significant influence, this contribution aims to revisit this notion from an intersectional and ecofeminist perspective, focusing on certain current practices that are particularly attentive to specific social contexts and promote sound awareness as a tool for social transformation. Sound art experiences aligned with Deep Listening demonstrate the importance of listening as an epistemic, artistic, and relational practice. According to Oliveros, these participatory strategies dissolve the separation between subject and object or performer and audience, recovering remote forms that precede the roles of spectator.

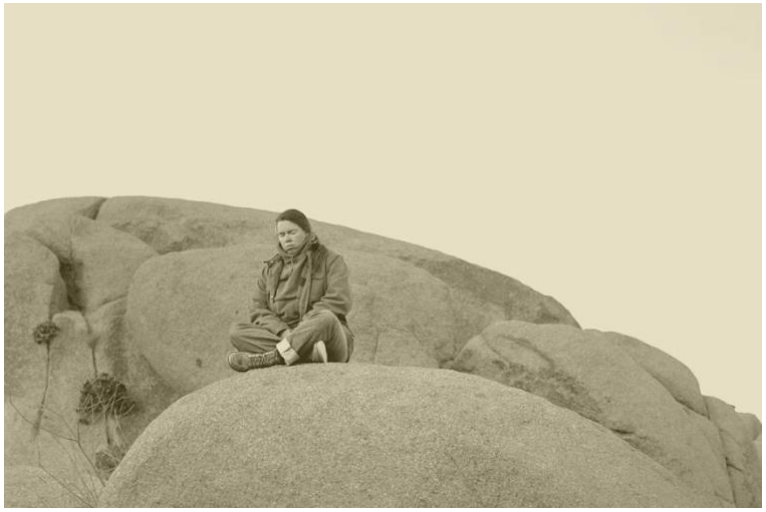


Fig. 1. ***Deep Listening: The Story of Pauline Oliveros*** (Photo by Fred Lonidier included in the documentary film by Daniel Weintraub (2023): https://thestoryofpaulineoliveros.com)

Beyond developing a heightened state of self-awareness, Oliveros recognised how the sustained practice of these exercises would give her a profound sense of well-being (Oliveros, 2005, p. 25). Similarly, it was shown that relationships based on participation and exchange through sound could have a healing effect, as "individuals feel the common bond with others through a shared experience"; also because "one's inner experience is made manifest and accepted by others"; and "when one is aware of and in tune with one's surroundings"; and even "when one's memories, or values, are integrated with the present and understood by others" (Oliveros, 1971). That demonstrated that by listening, it is possible to make a difference in the community, expand it and strengthen it. A commitment to listening and understanding can create an altered state of consciousness in which identification with other beings occurs naturally.

Deep Listening

In 1971 Pauline Oliveros wrote *Sonic Meditations*, a guide to practicing collective sound exploration that constitutes the foundation of Deep Listening. The various compositions included in this publication could be performed by people with no musical training. These experiences were focused on patterns of attention to heighten awareness of ways of listening and responding (Oliveros, 2005, p. 25). This set of exercises would promote an understanding and practice of philosophy, as well as the experience of attentive and creative listening within non-verbal meetings to develop positive energy, tuning the mind and body of the participants, even influencing others who were less experienced, as the author said in the introduction of the publication. The healing power of the sound energy became part of the group experience (see Fig. 2). The sonic exploration designed by Oliveros brings a peculiarly inclusive point of view, in that it pointed to any form of life, beyond the dichotomy between living and non-living beings.



Fig. 2. Pauline Oliveros. *Deep Listening Study Circle*. (The Center for Deep Listening: https://www.deeplistening.rpi.edu/)

Sound, as a physical phenomenon, makes us vibrate; it touches us. It brings to light the material-affective dimension of existence, as Karen Barad has said: "Touching oneself" is an encounter with the infinite otherness of the self (2023, p. 41). In this way, matter, being a fold, can do nothing but touch itself; and in touching itself, it comes into contact with the infinite otherness that it is. This allows us to "welcome the stranger" through the possibility of touching and being touched (Barad, 2023, p. 52), of listening and being listened to, in an exercise of mutual recognition and understanding of our responsibility towards the infinite diversity of the other. That way, Deep Listening is directly linked to the concept of coexistence and interdependence. And this interconnectivity implies a radical familiarity with other beings. According to Timothy Morton's concept of the web, ecological thought recognises that all

things are interconnected and that "the boundaries between individuals, and their identities, are affected by this interconnectedness" (2018, p. 122).

