

The Black Market Sound

Sampling a Micropolitical terrain of listening resistance and refusal

by Masimba Hwati

How does one theorize constantly shifting socio/cultural/political/economic conditions? take for instance the muffled tones and speaking through the teeth that characterizes the black market – the Illegal foreign currency and street stock exchange in Harare Zimbabwe. Ximex Mallⁱ in Harare was the matrix of this dark trade back in 2003, this was the cradle of the Black market. The phonetics and sonic registers in this metropolitan zone are unique even the sound made by over circulated, worn out greased and grimed bank notes is very particular to this environment. How about the frantic speed at which the notes are counted and flipped to you during a transaction in these spaces? It takes Ninja and Jedi skills to count money like that while the eyes are scanning the periphery for the city council police. Hushed voices, suspicion mixed with seduction hang in the atmosphere. The fashion aesthetic made by the young traders-here are a political statement tight pants, flat base caps, gold chains and rings shiny shoes , semi expensive -fake watches, semi expensive -fake perfume aromas make the air tangible you can almost touch it. A hybrid of African American rap aesthetic and Congolese dandy fashion collide creating a new world. The young men wear cheap badly drawn regrettable tattoos made from the toxic milk of the African Milk tree (*Euphorbia Trigona*) locally known as *Heji* because it was planted in rows around houses to create a hedge and a deterrent against intruders, sometimes cheap Indian ink is used creating another hierarchy of tattoos.

There is an un-manipulatable androgyny present it seems to register a militant fluidity and a stubborn shapeshifting agenda, a resistance to category, to knowledge–“now you see me now you don’t”, In John Cena style-*Kurasisa vavengi*ⁱⁱ, here I refer to the version of John Cena in Sho Madjozi’s songⁱⁱⁱ, an elusive vengeful protagonist betrayed by a lover. Maybe a whole generation of young African people betrayed by their so-called revolutionary governments.

If there is an oxymoron, a vulgar beast hidden in plain sight in post-colonial Harare, it is the black market a dark elusive economy of illegal foreign currency and goods exchange, an ever-

ⁱ Ximex Mall started out as car showroom before it was converted into a department store and then a shopping mall. From around 2008, the mall, which used to house shops selling designer wear such as South Central, trendy hair salons and Internet cafes, was commonly referred to as the dealer's paradise because of the black-Market concentration through the influx of illegal foreign currency traders and traders of phones, iPad, laptops and other electronic gadgets. The mall was demolished by the Harare city council in 2015 and the proprietors converted it into a car park. Former tenants, did not disappear after the change of use. Instead, they took up positions around the car park and continued with their trade. This resulted in all sorts of things being sold there from liquor to drugs and cars. Gamblers also appeared at the same spot. The spot also became a pop-up car wash venue and car boot seller appear at disappear at the same spot

ⁱⁱ Harare Slang loosely “translated to confuse your enemies”

ⁱⁱⁱ Artist: Sho Madjozi, Album: John Cena, Released: 2019, Genres: Gqom, HipHop/Rap <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9bGITkIHmM>

shifting diabolic wall street located in the streets of Harare. As much as it is illegal it is financed and run by the kleptomaniac Elites of mostly government people who still grease and oil the extractive capitalist and colonial machine that they fought 40 years ago. I find it important to take a listen to the culture of secret system and terrain where the nation's wealth is captured and eaten by a few select. The aesthetic, olfactory and sonic registers here in the Black Market suggests the contradictory language of post-colonial aspiration to wealth and at the same time a biting critique of this broken system that makes some rich and some poor. *Ma-Changemoney* is the name given to these young men who trade foreign currency and other commodities on this illegal market. The *Changemoney* carry about themselves a sound (thinking of Tina Camp's listening to images/*bodies*) whether audible/inaudible it doesn't really matter the point is you can hear it, smell and feel it either/neither way. It's a (Kofi Olomide meets Little Wayne) hybrid sound of African American bling and Parisian /Congoese Flea market and second-hand clothes (*Bhero*)^{iv}. When passing through The *Changemoney* zone, the aerosol -collage of genuine perfume brands meets Chinese made- meets local made perfumes, characterizes the olfactory space. *Panenge pachinzwika* perfume *dzakasiyana siyana*. Again, The Shona description of the olfactory environment uses sonic terminology *Kunzwa*, a verb that comes from the root noun *Nzeve* (ear) which in the above phrase conjugates to *Nzwika* (*heard*). You can *hear* the smell of the perfume just as you can *hear* the salt in your food or the sugar in your tea.

