

# SISTERS AKOUSMATICA'S 'EXPANDED RADIO' PRACTICE AS RADICAL FEMINIST BROADCAST

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## ABSTRACT

*Sisters Akousmatica* is a collaborative transmission arts project launched by Tasmanian sound artists Phillipa Stafford and Julia Drouhin in 2016, concerned with 'promoting women and gender diverse voices in public space' (Sisters Akousmatica, 2019a). Their practice involves large scale public transmission projects, hidden radio broadcasts, transmitter building workshops with women and children, and written research, exploring the potential of emergent art forms to support, promote and cultivate socio-cultural and gender minorities in the field of sound arts. This paper investigates the 'expanded radio' medium (Sisters Akousmatica, 2019a) and how it may enable *Sisters Akousmatica*, women and gender diverse folks to reimagine the cultural space of radio through alternative discourses. I approach analysis from a feminist musicological framework, informed by theories of Susan McClary and seminal feminist theorist Hélène Cixous. Considering the paucity of empirical and theoretical study regarding women, feminism and broadcast, this paper contributes to the understanding of feminist radio practice, and offers suggestions of the possibilities of expanded radio as a model of radical feminist broadcast.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Considering radio as a form, producer, and transmitter of popular culture, it is important to question who has access to this cultural space, *who* is being represented, and *how* (Mitchell, 1998). It is widely recognised that women, trans, and gender diverse people have been, and continue to be, underrepresented at all levels of production in radio (Gallagher, 1990). Though they are dominated within the masculine hegemonic discourse of radio and sound arts more widely, it does not mean that their dominated position goes uncontested. Feminist musicologist Susan McClary has theorised on some of the strategies used by women<sup>1</sup> musicians to challenge the 'absurd and pernicious stereotypes that have plagued [them] for centuries' and have systemically excluded them from participating fully (or at all), in music production. (McClary, 1991). Phillipa Stafford and Julia Drouhin are two such artists who have developed a practice that implements strategies of contestation. In this paper, their

'expanded radio' practice is investigated as a reimagining of the broadcast medium. In this reimagining, radio becomes a cultural space which cultivates communities of active listeners and sound makers, generates networks of shared knowledge and technical skills, and begins to build inclusive systems that operate as a *feminine economy*.

## 2. SISTERS AKOUSMATICA

*Sisters Akousmatica* is the collaborative duo of Tasmanian based sound artists Julia Drouhin and Phillipa Stafford. According to their curatorial statement (which reads as a manifesto of sorts), *Sisters Akousmatica*'s practice develops 'curatorial, artistic and written projects which are concerned with collective radio practices, auditory-spatial exploration' (Sisters Akousmatica, 2019a).

The project was launched in 2016 as part of Next Wave festival's Emerging Curators program, developed in association with Australian sound arts organisation Liquid Architecture (Next Wave, 2016). Their debut was a large-scale transmission event involving live sound performance, radio broadcast and audience participation in a 'city scale radio-orchestra' (Sisters Akousmatica, 2019c). Over seven hours, seven women artists performed live on the banks of the Yarra River in Melbourne, their sounds being broadcast live via radio transmission. At the same time, Drouhin and Stafford led an audience of listeners armed with portable radios around the city, stopping at various locations to tune into each live performance (Sisters Akousmatica, 2019c).

From this debut as a stand-alone project, 'Sisters Akousmatica' has developed into an umbrella for Drouhin and Stafford's collective arts practice, which intersects the forms of installation, live broadcast, live improvised electronic sound, written research, curation, workshops and retreat for women, trans and gender diverse artists (Sisters Akousmatica, 2019a).

One of their recent works, *Cutting Laps*, was a custom-built wandering radio station in the form of a transmitter built into the body of a car. This car transmitter was driven around the streets of Castlemaine nightly as part of the Castlemaine State Festival, broadcasting works

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<sup>1</sup> Here, and at various points throughout this paper, the term 'women' is used to refer to all those excluded by the masculine hegemony, including

cis-female, trans, non-binary and gender diverse people. This is not intended to minimise the visibility of trans and gender diverse folks.

by international artists Verónica Mota, Celeste Oram, Anna Raimondo, and Beatriz Ferreyra. The broadcast could be listened to using any radio device within a 1km radius of the 'brum brum radio car' (Sisters Akousmatica, 2019f).

Another example of their work is an installation for moon rising signals, titled *RISING*, which was selected as a finalist work for the Women's Art Prize Tasmania 2019 and presented as a touring exhibition across three galleries in Tasmania. The installation was constructed using a radio transmitter and receiver, audio player, speakers, mineral, brass and paper (Sisters Akousmatica, 2019d). Using these two projects as a small sample of their work across three years, it is obvious that *Sisters Akousmatica*'s practice is extremely diverse.

