

Radio Earth Hold 001: The Colonial Voice

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This broadcast examines British Mandate radio as a colonial instrument in Palestine; Israeli control of Palestinian telecommunications as part of an architecture of occupation; and the use of radio as a platform for Palestinian resistance. It connects these to the birth of Mni Wiconi at Standing Rock, radical midwifery practices, and the acousmatics of sound in the womb. The research argues for acousmatic sound – reverb without a cause, or echo without a source – as a manifestation of the colonial voice, a hijacking of the uterine experience in the service of biblical narratives, of the kind that justify settler-colonialism.

Stay tuned for the next broadcast *REH 003: Pitch Blue*, as it continues these themes and REH's broader collective research into the possibilities and pitfalls of sonic solidarity across discrete geographies. *REH 003: Pitch Blue* is commissioned by Nottingham Contemporary Public Programmes and Research.

Transcript

Lie very still. Place your shoulders right up against the frame. Keep your head still, no tilting. Are you comfortable? Breathe slowly. You must lie very still. You are about to enter an MRI. It stands for Magnetic Resource Imaging. You will be placed inside a strong magnetic field. Did you drink enough water?

This makes sure your tissues and blood vessels show up clearly. As the MRI scanner produces strong magnetic fields, it's important to remove any metal objects from your body, including watches, jewellery, and piercings. No dentures either? Good, and that isn't a wig? You have lovely hair. Some wigs contain traces of metal.

This magnetic field will organise the protons inside your hydrogen atoms, found in all the fats and liquids of your body. The magnetic field will make the protons stand in a straight line. If the image is not clear, we may have to inject you with special dye, that temporarily changes the way imaging tools interact with the body. This way we will be able to see inside you, see what you are made of, and hopefully see what's wrong with you. Are you comfortable? Lie very still.

[sound of MRI getting louder]

It felt like we were stuck inside a washing machine or a packet of polos. The noise was deafening. Somehow it lacked rhythm. The plastic was hard, cold, unforgiving. We closed our eyes to try to feel the magnetic field, the conveyor belt, thumping noises that were maybe coming from inside our cells, our fats and liquids, our atoms or their nuclei. Mostly we tried to forget where we were, and why our protons were standing to attention, as if they had been militarised.

Like a piece of luggage, we slid into the loud clicking machine. Strange thoughts seemed to get pulled from our brain – as if they had never been our own. What if I'm not made of the right things, the right matter? What if my body is not only mine, what if they discover I'm not only me, but made of others too? But one thought in particular kept coming back, as if it were a satellite in orbit, something the nurse had said calmly: 'Using radio waves, your body will be turned into a transmitter'.

And we thought, bodies don't really have edges,

rather they are always transmitting.

[fade to natural radio sounds]

[jingle]

This is Radio Earth Hold, I'm Rachel Dedman. I'm Lorde Selys. And I'm Arjuna Neuman.

Our research traces echoes between the anti-occupation movement in Palestine and anti-racism movements in the North American context. We are specifically interested in the aesthetic or dramaturgical sides of political movements.

Radio Earth Hold marks a narrowing of our focus. We turn our attention to the acoustics, acousmatics and frequencies of both struggles. We want to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of sonic solidarity across each region.

Our choice to follow this research into and through radio draws from its historical application, dissemination, and strategic use as a political and aesthetic tool. We also consider radio a mode and structure that has planetary potential. Pirate radio was historically broadcast from roving, untraceable ships; while natural radio exists everywhere – in the frequency and sound made by our environment. Radio-waves can even mutate DNA sequences.

All these indicate different ways of organising geography, space and difference itself.

[music – dawn of midi type tension]

Radio Earth Hold is a series of radio episodes that aim for just such a reorganisation – starting with this first episode – The Colonial Voice.

What we found to be common in the history of both regions and their respective struggles is a particular voice of authority, what we are calling the Colonial Voice. This voice is both infrastructural and metaphysical – as both domains are used to establish an

unquestionable authority, an ownership of airways, origins and land. A voice and a transmission of this voice that implies a powerful omnipresence.

We will first describe the legacy of this Colonial Voice as it straddles these two different parts of the world, and then we aim to disorganise it.

[Music fades over the next paragraph]

Radio came to Palestine in 1936. Founded by the British Mandate government, the Palestine Broadcasting Service (also known as Jerusalem Calling), was organised along predictably colonial lines. The radio service broadcast in English, Hebrew and Arabic, each for one hour, every afternoon, and then played a mixed selection of Arab and European music in the evening. The station's ideology reflected broader British assumptions about local demographics: an opening speech by the Mandate High Commissioner Wauchope asserted that the station would satisfy the lofty cultural standards of European Jewish emigres to Palestine, while simultaneously edifying and educating the peasant class of Palestinian Arabs. The radio thus reinforced perceived distinctions between a rural working class and the urban elite, and rendered it racial – urban Jews, rural Arabs – flattening out a complex and diverse social landscape. Discussion of politics on the radio was banned, so the British kept tight control over news, but local Palestinians and Jews were invited to program their hours of Arabic and Hebrew – commissioning music and inviting speakers.

