

“Ellos no están entendiendo nada” [“They are not understanding anything”]: embodied remembering as complex narrative in a Telematic Sonic Improvisation.

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INTIMAL is a physical-virtual system for relational listening, exploring the role of the body as interface that keeps memory of place in migratory contexts. The system is developed to integrate the body movements of performers (and their voices) with an oral archive. The system has been informed and tested by nine Colombian migrant women in Europe in a telematic performance between the cities of Oslo, Barcelona and London. In the performance a “complex narrative” emerged, for both the improvisers and the audiences. In this paper, we describe the conditions of the narrative environment, and the embodied expressions that emerged. We reflect on how this distributed embodied expression—through technological mediated sound and movement interactions—might further aid processes of collective remembering and catharsis, in a context of conflict and gendered migration.

Embodiment, memory, telematics, migration, listening, interfaces, conflict, complex narrative

1. INTRODUCTION

The INTIMAL art–research project explores the body as an ‘interface’ that keeps memory of place. We have developed an interactive system to be used in telematic sonic performances between cities in Europe. The idea is to stimulate *relational listening* as the process of making relations through listening to different sonic sources while one navigates through memories of distant locations. In the context of human migration, the navigation is proposed as in the search for place and presence (Alarcón Díaz 2019). Sense of place, understood as the feelings that attach us emotionally to a place, for instance to nature, people, and culture (Cross 2015; Tuan 1977); and sense of presence, as the feeling of others being present through the distance, which is facilitated with technological mediations (Nowak 2001; ISPR 2000). Through collective improvisation INTIMAL has been designed to perform exercises of collective memory. Collective remembering is understood here as a form of “mediated action”, in which “the representation of the past is distributed across members of a group” (Wertsch 2002, p.23), but also across locations and times. Remembering with others can take place in

agreement, or in contestation, regarding the stories that are shared, and according to the versions of stories that the members of the group have. Thus, in contexts of migration and conflict, the use of creative platforms for collective remembering stands as key for bringing together fragments of stories that can be activated and freely responded. INTIMAL was informed using two main materials: first, an oral archive containing Colombian migrant women’s testimonies of conflict and migration collected by Diaspora Women¹, representing a diversity of stories, from different generations and regions of Colombia. These texts were annotated according to the researchers’ proposed ontology of *four spheres of migratory memory*, namely *body stories*, *social body*, *native place* and *host-lands* (Alarcón et al. 2019a). Second, the migratory listening experiences of nine Colombian women living in the cities of Oslo, Barcelona and London. They were selected through an open call via the blog of the project², social media, and the email list of the organisation

¹<http://mujerdiaspora.com> Accessed June 12, 2019

²<https://intimal.net/2018/01/31/convocatoria-a-mujeres-colombianas-migrantes-londres-barcelona-oslo/> Accessed December 5, 2019

Diaspora Women. Twenty-three women responded to the call, and the selection of the nine participants was based on their expression of interest and on their availability to participate in all the activities of the project. Using Deep Listening practice (Oliveros 2005)—which involves sonic meditations, listening to the body (Gold 2008) and listening in dreams (IONE 2005)—the women recalled their listening experiences from memories in Colombia and in their host lands.

With special focus on dream awareness, and through sessions via Google Hangouts, the participants reflected on how voices, characters, and spaces that appear in their dreams, are manifestations of their migrations, and which agency they have with those characters in such spaces. During one year, and in each session, they focused their attention on one of the proposed *four spheres of migratory memory*. They amplified their dream content through free improvisation involving body movement, voice and spoken word. The sphere of *body stories* specially brought to their awareness the agency that they can develop as migrants and as women in their living environment. Thus this dream and virtual space prepared them to move beyond their conscious possibilities, and playfully bring new embodiments to their awoken time. In tandem, networking technologies are connecting time and space as vehicles and metaphors of their migrations (Alarcón 2015). In a physical intensive workshop³, they further explored migratory memories by listening to their bodies, and the surroundings. They practiced spontaneous responses to unknown voices that come from their dreams, as in preparation for listening to the oral archives. This exercise brought to the surface common, diverse and opposing perspectives of Colombian culture: such as the role of humour and the need for silence. The INTIMAL creative research process stimulated for participants various body movement and vocal expressions, which they rendered into an improvisation of their own “migratory journeys” across the *four spheres of migratory memory*. It also triggered responses while listening to fragments of oral testimonies. These expressions were recorded in the motion capture lab at University of Oslo (Alarcón Díaz 2019), helping us to envision two interfaces for the INTIMAL system:

- MEMENTO: which triggers and interrelates fragments of the oral archive, and interactively builds around *sense of place*
- RESPIRO: which explores *sense of presence*, through breathing across distant locations

The interfaces were used in a long-distance improvisation (telematic sonic performance) on May

³In Grán, Norway

7, 2019. Here three venues in Oslo, Barcelona and London were connected, and the women in the three locations expressed their migratory journeys and navigated through the oral archive together. Six of the improvisers were part of the initial group participating in the research⁴, while three new participants were volunteers who became involved in the project through workshops previous to the performance in each city⁵. The performance was proposed as a “shared dream”.

In this paper, we describe the complex narratives that emerged during the performance (in voice, language and body movement), the technological environment, and the experience for improvisers and the audiences. We reflect on how such a distributed performance might further aid processes of collective remembering, and catharsis, in a context of conflict and migration.

2. COMPLEX NARRATIVES ANDEMBODIED INTERACTION

Fragmented narratives are complex, as conflict, migration and dream environments are, intermingling times and spaces; the use of distributed and networked media adds into the complexity. We find useful Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki’s approach (Grishakova and Poulaki 2019, p.13) to narrative complexity, which they sum under two dimensions: first, narrative representation and embodied mind, which involves “mind and body engagement” (perception, memory, emotion, affect, and somatosensory effects), and “complex scripts of communication and behaviour related to narrative experience and sense making”. Second, narrative representation and environments, which involve the reuse of narratives in social and technological environments, including distributed and emergent narratives, machine-generated narratives, and multimodal narratives.

First, we introduce MEMENTO, which is re-using narratives from an oral archive, and RESPIRO, gathering and sonifying in real-time data from the improvisers’ breathing activity. Second, we present the score that helped the structure of the performance. This score, together with the implicit narratives of migrations, and the emotional links created between the improvisers during one year sharing memories and dreams, inform the complex

⁴For different reasons, the other three participants were not able to improvise on the day of the performance.

⁵The workshops were a very important activity to test the interfaces. All women who have initially applied to participate in the INTIMAL project were invited to these four-hour workshops in each city. In Oslo, not only Colombian but women from other Latin American countries such as Mexico, Peru and Guatemala attended to the workshop.

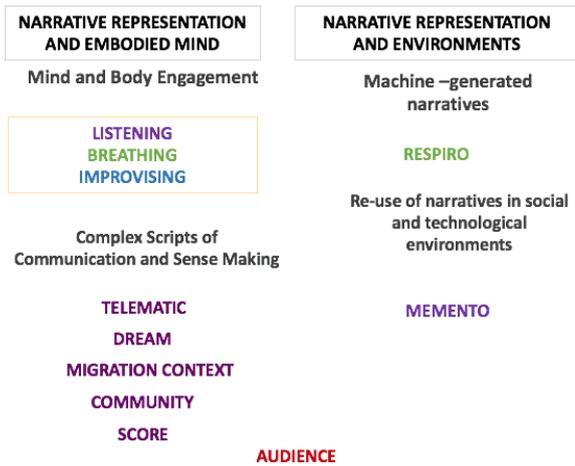


Figure 1: Elements of the Improvisatory Performance according to the narrative complexity approach by Grishakova and Poulaki (2019). (Source: Ximena Alarcón)

scripts of communication and sense making within the performance. Third, we describe and reflect on the consequent processes of listening, breathing, and improvising freely, which make connections in such complex narratives (Fig. 1).