Despite this diversity, their creative output is collected under the one banner, self-described as belonging to the 'expanded radio' medium, unified by an interest in 'the potential of emergent art forms to support, promote and cultivate socio-cultural and gender minorities in the field of sound arts' (Sisters Akousmatica, 2019a). With such variation in the creative outcomes of this medium, what exactly might a definition of 'expanded radio' entail? Using *Sisters Akousmatica*'s practice as an example, the medium (as its name suggests) seems less concerned with creating definitive boundaries for itself to exist within, and more concerned with the ever-expanding radical possibilities of radio removed from institutional power structures and traditions. So, rather than attempting to define 'expanded radio' and its boundaries as a medium, the author proposes expanded radio as a model of *radical feminist broadcast*. Using a feminist theoretical framework informed by musicologist Susan McClary and theorists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, this discussion investigates how the 'expanded radio' practice of *Sisters Akousmatica* may allow women and gender diverse people to reimagine the cultural space of radio.

### 3. RADICAL FEMINIST BROADCAST

At this point it may be useful to briefly elaborate on the proposed term 'radical feminist broadcast' as a blanket term to describe experimental broadcast or transmission art concerned with contesting the masculine dominated discourse of radio.

A general paucity in the area of feminist radio study means there is limited terminology, and what little of it does exist is far from universal. Caroline Mitchell proposes women's community radio as a potential 'feminist public sphere', and uses temporary community broadcast projects as case studies to investigate models of 'feminist radio praxis' (Mitchell, 1998). Mitchell's suggestion of 'feminist radio praxis' is a term applicable to *Sisters Akousmatica*'s practice, but falls short in communicating the radicalisation of traditional broadcast structures. The use of 'praxis', referring to 'the practical side of a profession or field of study, as opposed to the theory' (Collins, 2019), also excludes the theoretical and academic aspects of *Sisters Akousmatica*'s practice. On

the other hand, Austrian National Radio program *Kunstradio* have attempted to define 'radio art' as 'not a combination of radio and art. Radio art is radio by artists', (Kunstradio, 2019). This term 'radio art' (at face value, and according to *Kunstradio*'s definition) sufficiently communicates the possibilities of engaging with radio in non-traditional ways, but fails to express the social and cultural implications of a project such as *Sisters Akousmatica*.

As an alternative to the terminology above, the author proposes the term 'radical feminist broadcast' as a blanket term applicable to experimental broadcast projects concerned with promoting feminist values, and contesting the masculine dominated cultural space of radio. The word 'radical' is operating in a number of ways. Firstly, it refers to a radicalisation of radio tradition, in its sonic content. Secondly, a radicalisation of the gendered practice & discourse promulgated by the institutional power structures of commercial radio. Thirdly, it is important to understand 'radical' as 'concerned with ... fundamental aspects of a matter' (Collins, 2019). The term 'radical feminist broadcast' attempts to signify these things concurrently. In regards to the research of *Sisters Akousmatica* specifically, this term seems most indicative of the sonic aspects of, as well as the social and cultural intentions and implications of, their practice.

### 4. EXPANDED RADIO AS A FEMININE ECONOMY

Feminist theorist Luce Irigaray argues that in modern society the feminine is the cathetical *other* of masculine, phallogocentric desire and discourse (Irigaray, 1985). Indeterminate, the feminine is constantly attempting to redefine itself outside of a masculine discourse (Mitchell, 1999). This assertion allows us to (re)consider how the feminine may be recovered, reconstructed, redefined, represented through alternative, non-phallogocentric discourses, termed *écriture féminine* by Hélène Cixous. Her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* presents the 'feminine economy' as an example of *écriture féminine*, and as opposed to a masculine economy, which operates on a fear of loss (of accumulated capital), a feminine economy operates on a logic of giving without expectation of receiving in return:

*She gives more, with no assurance that she'll get back even some unexpected profit from what she puts out ... This is an 'economy' that can no longer be put in economic terms. Wherever she loves, all the old concepts of management are left behind.*  
(Cixous, 1976)

Cixous' concept of the feminine economy as based on the freely given gift presents alternative means for exercising knowledge, given without predetermined bounds or stipulation of how that knowledge may be used (Mitchell, 1999). Radio is innately a gift (in Cixous' understanding of the term); sound, voice and knowledge given to an undetermined audience at no cost, with no expectation of

receiving anything from that audience in return. But commercial and institutional radio stations still operate under a masculine economy. As an alternative, *Sisters Akousmatica*'s 'expanded radio' permits us to reimagine the economic and cultural power structures of radio by using the freely given gift and the feminine economy.