[1930s Palestinian band music plays]

As swiftly as the official radio was founded, clandestine radio stations sprang up. Some were almost certainly Palestinian, though information on pirate Arab radio in the 1930s is scant. But just a month or two after the Palestine Broadcasting Service was founded,

the Arab Revolt began – a three-year period of strikes, riots and civic disobedience that protested against the Mandate government’s policy of open-ended Jewish immigration and land purchase. One can imagine clandestine radio stations being used to organise and keep abreast of army movements. Was anyone listening to these attempts at quelling disturbance? Or were the Arabs operating below the radar?

Clandestine Zionist radio stations have been better recorded, with paramilitary Zionist organisations, such as the Haganah, Irgun and Stern Gang using broadcasting for expressly extremist political ends, calling for local Zionist uprising against the British, and the establishment of a Jewish state. Geula Cohen, the most famous announcer for Irgun, was arrested live on air in 1946 by the British and sentenced to 5 years in prison for illegal broadcasting. She escaped and went on to serve as a hard-line right-wing politician in the Israeli Knesset. For someone who advocates for extraordinarily repressive treatment of Palestinian protestors for spreading ‘terror’, there is a pretty shameless boldness in the naming of her biography, *Woman of Violence: Memoirs of a Young Terrorist*.

[sketch plays]

A 1981 sketch from American comedian George Carlin’s show *Fridays*, attests to the double standard with which Palestinians and Israelis are presented in relation to their struggles. Palestinians, specifically the Palestinian Liberation Organisation are, in the popular cultural imaginary of 1980s America, seen as militarised, incompetent, Arab guerrillas, running a terror organisation while living in a war zone. And as though to highlight further the unofficial nature of the Palestinian claims to statehood, in the sketch the PLO reach their listener-citizens via clandestine, pirate radio.

Light-hearted though the sketch is meant to be,

evidently the Israelis have taken Palestinian radio as a serious threat to Israeli power. In 2002, as part of Israel’s Operation Defensive Shield ‘anti-terrorism’ drive, troops destroyed equipment at Palestinian radio and television stations. Records were stolen, computers were smashed, and a big data node in Nablus was demolished – eradicating the educational records of 2 million Palestinian school children. In the same year, during the siege of Ramallah in the Second Intifada, the IDF raided the offices of the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation, stationed in Ramallah, and blew them up – because their broadcasts were inciting resistance against the occupation.

[Sounds of knocking and of a video recording from a demolition]

Radio and telecommunications technology have been primary instruments of Israeli violence and control over Palestinians, and are visible through something as mundane as phone penetration statistics. In 1992, when the first records exist, just 3% of the Palestinian population had a landline telephone, compared to 35% in Israel. Other stats state there were 80,000 lines for 2.3 million Palestinian people. This was not for want of trying – but because Palestinian phone installation was entirely controlled by the monopoly Israeli state provider, Bezeq, the average waiting time for West Bank Palestinians to have landlines installed in the 1990s was between 5 and 7 years. Facsimile technology was banned entirely.

In 1994, Palestinians founded the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation, making their first transmission from Jericho, the lowest point on earth.

[Sounds of this first transmission in the background]

The establishment of the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation followed the signing

of the Oslo Accords, struck between Israel and the PLO, which – among many other things – settled that Palestinians had the right to establish their own telephone, radio and TV networks. However, the Accords kept connectivity, infrastructure and spectrum allocation under Israeli control, meaning Israel has been able to stymie all attempts at independent Palestinian telecommunication ever since.

Quick interlude: Different frequencies of radio waves have different characteristics in the Earth's atmosphere. Long waves can diffract around obstacles like mountains and follow the contour of the earth (these are called ground waves); shorter waves can reflect off the ionosphere and return to earth beyond the horizon (these are called sky waves).

Claiming dominion over the radio frequency spectrum is contiguous, therefore, with claiming dominion over vast swathes of landscape: to the horizon and beyond. In controlling the very frequencies on which radio stations operate, the Israelis enact their broader strategies: of placing absolute control on communication in Palestine, of limiting the spread and sharing of information, and of denying Palestinians expressive and creative freedoms, alongside basic human rights.

[switch to sounding of a phone – or answering message? Sound of text message?]

