

## **What's in a Voice**

*in seven scenes*

*propositions*

*episodic tales*

This reading is a revised version of the one that I did at SAM, a few months back during my residency, in November along with my co-residents Sorawit Songsataya and Bolun Shen. Today's is a redacted version of it in my voice only.

Each of the scenes is an episode, a proposition, a tangle, an unfolding.  
Within each scene, are the many fragments are still being explored, interrogated.  
Stories, tales and conversations pave the way through thinking - *What's in a voice, after all?*

In the following sections I will often also be thinking about the thresholds of speech, writing, voicing and listening. Anecdotes questions, keywords, segues and provocations floating in the air - setting the stage for an unfolding of the thoughts around these thresholds across people and voices, across sites and time. Spread apart across time and context possibly also beyond.

As a form, I hope this can be generative to think with and through.

**I invite you all to contribute to each scene, annotate, comment, counter, maybe even make new ones? \*\***

\*\*Think verses, bridges, interludes, chorus.

## Scene 1: Corporeality / Materiality

One of the things that interests me is what constitutes the body of the voice? What is the relationship between the voice and body? Is a voice always attached to a body? Does it become an immaterial or a material entity based on where it lands? Can the anatomy of a voice be determined based on the bodies that it is composed of and the ones that it shapes?

How about space- physical space? Often we think about space and sound in close affinity to one another. That is sound not of or in space but **sound AS space**. My voice would sound different in any other space. So then- is the spatial that which makes up the voice? The voice is emitted in or heard in the body/ material of the voice? – organs, bodies, cables, frequencies

Saturday morning. NGS. Dr. Cissy Fu in her captivating response to *Teo Eng Seng's* show gave a talk titled [A Science for Happiness: On Teo Eng Seng's Aesthetic Prospectus](#). In this she spoke of the **Resonance** of **hollows**. However empty inside, without a solid core, void and vacant a space is, but it can still resonate and be resonant, as long as it is not a vacuum. I thought about how voices resonate within one's own body but also how they travel outside of the bodies in the form of ideas, memories, thoughts, intuitions, desires....

Sunday evening. 'Ikut Arus'. An artistic performance by Zarina Muhammad and Firdaus Sani was accompanied by a spoken word piece influenced by the ancestral mantras of the Orang Laut/Pulau descendants. In the discussion after with TinTin from Bintan, sites of polyvocalities appear in the inextricable linkages between water, earth, spirit, life, myths and language. Polyvocality- the site of a plurality of voices, emerging together.

Tuesday afternoon. A conversation with artist, composer and sound designer Chong Li-Chuan where he emphatically stated- Space is porous for sound to thrive in, leak in, spill out in so far as you don't **insulate** or isolate it.