As part of *Sisters Akousmatica*'s project *Cutting Laps*, transmitter building workshops with children from Candlebark Primary School can be observed as an example of the freely given gift. Here, the practical skills and technical knowledge of radio transmitter building is being given freely to the children. *Cutting Laps* also involved a student talk on curating resistances as a peripheral event, as well as a community call out to enter the *Cutting Laps* car and produce a one minute sound work to be broadcast live (from amongst the backseat pillows, rainbow-fur paneling, and beaded chandelier trims):

*#cuttinglaps started!!! ... You can come in the  
Brum Brum radio car and make your own 1 minute  
live show!!!* (Sisters Akousmatica, 2019f)

In this instance, the car itself is given as a gift: providing the space and technical equipment needed to create and broadcast your own one minute segment, offered at no cost (Sisters Akousmatica, 2019f). Importantly, there are no stipulations regulating what the segment must sound like, or who has access to the space and opportunity.

In a project such as *Cutting Laps*, we can observe 'expanded radio' as a reimagining of the broadcast medium which grows communities of active listeners and sound makers, generates networks of shared knowledge and technical skills, and begins to build inclusive systems that operate as a feminine economy. As both process and outcome of the growth of these systems, the development of alternative discourses allow women to redefine the *feminine*.

## 5. ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES: 'A LANGUAGE TO GET INSIDE OF'

*If woman has always functioned "within" the  
discourse of man ... it is time for her to dislocate  
this "within," to explode it, turn it around, and seize  
it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own  
mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to  
invent for herself a language to get inside of.*  
(Cixous, 1976)

The feminine economic sphere generated through *Sisters Akousmatica*'s expanded radio practice provides a space for the dominated to pursue subversive acts and challenge the hegemonic discourse that excludes them (Mitchell, 1998). Alternative media academics (Bredin, 1991; Steiner, 1992), and feminist musicologist Susan McClary

have investigated and theorised upon some of the ways women have contested a masculine discourse by creating new forms of practice where feminist values are central to the production and content of what is being produced (Mitchell, 1998). Womens' community radio has been cited as one such form of alternative practice, allowing new discourses to emerge (Jallov, 1992). Furthering this suggestion, the author proposes *Sisters Akousmatica*'s 'expanded radio' as another possible site for this to happen.<sup>2</sup>

From within the feminine economic sphere generated by *Sisters Akousmatica*'s practice, sound makers and listeners alike are enabled to pursue alternative discourses, to 'invent for [themselves] a language to get inside of' (Cixous, 1976). In the text based material that surrounds the project *Sisters Akousmatica*, Drouhin and Stafford utilise language that in itself conjures a radical reimagining of the magical space that radio occupies. Their curatorial statement acts as an example of this, its poeticism holding uncanny resemblance to Cixous' 1976 essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*. The similarities come down to near exact phrases: Drouhin and Stafford 'are seeking the truth of **herstory**<sup>3</sup>' while Cixous is calling to '[draw] her story into history'. A shared sense of occult wonder, and collective magic permeates both texts:

*They sing loud with the wind, feet in the ground of  
sand and ears in the ocean of air: they are radio.*

(Sisters Akousmatica, 2019a)

*In women's speech, as in their writing, that element  
which never stops resonating ... that element is the  
song: first music from the first voice of love which  
is alive in every woman ...* (Cixous, 1976)

Despite being primarily sonic artists, Drouhin and Stafford actively acknowledge the kinship between language and sound, between writing and speaking. Through writing they have created a language to 'get inside of,' generating a discursive model alternative to the masculine discourse of radio.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper investigates the 'expanded radio' medium, and how it may function as a cultural site that allows disenfranchised groups to reimagine the cultural space of radio through alternative discourses. The collaborative broadcast project *Sisters Akousmatica* grows communities of active listeners and sound makers, generates networks of shared knowledge and technical skills, and begins to build inclusive systems that operate on a logic of the freely given gift. From within this feminine economic sphere, sound makers and listeners are provided with a space to pursue alternative discourses,

<sup>2</sup> The author intends to collect qualitative data through interviewing *Sisters Akousmatica* collaborators Phillipa Stafford and Julia Drouhin in order to extend this research as an Honours dissertation

<sup>3</sup> By 'herstory,' Julia and Phillipa mean alternative histories (of gender minorities) that have often been excluded from the supposedly "objective" and "neutral" written histories of Western sound arts (McClary, 1991).

and subvert the masculine hegemonic discourse that excludes them. More research into radical feminist broadcast deserves attention, especially in the context of Australia; a country whose vastness has necessitated radio as an important social and cultural tool in building community and developing a sense of collective identity. This investigation presents 'expanded radio' as an exciting medium that may enable women, trans, non-binary and gender diverse people to radically reimagine the cultural space of radio.

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