The Infra and micropolitical statements suggested by the sonic and phonic material in the black market opens up bigger questions around the socio/cultural/political extractive violence in post-colonial state making in this case in modern day Zimbabwe. The conditions/modes of production leading of this ad-hoc cultural situation in modern day Zimbabwe is revealing of how Shona Philosophy thinks through sound and listening. The young predominantly male, Black-market traders are locally described as “*vapfanha vasinganzwe/ vapfana vanemisikanzwa*, the persistent use of sonic/phonic terminology brings us yet again to another noun *Misikanzwa* (Mischief/shenanigans/boundary pushing). The root noun *Nzeve*^v (ear) which is transformed through various processes in these transcends aurality/orality and points towards a mis-alignment, refusal, resistance to a socio/cultural/political norm. This sense of defiance and dissent creates new improvised spaces beyond and outside the norm that is herein described in sonic terminology as mischief defiance, refusal.

The Black market as a space is characterized by what Achille Mbembe calls Political Improvisation^{vi}. In Zimbabwe the Black market began flourishing around 2003 with fuel, food and ^{viii}foreign currency shortages it soon grew to become not only an economic alternative but a

^{iv} Is a Shona translation of a bale of second-hand clothes donated from North America and Europe that are tightly packed and shipped to be sold in 3rd world African countries these weigh from 45kgs to 100kgs

^v Shona for 'Ear'

^{vi} Mbembe, Joseph-Achille. *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press, 2001.

^{vii} The oldest black suburb in Zimbabwe established in 1907 to house laborer's and domestic workers is home to several home industries and DIY small and medium informal business.

cultural space capable of producing and sustaining its own street ^{viii}lingua and etiquette that eventually ends up in ubiquitous urban circles. This is the language of syncopation in post-colonial thinking of *Mazhetix*, *Gaps/Maghepu*^x and recently *Kungwavha-ngwavha*^{xi}. This is the political position of people who refuse death by colonial/post-colonial legislature, a posture of improvisation against the ghost of an extractive handed down Rhodesian^{xii} system.

“In contrast to down beat marches the offbeat rhythms do not obey but resist. Moreover, “they leave behind the phantasm of atomized egos, but instead become alive through the communal interlocking of various players. Instead of the phantasm of mechanized identical repetition they unfold their power through permanent variations and improvisations in the repetition which seems to stretch the bend of time.” ^{xiii}

“The common denominator in all African American music is the rhythmical complexity of the syncope” (Salaverria, Florez, 2018)

Sounding is the politics of occupying space and self-liberation. It reminds of the Zoot riots in June 1943, in LA when young Pachucos^{xiv} appeared in public spaces, deliberately ‘being’ present in strategic spaces while wearing Zoot suits during World War II. This was deemed as defiant and dangerous by state agents and during the week-long disturbances US army personnel responded with violence against this loud presence of the Zoot suit. This sounding -using the body and fashion as both speaker and microphone has potential to generate frequencies, social social-cultural noise and a feedback . I’m persuaded to think that reviving ancestral cultures of deep listening and sounding might be the best way to understand the social-economic colonial trauma of the postcolonial state crafting. I’m aware that it’s a lot of work and it’s not the trendiest thing to write or theorize about but something in Shona Philosophy so deeply rooted in sound and

^{ix} Zimbabwean street Lingo for semi-legal deals or enterprises

^x Zimbabwean street Lingo for ‘gaps’ economic openings and cracks in the system

^{xi} Recently coined Zimbabwean street Lingo for economic improvisation i.e. making ends meet

^{xii} Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, also called Central African Federation, political unit created in 1953 and ended on Dec. 31, 1963, that embraced the British settler-dominated colony of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and the territories of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi), which were under the control of the British Colonial Office. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland." Encyclopedia Britannica, January 6, 2011. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Federation-of-Rhodesia-and-Nyasaland>.

^{xiii} Mk. "Heidi Salaverria / Ariel Flórez Syncopated Resistance Rhythms of Post-Colonial Thinking." Hycp. February 11, 2018. Accessed May 22, 2019. <https://www.hyperculturalpassengers.org/heidi-salaverria-ariel-florez-syncopated-resistance-rhythms-of-post-colonialthinking>.

