

# Listening to complexity

## *A escuta da complexidade*

Laetitia Kozlova<sup>1</sup> (CITAR-UCP, Porto)

**Abstract:** This essay is based on the sound installation I created for the exhibition MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA (Nov. 2024 – Jan. 2025) at the RAW Material Company – Center for art, knowledge, and society, as part of the Dakar Biennale. This exhibition is a journey into the intimate territories of Nathalie Vairac (b. 1972). The artist, based in Senegal, born in France to a Guadeloupean father and an Indian mother, traces her ancestry and confronts colonization. Back in her homeland, she writes and records. Vairac invited me to listen and stage her words in the curatorial space. With the help of sound practitioners Deshays and Chattopadhyay, and the pioneering work of composer Amacher, I explore expository strategies for the recorded spoken voice, and specifically the tension between the formal search for non-linearity, and the inherent linearity of listening, ensuring the preservation of meaning.

**Keywords:** voice; listening; colonization; heritage; transmission

**Resumo:** Este texto baseia-se na instalação sonora que criei para a exposição MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA (nov. 2024 – jan. 2025), no RAW Material Company – Center for art, knowledge, and society, como parte da Bienal de Dakar. Esta exposição é uma jornada pelos territórios íntimos de Nathalie Vairac (1972- ). A artista, radicada no Senegal, nascida na França de pai guadalupense e mãe indiana, traça sua ancestralidade e confronta a colonização. De volta à sua terra natal, ela escreve e grava. Vairac me convidou a escutar e cenografar suas palavras no espaço expositivo. Com a ajuda dos profissionais de som Deshays e Chattopadhyay, e o trabalho pioneiro da compositora Amacher, exploro estratégias expositivas para a voz falada gravada, especificamente a tensão entre a busca formal pela não linearidade e a linearidade inerente à escuta da voz, garantindo a preservação do significado.

**Palavras-chave:** voz; escuta; colonização; herança; transmissão

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<sup>1</sup> PhD candidate in Science and Technology of the Arts at the Catholic University of Portugal (CITAR – UCP, Porto). She is interested in new practices of listening to recorded spoken voices, at the intersection of sound studies, performing arts and cultural heritage sciences. ID ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0567-2271>.

## Introductory Note

The voice has long been considered in academic circles as the vehicle of language. This approach has reduced listening to the voice to understanding a message. By approaching the voice as a sound, I open other possibilities. By incorporating the spoken voice into the field of Sound Studies, I combine it with a reflective and creative practice of listening to audio recordings.

In this essay, I discuss the expositive strategies of the recorded spoken voice in the curatorial space, and specifically the formal search for non-linearity, subject to the linearity of listening to the voice, to preserve its meaning. I take as references the work of artists and researchers Daniel Deshays and Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, as well as the pioneering work of the American composer Maryanne Amacher.

Listening is necessarily linear, unfolding over time. If vision allows us to embrace a multiplicity of images simultaneously, without attenuating their complexity, listening induces a relationship that is both more fusional and more fragmentary, to the unity of sound. Sounds are not juxtaposed when listened to, they blend in a tiny space-time. Even the concept of “reduced listening” (Pierre Schaeffer, 1966, p. 270), which proposes that we focus our attention on the sonic features of sounds, struggles to abstract us from the continuity and globalising effect of listening. The editing of the spoken voice takes this specificity into account, notably by creating cuts. The silences draw the listener's attention and act as a motor for listening.

The transition from solitary listening, or *entre soi*, to shared listening in the museum space, needs a search for a listening device to create a space for the unveiling of inter-subjectivities. With the aim of enabling this sensitive exchange, the device considers the technical, acoustic and curatorial characteristics of exhibition space. This is the process I used to stage, *mettre en scène* the voices of the MUTIKKAPPATĀTA project, at the invitation of Nathalie Vairac.

In the exhibition booklet, the actress and performer writes:

It is a word that has been silenced... a word that has died  
a word walled up with shouted silence  
(...)  
To grasp in the space of memory the source of my  
identity, of my identities.  
(...)  
My unconscious, my imagination, my memory, my  
dreams,  
my soul are all  
soils that have become permeable.  
(...)  
I cross territories. Crossing is one of my states of being in  
the world." (Vairac, 2024, p.5)

The *MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA* project was first presented at the RAW Material Company in Dakar from 10 November 2024 to 13 January 2025, as part of Nathalie Vairac's artist residency, curated by Delphine Buysse. The RAW Material Company is a Center for art, knowledge and society, opened in 2011 by Swiss-Cameroonian Koyo Kouoh. The initiative focuses on exhibition curating, art education, residencies, knowledge production, documentation of art theory and art criticism. The space works to promote the growth and appreciation of artistic and intellectual creativity in Africa. The programme is transdisciplinary.