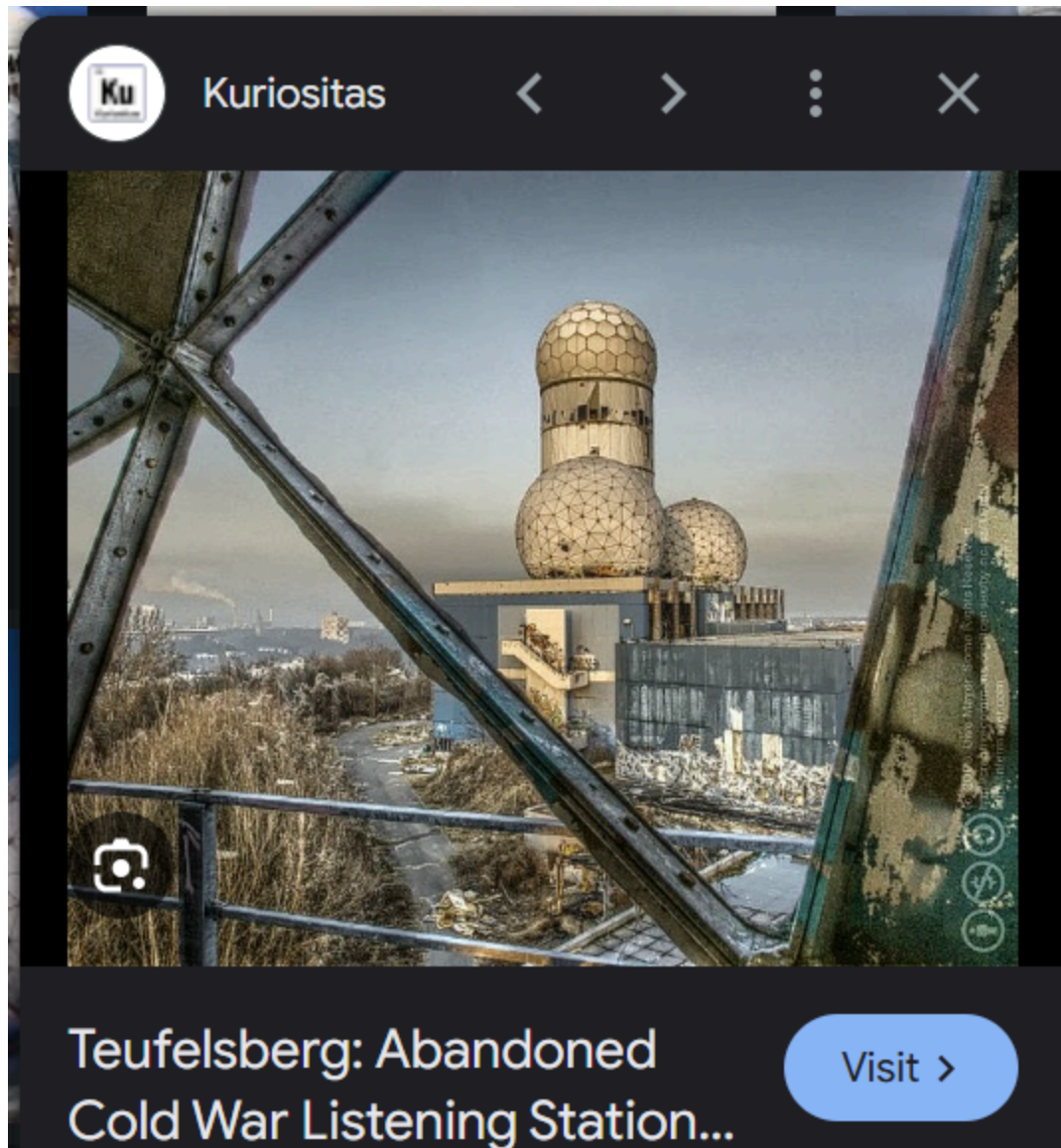
It reminded me of a short story by Italo Calvino. *Un re in ascolto* translated to *A King Listens*. In this, we find a king, who has dethroned the previous ruler and now as the head of the empire, there is not much else for him to do but to safeguard his precarious position. So how does he do that? Well all he can do is sit in the middle of the palace and wait and listen all day long. All day long he **listens [how does he listen, where does he listen...]** to the sounds of the palace, the footsteps of servants, the trumpet blares, people working, the ceremonies, the visitors to the palace, the clocks, the clicks, the music mostly played in his honour, the words of praise, and beyond the palace the sounds of the city the parades the distant echoes, but also the riots and their stifling. All the acoustical routes converge in the throne room and all the voices, sounds and noises flow into the king's ear.

The king is the **permanent listener and interpreter**- to rule is to listen and to interpret. He is always on the watch-out for the hidden meaning. The palace becomes a giant ear and the king, obsessed by fears of rebellion, is in a state of constant restless **aural surveillance**.

And then one day he hears a voice that is different---a singing voice. For the very first time, this *voice does not raise the question of meaning*. No hermeneutic question for once. It appears in the form of '**voice as voice**'. Unique, inimitable, offering itself in song, the acousmatic voice surprises him, confuses him, destabilises the grounds beneath him for he cannot listen anymore in the way that he was.

What happens to the king in the story- we wait to find out.

