

Speak louder please, I can't hear you:

Voices, Spiritualities and Minorities

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“There is no such a thing as silence” - John Cage

"Sometimes you have to scream to be heard" - Avital Ronell

This conference celebrates 100 years of the American Waldensian Society, which is a small time compared to the history of the movement since its beginning with Waldo of Lyon. I rejoice with this celebration of resistance and resilience against intolerance. Your survival is my survival and the survival of all minorities across the globe.

Reading some of the documents of the Waldensian Church I was struck by one of its oaths. It says:

*Waldensians by these oaths,
Heaven blessed our fathers,
And in these days is still ready to bless us.
Joining our brother's hands, let us loudly proclaim:
At the altars of my God,
So, I want to live and to die.*

This is a powerful statement of faith, a radical shout that clearly places life on the edge, understanding both faith and life as one event and this one event is always at risk. This profession of faith was a second step, a response from a community who knew pretty well faith in praxis meant. I would like to reflect on just one word from this oath, namely, *loudly*.

The oath says: "let us *loudly* proclaim." That word called my attention. Why this need for volume? Why not to say "let us proclaim" or even "let us boldly proclaim?" Why is it not enough to proclaim, declare or confess? I might as well be wrong but for me, it seems that this oath refers not much to *what* you say but rather to *how* you say it, which I guess, is very Italian, or Brazilian... The oath seems to be more preoccupied with the levels of energy, trying to instill some sense of awe mixed with urgency, intending to fill the believer with a necessary intensity that she or he will need to live the challenges and perils of this faith and take it to the last consequences. Thus, the *how the believer says it* has to do with the core of a faith that relies perhaps more in the attitude of the believer than in the belief itself, more on how you are going to do with what you are saying than *just* what the believer is saying. In order to believe, one cannot only proclaim what one believes but has to do it, to believe it, in a loud mode.

This oath claims a faith that combines words and sounds, making every affirmation sound like an exclamation, a shout, a scream, a creed confessed with a loud voice. Moreover, you cannot understand this faith if it does not come with the gestures of the body moving closer to the altar and the movements of the hands searching for somebody else. "Joining our brother's hands... At the altars of my God". These liturgical gestures and movements are made as if this celebration of faith could be the last one.

"Let us *loudly* proclaim..." Again, the volume of one's voice has to do with the ways one believes which radically affects the believer's subjectivity and, consequently, determines the ways in which one understands, negotiates, lives and performs its spirituality.

Liberation theologies, post-colonial, cultural, race, sex and gender studies, deconstruction, and so on have tried to undo the universality of given concepts, to problematize the grounds and usage of reason, to question the proper and logical understandings that circumscribe faith and life in general into acceptable religious forms and contents and allowed spiritual practices. What is at stake among these studies is the search for difference, alterity, i.e., other ways of seeing, living, understanding, believing and experiencing life. Differences that were denied, dismissed, avoided and erased in the construction of the Western thought. In this process, the task of hearing the voice of the voiceless has been a major and complicated one. Among many questions, we should ask: can we hear the voice of the other? If so, how can we hear the voices of those who have been silenced for so long, whose voices have been smashed down and whose mouths have been brutally shut up? How can we hear if they don't speak? Why they don't speak? Can the poor and the oppressed speak?

The voices of minorities have been historically dismissed, shut down and forbidden. The construction of an official history determining what existed and what did not exist was made by those who, imposing a single voice over many others, decided to speak for all the others, imposing straight and proper measures of dignity, truth and ways of being and living in the world. A voice so loud that made mute many other voices, the voices of the women, the voices of the black people, the voices of the south of the world, the voices of religious difference, the voices of nature. This voice was so loud that it ended up deafening many of those who were trying to say something with a noise that intended to continuously strike at the ears of the others until we all agreed, like the movie

1984¹, that what was being repeatedly told was what was real and how reality should be perceived.

However, within the inhabiting noise of these regulating sounds, there were those who resisted, and decided not to conform or to obey. These people ended up writing our history in different shades, modulations and tonalities of sounds and voices. These voices, hidden under the colonizer's voices or not, were ways of understandings the world differently. These voices of dissent that gave us different histories filled with examples of resistance and possibilities to perceive, understand and live differently in this world. Waldo of Lyon and the Waldensians is one of these voices.

Waldo's strange voice shaped an other spirituality that challenged the proper and acceptable, creating different ways to live life and faith, renaming sacred spaces, constructing other theologies. His voice was *shouted* as if in a desert, preparing *other* ways for the coming of God. The sound of his voice echoes within us today and it is mixed with the screams and shouts of those who decided to listen to other strange voices. Today is a day to listen to Waldo's voice and the voices of so many people who lived and died on the margins, and those who are still living and dying on the mute gutters of our world: Are they saying anything? What are they saying?