2.1. Narrative Representation and Environments

MEMENTO is a text mining and interaction software, that interrelates previously annotated fragments of the oral archive, according to their semantic proximity, namely nouns and adjectives, and the *four spheres of migratory memory*. Sonic interaction has been integrated into improvisers' movement of walking and rotating, using a mobile phone as sensor; this also serves as a device to listen to the stories and transmit improvisers' vocal responses. Walking (or displacement), including rotation, was chosen as meaningful movement to develop interaction between improvisers and the oral archive, as if in search for directions and place (Alarcón Díaz 2019; Alarcón Díaz et al. 2019b). Each (decisive) step forward, brings to the listener a new fragment of story. Rotations to the left, trigger stories told by the same woman who has just been heard, and rotations to the right, trigger stories belonging to the same sphere of migratory memory, but told by a different woman. Only one improviser per city, called la "brújula" (the compass), activated MEMENTO. After testing the interface, improvisers in each city decided who wanted to act as "brújula". This decision involved personal and performative perspectives regarding control and freedom of their body movements and the use of the technology (Alarcon Diaz et al. 2019c, p.15). Although in each city improvisers were listening to the interrelations, between the same three stories used from the

archive, the trigger was random. RESPIRO software was developed to transmit and sonify in real-time data from the improvisers' breathing activity. Breathing, in counterpart with walking, was chosen as an involuntary yet vital movement to transmit a sense of presence, devoid from literal voice but informed by it, between distant locations. The data was collected by FLOW™ breathing sensors⁶, which were placed in each improviser's abdomen and created a sound, to characterise and distinguish sonically each city. The sound was amplified using three loudspeakers, in each venue.

2.2. Complex scripts of communication

The score (Fig. 2) invited participants to improvise during thirty minutes and integrated, the expression of each improviser's "migratory journey", and their responses to the oral archive. Each improviser was fully free to express their "migratory journey" across the four spheres of migratory memory, moving as much or as little they wish in the space. The only constraint was the given time of 1'30" for each journey; the name of each main improviser was voiced by a helper called "tiempa" in an alternate order in each city, giving turns for each improviser to be heard, and keeping the time of all the improvisation. The other improvisers were invited to become "resonators" of the migratory journeys of each participant. The second part of the performance, called "Histomemoriology", involved the use of the MEMENTO interface to navigate through the oral archives. Improvisers were also free to respond spontaneously to the archives and naturally interact with each other. The improvisation was broadcast online bringing the sonified breathing of the three cities and the voices from the improvisers transmitted through the microphones from the mobile phones, using the Discord app.

3. EMERGENT NARRATIVES

3.1. Listening and Improvising

Improvisers integrated all their backgrounds regarding body movement and vocal expression (e.g. theatrical, dance, conversational, spoken poetry, performance art). As a response to the oral archives they naturally replied with words, establishing conversations, directly with the archives and with the other improvisers. Reacting through repetition, they generated rhythms with the words heard, and resonating with accents. Singing, running, throwing themselves on the floor, were part of the individual responses.

In Barcelona, one felt the need of running, as if escaping from the other improvisers, and touched

⁶Developed by Sweetzpot AS. See <https://www.sweetzpot.com/flow> Accessed 5 December, 2019