^{xiv} Pachucos are male members of a counterculture associated with zoot suit fashion, jazz and swing music, a distinct dialect known as caló, and self-empowerment in rejecting assimilation into Anglo-American society that emerged in El Paso in the late 1930s.

listening shines a distant light and suggests a key. The same could be said of most Sub-Saharan cultures whose languages and cultures have a deep affinity to sound. Bernie Krause, in his book *The Great Animal Orchestra* posits that our early human ancestors navigated their way around their environments by deep and participatory listening, listening was not passive but was a survival skill, it still is today on the Black market in Harare. The black market has an older and a more legitimate sister the Flea market (*Mupedzanhamo*)

Mupedzanhamo/Flea market

Polyphony, chaos & Spontaneous synchronization

The use of loud music to lure customers is a common strategy at *Mupedzanhamo*^{xv} / flea market in Mbare^{xvi}, Harare. These second-hand clothes flea markets are a common feature all over Sub-Saharan Africa they are known by various vernacular names in various African countries Ghana: „*obroni wawu*” (clothes of the dead white man) Zambia: „*salaula*” (selecting from a bale by rummaging), Nigeria: „*okirika*” (bend down boutique), Zimbabwe: “*Mupedzanhamo*” (where all problems end)^{xvii} Kenya: „*kafa ulaya*” (clothes of the dead whites). Inside the walled overpopulated chaotic market at Mbare msika, you experience an aural offering, an intense polyphonic, sonic bath beaming from several radio sets playing diverse types of music (all genres) co-existing with the high-pitched calls of the vendors wooing customers this is also mixed with the shouts and advertising from other species of roaming nomadic vendors of no fixed abode. By sitting long with this aural/oral and haptic cosmos one notices a fascinating spontaneous synchronization effect taking shape a defiance a refusal to be understood. Stefano Gherardini, Shamik Gupta, Stefano Ruffo define Spontaneous synchronization “as a remarkable collective effect observed in nature, whereby a population of oscillating units, which have diverse natural frequencies and are in weak interaction with one another, evolve to spontaneously exhibit collective oscillations at a common frequency”^{xviii} The vibrating subjects both human and non-human seem to share a common consciousness that is regulated by a sonic medium and they seem to adjust their frequencies with an intelligence and an intuition beyond logic, there is an immaculate sense of order that sustains this polyphonic chaos. This sonic milieu is typical of several African second-hand clothes markets.

These markets are places where sonic facts and poetry of socio-economic historical consequences merge. This convergence engages us primarily with an auralilty that demand that

^{xv} Europe processes hundreds of thousands of tons of unwanted textiles. Overproduction strengthens charity foundations which, through redistribution, transform them into new capital. Unaware fashion consumers, getting rid of excess clothing are convinced of the purpose and importance of apparent recycling. In fact, the supply significantly exceeds demand. In the common belief, the global south is still a viable market. However, clothing sent from the rich north destroys the basics of the textile industry in many countries

^{xvi} Mbare is a high-density, southern suburb of Harare, Zimbabwe. It was the first high-density suburb (township), established in 1907 by the Colonial Government.

^{xvii} <http://weronikawyssocka.com/photography/where-all-problems-end-mupedzanhamo/>

^{xviii} .llators arXiv:1805.06647v1 [nlin.AO] for this version

we slow down and listen deeply to this atmosphere. But how do you position yourself to listen to/with/in/around such a complex, opaque and if I dare say noisy environment. This sociopolitical universe of *Mupedzanhamo* seems to demand a specific type of listening that is neither ethnographic nor an autobiographical, it seems to demand a type of immanent locating where the listener positions themselves within/without/besides/above/below the social acoustic space. Rastafarian counter lingua proposes a listening positioning known as ‘overstanding’ a word coined in Rastafarian anticolonial circle before 1965, which appears to critically respond to and counter the conventional term -understanding. The Polyphonic chaotic sonic soup in *Mupedzanhamo*, however, seems to demand a listening position more complex, almost a fluid and trans-locative approach that allows an omni-aural response to time and space. A slowing down an immersion and a detachment. This is the reason why attempts to theorize this sonic complexity almost always fail. One has to be willing to sit with the contradictions and tension of the sociopolitical and cultural matrix that give birth to these sonic-scapes that confronts the body in these postcolonial market places. The opacity presented by these aural/oral/audible and pseudo audible environments defies the easy concept that sound is an ethnographic tool to study a society. The twists and turns, disjunctures, breaks and false leads demand a humble slowing down and an admission that one might never really figure out what is actually happening. In this listening situation one would consider Jan Zwicky’s ideas of lyric and poetry vs analysis she describes analysis as unidimensional.