With *MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA* (Translation from Tamil: Unfinished), Nathalie Vairac embarks on the winding road of her visible and invisible legacies. In a burst of life, through the breath of her words, she traverses and transcends ancestral pain, seeking ways to re-fertilise the still gaping places of her ferment. Nathalie Vairac wants to "show" and "make heard" her intimate territories to "set them in resonance" (Vairac, 2024, p.7). This essay presents the process of assembling and sharing fragments of voices, fragments of land, fragments of oneself. It emphasises the delicacy required to handle this living, sonic realm. Listening to complexity means respecting and honouring the complexity of intimate trajectories; it means celebrating multiplicity and the path to accepting it; and finally, it means challenging the technical, acoustic and curatorial conditions of the exhibition space to allow freedom of listening and interpretation.

### **MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA: Process, Installation, References**

The MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA project begins in the outdoor courtyard of RAW Material Company, then invites visitors to wander through the Centre's spaces, covered with woven straw and scenographed by Velika Panduru (Figures 1, 2, 3). On the right, a table and shelves display a selection of Nathalie Vairac's family photos from India, France and Guadeloupe. The left wall features a large-format photograph by Antoine Tempé (2024) of Nathalie energetically advancing underwater with a veil over her face. In the main exhibition space, the Romanian scenographer represents India, Pondicherry, the maternal land, in blue on one side, and the paternal land, Guadeloupe, in brown on the other. Objects brought back from Nathalie's long journey to her homeland are arranged throughout the space. Nathalie's words flow powerfully across the walls: here written directly on the wall, there engraved on leather, there hammered onto a piece of metal. The organic and textile textures immerse us through the senses: sandalwood, cotton flowers, silk, turmeric, nebedaye leaves. On the wall are framed maps and documents from the colonial administration relating to the name Vairac.

At the heart of this intimate and historical narrative, I have installed three listening spaces/times, distinct in duration, content and layout,<sup>2</sup> as well as a soundtrack played on the evening of the opening, before Nathalie Vairac's performance,<sup>3</sup> in the inner courtyard of RAW Material (Figure 4). At the entrance, Nathalie's voice addresses her ancestors, with the sound of the sea in the background, as the artist imagines it was heard by the slaves transported in the holds of the ships. I recorded the sound of the sea crashing against the rocks at Ngor, north of Dakar. Behind the framed family photos, a small radio (Figure 5) plays fragments of an improvisation

<sup>2</sup> See Exhibition View, available at: <https://youtu.be/6wz5Xzw39D8?si=Zhaoi7HlNla1DzBi>. Accessed on: June 2, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> See Performance, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dW-tU1-wic>. Accessed on: June 2, 2025.

session by Nathalie, recorded in a studio in Dakar. We hear her whispering voice persistently asking who is behind the name Nathalie Vairac. For the opening performance of the exhibition, a multi-voiced soundtrack, featuring Nathalie and her two daughters, plunges the audience into the heart of transmission, leafing through family albums and the fragile weaving of words and silences of filiation. Finally, in the main exhibition space, which separates the artist's geographical territories (Figure 6), I installed a 'sound bowl'. It is this sound bowl, desired and named by the artist, that I have chosen to present here. Below, I discuss the editing and listening device for this sequence.

