HEARING FEMINIST SEX:

Imaginative potential in the soundscape of audio erotica

By Haley Down

Introduction

In the heterosexual patriarchal imagination of sex and sexuality, women are vocal, men are visual, and violence against women is standard (John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis 1996; Nicole K Jeffrey 2022). Given the ubiquity of violence in our culture's sexual imagination and modern technological landscape as well as the degree to which the sounds we encounter impact our behaviour in the world, I will examine the components of the soundscape of audio erotica applications and suggest the alternatives this soundscape offers to listeners: the ability to experience and explore sexuality free of the violence of heteropatriarchy. I will do this through a close reading (rather, listening) of an erotic audio narrative from the Quinn application, which was made available in 2019. Quinn, along with Dipsea, are North America's leading applications in subscription-based erotic fiction (Sarah Larson 2019). This reading will establish three elements of the soundscape of audio erotica—naturalistic modality, voice grain, and the gender reversal of the frenzy of the visual and audible (Theo van Leeuwen 1999; Roland Barthes 1977; Corbett and Kapsalis)—as primary contributors to their atmosphere of pleasure, safety and calmness (Larson 2019). These features of the sexual soundscape enable listeners to, perhaps for the first time, meaningfully explore their personal desires while witnessing sexuality free of the threat of violence which usually accompanies the heteropatriarchal imagination.

Part One: The Sexual Imagination of Heteropatriarchy

I learned too young that real sex—not movie or marriage sex—is about a woman, moaning, and a man, ejaculating onto her loud and rhythmic body. To reach that end, he slaps her in various fleshy places; if he speaks, he growls about possession; in his best moments, he has his hands over her throat. She screams pleasure and coos words of encouragement to him. It is entirely spontaneous; they ask no questions.

Culturally, we ascribe roles to men and women in, what Jenny Sundén and Sara Tanderup Linkis call, "our sexual norms and imaginaries" (2024, 3). There are two significant components of this imagination which are evident in the scenario I have just described. The first is that, as Nicole K Jeffrey quoting Nicola Gavey writes, "hegemonic heterosexuality functions to obscure clear 'distinctions between what is [sexual violence] and what is *just sex*'" (2022, 477, emphasis original). To define this violence I turn, again, to Jeffrey, who says:

> *I purposely do not define the boundaries of what is and is not sexual violence in this paper because doing so risks [...] perpetuating the very systems that obscure it. [...] sexual violence is not a lack of consent but gendered power relations [including] men's entitlement, superordination, and denial of women's desires and ability to meaningfully co-determine the conditions and quality of their sexual relations and experiences. (2022, 477)*

The second component of the heteropatriarchal sexual imagination is the belief that "men's pleasure is absolute, irrefutable, and often quiet, while women's pleasure is elusive, questionable, and noisy" (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996, 104). Female pleasure is almost entirely "deferred to the aural sphere" (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996, 103). Linda Williams attributes this to "the enduring fetish of the male money shot," wherein the money shot, the most important moment of heterosexual intercourse, is the visible ejaculation (1989, 185). Corbett and Kapsalis identify this gender discrepancy as the masculine "frenzy of the visible" versus the feminine "frenzy of the audible"

(1996, 103). In heterosexual sex, women's sounds verify both "her pleasure" and the "prowess" of her lover (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996, 104). Women are often blamed for the perceived impotence or inadequacy of her lover. We have seen enough women pleading forgiveness and wrestling pillows off their faces from angry, humiliated lovers in television, film, and pornography to know that this misattribution, that *her* sexuality signifies something about *him*, often results in violence.

Part Two: Being Sexual Under Heteropatriarchy

I am writing this essay when I get a call at 10:30 pm. I answer to find my stoic friend crying hard, asking me to come pick her up. She has gotten off the train halfway through her commute because a man standing inches from her face made repeated throat-slicing gestures. I have never heard her cry before. We are both shaking with familiar adrenaline. When she is home, she says "my outfit was so cute today. I shouldn't wear cute outfits." We remain in knowing silence. As she falls asleep, I am awake, fixating on my impotence at the sound of her crying alone on a dark street.