“Analysis is not cumulative, it is “explicitly disintegrative,” reducing a concept into its component parts.³ In Zwicky’s words, it is a river that “may have many branches ... but all water always flows in the same direction: down.”⁴ and then, and then, and then. If analysis operates on a “single axis of connectedness,” lyric presents “a spray of possible axes of connectedness.”⁵ Lyric is poly-dimensional, and cannot be easily translated or interpreted, because it does not mean in a way that is legible (at least not to systems that prioritize legibility).

In his book, *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places*, Bernie Krause proposes that in order for various species of animals and insects to communicate amongst their kind with sound they tune into an open bandwidth of frequency in the sonic fabric that does not clash with other species but places itself in an open channel where they can be able to hear each other among myriad of other species who also find different open channels or frequencies to communicate. This is typical of how normal quotidian conversations seem to continue even in this seemingly chaotic and noisy place. All kinds of conversations from romantic low frequency to para-legal deals to high pitched gossip meets a street preacher, all somehow seem to locate themselves in this sonic configuration with a co-existential ease. The high-pitched fast paced shouts of the tout ‘*Hwindi*’^{xix} -another illegal player in the post-colonial economy pierce the atmosphere with an insidious violence. Just like the *Changemoney* the omnibus tout seem to have his place in the urban sonic milieu and every other noise seems to configure itself around his high pitched, fast paced voice. *Hwindi* is another illegal social subject created by the broken, extractive post-colonial ghost of a system that refused to die.

^{xix} Slang/street lingua for omnibus conductors cum tout, these unemployed youth in Harare specialize in shouting to coerce prospective passenger in the omnibuses around the city and the various neighborhoods. They are known for uncouth language and they are the inventors and custodian of new street lingua on the streets of Harare.

Sonic Territorial marking in Post-colonial Zimbabwe's restricted spaces

I grew up in Highfields, Harare a black suburb with a mix of low class and middle-class residential pockets in the early 1980's. Highfields was constructed by the Southern Rhodesian government in the 1930s as a segregated township to accommodate black laborers and their families during the colonial times. The township, the second oldest in Harare, was home to workers employed in the nearby industrial zones of Workington and Southerton just as Mbare, the oldest formal black suburb, had been built to accommodate black workers employed in Workington and Graniteside as domestic labor to white households in the city's northern and Western suburbs.

The presumably 'affluent' parts of Highfields are located in Old Highfields; The Stands, the 12 Pounds and the 5 Pounds (the names of the later are arguably associated with the initial price of purchase in British pounds). The 'Stands area' got the name because when first sold, the area was a greenfield and residents had to build houses of their choices on the new Stands; this is in comparison to the other areas of Highfields where the government had built low-cost basic housing for the indigenous colonized population and sold it at reflective prices. Historically, the yard areas in the 'Stands' are relatively large and the houses, arguably flamboyant (or used to be, be) and indulgent to reflect the affluent status of the black Rhodesians who settled here. The sonic scape in the past up until recently was quite subdued. The decibels level was controlled by several cultural and social apparatus.

Our home was, fortunately, located outside these affluent sonically oppressed zones of Old Highfields. Our precinct was not considered 'affluent' according to the adopted self-oppressive colonial paradigms that shaped the town planning and post-independence social architecture. One of the distinguishing factors between the so called 'affluent' and not so affluent partition was the sonic atmosphere. The Ghetto sonic-scape where we grew up, was well textured and loud. It was an un-curated audible/ non-audible atmosphere, a spontaneous sound scape, a collage of the voice of floor polish vendors singing- "*Cobra ye red ne black ne white-Cobra*", in F# minor. The falsetto of the Okra vendor "*Dereeeere*", the ad-hoc improvised shrill songs "*Namamapoto*" of the pots and pans, solder man who repaired damaged enamel teapots pots and cups using a brass soldering iron. These types of enamel kitchenware were of the Kango brand from Treger a Rhodesian company that made tin household ware coated with enamel. Every Saturday morning you would hear the kink and klang of enamel ware as neighbors pulled out their damaged teapots and pots for repair followed by the hissing and sizzle of oxygen and acetylene melting the brass solder wire used to repair the pots and cups. This environment was not only an oral/ aural affair but also an olfactory one as the specialized gases used to solder created a scent of their own. In the end, you had this aesthetic of brown and yellow enamel teapots and pots with shiny and random brass spots on the bottom. In my work *Putugadzike*(2016) I reference this Ghetto aural/aesthetic/olfactory urban ritual.