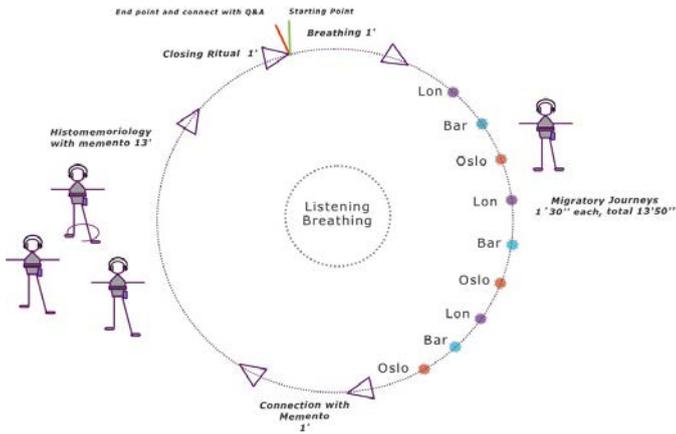


Figure 2: Score for time structure of the INTIMAL Long-Distance Improvisation. (Source: Ximena Alarcón)

the head of one, as a sign of protection; other was trying to hug the women who were telling the stories (as if "hugging the voices"). They brought spontaneous laughter as an expression, bringing fluidity to their feeling in the midst of painful stories.

The decisive step needed to activate MEMENTO, seemed to create also connections between the improvisers bringing empathy, involving eye contact, touch, words, and co-narrative. Rapid interaction, empathy, and connections happened between them. For instance, in London, this is manifested in the fast response to a ludic game proposed by one, a nursery rhyme. With it, the stage became a playground, and participants became like girls playing songs with lyrics and movements part of a shared memory⁷.

Interacting with the "brújula" in Oslo, one asked her to "go out" from a sphere of memory that an improviser did not want to hear; "brújula" left the space, and realised her tiredness of words' overflow, which prompted her later to connect more with physical movements of impact. Meanwhile, for the other two improvisers who remained in stage, nervous laughter followed by a scream emerged as a very strong expression, surprising also for them, as part of the uncertainty of the technological functioning of the "brújula" which is the trigger. They keep breathing.

3.2. Breathing

Listening to RESPIRO, and the act of breathing is recalled by one improviser as something key for starting and ending the improvisation, but that is forgotten as an interactive option during the performance. For other improviser, sonified breathing becomes as a "blanket of colours",

⁷This is a video with a fragment of the performance illustrating these expressions. <https://vimeo.com/368031898> Accessed 5 December, 2019

between the three "shores" (meaning cities). Sounds from the sonification of breathing were regarded by one, as helpful to listen to the voices of the archive, as many of these are talking about painful events related to the Colombian conflict. In London, and during the interaction, the creation of an almost sculptural shape with their bodies, that evokes a human lung, and helps one to expel a paper with words about identity and migration, that she has been ripping and chewing in her mouth.

3.3. Languages in stage

Regarding language, improvisers privileged the Spanish, as language of expression during the improvisation, also questioning it. For instance, strong statements of identity in London such as "we should be singing in Quechua, why in Spanish", brought the theme of ancient native language as memory of loss and colonial imposition. This relates to other improviser's comment of refusing to acquire the Spanish accent from Spain.

In Oslo, one improviser surprises herself, when she is telling stories of her life in Norwegian language to a Norwegian audience, when talking about the need of affirming her identity through Spanish language. The need of speaking mainly in Spanish, regardless their multilingual possibilities, was expressed also there when one of the improvisers stops the narrative of her story to reflect on the audience's listening perspective, saying: "Ellos no están entendiendo nada" [They are not understanding anything], followed by a response of another improviser saying "No te preocupes, lo estás haciendo para tí, no para ellos" [Do not worry, you are doing it for you, not for them]. These expressions place language as an unresolved yet important place to be, or to move through. In that linguistic space, audience adds complexity into the narrative, specifically becoming "the other", and perhaps "migrants" themselves, when improvisers are sharing stories in a language they cannot understand.