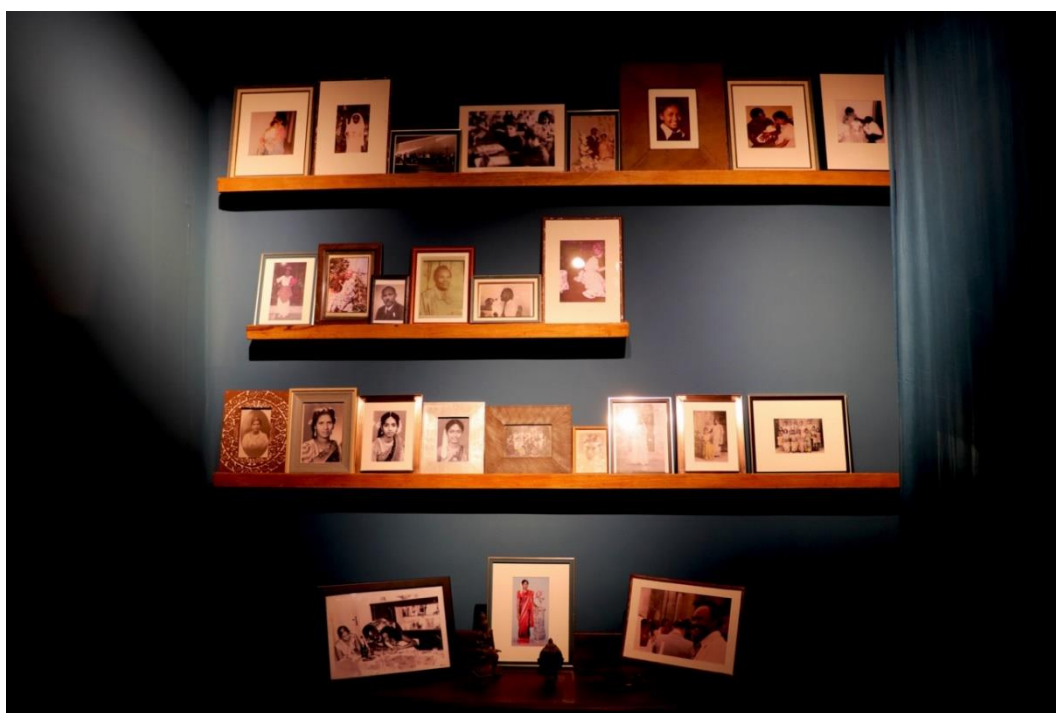


Figure 1. A table and shelves display a selection of Nathalie Vairac's family photos in India, France and Guadeloupe. Scenography by Velika Panduru. Exhibition view MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA (Nov. 2024 – Jan. 2025) at RAW Material Company, Center for Art, Knowledge and Society, in Dakar. Credit: Kerry Etola Viderot.



Figure 2. Two turquoise blue walls and floor covered with woven straw shelter textile and organic textures from India, Nathalie Vairac's maternal lineage. Scenography by Velika Panduru. Exhibition view MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA (Nov. 2024 – Jan. 2025) at RAW Material Company, Center for Art, Knowledge and Society, in Dakar. Credit: Kerry Etola Viderot.