[Site in Berlin/ Teufelsberg/ round acoustic space built for listening](#)  
**Panacousticon**



## Scene 2: Movement / Motility

The next scene of unfolding of the voice is one where we contemplate how it moves. The motility of the voice. Mobility-Motility. I am not really sure of how they are different-maybe one of you could elaborate?

How the voice moves is equally a question of location or embodiment. Often to move, to live, to thrive, other voices, other names, other identities have to be taken on, embedded, embodied. Fictions come alive.

My conversation with artist **bani haykal** a few days back steered towards the impulses behind speculation and fictioning. He likes to posit Fictions, he said, as **Frictions**. If there was to be no friction, how would one move? We would only always be slipping.

What are the fictions/ frictions that voices carry as they perform and traverse through bodies, spaces, moments, time frames, imaginations, worlds, creating new ones in the process.

What can a “sonic-writing/listening/fictioning-voice” be?  
a voice that listens...a listening that speaks...voices in which one writes?

[Thinking here of another story.](#) The story of Kafka’s **Burrow** is one that brought me to uncanny sounding and resounding. It is a tale of anxious listening. A nameless and undefined creature inhabits the story. It is most likely a mole or a badger, going by the signs that lie scantily strewn across the volume of a convoluted underground fortress. A register of hyper-listening is invoked by a piercing sound that wakes up the mole. Like an earworm, the “inaudible whistling” wriggles its way all the way into its aural faculties. From an inside to an outside, from refuge to peril, it spirals all the way through the burrow. Driven to the edge by the task of locating the source of this acousmatic sound, the mole steadily enters into a state of **neuroticccccccc** surveillance, a **sousveillance**. The whistle is writing the mole as it keeps looping into a feedback of its own making, eventually demolishing the burrow. In a bid to excavate its way out of the clutches of the disconcerting **unsound**, a circuitous route is taken by the mole towards an urgent escape from what has produced a **disquiet**.

I have been fascinated by the idea of a room that listens, and plays back to all that moves within itself. The **stone tape theory** [BBC film - TC Leip???? - horror drama  
] postulates a similar idea of how natural environments, materials, and architectural features hold or ‘record’ sonic events and the ways in which these acoustic memories get activated or ‘replayed’ or ‘released’ is through the presence of specific human agents and **parapsychicccccccccc** energies.

A form of undead place memory. But it needs the playhead to move with the motility of voices present within and around it.

How voices travel across landscape, across time, across history



Singing practice in commune with–singing that reaffirms the place which it is about –  
Architecture and acoustic effects- designed to happen

Sound is what remains unheard

Idea of hauntology- something repressed/ contained that keeps coming back  
Tape- playback- magnetic tape–mechanism-rubbing against the tape- vinyl record - a  
diamond against shellac (made of crushed insects) or vinyl (plastic?)

### Scene 3: Opacity

During our visit to Starch, an independent arts space in Singapore, Bolun and I were standing in the complex where it is situated and saw a protrusion in the form of a children's play space rising from the centre of the space. Transparent from all sides, you could look within from wherever you stood. The cute illustrations on the see through walls- framed the view. Think transparency, think panopticon, think panacousticon.

Gerald Wacman, in his work *Intimacy Extorted Intimacy Exposed*, speaks of a figure that haunts our era, a phantom or a fantasy: that of the transparent subject. He writes

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The invention of the X-ray at the end of the nineteenth century gave birth to the scientific dream of the transparency of the body–to the point of inspiring the belief that our most secret thoughts would no longer be safe from the practiced eye of the physician. It is clear that today the forces of technical expansion seem to want to extend the power of the **machine-for-seeing** to the point of creating a **man without a shadow, a totally transparent subject**, in body and soul. Between the explosion of medical imaging, the perpetual innovation in the field of police surveillance and espionage technology, the triumph of legal medicine and of anatomic pathology, it seems that **power is**

**today centred on the gaze**, and that the exercise of power consists first of all in increasing the powers of surveillance of the subject and the investigation of bodies. We are thus led to think that what formerly was considered a divine attribute—the omniscience of God, her power to see everything without being seen—has today become *an attribute of a secular power*, armed by both science and technology.