Through her musical theories and experimental research, Oliveros advocated a particular approach to attention based on listening, with the aim of fostering *sonic awareness*: "She developed Deep Listening, a meditative practise that advocates mindfulness of sound to motivate personal and social consciousness, and founded the Deep Listening Institute, a nonprofit arts organization, in 1985" (Rodgers, 2010, p. 27). From the context of artistic creation and social studies, this research aims to recognize the value of deep listening as an inclusive epistemological model. It also seeks to examine the capacity of contemporary artistic practices based on listening to include the diversity of non-hegemonic voices, paying attention to and valuing the richness of diversity and the peculiarities of their situated realities.

Learning to listen as an artistic situated ecofeminist practice

Through an analysis of the theories developed by Oliveros herself, as well as a review of other works of sound creation and experimentation today, we propose an approach to Deep Listening as a methodological axis for sociocultural action. According to the theories of Situated Listening, deep listening strategies are a powerful tool for attending to the unheard (Loveless et al., 2025).

This strong conviction brings us back to models of inclusion and the celebration of diversity, such as that advocated by the Roma Project (López-Melero, Soler-García & Payá-Gómez, 2025). The need to listen to all voices, and not just those that stem from a position of privilege due to their proximity to the hegemonic norm, is something that bell hooks also championed throughout her Teaching Trilogy (2021, 2022 y 2024). hooks' feminist thinking and social activism, rooted in the importance of love, emphasises the need for inclusive spaces that accommodate a diversity of voices—spaces where everyone can be listened to. Her vision focuses on the interconnectivity of race, class and gender in order to prevent the perpetuated conventional systems of domination and oppression. Listening to each unique voice allows us to incorporate the wisdom of personal experience into a process of collective knowledge-building. Listening creates space to learn from the gift that is the existence of other beings, involving a multifaceted perspective and addressing different realities within a fully inclusive process, listening and waiting together. As hooks states, even longing can constitute a form of knowledge (2021, p. 114).

This approach, developed by Oliveros, is rooted in the sensibilities of Eastern spiritual philosophy. As the artist explains, throughout the 1980s she studied different forms of meditation from various traditions: Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, yoga and Taoism (2005, p. 27). According to Oliveros herself, these practices deepened her understanding and appreciation of meditation, strengthening her work as a composer and performer.

In this study, we propose the practice of listening as an artistic, epistemological and ontological practice—a situated ecofeminist practice that promotes various contemporary sound-based artistic strategies through social engagement. As we have been pointing out, Oliveros's holistic approach can be applied to social studies by incorporating a feminist, inclusive and intersectional perspective (hooks; López-Melero, Soler-García & Payá-Gómez, 2025; and Hill-Collins & Bilge, 2016). That way, Deep Listening can be understood as a methodological framework for the socio-cultural action of an autonomous yet ungovernable culture, as advocated by Jazmín Beirak (2022), capable of incorporating a diversity of voices while taking their specific contexts into account. It can therefore be argued that sonic exploration or sound meditation establishes a methodological framework for collaborative sound experimentation. These participatory strategies blur the subject/object or performer/audience distinction, reviving ancient forms that predate the roles typically associated with spectatorship (Oliveros, 1971). We can agree that "people are always listening, but what they are listening, to what they are giving attention to is the important thing" (Weintraub, 2023). Becoming aware, through listening, of what others think and say could help alleviate stress and violence. Knowing how to listen would foster greater acceptance and respect for those who are different.

Below, we will examine three examples influenced by the theories and practices of Deep Listening developed by Oliveros. We will also consider how these experiences approach listening as a collective and situated practice.

First, the work of sound artist and DJ Ain Bailey centres on the exploration of sound autobiographies and the acoustics of architectural contexts. In the project *Sonic Stories*, developed in 2019, Bailey invites a group of young women from Westminster Academy School in North London and approaches listening as a collective and situated practice, by questioning ideas like home, memory, identity, and place (Bailey, 2019). They recorded their own surroundings, transforming everyday objects into instruments, and creating shared soundscapes. Through collective listening and sound practices, they would be led to ask themselves what the distinctive sounds of their own space are; what *home* means; and what happens when we listen together. This analysis and reflection would lead them to consider how sounds can reinforce a sense of belonging to a particular space or context.

For an episode of Serpentine Podcast *On Practice* Bailey used *Ear Piece* by Pauline Oliveros. In this short exercise of Deep Listening, included in *Sonic Meditations* (1971), the public was asked to pay attention to the questions included at the infographic illustration created by Joy Yamusangie (see Fig. 3). On this occasion, the artist will be working in collaboration with Micro Rainbow, which supports LGBTQI+ asylum seekers and refugees who find themselves in isolation in the UK.