No amount of intellectualization or sharing stories will protect women from the violence we encounter in the ordinary routines of our lives. Knowing this, women often turn to fiction to experience safety and pleasure. We see this in the skyrocketing sales of romantasy, smut, and erotic literature and scholars have known that romantic fantasy has offered something "pleasurable and restorative" to women since Janice A. Radway's book "Reading the Romance" came out in 1984 (119). Radway went so far as to say that some romance readers find it not only "generally enjoyable but also emotionally necessary as well" (1984, 10). Radway sought a method of romance reading that could "encourage" and "strengthen" its women readers; I suggest that these apps may offer the necessary form of narrative delivery that in doing so "might lead to [the] substantial social change" Radway called for (1984, 18).

To fully immerse themselves in safe pleasure, women are rapidly adopting usage of app-based audio erotica, such as "U.S.-born forerunners like Dipsea […] and Quinn" (Sundén and Linkis 2024, 4). In 2021, Quinn reported "3.2 million minutes" of user listening, with listenership increasing to "14 million minutes each month" in 2023 (Sarah Diamond 2023). These applications use "sound and listening to create a safe space for sexual imagination and exploration" (Sundén and Linkis 2024, 13). These apps are "reinventing the genre of erotic storytelling" by focusing on "audio details that enhance a sense of pleasure, safety and calm" (Sundén and Linkis 2024, 4; Larson 2019). The vitality of each of these three words cannot be overstated: pleasure *and* safety *and* calm.

It is not frivolous or scandalous that so many women are listening to sexual scenarios in their free time. These applications are advertised as both pleasurable and political. adrienne maree brown writes that pleasure "is a measure of freedom," and many feminist movements consider pleasure to be "essential to liberation" (brown 2019, 3; Sundén and Linkis 2024, 13).

The locations in which women listen to audio erotica is also relevant in the opportunity to experience the world without violence. Women's bodies are sexualized and thus threatened no matter where we go: the grocery store, the library, the bus. While reading is considered a solitary, private experience, women are listening to erotic audio fiction in public spaces, becoming agents over their public eroticism (Sundén and Linkis 2024, 13). The nature of audio narrative means that the listening experience is highly mobile; the scenarios and sounds of the erotica infuse "everyday movements and spaces with erotic potentials and possibilities, allowing for desire at a low frequency to reverberate through the body in in-between spaces" (Sundén and Linkis 2024, 13-14). The potentials of this kind of listening are significant. Imbuing daily life with pleasure, safety, and calmness through aural fiction may allow women to experience those routinely threatening spaces as pleasurable, safe, and calming. It may also offer ways to imagine possible futures that are different from our present, both culturally and in listeners' own sex lives. As the mind is enveloped in the sounds of agentive desire, the body experiences it, too. This embodied (though also disembodied) reimagining of ordinary life allows a listener to experience that agency, both by hearing the participants in their ears demonstrating it and through enacting agency of where, when, and what they hear.

The question then becomes *how* can sex sound feminist, pleasurable, safe and calming?

Part Two: Being Sexual Under Heteropatriarchy

The only way to understand how these narratives can impact the listener is by experiencing it firsthand. So, I download the Quinn app. There is a free story to trial, before you decide whether to pay $4.99 per month for unlimited access. The audio file is titled "The Library (Preview Audio)." I sit at my desk with headphones on and press play. The narrative unfolds at a public library, hidden in a back aisle, and occurs between an unnamed young man (the narrator) and the listener ("you"). You are a librarian and he asks you for a recommendation. After helping him locate a book, you are both interested in and enthusiastic about having sex. You agree that he will be dominant and you submissive. You remain in this soundscape for forty-three minutes and fifty-eight seconds.