He then goes on to formulate and argue that -

“There can be no subject without a secret, **that is, there can be no entirely transparent subject**. Every dream of transparency removes, with the dissolution of every opacity, the opacity of the subject itself.”

Somewhere i think that this is where voice comes in, shrouded in a matter of opacity. An irreducible opacity. A way to say the unsaid through an inherent opacity that it is coloured by. Exercising modes of encryption as a way to bypass imposed blockages. Underground and overground- the voice seeks out hidden resonances.

Voice persists in the *Right to Opacity* (Glissant *poethics of relation?* Cavereiro?)  
The voice can never truly be transparent

Not everyone has to speak and understand everything. Not all secrets have to be shared. Not everything needs to be known. Secrets are often held on to, closely only to be passed on in specific conditions, in certain languages, through shared communities and histories. As a counterpoint to *hungry listening* [decolonial listening], oblivious listening as a way to not only conceal but also selectively reveal.

In her essay, ‘*The Miner’s Ear*’, Rosalind Morris writes of the significance of overhearing. She says, ‘To understand the history and nature of gold mining in South Africa and elsewhere, one must listen for different and false or "accidental" resonances, the mere coincidence of frequencies that amplify each other.’  
[https://serendipityarts.org/writing\\_initiatives/rambles-fatigued-listening#u6dzbeqgtlla](https://serendipityarts.org/writing_initiatives/rambles-fatigued-listening#u6dzbeqgtlla)

Through Morris, i came across a poem by Zulu poet Vilakazi

### ***I. The Miner's Ear***

In her essay 'The Miner's Ear', Rosalind Morris invokes the image of the mole and the burrow via Vilakazi's poem that recites/ resides in the suffocating space between the sounds of the mining machines and the eventual bodily breakdown.<sup>8</sup>

An excerpt from Vilakazi's poem (as cited in the essay) that ventures into a mythological narrativisation of the mines-

*"one day a siren screeched  
And then a black rock-rabbit came,  
A poor dazed thing with clouded mind;  
They caught it, changed it to a mole:  
It burrowed, and I saw the gold..."*<sup>9</sup>

The hue of voice is the colour of the world. There's a vibe in the air. One is controlled by a vibe. Passions are restrained by the vibe as one breathes in the air of neutrality. Been noticing a lot of middles here in Singapore- middle roads, lanes, stories and voices. The middle often tries to be translucent if not transparent. Where does one hear the passionate intensity, the peak pitch? I asked someone the other day. I was directed to a lecture that spoke of **obscurity as a necessary instance of creative activity**- as a productive concept inducing transformation. The middles were being turned inside-out.

Habitual network behaviour prompting behaviour itself - behavioural engineering  
Algorithms /

*"Platforms know you better than you know yourself"*

*Surveillance - a kind of behavioural conditioning*

*Nicholas Mertzoff - our propensity to document everything everywhere all the time  
visually now*

*What gets normalised- is the behavioural conditioning*



Dominating capacity to archive - common behaviour - *when was it that we started photographing out lunch before we started eating it?*

What is the “right to opacity”?

☆ **VibEEEEEEEEEEEE** ☆: vibration

Fugitive → a radio that is interested in infrastructures- and inhabits different networks and infrastructures→ a kind of stealing away in relation to surveillance, radio's relative invisibility now is something that can be taken advantage of, it's qualities are something that are attractive → intimate space of staging or performing or making a kind of space for **acoustic co-mingling**

**Glissant - poetics of relation**

Headphones as Private Listening | Speakers as Public Listening  
Solitary Space | Amplifiers

What is a truly public? What is truly solitary?