So, who's speaking here? How do we hear it? How do we know that the very voice we are using is our own voice? Or, am I, at this very moment, speaking with my own voice? How can I be certain of that? My voice is never a single voice. My voice depends on the structures and settings in which I am confined; it depends on opportunities, on the education I had, and the network of possibilities in which I am integrated; it also depends on the voices I heard and the choices I make; the voices I

¹ Based on George Orwell's novel *Nineteen-eighty-four*

didn't hear, the things I was told and the things nobody never told me; it depends on my history, the limits of my world and the multiplicity of voices that I allow to speak for and with me.

Our voices are necessary tools to determine who and what we are always becoming. It determines the ways in which we develop our spirituality. So, my questions for us this afternoon are: Is it possible to develop a sense of spirituality if we cannot talk? How can our voices and more specifically the *volume* of our voices give contours to our faith, and a place of dignity in the world?

Franz Fanon in *This is the Voice of Algeria*, says that the Algerian people were only able to incorporate a larger sense of "the struggle of an assembled people"² when they were able to buy a radio and listen to the *Voice of Fighting Algeria*, which was "an official voice, the voice of the combatants, (to) explain the combat to him, tell him the story of the Liberation on the March, and incorporate it into the nation's new life". But the, due to the highly trained French services, they detected the "sound-wave warfare" and the programs "were then systematically jammed, and the *Voice of Fighting Algeria* soon became inaudible".³

The *occupier* of the foreign territories intended a people that would become gradually mute and without voice, lose its grasp to ones memory, capacities and promises. By dismantling the voices of the colonized people, the colonizer shattered any attempt to concatenate thoughts, racial structuring and viable moves. Fanon says: "Imperfectly heard, obscured by an incessant jamming, forced to change wave lengths

² Franz Fanon. *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 84.

³ *Ibid.*, 85.

two or three times in the course of a broadcast, the Voice of Fighting Algeria could hardly ever be heard from beginning to end. It was a choppy, broken voice.”⁴

Voice matters and the process of colonization, then and now, tries to obliterate the voices of the other, cracking its codes and shattering its nuances, turning the voices imperceptible, unpleasant and easy to be distracted from as one tries to say something. Fanon was in favor of adding new sounds into the univocal sound of the colonizer. When only one voice speaks, the silence of the other amplifies the volume of the one who speaks. That relation between silence, voice, amplification and reverberation performs an acute role in the Waldensian service where silence plays an important aspect in the service.

By adding new sounds to the one loud voice, we overcome the connection of the voice to the word, turning the Logos into the voice of the oppressor. Fanon says that “... the French language, the language of the occupier, was given the role of Logos, with ontological implications within Algerian society.”⁵ Turning the Logocentric voice of the occupier into a Babel of many languages, we might be able to get to a fair place by means of dizziness and amplified noise. Added sounds that try to speak always a foreign language and thus creating and reinventing oneself into liberating process that entails various abandonment of self-denial, discoveries of life’s possibilities, a certain awareness of the roles that establish injustice and destruction and then possibilities of spiritualities that could be performed in praise of an otherwise speaking God.

The addiction of sounds also scatters individualisms. My voice is never my own voice, alone, unique, but is also the mute screams of those who came before me, those

⁴ Ibid., 86.

⁵ Ibid., 91.

who were enslaved, exploited and killed. My voice is kaleidoscope of sounds, utterances, mumblings, words, speeches that dispute a place and a right in my mind, in my heart and in my throat. One thing is certain: I can only speak through the timbers and sounds of those who colonized me, those who taught me how to speak and how loud I could speak. It is with and against this voice that I try to engage and unravel my own history. Let me tell you a story:

It was July 2004. I was in Bahia, a vibrant state of Brazil with 80% of its population composed by Afro-Brazilian descent. I went to visit Mercado Modelo, "Model Market" where the slaves used to be negotiated in the 18 century. Under the main floor, there was a large basement where people that came from Africa were thrown after arriving in Brazil and kept until they were negotiated to slave owners. Women and man of all ages were kept under the market with water covering their bodies up to their waist. On the walls, there were holes with images of Christian saints, trying to educate them with a proper and civilized faith. This place was open for visit only few years ago by the local government after the complaints of various Afro-descent movements who wanted to show a very important part of the history of Brazil. It was there, in that basement, that I had a conversion moment. All of sudden I heard a myriad of voices indecipherably speaking and shouting out loud to the point of making me deaf. Words and sounds that I never heard. There were sounds of wipng mothers and fathers, shouts of utter despair, desolation and unredeemable cries that hit the ceiling just to disappear. Nonetheless, there were also screams of resistance, words of command to not give up, prayers to all the Orixás, and then, a horrifying silence that surrounded every corner of that place.

