



DEEP LISTENING
a sensory technique to inhabit the darkness

ESCUTA PROFUNDA
uma técnica de sentidos para habitar a escuridão

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**Deep listening -
a sensory technique to inhabit the darkness**

Abstract: Deep Listening can be understood as a field of encounters between differences that build forms of relationship based on attention, sensitivity, and listening as ethical practices when intertwined. This approach invites openness to being transformed by space, by context — which is also culture — and by the entire sensory landscape that traverses the body. In this sense, listening becomes an embodied gesture of reflection on our modes of existence, opening paths for an active critique of hegemonic forms of perception, anchored in the centrality of the gaze, in certainties, and in Cartesian rationality. This article shows Deep Listening in its potential as an educational practice for the dancing body, while also articulating Afro-diasporic concepts and knowledge that help us understand imagination as a force for transformation. Originally developed in its sensory content by musician Pauline Oliveros and later deepened and recreated for the dancing body in the processes of Anikaya Dance Theater, Deep Listening expands here as a tool for creation and resistance, sustaining premises for interdependence and radical listening.

Keywords: deep listening; dance; afrodiaspora; darkness; imagination.

**Escuta profunda -
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Resumo: A Escuta Profunda pode ser compreendida como um campo de encontros entre diferenças que, ao se entrelaçarem, constroem formas de relação baseadas na atenção, na sensibilidade e na escuta como práticas éticas. Essa abordagem convida à disponibilidade para ser transformado pelo espaço, pelo contexto - que é também cultura - e por toda a paisagem sensorial que atravessa o corpo. Nesse sentido, a escuta torna-se um gesto encarnado de reflexão sobre nossos modos de existência, abrindo caminhos para uma crítica ativa às formas hegemônicas de percepção, ancoradas na centralidade do olhar, nas certezas e na racionalidade cartesiana. Este artigo apresenta a Escuta Profunda em sua potência como prática educativa para o corpo que dança, enquanto também articula conceitos e saberes afrodiaspóricos que nos ajudam a compreender a imaginação como uma força de transformação. Desenvolvida originalmente em seu conteúdo sensorial pela musicista Pauline Oliveros e posteriormente aprofundada e recriada para o corpo que dança nos processos da Anikaya Dance Theater, a Escuta Profunda se expande aqui como ferramenta de criação e resistência, sustentando premissas para a interdependência e a escuta radical.

Palavras-chave: escuta profunda; dança; afrodiaspora; escuridão; imaginação.



1 Introduction

She crosses the space in silence and places herself in the center of the room. Right behind her, another person walks slowly and takes their place in the rear: not as a shadow, but as a sensible extension. Their hands touch the body in front of them with delicate precision – one rests on the shoulder blades, those sleeping wings that inhabit the back; the other is anchored to the side of the lumbar, where the body establishes balance and propulsion. And that is when the dance begins – evident movement towards the unknown.

This description, recorded during one of the exercises of the methodology, entitled Deep Listening (DL), announces the main foundations that guide the investigative proposal of this article: to approach a methodology for dance that integrates dimensions of motor organization, sensitivity, collective belonging – all oriented in a counter-hegemonic way. The gestures described – slow touch on the scapulae and lumbar, the closing of the eyes, and the beginning of a dance – synthesize this bodily practice that decentralizes some logics of the universe of dance techniques often centered on control, hierarchy, and predictability. An approach that values presence, mutual trust, and openness to the unpredictable is proposed, tensioning the paradigms that underlie the notions of dance based on individualism and personal virtuosity.

2 The encounter with Deep Listening

DL practice begins in the experience with Anikaya Dance Theater¹, a company based in Boston, USA, of which I was a member between 2017 and 2023 and with which I still collaborate occasionally as a guest artist. This is a methodology used by the Company as a dynamic to manage attention, presence, and coexistence both in the daily training of the group and in the various interactions in the workshops disseminated by the Company around the world.