We suggest that these embodied expressions, derived from improvisatory movement, voluntary and involuntary breathing, might be also observed through the lenses of Jensenius' taxonomy of sonic and body motion interaction (Jensenius 2017), presenting spatiotemporal levels such as *micro/meso/macro*, and interplay with vocal expression. In the taxonomy, the ranges are indicative; the *micro* level is proposed as a motion that occupies in space less than 1 cm, and a duration in time less than 0.5 seconds; followed by *meso* level, in which the motion occupies in space 1 to 50cm, and a duration in time 0.5-10 seconds; the *macro* level in which the motion occupies in space more than 50cm and a duration in time more than 10sec.

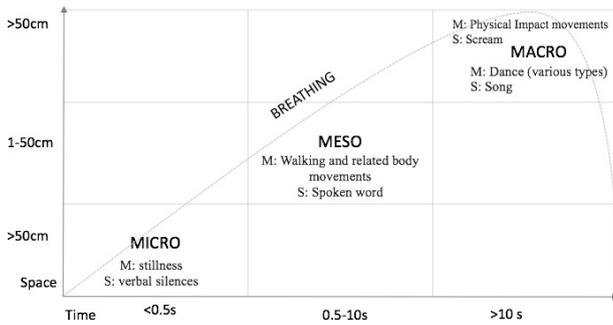


Figure 3: Locating emerging narratives into Jensenius’ taxonomy of body motion, with breathing as a bridge. (Source: Ximena Alarcón)

Emerging from the performance (Fig. 3), we observed a continuum of body movement and vocal expression: walking related body movement and spoken word, can be located mostly in the *meso* level; while various types of dance and song, can be located in the *macro* level. In turn, verbal silences in stillness occupy the *micro* level. In the moment of stage fright, described above—from the voluntary decision of being in stillness (as being paralyzed), to the explosive scream—and from the tiredness of words, to the need of having movements of physical impact, it seems that improvisers are going spontaneously from *micro* to *macro* levels, which feels as emotionally liberating. In-between these motion levels, we suggest that breathing, as a voluntary/involuntary act, which is being sonified, can potentially become a bridge, that interactively stands as an attentional point for feeling emotional presence both in co-located and telematic interactions.

3.4. The Audience, the “other”

Physical audiences became part of the stage, as they were surrounding the improvisers; we might say that in the context of a “shared dream”, they became characters with specific roles in such narrative. From the perspective of the improvisers, they played a role of “witnesses”, “observers”, someone “important to connect” to, or having an “irrelevant role” in some cases. The presence of the audience in Oslo and Barcelona seemed to be haunting and uncomfortable for most of the participants. In Barcelona, one improviser hides herself under a “skirt” from a haunting audience, and also goes and touch some friends, who are there, telling them in secret “this is a dream”. In London, women from Diaspora Women, were part of the audience, and this seems to create a different perspective, of commonality. There, one improviser also translates to the audience, what is being heard in the headphones into English.

Online audience members were able to listen to an audio mix of these encounters for public broadcast, hearing layers of sound in a non-defined environment (not in time and not in space)⁸. This particular “sub-performance” made it possible to listen to in-betweenness, and possible synchronicities,⁹ from distributed memories. Thus, the online audience emerged as an interesting group, since they were physically distant from the participants, but were fully immersed in the vocal improvisation and its sonic layers¹⁰:

I listened to the recording and I couldn’t stop until it reaches the end of the performance. At every moment, I was very curious to hear what was coming next. It was a very dynamic act, always a new element coming up. And the women reactions quite surprising. (AD, feedback from online audience).