The term 'soundscape' was coined in 1977 by R Murray Schafer in his book The Soundscape: *Our Sonic Environment and The Tuning of the World*. In it he writes, "The soundscape is any acoustic field of study. We may speak of a musical composition as a soundscape, or a radio program as a soundscape or an acoustic environment as a soundscape" (Schafer 1977, 7). My analysis of the erotic soundscape follows Schafer's guidance that "what the soundscape analyst must do first is to discover the significant features of the soundscape" (1997, 9). The three features I have identified of this feminist sexual soundscape are its naturalistic modality, the grain of the narrator's voice, and the gender reversal of the visible and audible frenzies (van Leeuwen 1999; Barthes 1977; Corbett and Kapsalis 1996).

Theo van Leeuwen, in his book *Speech, Music, Sound*, identifies several modalities of sound. The feminist sexual soundscape of the Quinn audio is firmly situated in a naturalistic modality, that is, while an artifice, the hearer agrees to its appearance of naturality. Van Leeuwen defines naturalistic sounds as the way the "roar of a waterfall or the whine of an engine can disclose the presence of an actual waterfall or engine nearby, but may also be used to signify 'waterfall' or 'engine' in the absence of an actual waterfall or engine" (1999, 36). The naturalistic modality of the Quinn soundscape means that the listener hears the unfolding erotic scene as if it were natural, real. For example, the narrator addresses you as if you were having a real conversation, and despite never hearing a response from you, he carries on as if he does. The narrator reminds you throughout the encounter that you are in a public place by making shushing noises and saying, "oh s*** someone's coming" or "they're right over there." The ambient noise reminds you of the presence of other people as well. You are reminded that this is happening to *you*. When you, the librarian, first help him find a book, you hear flipping pages. You hear him unzip your pants. When the intensity of the sex increases, the narrator tells you that you have knocked a book off the shelf and you hear it crash to the floor. The sex, too, sounds lifelike. As he performs cunnilingus, you hear tongue against flesh, you hear a sucking mouth. When the penetration becomes frantic, you hear the smacking of damp skin. The soundscape becomes hyper realistic in the way the sound moves around it. Your ears are always the focal point, his voice moving around you unambiguously. When the narrator says he is kissing the left side of your neck, you hear his voice only in your left ear. His voice becomes distant when he is on his knees, it draws near when he stands.

The narrator's voice plays a significant role in the atmosphere of the Quinn soundscape. Roland Barthes introduced the concept of the grain of the voice in his 1977 book *Image-Music-Text*. He defines the voice's grain as the audible "materiality of the body" (1977, 182). To identify grain, Barthes is looking to hear not only the lungs but also "the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose" (1977, 183). The voice of the Quinn narrator has so much grain that at times it verges into distraction. He introduces himself in a whisper (you are in a library, after all) and you can hear the saliva in his mouth, you hear each laboured inhale and exhale as his pleasure mounts, you hear his whimpering, his moans, his growls. You hear where his tongue is positioned in his mouth and when a breath catches in pleasure. His voice is not only intended to convey "clarity of meaning," despite his detailed descriptions of what he is doing to you because he frequently interrupts his coherent language with an insuppressible moan or by vocalizing both of your orgasms (Barthes 1977, 184). Barthes criticizes "art that innoculates [sic] pleasure (by reducing it to a known, coded emotion)" (1977, 185). The Quinn narrator's voice is the antithesis of rote, as his

orgasmic vocalizations infuse the moment with "the blissed-out sound of broken-down speech" (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996, 102). The narrator's voice is particularly significant in contributing to the pleasurable, safe and calming experience of the listener. He often makes noises which, in the heteropatriarchal imagination, are reserved for women. His whimpers and moans alternate between being growly and masculine, and delicate and feminine. He pleads, a lot. He nervously stumbles over his words as he tries to seduce you. He giggles after he climaxes. His nervousness serves to indicate your agency, your safety in this situation. The narrator's giggling and unthreatening dominance create a relaxed and calm environment. His voice signals the kind of true pleasure, beyond physical pleasure that emerges between two people enjoying themselves and you, the listener, share in it.