The settler-colonial voice of Israel is channelled today through the state's absolute access to Palestinian phone lines. This is used to particular effect in Gaza, where residents receive phone calls telling them they have 5 minutes to leave their house before it is bombed. These warnings are called 'roof-knocks' for the small bomb that is first dropped on the roof, to show that they mean business, before a full bomb destroys the building. These chilling phone calls are an attempt to put a humane gloss on the routine IDF practice of

extrajudicial house demolition and the killing of innocent people. But they are also part of Israel's broader enactment of psychological warfare – a reminder to Palestinians that they can be reached anywhere, surveilled always, spied on, listened to, and rendered unable to communicate at Israeli discretion.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah has long understood and advocated for the importance of telecommunications technology as a tool of warfare and rolled out its own private internet networks across the country. In a country with one of the slowest internet connections in the entire world, Hezbollah enjoys high-speed fibre-optic cabled broadband, laid illegally alongside Lebanese national phone lines. Private telephone networks also mean Hezbollah's comms systems evade Israeli wire jamming, such as during the invasion of 2006. This hasn't stopped Israel hacking them, however: just last year, citizens across southern Lebanon received Israeli-sent text messages during a speech by Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah, decrying his lies, originating from some mysterious off-shore server. The Israelis have also more than once tried to hack Hezbollah TV station, al-Manar.

[get closer to microphone – more asmr sounding, intimate]

Like the roof-knocks, there is something chilling about the violent intimacy of such reach – the ability for a foreign, occupying government to speak to you at a moment of political urgency or danger, appearing perversely within the comfort of your very own living room, through the radio or on your phone. This is the voice of an all reaching, unrelenting colonialism, a voice that emanates without a source, a voice that is so pervasive it begins to be internalised, first into the most private of domestic spaces, and soon as a voice that gets into your head.

Before we turn to the metaphysical ways in

*which this Voice has been used to authorise
perverse claims, we have a small announcement:*

Mni Wiconi was born on October 12th, 2017, in North Dakota during the Standing Rock protests. The mother, Sky Bird Black Owl, says of her decision, 'Having babies is my act of resistance; our reproductive rights as Native women have been taken away from us in so many ways.'

Sky Bird Black Owl is referring to practices of reproductive violence and control that is common to many colonial projects: we can think of the missing generation in Australia, the rape camps in Bosnia, or in the North American context the legal and socially-encouraged sterilisation of Native women – a practice that was often done by doctors and gynaecologists without telling the patients that they were being made sterile. This practice of forced sterilisation was continued into the 1970s: during the last ten years of the practice the birth-rate of Native women fell by 50%.

For Sky Bird Black Owl, having a child on her own terms, literally without doctors, refuses this colonial legacy. The action reclaims reproductive sovereignty and with it, a biological right – remember, bios means life. At the same time, implicit in Sky Bird Black Owl's radical action, there is also an aesthetic gesture. The child was deliberately named after the rallying cry of the Standing Rock protests, *Mni Wiconi*, which means 'Water is life'. This not only raises questions about the continuity of a struggle that must span many generations, asking how does resistance reproduce, continue and grow? But this naming also speaks to and from the heart of Standing Rock, the Dakota people and their fundamental belief and knowledge that 'water is life'. Through the bringing of life – the child himself – into this context of resistance, Sky Bird Black Owl's act reinforces, underlines and proves this essential philosophical aspect of the Dakota worldview:

namely that water and life are inseparable, their connections are more than aesthetic. Rather, they are elemental.

[Sound of massive attack]

This inseparability manifests in the space of the unborn child and the way they hear from within the womb.

[Womb sounds underlay the coming paragraphs]

Hearing is the first sense we develop. It allows us to begin to individualise and become self-aware even while still within the body of our mother. Unlike the psychoanalytic view that sees the child becoming independent and self-aware in front of a mirror, once literally separated from its mother, new science describes how self-awareness in fact arrives while still very much within and coextensive with the mother's body.

What we learn first about ourselves is precisely that we are not isolated selves, but coextensive, inseparable, enmeshed and multiple. We can understand this formative sense-of-self – of being more than one and less than two – through the strange acoustic experience of the unborn child.

[Bass, subsonic sounds, pulses, sonar sounds]

The child hears both internally and externally. It hears internally through the body it shares with the mother as it vibrates and transmits sounds, and externally as the mother's voice reverberates back through the belly, the amniotic sac, and into the ears of the gurgling unborn child. This double experience is a little like an acoustic version of a submarine's periscope, or what I call *peri-acoustics*.

Given that the mother and child is a coextensive, almost-singular body, when one speaks they both speak. Therefore, when the mother's mouth makes noise, the unborn child both recognises itself as a speaking body, but

also does not recognise where the speech is coming from. Internally and perhaps cognitively, it hears itself as the source of sound, while externally the sounds meet the foetus as if from an unknown source.