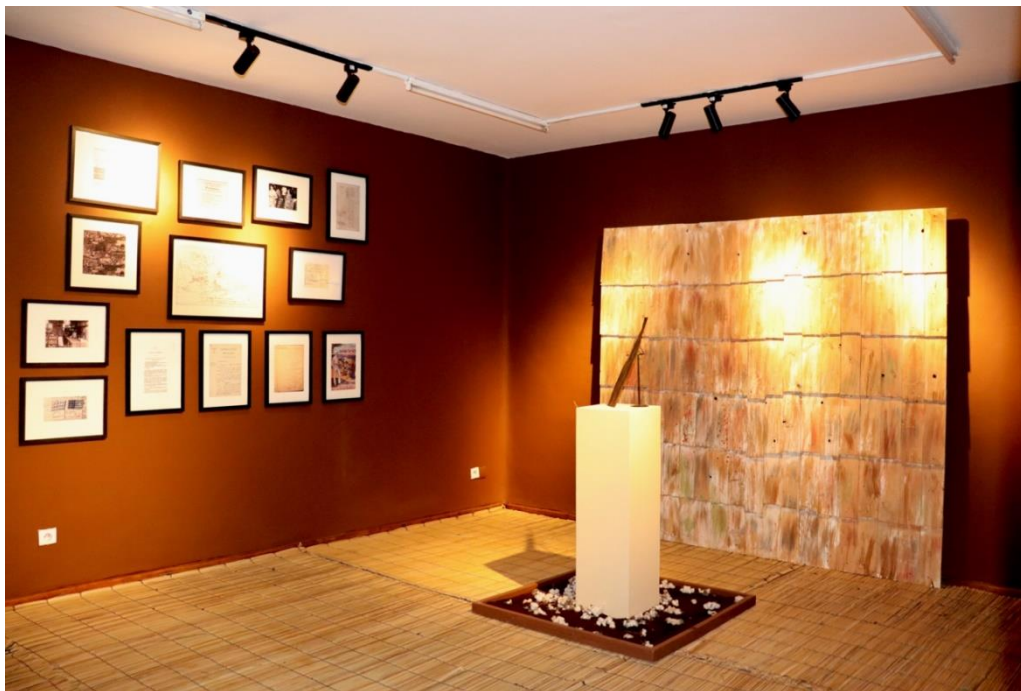


Figure 3. Two brown walls and floor covered with woven straw shelter organic textures from Guadeloupe, Nathalie Vairac's paternal lineage. On the left wall, are framed maps and documents from the colonial administration. Scenography by Velika Panduru. Exhibition view MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA (Nov. 2024 – Jan. 2025) at RAW Material Company, Center for Art, Knowledge and Society, in Dakar. Credit: Kerry Etola Viderot.





Figure 4. Inner courtyard, plants, floor covered with broken shells and grey cushions. Scenography by Velika Panduru. Exhibition view MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA (Nov. 2024 – Jan. 2025) at RAW Material Company, Center for Art, Knowledge and Society, in Dakar. Credit: Kerry Etola Viderot.



Figure 5. Dark wooden table with framed family photos, metal Indian miniatures and behind, a small radio set. Scenography by Velika Panduru. Exhibition view MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA (Nov. 2024 – Jan. 2025) at RAW Material Company, Center for Art, Knowledge and Society, in Dakar. Credit: Kerry Etola Viderot.



Figure 6. View of the two spaces, one brown and the other turquoise blue, with Nathalie's words, hammered onto a piece of metal. Scenography by Velika Panduru. Exhibition view MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA (Nov. 2024 – Jan. 2025) at RAW Material Company, Center for Art, Knowledge and Society, in Dakar. Credit: Kerry Etola Viderot.

The bowl refers to a unique acoustic space, as well as to the circular, non-linear form of the narration. In May 2024, Nathalie Vairac contacted me in Porto, Portugal, five years after our last exchange in Dakar. Over the phone, she told me about her desire to use sound for her first personal and transdisciplinary project. Her artistic practice unfolds in a process of journeying together to create. The main methodology is conversation, exchange, and openness to others.

In my practice, listening to the spoken voice is approached as a sonic and sensory experience. In May, we talked about the sound recording gesture, how to record and what equipment to use. As an actress and performer, Nathalie wasn't recording, she was saying, in the space of the performing arts. She wanted to keep a sound record of this long journey back to her roots. During her travels, we spoke several times to share the stages of her journey. I received recordings, made with her telephone, of frog songs, her father's footsteps in the banana plantations, a concert in front of a Hindu temple, and readings of her texts. I listened to these recordings in Porto. I



measured the trust it took to share her quest for unity at the heart of “drifting” intimate territories (Vairac, 2024, recording). I heard the desire to be. I felt that these sounds were depositing themselves in me like sediment. In October 2024, I joined Nathalie in Dakar, and we reinvested the recordings with a new series of listenings, together. To share them in the museum space, we looked for a device based on the existing equipment available at RAW Material, which would resonate with the exhibition as a whole.

This stage of the sound installation raises the question of the place of sound, exhibited as an art object, in a curatorial space, but also and above all the question of the relationship with the visitor, who alone, by listening, activates it and gives it meaning. Deshays places listening “in the tactile sphere” (Deshays, 2023, p. 139). Organising the space for this contact, this touch, means organising the conditions for placing bodies. In the open space of MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA, Velika Panduru uses two colours, blue and brown, to distinguish the two ancestral lands, India and Guadeloupe. In the recordings made by Nathalie with her phone during the two-month trip, we hear: the reading of her texts with her voice in close-up, the car journeys, the conversations with her father about vanilla growing, the running water. There is also the poem written and read by the Senegalese thinker Felwine Sarr, in response to the artist's central question: can silence be fertilized?

It's not a 300-year journey  
It's a collision  
A meeting  
In the hollow of dreams (...)

says Felwine Sarr (2024, recording). I listen, I cut into the material, and I glue these pieces end to end, without “fade-in”; I space them by silent hollows. The splintering of space and time is the collision. The socio-temporal discontinuity creates a path of crossings, sounds and words.