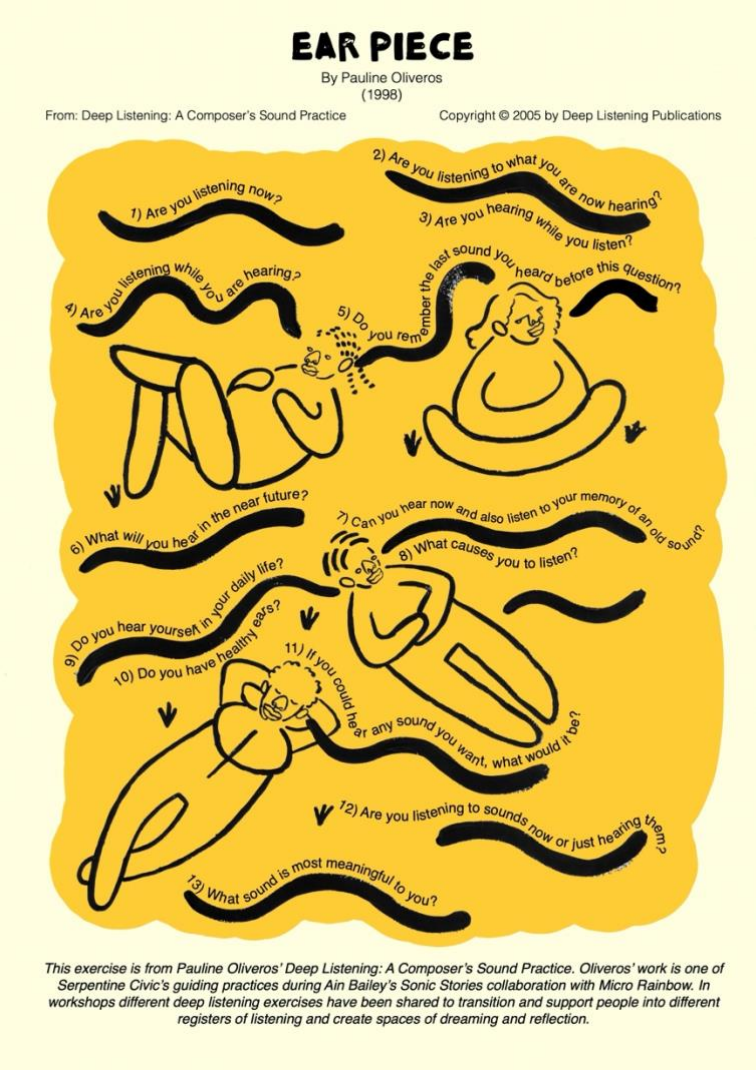


Fig. 3. Bailey, A. (2021). *Ear Piece*. Serpentine Podcast. (Desig by Joy Yamusangie. Serpentine Gallery: https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/art-and-ideas/on-practice-listening/)

Throughout the workshops, various deep listening exercises would be shared with the aim of easing the transition and helping people to explore different modes of listening, creating open spaces for daydreaming and reflection. In the artist's own words: "There is the moment of free-ness in just being able to talk about it, their lives, without the trauma of like you know, their status, basically" (Bailey, 2021). By highlighting the difference between listening and hearing, this work emphasised how it is possible to create a space for political engagement through listening.

Un·Tuning Together: Practicing Listening with Pauline Oliveros was a collective exhibition curated by Maud Jacquin and Émilie Renard in Bétonsalon Center for Art and Research in Paris, 2023. The exhibition formed the second part of *Dissolving your Ear Plugs*, curated a few months earlier by Maud Jacquin together with Anne-Marie St-Jean Aubre at the Musée d'art de Joliette in Quebec, also in 2023. Rather than presenting a fixed tribute, the exhibition functioned as a shared space of experimentation. The participating

artists took Oliveros's concept of *Deep Listening* as both a conceptual and methodological framework, exploring the act of listening as a relational, ecological, and political practice. Drawing on Oliveros' concept of Deep Listening, this group exhibition explored the possibility of listening beyond the surface of the audible, delving into the hidden recesses of the acoustic environment. It opened up new forms of sensoriality through the various experiences presented and suggested a range of strategies for paying attention and ways of listening to ourselves, to others and to the collective environment, promoting attentiveness and receptiveness towards others and towards what is happening.

The various works that made up the exhibition expanded on Pauline Oliveros's ideas through a direct dialogue between the different research projects and the practice of Deep Listening: "Each artist [was] invited to inhabit the entire space and to share with participating audiences practices that bring into play the principles of improvisation and mutual listening within a group" (Bétonsalon Center for Art and Research, 2023). The works by the artists taking part in the exhibition were presented in a collective programme that brought together various installations, workshops and performance-based initiatives, as well as other regular sessions dedicated to the experience of the Sonic Meditations (see Fig. 4). Therefore, Pauline Oliveros' work became a kind of catalyst for collective thinking involving artists, researchers, participating audiences and the organising team. Taken as a whole, the project would provide a comprehensive insight into how Deep Listening can bring about transformation at both a personal and a social level.