As I heard these voices, I realized that I have never lent my ears to this part of the history of my country and my people. Why it took me so long to be able to hear those voices? Why nobody has ever told me about them and why they never told me they were part of my self and my history?

That day I realized that I do speak with my own voice and that my voice is a blur of silent and loud voices that speak inside of me. Voices that are unknown to me, voices that are telling me things that I am not able to understand, voices that are screaming inside of me and I cannot not hear them, silenced voices that are trying to find their ways into the volume of my voice. And yet, they make me what I am trying to be, they subvert my thoughts, they challenge me every time I try to speak just for myself and not for my community, a community of those who lived before me and those who are yet to come.

These voices in the Mercado Modelo taught me that I cannot develop my spirituality without those voices. I learned that my spirituality should be a Babel tower of indiscriminate sounds and many voices.

However, how should I proceed to listen to them? The way we answer this question is the way we construct our spirituality. I must keep listening, or trying to listen, digging into my history and the history of my country, listening to faded voices, seeing erased traces, looking for obscured remains of a people that I know and I know nothing about. I must listen to those who live on the streets, near and far, "loudly proclaiming" what I cannot hear. I must make an oath to them saying: "with you I want to live and die". My faith can only make sense if I listen to those who are on the margins of this world, a world that *is* mine but is *not* theirs. Then, I must keep my faith "loudly

proclaiming” WITH, always with somebody, the many ways of God in our world, finding contours for our faith to be like the realm of God, somewhat at hand.

Stretching the possibilities of our spiritualities, let us assume for now that our spiritualities are closely related to the ways in which we speak, and to the volume and tonalities of our voices. If that is so, how can we measure, understand or relate to the spirituality of minorities? The Waldensian spirituality had to find ways to develop itself under hidden places, dangerous situations, always using a lower voice, negotiating its place in the world with a quiet voice. A louder voice would mean death. What kind of spirituality can be developed under such circumstances?

Nowadays, we see the same situation happening to non-documented immigrants in this country. Even though their presence is well known by the authorities, their presence must be made invisible. The word of order within these communities is “don’t get the attention of the police, be quiet in everything you do, do your job and don’t call attention to yourself.” This invisibility entails the lowering of their voices. They cannot speak out loud, they cannot fight for rights, they cannot complain about abuses and exploitation for if they do they are put in prison and sent back to their countries. They learn to pay a high price for their non-existence in this country and learn that their voice can be a weapon against themselves. Churches are usually the space where non-documented immigrants choose to develop their spirituality, a ghetto where they can fake their existence. Under cover, and not being able to say it out loud, the immigrant find in the church:

- a) A place for sanity and safety where they can be with peers and find some solace over and against rampant fears that have the power to disrupt and disarticulate one's subjectivity and to destroy hopes, desires and resistances.
- b) A place where two or more colliding worlds try to make sense, a place between places to call home. Worlds trying to be connected together through the thin air of a certain spirituality that might allow them to breath.
- c) A place of recovery when the experience of utter and indescribable violence plagues the individual and the community. A place to speak when silence seems to fill one's heart with shame and sorrow.
- d) A place to deal with someone's roots and learn that now, roots do not go deep down but will be spread as a rhizome.
- e) A place to use one's own language to describe oneself, God and the world. A place where language brings dignity, where one understands and is understood. A place where the language and culture are kept, and thus, giving to the immigrant a certain measure of their world.
- f) A place where broken spiritualities reflect broken lives made of so many stories of pain, abuse and denial; a place where an exilic spirituality mirrors an exilic faith that tries ceaselessly to find rest in an insecure promise land. A half way spirituality that reflects lives that live scattered dreams, partial joys and fewer possibilities.
- g) A place where divine authorities are claimed and sought to help the wanderer, where hopes are cherished and horizons are stretched.

- h) A place to remember, where resistance is always reinvented, where subjectivities are constantly recreated, where strength is gathered and courage developed.
- i) A place where voice that finds a face that structures a speech. Here we are in front of this othering unfathomable challenge: the "Face of the Voice of Speech"⁶.

The spiritualities of non-documented immigrants are unmapped territory, with erasing marks, moveable sights and unclaimed territories. The substratum, the source of their spiritualities is made of contingent material supports that are always under suspicion and denial. They cannot talk out loud outside of the church, are always relying on fake id cards, expired driver's licenses, and do not have a permanent address. This way of living engenders a spirituality that is always under negotiation between lies and truth. We become a real fake people, a truth that is constantly turned into lies, an eternal vanishing point that spurs hatred and xenophobia. We became the flip side of the proper, the mistaken appropriation of a cheerful and singing faith, a colonized people that went wrong. Our subjectivities become a pale shadow of what we never thought we could have been. How can somebody else listen to us if we don't know what to say about ourselves? How do we, myself included, give account to that which we do not know?