I have mobilized deep listening in the contexts of dance teaching in Brazil in dialogue with concepts and perspectives from the Afrodiaspora and African epistemologies to broaden their meanings and also enhance their political-poetic reach. By being intertwined with modes of existence and knowledge marked by the circularity of time, community life and the centrality of the body as a vehicle for memory and listening, DL intensifies as the counter-hegemonic practice that it is by nature. This approximation reveals structural affinities between listening as a way of radical

¹ This is a dance theater company whose artistic practice intertwines performance, community engagement, and critical investigation of movements linked to self-knowledge and human interdependence. Via interdisciplinary scenic creations, the group develops an approach that articulates body, culture, and community, disseminating performances that cross geographical boundaries while deepening reflections on coexistence, listening, and collective transformation. The group, which is composed of nine dance artists from nine different countries – Egypt, Indonesia, Benin, Turkey, Taiwan, South Africa/India, Palestine, Brazil, and the United States – has the coexistence in difference as a mobilizing element. The company has already performed and developed works in India, South Africa, Rwanda, Botswana, Mozambique, Brazil, and in several states in the USA.



attention and the ways of life that have historically produced resistance and knowledge from other ways of feeling, perceiving, and being in the world.

The primal concept of Deep Listening has its origins in the practices of composer and instrumentalist Pauline Oliveros (1932-2026), a pioneer of experimental electronic music, who dedicated herself to researching the various facets of sound in physical and musical terms and as a collective experience, drawing attention to the need to understand the difference between hearing and listening. Her artistic proposition in the Music² field is crossed by a desire to build practices that operate as resistance to the symbolic violence of the world, favoring processes of acceptance and mutual respect.

3 Touch Directions

The touch of the hands on the scapula and lower back region awakens several layers of perception, combining biomechanical and affective aspects. This is an experience that includes both sensitive listening and the precise activation of anatomical structures. These touches guide movement and also stimulate deep body awareness, enabling the body to reorganize itself based on the relationship with the other and with space.

When touching the scapula, communication is established with the trapezius, rhomboid, and levator scapulae – muscles that regulate the movement of the shoulders and the amplitudes of gestures. The hand that touches the lower back feels the paravertebral muscles, the quadratus lumborum, and the obliques that together activate the center of balance and support. The subtly touched region of the scapula serves as an orientation of the upper torso, suggesting direction.

The hands on the lumbar side, close to the iliac crest and quadratus lumborum, access structures directly linked to the center of gravity and the organization of the body axis. The scapula offers direction to the lumbar with base and confidence. Together, these two hands create an energetic conduction arc that crosses the spine as a continuous wave or serpent of life, recalling the concept of choreographer Germaine Acogny (1980). Touch should not push, nor pull, but propose and accompany.

With the eyes closed, the guided person activates proprioceptive senses by sensing their position in space, the contact with the ground and the oscillations of the center of mass. The body, which responds to smaller and larger variations in direction and rhythm, cultivates an amplified

2 Pauline Oliveros proposes the concept and some exercises related to the perception of sound, simultaneity practices, anticipation, and response. These elements have been optimized and taken to the field of body practices by Anikaya Dance Theater, adding a whole tactile and motor dimension that constitutes an important part of Deep Listening as a methodology for dance.



state of presence by being triggered into a kind of active yaw. The body must surrender without losing autonomy, trust without losing itself and without ceasing to feel.

The one in front leads with the whole body, but attentive to the transmission of energy from the center (of the earth and the body) to the extremities. When the person behind follows with their eyes closed, deactivating their vision and lighting up all the other senses – touch, proprioception, smell, feeling the other's breath, they not only follow, but surrender, tune in. Thus, guiding and being guided does not denote submission. A field in which touch, language, conduction and sharing are foundations in created.