The exhibition room is equipped with a line of three interconnected ceiling loudspeakers that cross the room diagonally, from India to

Guadeloupe. The sound bowl is diffused simultaneously into the two speakers at the ends, the central speaker being muted.

For this installation, I was inspired by the work of the sound artist Maryanne Amacher (1938–2000), and in particular her work “Living Sound (Patent Pending)” (Amacher, 1980), in which she puts into practice her concept of “audjoined rooms”. As part of the New Music America Festival, Amacher connects all the rooms of an empty mansion in St Paul, Minnesota, by the propagation of sound alone. For the MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA project, which visually distinguishes maternal and paternal lines, the soundtrack acts as a sensitive, possible link between territories. The sound comes from above and from the extremities of the room. You need to approach one or other of the ceiling speakers to be “touched” (Deshays, 2023, p. 139), vertically. The sound bowl propagates at the same time in the two geographical spaces, a single acoustic space, living through the noise of the movement of bodies and other random sound emergences.

The fragile experience of “contact” with sound activates our memories, both physical and mental. Listening is not just attention. It can be imposed, monitored or traumatic. It leaves a trace. In the family flat in the village of Eysines, near Bordeaux, Nathalie heard the voices of the children her mother babysat, the violence in the marriage and the telephone conversations of her unfaithful father. In the main acoustic space of MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA, visitors can hear the family's chaotic journey through space and time, and the intersections with history.

Colonisation runs through Nathalie Vairac's lineage: the name Vairac was given to her ancestor in Guadeloupe by the colonist; Pondicherry in India was a French trading post; she grew up in France, in a village in the Bordeaux region, in the middle of the vineyards, where for a long time she was the only little black girl. Nathalie Vairac is now based with her children in Senegal. Her introspection anchors her suffering in a complex and interconnected history. She questions the depth of our links to geographical and cultural spaces.

The critique of colonial actions and legacies grounds the work of sound artist and researcher Budhaditya Chattopadhyay. In his essay “Co-sounding: towards a sonorous land”, the author stresses the political capacity of sound: “Sounds, when they are plurivocal, collective, situated, (...) can have socio-political agency to disrupt the status quo and reveal injustices” (Chattopadhyay, 2023, p.4). For him, it is in the act of listening, and what this engages, that sound finds its place in the curatorial space, “opening the art object within an exhibition, to be more participatory, responsive, alive and active” (Chattopadhyay, 2023, p.4).

### **Final Thoughts**

By addressing the tension between the non-linearity of personal histories and the inevitable linearity of listening, I have outlined the reflexive and creative processes that informed the sound installation for MUṬIKKAPPAṬĀTA at RAW Material Company, in Dakar. To articulate the family and historical spheres, Nathalie Vairac used words, and metaphors. We take off our shoes at the entrance, as if entering a house, but also to drop the masks of history and engage the collective in questioning around healing, anchoring and transmission. The sound project, comprising recordings, spatial arrangements, and listening devices, is part of this metaphorical transposition of intimate and collective fragmentations. There is no vocal composition, but a collection of fragments of raw recordings, unprocessed, suggesting complexity, with back-and-forth of thoughts and emotions. The characteristics of sound, as a living, invisible, arguably an immaterial object that can neither be tamed nor fixed in space, give the exhibition dynamic and allows for freedom of interpretation. If our listening is continuous, at least in appearance, sound matter is fragmented, random and in movement, whether it be our sound memories or the sound emergences of the present time. In this way, perhaps more than images, it avoids objectifying the message we are trying to convey. However, and for the same reasons, it is also a source of

frustration, since it is “free” and “fleeting” (Deshays, 2023, p. 13) in the way it appears, occupies space, and “touches” the listener. Sound installation in the museum and curatorial space mainly consists of thinking about our relationship to sound and adjusting the living within the living of the exhibition. Deshays, talking about the work on sound in performance, which he has been doing for 40 years, describes it as “a kind of permanent failure” (Deshays, 2023, p. 308), which constantly forces us to “change direction” (Deshays, 2023, p. 308). This makes it an infinite creative force. In this sense, practices linked to sound, and in particular to the exhibition of the recorded voice in a museum space, are ongoing journeys through the blur of our affects, our impulses, our quests.

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