All of that has a strong reflection in our spiritualities. How do we get to the altars of God? What offerings or disturbances are we allowed to bring? At the Eucharistic table for example, are we the hosts or the hostages of God's sacrament? Do we blend our voices or only regurgitate the words of institution? Saint Augustine famous line says: "you receive what you are: the body of Christ." What body are we and to what body do we belong? In this affirmation there are vestiges of a subjectivity to be found, possibilities of being and

⁶ Craig Dworkin *Reading the Illegible*, (Northwestern Univ. Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2003), 32.

being something in relation to something else. The spiritualities of minorities are always under negotiation, trying to spend the stiff limits that the other allows me to be. By either giving up, fading away, breaking down, destroying, smashing and/or resisting, we keep negotiating our awkward becoming.

In this endless movement, one must talk out loud, speak up and loudly proclaim whatever one thinks one might be for now. We must engage our voices, voices that are not asking for recognition but engaging in negotiation with the ears of those who are listening and those who refuse to do so.

Notwithstanding, there is a part of both narration and listening that cannot be encompassed or included. Our contingent understandings are always trapped by that which we cannot say or are made impossible to listen, that is, our traumas. One must know that, no matter how loud our scream might be, there are things that cannot be said, things that can only be "*audible in the mouth.*"⁷ The spiritualities of immigrant and movable communities around the world are usually lived and constructed in places of unbearable distress, tensions and intolerable pain, where life's conditions are excruciating. How can we make sense out of it, out of ourselves?

Sometimes our lives and the ways in which we celebrate God and give contours to our spiritualities can only be *audible in the mouth*, where disfigured spoken words can only gain access to our mouths. Wounded words that do not dare and definitely cannot raise the volume since they are words of shame, of utter pain, of unspeakable trauma, words tainted by the horrific and thus, impossible to our ears to grasp. As Derrida says,

⁷ From Paul Celan, quoted in Siobhán Garrigan. *Worship Audible Only in the Mouth, So far*. Xerox, Not published yet. Garrigan says that *audible in the mouth* "suggests words forming in the mouth, but cannot be spoken out loud."

The ear is uncanny. Uncanny is what it is; double is what it can become; large or small is what it can make or let happen (as in laissez-faire, since the ear is the most tendered and most open organ, the one that, as Freud reminds us, the infant cannot close; large or small as well the manner in which one may offer or lend an ear.”⁸

Speaking and listening, being able to talk and to hear, mouth to ear and ear to mouth, that might be one of our ways to develop our spiritualities. Until we get to the point in which speaking and listening becomes the same thing, your tongue in my ear, my mouth in your ear, always negotiating our spaces, our becomings, disrupting ourselves, re-writing our biographies, translating each other and expanding what we know and what we do not know about ourselves.

The Waldensians can teach us how to get from imposed silence to a loud proclamation. Every time they were persecuted, destroyed, and killed, this community was able to resurrect and continue its journey. Through various tonalities of voices and uneven heartbeats and bodily gestures, they were able to come to a point in which they decided to proclaim loudly what they believed, and by doing so, to ventilate that which was stuck in their mouths. Perhaps they will have to scream for the rest of their lives but what matters is that they can voice their faith, their spiritualities their subjectivities.

Moreover, we also learn that when an oath must be professed loudly, it tells us something about the conditions of this community. If you are willing to proclaim out loud whatever you believe, you are trying not only to be heard, but also to tell to your peers that you can, that you are capable of something, and that you cannot and must not stop.

This conference is scream, a loud proclamation that says: “We exist! We have survived. And more, we have something to say.” We must lend our ears and touch their

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other. Otobiography, Transference, Translation. Texts and Discussion with Jacques Derrida* (Bisson Book, 1988), 33.

mouths. Then we should start make connections. The voices of the Waldensians are now stretched to the voices of my African ancestors in Brazil along with the mute, unknown, uncared for, improper and *unladed*⁹ marginalized voices from around the world. By now, our voices must have become a matter of life and death as well, as the Waldensian oath teaches us. So, as one and multiple communities, with different voices and tonalities, we should join together and say:

*Joining our hands,
Let us LOUDLY proclaim,
At the altars of my god,
So I want to live and to die!*

⁹ "It refers to the condition of dispossession and displacement that occurs during war and to zones of the world that have been effectively abandoned, where life has become absolutely intolerable." Doris Salcedo, in Siobhán Garrigan. *Worship Audible Only in the Mouth, So far*. Op. Cit.