4 Technique of senses

When addressing DL in my dance technique classes, I suggest elasticity to the very concept of technique. In this approach, the technique is not configured as a fixed model to be followed, but a relational tool that enables the transit between the states of presence, listening, and creation. In this context, the body is aware of itself and porous to its surroundings, disposed to the forces that cross it and to the stories that constitute it.

Dance is thus inscribed in the terrain of the unpredictable, expressing what each body carries in its historical anatomies – marked by time, memory, and experience. Not to mention everything that can become. Thus, technique does not necessarily follow a linear structure of beginning, middle, and end at the same time that it does not materialize in a system, moving away from the modern rationalist logic that seeks to order and above all control movement.

From this perspective, it is possible to re-signify the idea of technique based on the dances of the “outcasts of the earth” – populations oppressed by colonial systems, targets of dehumanization and systematic demerits, and who are at the same time historical subjects and shapers of new worlds (Fanon, 2022). These dances, historically disqualified by colonial epistemologies as devoid of technique, reveal complex technical knowledge in their ways of existing and resisting. Thus, the technique is intertwined with an ethical listening to oneself and the world, a listening that connects the person to the collectivity and memory, destabilizing hegemonic paradigms of body, knowledge, and creation.

5 De-hierarchizing functions between those who dance and those who witness

In DL, it is proposed a conscious break with the conventional hierarchies between those who dance and those who observe. All participants move between different positions: sometimes they assume the role of dancer, leading in front, sometimes they occupy the audience seat, positioning



themselves behind and touching with their hands regions of the body such as the scapulae and lumbar. In this context, the figure of the dancer is not associated with the idea of a virtuous or centralizing interpreter, but is recognized as a sensitive mediator – someone committed to the integrity of the experience and to the clarity of the message manifested in the midst of the gesture, space, and temporality of the performative action. Simultaneously, the audience is invited to participate in this shared listening in which the meaning of dance is constructed exactly in between bodies, times, and perceptions.

The practice calls on the person who dances to engage ethically in listening and collective transmission, which is a shared flow, sustained by listening to the body. Seen as a mode of training, DL can be a privileged way of deep awareness of oneself, but always in dialogue with the collective. The person leading the dance takes responsibility for conducting the experience – which should be horizontal and responsive to the whole. Thus, de-hierarchizing functions becomes a practice of reorganizing relationships and desires.

6 Close your eyes and inhabit the darkness

DL can be understood as a set of encounters and relationships to awaken our resources. This also foresees that we allow ourselves to be transformed by space and context (which is also culture). It is necessary to perceive our body and all the sensory landscape that crosses it. DL makes it possible, in the macro sphere, to reflect on our modes of existence and in this aspect I suggest the premise of “inhabiting darkness”, deeply engaged with Afro-Atlantic epistemologies, as a critique of the single perspective of vision, a strong mark of so-called Western societies, based on the truths of the gaze, on the certainties of what is lived and what it reveals – the Cartesian logic of the world.

Inhabiting darkness implies giving a form of perception of the world guided by opacity, a kind of right that each culture has to preserve its complexity without the need to make itself understood in the terms of the others, as proposed by Édouard Glissant (2021), and by the acceptance of uncertainty as a constitutive part of experience. It is a posture that distances itself from the search for total transparency and rational control, valuing, nevertheless, the mystery, the unspeakable, and the secret. Therefore, to inhabit darkness is to welcome what is not fully revealed, opening oneself to complexity, ambiguity, and the plurality of existences that are not inscribed in linear certainty.