Perhaps most significant about this erotic soundscape is the complete reversal of Corbett and Kapsalis' masculine "frenzy of the visible" and feminine "frenzy of the audible" (1996, 103). In this narrative, a female voice is never heard. However, the narrator's voice ensures that you are both kept present. He is identified only through his sounds, with no description of his appearance. His body is not introduced until halfway through; it is at the twenty-minute mark that his penis is first mentioned. Before that, he draws your attention to his pleasure by hearing him vocalize, by how much he takes delight in your physicality. In contrast, you become known almost entirely through visual description. You know that you are wearing jeans, have long hair, and how you are being (re)positioned. You climax twice before his singular orgasm, and his moaning crescendos similarly for all three. He makes your orgasms tangible, too, saying, "I can feel you coming" and asking you to give him "all of it." This suggests a visuality to the female orgasm that, as previously established, is often only the domain of the male money shot. This is a radical shift from sex in a heteropatriarchal imagination. The narrator is assured of his ability to please you, and he checks frequently that you are enthusiastically consenting, asking "is it okay if I…?" and "how does it feel if I…?" It is clear he wants his voice to sound sexy, deepening it, making it husky. He instructs "here's what's going to happen, you're going to listen to everything I tell you," and affirms that "you're such a good listener." Instead of relying on the money shot as the concluding signal as it so often is, after he climaxes, he sweetly kisses you, giggles and chats about how much he enjoyed your encounter and his hope that you might see each other again. The audio fades to the sound of him kissing you passionately.

Conclusion

Men's attribution of women's sexual noises to their achievement of masculinity continues to result in a violent cultural landscape. However, the proliferation of erotic audio fiction is undeniably remarkable in presenting the opportunity for a listener to experience sexuality free of violence, the threat of which most women have likely never been without. She could scroll a porn site for hours trying to find one video which *might* depict an agentive woman, but the violent environment she must wade through means it is, in part, a violent experience. The ability to open an application and trust that her pleasure and safety have been prioritized is already significant. But entering the feminist soundscape of Quinn's audio erotica offers more than prioritization, it serves to reorganize and expand listener's sexual imaginations. The soundscape's naturalistic modality enables the listener to experiment, away from another body, the emotional potential of pleasurable, safe, and calm sex and what it might entail, in a setting that is lifelike, at least to our ears. Of course, there is the question of the body. But it is my experience that the disembodiment offers opportunity to further experiment, temporarily, in the safety of the mind. The detailed grain of the narrator's voice offers listeners the opportunity to experiment with how they experience various power dynamics or scenarios, and to practice witnessing what ongoing consent sounds and feels like within them. While in the heteropatriarchal imagination, women are relegated to the aural realm, the Quinn soundscape firmly plants her in the visual and him in the audible domain. This is a dramatic reimagination of what sex for women can look and sound like and reveals the prescribed limitations of heteropatriarchal sexual scripts as well as opportunities for the listener to reevaluate how they relate to them.

Imagine a world where curious girls learn that real sex is pleasurable and safe, where men are not trained to be aroused by barely consensual sex. Imagine that encountering sex on the internet is safe at worst and delightful at best, and that

violence has no place in sexuality. This paper and the soundscape it maps are, of course, only a starting point. Future research should listen to this soundscape with the considerations, limitations, and opportunities of trans women and nonbinary people in mind. As a population whose relationship to sexual violence is often both heightened and dissimilar to that experienced by cisgender women, the observations I have made and my experience of being in this soundscape may not be entirely transferrable. Some of the limitations of this research could potentially be aided by purchasing a subscription and hearing a much greater variety of erotic narratives, for example I would look for depictions of sex with nonbinary, trans, disabled or queer partners. But—and this, too, is something to be further considered—the taboo of doing so remains with me. Not to mention a future conversation about who can afford such a subscription and the time and privacy required to use it.

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