Effort going into noise-cancelling technologies, noise cancelling ‘settings’

‘Silent’ devices - domestic appliances

Sonic public - dominant taking of the sonic space, and reclaiming of a private space through your ‘head’

Thinking also of the “call to prayer” in Singapore, and how the sonic space and public space have been restricted:

<https://medium.com/@elmizulkarnain/understanding-the-regulation-of-azan-volume-in-singaporean-mosques-factors-and-considerations-aa704cc99d8a>

Something public, now can only be enjoyed in private

Sonic politics

📺 The Sound of Silence - Official Trailer | HD | IFC Films

Clarence the clairvoyant? Retunes the ‘frequencies’ of institutional spaces? WHO IS THISSS!

KUEH LAPIS

// What happens to the document? Maybe it can be replayed another time?

// Multitasking, annotating, listening conversations

#### Scene 4: Relationality

The shot cuts before it is meant to–

The sound is heard before the image is seen.

The voice interrupts soon after.

The logic of the film edit generates sites of intimacies through the designed disjunctions.

Two disparate things that may or may not necessarily belong in a common world are brought together into a frame. The cut produces relationalities between voices held across bodies, occupying different times and milieus, *decentering, bringing to light the unthought, the inaudible in each of the scenes.*

*I often think of the Curatorial as the field of the edit or assemblage which foregrounds the relationality between voices.*

When assembling the series [<Norient City Sounds: Delhi Sensate>](#), a moment stands out that becomes the departure point for the curatorial frame–

«This Delhi that we uphold is an imaginary... it doesn't exist.»

The **provocation** by musician Madan Gopal Singh kept resounding in my head as I unpacked the intuitions with which I began assembling this collection– the impossible task of making sense of this strange chimerical being that is Delhi, appearing in parts and guises at different moments in time.

How does one listen to the deeply layered and complex sensorium of a city that both senses and is sensed in a multitude of ways? To frame a response to this, I turn towards Brandon LaBelle who reminds us that «Forms of listening are ultimately productions of subjects and sites, knowledges and relations, contouring and shaping the subjective and the intersubjective» (LaBelle 2020, 161).

Let's for a moment think about the relationality between LAND and voice– and also the break between the two– What when a voice cannot emit FROM a certain location?

What then is the corporeality that it takes on? In Calvino's story- the body that the song is arising from, is not known. The acousmatic voice could be from within the kingdom or outside of it, inside the king's head or a part of a dream. For a voice to locate, it often needs to (Dis) locate.

In Hsu Fang Tze's article '*Listen to Oblivion at Home: Experimental Documentaries and a City-State's Continued developmentalism*', the relationship between home, dislocation and sonic presences in Singapore is drawn out through an acknowledgment of oblivion and the aurality it holds. Asynchronous/ acousmatic sound as a strategy reactivates the unheard, overheard, hearing from above and below. Specific work of Tan Pin Pin *In Time to Come* and *Migrant Ecologies Like Shadows Through Leaves* becomes the lens through which the relationship between asymmetrical power sites and the reactivation of collective memories is traced.

#### Scene 5: Limits & Thresholds

One of the nights towards the closing of the residency and before our supper club- we (Sorawit and Bolun) were asking each other: Speech and language- what is the difference. Is it a factor of meaning, legibility, determinacy? Where in this, is the voice called upon? Hovering between body and language, belonging to both but neither.

Perhaps what is common to both is the notion of limits. Languages have limits. So does speech. Both work towards the cessation of meaning that the voice can carry. The english language is so ill-defined, said someone the other day in a panel I was attending

There is also a good line by Agamben: "The search for the voice in language, this is what is called thought" — i don't remember anymore where he says it.

In this tussle between meaning, interpellation, interpretation, there is the ineffable- that which cannot be said, spoken, articulated, expressed. Meanings abound, spill over. Speech cannot contain meaning, and so it is made to control itself and the limits and thresholds are constructed. Legibility conflated with legitimacy. The

sensible or that what is apprehended by the senses is controlled, distributed, divided between what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, audible and inaudible.