For a Spanish speaking audience, explicit themes emerge as synchronicities through spoken word, and abstract sonification of breathing data, as part of the response to the oral archive. This contains life stories of Colombian migrant women, who have been directly affected by the conflict, and thus reflect on their experiences, bringing also historical references of the country. For instance, a voice from the archives recalls the Botanical Expedition at the end of the eighteenth century by José Celestino Mutis. For the improvisers, this fragment sparked memories of the richness of Colombian natural resources, its biodiversity and the medicinal plants, as well as memories of the ancestral coca plantations, sadly caught as one of the environmental and financial actors in the country’s conflict. Other snippets of stories were heard: the story of “piojos” [lice], which deepens not only on stories of childhood but of helping each other to remove them; stories of women’s friendship, mom and daughter, and the happiness of giving birth to a girl; the distrust of patriarchal society, as well as to the role of the church to decide who is a good or a bad person. They used abstract vocal sounds as imitation of weapons and guns’ sounds. These, together with gestures of shooting, seem to synchronise from improvisers in one city, with voices of announcements of killings, coming from improvisers in another city; as well as the naming of the cities where the massacres in Colombia have occurred. The abstract sounds of the sonified breathing strengthen these statements with sonic gestures, either because of the strength of their voices, or in the case of Barcelona, the turns from

⁸This is a video with subtitles of a fragment of the online broadcast. <https://vimeo.com/372055756> Accessed 5 December, 2019

⁹Synchronicities are understood here as “meaningful coincidences” (Jung 2003) happening in the narratives across different spaces.

¹⁰This is the full original version of the online broadcast. <https://youtu.be/m30yRwG1Tp8> Accessed 9 December, 2019

their physical movements, running, or displacements in the space.

4. REFLECTION

In the understanding of emerging complex narratives, in the INTIMAL Long-Distance Improvisation we found interesting the journey that happened for participants in the process of embodied remembering, and the continuum of embodied expressions that emerged with the trigger of oral archives. We wonder how awareness of breathing brought by the sonification of breathing data, becomes a supportive bridge in this continuum of expressions, and can be interrelated with different forms of walking and displacement in space.

We think that the richness of expressions in the improvisation were stimulated by the complexity brought about by the score (similar actions agreed in real-time and in different locations, interconnected by breathing, and memory), the technological environment, and the sense of community that they developed during the process. In the emerging narratives, synchronicities articulated issues of gender and Colombian conflict for improvisers.

In turn, the presence of audiences, especially non-Colombian or Spanish speaking audiences, emerged as crucial as they become "the other". The conflict in the improvisatory situation is not only the "thematic" Colombian conflict, but the interaction with the other, in host lands, who perhaps understands nothing. Looking back at the proposed "shared dream" space, we question what is there to be understood, if a narrative is expected, in such a complex distributed environment. The answer might be suggested in this comment on an improvisers' personal experience:

When I listened to the sound piece that collects the interaction between the three cities and that was heard in streaming [. . .] I considered that the piece represented somehow that compilation of presences and absences. Because sometimes even if we are in location we are not embodied, and many times, being embodied, we cannot locate ourselves. Through the sound piece, the incomprehensible of the [experienced] technology, and the fragility of being disappear, to bring other sounds and sonorities that are not real, even if these are concrete. (AR)

Understanding the improvisatory performance, as only an event that is part of a process of listening and remembering opening avenues for healing feelings of loss associated to the migratory experience, it is interesting how immediately after the performance,

concrete and embodied stories emerged for one of the improvisers: "a sudden "zapping" of songs" (VO) in her memory.

Another participant reported on remembering stories of violence that she seemed to have forgotten. This led to the realisation of possibly related health symptoms, and the need of working creatively on that:

the power of speaking, speaking, sharing and listening, because I believe there is a sense of shame in the trauma. What does not let one speak, is the feeling of shame, for some reason or another there is a self-censorship, . . . , but once you manage to verbalize, to make it sound and public, there is already a step, and in that listening in some way, in empathizing with others, when you realize that you are not the only one with that story, . . . one can understand more easily that this has happened to more people or forgive yourself either for what one did or did not do; and if there are people with worse stories and have managed to overcome these, . . . I can also overcome mine. (YC)

To conclude, what we have seen is that the embodied, technologically mediated and relational work provided by INTIMAL, stimulates the improvisers' own processes of listening, remembering and healing. These are complex processes in themselves, and could emerge as a game, a childhood nursery rhyme, a dance, a scream, a push, or afterward, in a sudden zapping of songs.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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