I make here a brief exercise of historical-community digression. In 2015, I was in Oakland, California, for a season of artistic orientation with the choreographer Amara Tabor-Smith. During this period, I had the opportunity to live, during rehearsals and everyday experiences, with a community of Black women engaged in artistic practices, care networks, and healing processes. The motto “embrace the darkness” was repeated with some frequency in the meetings in which I participated, becoming an ethical and aesthetic imperative that had the appeal of building solidarity



and mutual aid, encouraging aesthetic ways that explored resistance and liberation, while proposing the search for spaces of healing and transformation. There it was experientially evident that the gesture of turning inwards, of perceiving oneself and one's ancestry, constitutes a radically counter-hegemonic act and a way to activate the imagination – this device of change –, especially in a world shaped by logics that associate darkness with emptiness, ignorance, and a kind of primitive magic. By breaking with such logic, which at the limit marginalizes the invisible, which cannot be explained, and embracing darkness, it reveals itself as a strong path to re-enchantment and the activation of imagination as a transforming force.

7 Internal time and rhythm

In DL there is a demand to recover the rhythms that give meaning and are in connection with the time experienced. This premise brings us to the proposal of the *Rhythm as eternal organizer*, by the Peruvian choreographer Victoria Santa Cruz. For her, rhythm is a principle that structures and gives meaning to life, it is not just a form, but a kind of ontological force that organizes and integrates coexistence. In DL, this rhythm comes from the interior and expands to the collective.

This is not a guided body listening, but a listening mobilized by the collective yearning. Breathing and moving together requires us to perceive time and space as one *continuum*, without end or beginning. Perhaps the very logic of spiraling time, a flexible temporality, which breaks with linear and progressive logics (Martins, 2021).

Touch implies a sharing of worlds, creating unique time and spaces. This can generate tenderness and tensions, after all, achieving fluency is not a certain destination. Sometimes we deal with paralysis, confusion, or disagreement. Understanding the other person and their dance, with all the complexity that this infers. Thus, DL is also an exercise in dealing with the contradictions of things and people. Touch, strongly relational and political, does not admit neutrality – touching is also taking responsibility.

8 Bantu-kongo Perspectives – Reciprocity and Vibrational Field

The energy that underlies presence and states of attention in collective bodily practices goes beyond the physical dimensions of movement. It is fueled by subtle forces that emerge from the bodies of each participant. We usually call these as energy flows and they create relational fields that are reflected in frequencies, affections, and listening.

When studying Bantu-Kongo cosmological perspectives, especially in the work of Bunseki Fu-kial (1934-2013), translated and interpreted by Tiganá Santana (2024), we understand the



relationship as invisible exchanges based on energetic reciprocity – a principle according to which everything that is emitted returns and everything that is felt is also sent – feeling, emitting, and receiving waves and vibrations.

Several works of anthropology have been dedicated to understanding reciprocity as a structuring principle of social relations (Mauss, 2003; Strauss Law, 1949; Sahlins, 1972). This principle encompasses the circulation of energies, presences, and memories, operating as practices of organization of space and coexistence. Such exchanges produce bonds and configure ways of inhabiting the world marked by relationship, interdependence, and mutual care.

9 Final considerations

By summoning an expanded presence that involves body, memory, spiral time, and alterities, Deep Listening asserts itself as a methodology that goes beyond the limits of the technique applied to dance. This is inscribed as an ethical and political practice of care, of the production of meaning and of the sensitive reorganization of the world. By recognizing that the organization of each body is crossed by collective and dynamic processes, this approach proposes a radical shift from the hegemonic paradigms that prioritize Cartesian reason, the perspective of the sense of the gaze and individuality. Associated with perspectives from Afrodiasporic epistemologies, Deep Listening values embodied, relational, and ancestral knowledge, pointing out ways to create possible worlds for all. Thus, it shows itself not only as an artistic methodology, but as a practice for good living.



Anikaya Dance Theater – Show

Image 1 – Scene from *Conference of the Birds* – Inside the Mystery



Source: Anikaya Dance Theater Company Archives, 2023

Image 2 – Scene from *Conference of the Birds* – Inside the Mystery



Source: Anikaya Dance Theater Company Archives, 2023



Image 3 – Exercise scene during workshop *Migrations*



Source: Anikaya Dance Theater Company Archives, 2023

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