Meanwhile, the search for what exceeds language and meaning obsessively goes on in the nooks and crannies inhabited by artists and poets, creators, makers and thinkers of the world

*Do you know of the Speaker's corner in Singapore, where you need a ticket to go and speak an 'address'?*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speakers%27\\_Corner,\\_Singapore](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speakers%27_Corner,_Singapore)

When Bolun, my co-resident from Beijing who toys a lot with questions around censorship, told me about it, I thought it had to be a joke. But he went there and showed me a picture of him sitting on that bench in the rain. He said he had applied online to speak here. I asked him if he would speak if he got the permit. He said- You can speak only as long as they don't listen.

He follows it up with asking aloud- Can you write but? Does that need permissions too, you think?

*Bolun goes on and writes-*

*I also have so many questions with that speaker corner actually.*

*So if I give a speech without a voice,*

*does that count as a speech?*

*If a group of people gives simultaneous silent speeches,*

*but without approval,*

*will they be arrested?*

*If I had given a speech with audiences,*

*do I still need to get permission for the speech from the past?*

You speak as long as they don't listen

Can you write?

Freedom and democracy—> debate, dialogue

Risk, Danger. Vulnerability

The voice lies in a limit point around all of these.

*Fearless Speech, Fearless Listening published by the CyberMohalla Ensemble in Sarai Reader 08, 2010*

Go all the way to page 290

<http://archive.sarai.net/files/original/7f19cb086dd3c08c4860ddf48b61b0d2.pdf>



A friend of mine from childhood had recently started working. When I met her, I asked her, “Do you like it? Are you enjoying the freedom that comes with stepping out of the house everyday?” She looked at me for a long moment, then smiled and said, “The strangest thing about going to work is that everyone wants me to talk about it, but it seems to me no one really wants to listen”. When she saw I was a little confused about how to tell her I sincerely wanted to know, she elaborated:

One person asks me about freedom, another about exhaustion, someone else about the difficulty of working, and yet another about the exhilaration of finding my own way in the world. It is as if the frames through which I can speak are outside of me. I keep talking, but it seems to me that whatever I say to someone, he or she already knows it. Moreover, if I become inward at home for a few hours, my family thinks I'm hiding something, and if I intervene confidently in any debate in my own house, my visiting relatives object and say that I've become a loud-mouth ever since I started working. So, if there's one thing I can say with absolute certainty about my going out to work, it's this: it has affected and changed what I can say and how much I should speak.

It seemed to me my friend was telling me something very fundamental – that whenever we start something new, or make a departure from our routine in even small ways, the first thing that happens is a shift in how we encounter speech. This set me thinking. *Are there thresholds of speech in daily life that we are not permitted to cross? What would happen if we crossed them?*

I started paying attention at home. I filled notebook after notebook transcribing conversations; I wrote down everything anyone said. Simple conversations my mother had with us, conversations between us and our guests, what someone said after a visit to a doctor or to her son's teacher at school, at weddings, when someone was born, when a stranger knocked at the door, when people gathered to offer condolences for someone's death. Months passed. My notebooks, and my mind, filled with words.

It was festival season. One evening, my friends and I stepped out into the streets of the neighbourhood to watch the magic that travelling magicians were performing. Everywhere, the audience stood mesmerised; many requested the magicians for certain tricks, each more difficult than the last. It suddenly struck me: *A magician can't say, 'It's impossible!' My mind raced through my notes from the last few months. I thought: My mother can't say to me or to my brothers and sisters, 'I forgot'. A doctor can't say to her patient, 'I don't know, I'm still learning'. A teacher can't say to her student, 'I don't understand'.*

As I turned back home, I remembered how once there had been a bitter fight between my mother and my eldest brother, and he had said, “I would have told you, but you wouldn't have been able to bear it”. Things didn't remain the same at home after this. Hadn't my friend poignantly said, “...it seems to me no one really wants to listen”?

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me we create thresholds of listening which determine what and how much we will hear, and, in turn, what speech we will allow around us. *What is my capacity to listen?* I wondered. *How and when is it challenged?* As I lay in bed, I thought, *Are there people around me who might want to say something to me but hesitate because they think I don't have in me the capacity to listen?*

I switched on the light, opened my notebook to a fresh page and wrote:

*Fearless speech requires fearless listening.*

①

## Scene 6: Traces & Residues

From the limits and the lack, the inbetweens and indeterminacy, this scene shifts to one of Spirits, Spectrality, Undead-ness. Unsettled energies, the ungovernable excesses.