Fig. 4. Sharing session of Emily Mast's workshop, during the exhibition *Un·Tuning Together. Practicing Listening with Pauline Oliveros*. Bétonsalon Center for Art and Research, Paris, 2023. (Photo by Susie Richard: https://www.betonsalon.net/en/expositions/un%C2%B7tuning-together-pratiquer-lecoute-avec-pauline-oliveros/)

Within a closer context, we would like to mention the work of sound designer, artist and researcher Ilaria Degradi whose doctoral thesis, *Soundscapes: Unusual Territories for Experimental Electronic Music* (2025), explores how

sound art can be used as a tool for social transformation to enhance the value of abandoned spaces and revitalise them. The Italian artist living in Andalusia is specialised in field recordings and digital instruments. Degradi focuses her work on the production of electronic music and soundscapes. And through her project *Music for Territories*, based on the practice of deep listening and different sound experimentations, she promotes the reconnection of communities with their environmental surroundings, emphasising the need for cooperation and reconnection with nature, developing what could be defined as an artistic practice based on an ecofeminist perspective (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Ilaria Degradi, *Music for Territories* (Ilaria Degradi (2025). Territorios Sonoros. Territorios inusuales para la música electrónica experimental. [Doctoral Thesis, University of Jaen, Spain]. Courtesy of the artist: https://ruja.ujaen.es/items/a2e066fa-dd11-4bc6-a3a8-8fb17ba0bc45)

The combination of her interest in experimental electronic music and in neglected or forgotten tangible and intangible heritage has given rise to a sound project aimed at giving a voice and visibility to silenced places and cultures through the creation of unique soundscapes and unusual settings. In the creation of her works, the methodology employed begins with soundwalking and field recording, moves on to the interpretation of the recorded material using digital tools and synthesisers, and culminates in site-specific sound installations.

Recently, Degradi presented the audiovisual installation entitled *Suburban Soundscape* (2024) in the Chapel Hall of the School of Architecture at the University of Granada, as part of the 10th International A/R/Tographic Video

Narrative Exhibition. The collaboration featured an original video work by Eugenio Rivas and a soundscape performed live by Degradi. The result presented an evolution of the previous work *My Neighbourhood, My Garden* (Rivas, 2023), created in collaboration with the artistic collective Artefacto Social, which, through a participatory strategy, brought together a large collection of plant pots lent by residents of a working-class neighbourhood in the city of Málaga (Spain). This sound garden explores community interdependence from an ecological perspective, building on previous research and social engagement.

Conclusions

Sound exploration based on this practice of attention without limits or distinctions recognizes the power of pause for care, establishing a methodological model of cooperative experimentation through sound. This kind of listening reinforces social commitment and connects with an intersectional and ecofeminist perspective, allowing us to recognize the interdependence and eco-dependence of all beings as part of a reality characterized by indeterminacy. A situated listening has the power to highlight unheard realities, influencing their context from a social, political, or ecological perspective.

Coming back to Oliveros's work, it is worth revisiting *Sonic Meditations* (1971). This collection of exercises, designed for group work within regular meetings over a long period of time, constitutes an inclusive way to participate in a collective experience and share the healing power of music or sound. As Oliveros noted, with continuous work, some significant results can be achieved, developing elevated states of awareness or expanded consciousness, and experiencing changes in physiology and psychology from known and unknown tensions. These changes may represent a tuning of mind and body, establishing strong connections between group members, through the exchange of positive energy, and constituting a source of empathy towards other forms of existence.

Irene Revell (2022) considers the textual instructional performance score as a feminist project. The collection itself is always speculative feminist, what has to do with the contemporary feminist new materialism promoted by Karen Barad. Revell defends the indeterminate, *in-between* and performative nature of Oliveros's work. And argues that such score- based performance works are diffractive: "That is to say that they open outwards to others in their multiple iterations in time and space, sharing authorship and labour, reinforcing the inherently speculative nature of any coherent understanding of their aesthetic" (Revell, 2022, p. 282). Listening became a way to know (Moore & Wright, 2025, p. 176), in a transcorporeal listening that involves and holds indeterminacy as critical to its formation: "Trans-corporeality means that all creatures, as embodied beings, are intermeshed with the Dynamic, material world, which crosses through them, transforms them, and is transformed by them" (Alaimo, 2018, p. 435). Deep Listening thereby becomes an act of love, in which one pays attention to the other from a sense of absolute

interdependence. Thus, through collective listening, the capacity to love many others is put into practice, in a process of knowledge-building which, going beyond social involvement, establishes an ecological and feminist commitment through socio-cultural action.

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Author Contribution

The research was carried out cooperatively by both authors:

Author 1: Conceptualization, investigation, methodology, visualization and writing.

Author 2: Conceptualization, investigation, methodology, visualization and writing.

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No AI tools were used in preparing this research.

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