We can describe this strange, double experience as ‘reverb without a cause’ – as if you were to hear your own voice echo back at you, without having uttered a word in the first place. Such an experiential paradox is confusing precisely because it relies on the understanding that the mother-child is coextensive: a being with difference, but without separability.

This is something we have all been through, its imprint is deep within our experiential and embodied memory. It complicates our traditional notions of what a self is, or even should be. In short, ‘reverb without a cause’ is a strange sensual place to begin life from. It seems to whisper of a time when self and environment are less concretely separate. It also opens up all kinds of questions, and intuitive doubts about the laws of cause and effect, separability and authority; culturally speaking, it challenges things like birth right and claims to a distinct origin.

[otoacoustic sounds? Phantom sounds?]

The natal experience of ‘reverb without a cause’ – historically or biblically speaking – has been hijacked and turned into the metaphysical basis for the Colonial Voice.

A sound without an identifiable source is technically known as acousmatic. This phenomenon is perhaps best or first exemplified in the voice of the Judaeo-Christian God speaking from the omnipotent beyond. This gives Him an unquestionable disembodied authority. Later, the acousmatic voice would become the voice of coloniality, discipline and statehood. It disciplines in a similar way to the panopticon in the visual regime, by granting authority through the power of omnipresence

and invisibility. This leads to its subsequent internalisation. This authority is ramped up as it calls on, or rather hijacks, our first inter-uterine experience of the world, of hearing ourselves as inseparable from the world.

[heavy reverb]

This hijacking takes place mythically before the human, for example in the Biblical story of Genesis that begins with God saying from the void, ‘let there be light’. Our individual beginning as a human equally starts with an acousmatic (albeit female) voice. Such a parallel or twinning makes the Bible’s Genesis story quite intuitive, as if we had heard it all before, which in a way we have.

Not only is the Genesis story prenatally programmed in all humans but given that the creator speaks from an omnipotent beyond, this makes it doubly difficult to disagree with. How do you argue with a voice from the void? Later in the Genesis story we know the same acousmatic voice of God lays out the promise of the Promised Land.

[Audio tape of bible]

This Biblical or God-given ‘reverb without a cause’ was heard by Abraham and continues to justify settler colonial activities in Palestine today.

At its most perverse, colonial Zionist activity is justified through the story of Genesis as if it were an indigenous claim to the land. A certain false solidarity has been attempted between Zionist settlers and Native American movements to reclaim sovereignty over land that was stolen by European colonists.

To break this false solidarity, we must make a distinction between the colonial, authorial, and biblical voice that hijacks our foetal and universal experience of ‘reverb without a source’ with another non-administered and

non-cultural type of acousmatic sound.

Natural radio is just such another type of acousmatic sound: it describes planetary or elemental reverberations as they arrive without a source. Telephone lines first enabled us to hear this natural radio – which is the sound of things like a thunderclap from one side of the hemisphere bouncing back from the ionosphere to the other side. Such a galactic echo, while it technically does have a source, has an untraceable origin. After its trip to space and back, the sound becomes planetary in its reverberating reach.

[sounds from standing rock]

This planetary sound of natural radio exists prior to any human construction or culture (biblical, or rational), prior even to the first appearance of organic matter on this planet. Put differently, the elemental sounds of natural radio are entirely indigenous and diegetic to the planet itself, in that they are inseparable from the planet, just as water and life are also inseparable. This planetary diegesis is a state that pre-exists culture and therefore any human exceptionalism with its puppet gods or rational violence.

[sound of thunderclap reverb – whistles on the other side of the hemisphere]

What we are listening to is natural radio, a whistler that has bounced back from the magnetosphere, catching a ride on it, to return to this hemisphere. It is this type of pre-cultural indigeneity in radio that is expressed through the radical birth of Mni Wiconi, whose name means ‘water is life’. It is manifested in the alien and alienating experience of the MRI machine, when our bodies are rendered transmitters, their acousmatic ‘sounds’ converted to images of our insides.

Our experiment is to see if we can vibrate across these two scales; on the one hand

frequency jumping and jamming through the planetary reverberation of natural radio, and on the other, harnessing the political and practical techniques of pirate radio.

[sound of MRI coming back, more rhythmic]

One thought in particular kept coming back, as if it were a satellite in orbit, or a sound wave riding the magnetosphere. It was something the nurse had said in her authoritative voice – ‘using radio waves, your body will be turned into a transmitter, so we can see inside you’.

And we thought, bodies are always transmitting, not just when a machine or doctor makes us into some kind of instrument of self-surveillance. Rather, we have always known and felt that bodies are not limits or containers or vehicles for someone else’s power.

We have always felt they are much more than bodies in the classical and enskinned, identitarian sense. As they are always implicated in patterns and sounds and frequencies that are both planetary and pre-human; sounds that are at once inside of us, our fats, cells and liquids, sounds that are much bigger than us. What happens if we remember this?

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