The Inaudible is after all but in the audible. There are voices in the air.

*There Is Something In The Air* by Iram Ghufuran, 2011  [There is Something in the Air](#)

Watch the opening sequence of the film. A call that goes to a psychiatric clinic where a woman claims that she keeps hearing the sound of a woman. The psychiatrist keeps asking- where is the voice coming from? Is it from the inside of you or the outside? Do you hear it in your ear or your mind? The caller keeps saying- I hear it, all the time-it keeps repeating. It's always there. The question of the source/ where is completely bypassed.

In the *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise*, published in 1837, Charles Babbage speculated that spoken words leave permanent impressions in the air, even though they become inaudible after time, possibly due to the transfer of motion between particles.<sup>4</sup>

*The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are forever written all that man has ever said, or woman whispered.*

Cut to the archive. I saw the silverfish that metabolises the archive preserved in the national archives of Singapore during my visit there.

*How can the act of listening activate and materialise the unrecorded and inaudible traces in an archive? This question is at the centre of my artistic and curatorial research [The Search for Hassaina's Song and Other Phonophanies](#), which deals with the audio archive of the Linguistic Survey of India. The LSI was a mammoth colonial project to capture and record all the languages and dialects of the Indian subcontinent ruled by the British Raj in the early twentieth century.*

*The absurd impossibility of this vision by the Irish Linguist George Grierson is what drew me to it. How does one 'capture' languages? In my continuing work with the archives of the Linguistic Survey of India, at some point I heard my own voice floating in the archive, navigating, reading, rereading the crackles in the archive. Producing encounters, short circuits in the process. But to find my own voice, I had to lose myself first in the voice of Hassaina- a young 14 year old nautch or gypsy girl who walked into the scene of one of the recordings. She wasn't intended to be a part of the 'archive' but was an accidental occurrence. A sonic event. A century later, listening to the hissing, crackling, rustling and static of the impossible archive of languages, a trace of stories, voices, spectral and uncanny sounds emerges as I make my way through the index of records, I think of what a dear friend Vaibhav Abnave recently wrote, 'to repeat a thought is to think in one's own voice what remains to be thought in any thought' In one's own voice*

Think echoes, and activations,  
citations and reenactments.

## Scene 7: Entropy

The Voice can also be seen as a scene of chaos and entropy.



What happens when entities, elements, materials, languages that don't belong to the same world come together? In the short circuiting, what are the entropies that are generated? How is the voice inherently a scene of chaos? Whose voice do you speak in?

Sorawit was speaking of an instrument as a reconstruction of memory. Everytime the memory surfaces, the form shifts, the instrument plays differently.

There is something that the voice of sound activates. I'm thinking the Rats of Geylang, cats sitting on the bin waiting to pounce on them, the Chickens and Frogs we recorded,

There is something that the voicings in music activates.

Angela and I attended a Balinese Gamelan rehearsal last week. Every individual takes charge of one rhythm, one groove, over and over and over again. 10-12 people together resounding, syncopating.

The experience of it from the outside felt like one of pure uncontainability. The kind of entropy that produces a polyrhythmic vibe of a kind that is hard to grasp. Within the multiple polyvocal sites, one can choose to attend to each or all at the same time.

Something like a chorus in which there is the singing voice with its tangles amidst the ordered chaos. The patterns of a song in the messiness of a voice resonating deeply with the confusions that arise.

What happens to the king at the end of Calvino's story- the one we began with?

Amidst the state of perfect order, persistent aural surveillance is the singing voice that he hears. The voice leaks. The magic of the voice mesmerises him. And then, there's nothing else to hear anymore. Taken over by the demand of the song, a desire is produced and the king begins to sing in response. Suddenly there is no more power for him to defend. In the singing voices, he loses himself or perhaps finds himself. This is how the story ends.

***What's in a Voice?*** A puzzle, yet to be solved.

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