Figure 1 Putigadzike(tea), 2016, Masimba Hwati image credit Smac Gallery

The More 'Affluent' parts "*Kuma Stands*" were characterized by a version of aural panopticon control and enforced silence, sometimes you would hear a dog barking and the chit chatter of the maids and the 'garden boys' behind the high durawalls. The night sonic scape especially, was extremely deadened as compared to our part of town where the tower lights extended daytime and soccer matches would continue alongside the normal activity until midnight living up to the name of the city *Harare* which is derived from *Haarare* (the one who does not sleep). The "affluent" side had a deafening silence that caused one to be hyper self-aware. The sense of an aural panoptic ear was overwhelming and oppressive. This area was always clean and everybody knew how to behave themselves, sonic-wise. In these places, Even the *Mutsvairo*^{xx} vendors didn't shout, if they ever ventured to sell their brooms in these parts they would gently knock the iron gate or would respectfully press the intercom. This is one example of the colonial curation of sound lingering even after the political independence in Zimbabwe. The high walls that partition and fragment the houses, the solid iron gates and cartesian arrangement of stands/ yards including the cultural architecture carried with it a sound of colonial silencing, suppression and ordering. What's more interesting and disturbing is the complicity and acquiescence of indigenous people to these lingering colonial vestments of social engineering. As kids growing up in the shadow of a young national independence euphoria, our young minds were conditioned to aspire to the quiet, civilized standard of the 5 pounds, 12 Pounds and '*Kuma Stands*' areas.

^{xx} Shona for traditional/homemade hand broom.

Noise was considered uncivilized and “*Chiruzevha*”^{xxi} like. In my early days at school I was always on the list of noise makers who would be punished every Friday by watering the school’s vegetable garden. As kids, we however offered some disruptive interventions to mediate the oppressive and pretentious sonic-scapes of the so-called affluent parts. After school on some days we would ride to these neighborhoods on our bikes and press the intercoms frantically before running for dear life, sometimes we would do a drive-by pelting of the iron gates with stones and pebbles and sometimes a random shouting exercise and run before the maids and the *garden boys* released the dogs on us. Those houses which were so unfortunate to have metal trash cans outside them would experience the full sonic wrath of the metal lid against their iron gate or their tarmac or concrete pavement. This was sonic marking of territory and a registration of our presence via the medium of noise and disruption.

“Their loud, celebratory mass occupation of and toyi-toying^{xxii} through the cities was therefore a climactic performance of decolonization and decomposition of self: the taking back of power, space, and their alienated voices and identities. Their songs swallowed the city in a sonic counterassault that was both visceral and therapeutic^{xxiii}. As Julian Henriques wrote on the Jamaican reggae sound system, the sounds become embodied and framed the entire sensorium: “Sound at this level cannot but touch you and connect you to your body. [It’s] not just heard in the ears, but [it is] felt over the entire surface of the skin.”^{xxiv}

Mhoze Chikowero documents the POVO (black politically conscious population) marching on Independence Day sonically mapping the city from Ambassador Hotel to first street strategically targeting those places in the city where black African people had been banned or restricted from populating, these were the politics of occupying space, of sonic mapping. Before Political Independence in Zimbabwe, First street and other parts of the city were considered no go areas for black people and silence was one of the characteristics governing these spaces.

^{xxi} *Ruzevha* bastardized English for Reserve where dry and arid area that the indigenous Zimbabweans were forcefully displaced to by the colonial government via a legislative instrument called the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 which made it illegal for Africans to purchase land outside of established Native Purchase Areas, these were places of suffering and acute poverty which became synonymous with black peoples precincts

^{xxii} *Toyi-toyi* is a Southern African dance originally created in South Africa by the African National Congress (ANC) during Apartheid. The dance is used in political protests in South Africa and Zimbabwe. *Toyi-toyi* could begin as the stomping of feet and spontaneous chanting during protests that could include political slogans or songs, either improvised or previously created.

^{xxiii} Mhoze Chikowero *The Afrosonic Making of Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga Military Entertainment Complex*

^{xxiv} Julian Henriques, “Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session,” M. Bill and L. Back, *Auditory Culture Reader*, Berg, Oxford, 2003, 452.

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