



*conversation with* **SHENECE ORETHA**  
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*From Moving Speakers* (detail), Sound sculpture, print on curtain, Delfina Foundation, London, 2024. Photographer: Anne Tetzlaff.

**SANDY YU** *in conversation with*  
**SHENECE ORETHA**

*This interview took place in July 2024.*

**SY** How did you become an artist?

**SO** I went to art school, but for me, it started much earlier than that. I always loved learning, and I went to a regular state school in London, where I was first introduced to the arts. Growing up in London, art is everywhere. But if you do not have the right guides, it can be difficult to know the avenues to follow. My art teachers were wonderful, and school is where I found my people. The arts offered a space for like-minded people—those who wanted to question the world, think deeply, and learn new things.

When I had a tragedy happen in my teenage years, the arts held me. That is when I decided to go to an art foundation course, and that blew my mind. I was introduced to people who were trying to say something new about the





*Ah So It Go, Ah No So It Go, Go, So!* (detail), Metal rod, speakers,  
Cubitt London, 2022.



world, to create rather than simply regurgitating other people's thoughts. Arts education and art tutors really got me into the arts, so they are my beginning.

When I started at Slade School of Fine Art in London, I discovered sound art, and it clicked with me as someone coming from a family where DJs, sound systems and music was an integral part of life. Sound has always been with me; when I was younger, I used to sleep surrounded by speakers in my brother's room. So, when I encountered this merging of art and sound, it felt like I had finally found my true place.

**SY** Was discovering sound art a turning point in your practice?

**SO** It gave me a voice in a space that did not always feel like mine. My family did not have paintings, nor did they teach me art history, but we definitely had strong connections to sound. I felt like I actually had something to say about sound, about listening and voice, and sound's ability to move or gather people. That was when I truly found myself. Visualising that is the endless quest in my practice.

It feels like the sound art scene was quite small in London ten years ago, but now it is really growing—and we are still building it. Many of my studio neighbours at Somerset House work in sound, some of which is more rooted in music. Although my practice is grounded in music, its foundation lies in listening—to poetry, vocals, speech, ambient sound and noise. Sound gave me a path that I am still travelling down.

**SY** Do you conceptualise music in relation to or in opposition to sound art in your practice?

**SO** I try not to create too many boundaries. On a general level, for me, music is made for entertainment, whereas sound art is about



***Listening as a Whole***, Series of happenings organised by Shenece Oretha,  
LUX Gardens, London, 2021.



questioning sound and its many guises beyond music. Yet sound art also involves finding the music of the everyday: enjoying things that are not traditionally considered music. This could range from the endless drilling of gentrification to the sound of speech.

Sound studies are a couple decades old, and there are some great thinkers in the field, both past and present. However, their work does not always resonate with me. Many of them think about the political context of sound, but they do not always address the personal, emotional, intergenerational, or interpersonal aspect of sound that I explore in my practice. Sound also does not always have to make music, or even sound.

What drew me to sound—and where music becomes a starting point for my work—is the sound speaker itself. I see the sound speaker as an entity, a conduit and a body, as a reflection of our own bodies and selves, as a personified object. Speakers can also be explored as instruments, and instruments can do more than make music—they can also create ceremony. They begin and end gatherings, and can summon people into spaces. The steel pan, for example, is something that I look at as an instrument, but steel pans are also an object of defiance. These were created in Trinidad because drums were banned.

**SY**

**SO**

When you say ‘they’..?

By ‘they’, I mean colonial forces in Trinidad, the Caribbean, the Americas, and Africa. Colonial authorities at the time banned instruments because they recognised their power as tools of communication, gathering, and mobilisation. In response, the people of Trinidad looked for other things—soap boxes, tins and kitchen items. Steel barrels are very much an object of trade—they



***Called to Respond*** (detail), Active speaker, chicken bones,  
Cell Project Space, London, 2020.



carry oil and many other commodities. These steel barrels are deposited as waste on the island of Trinidad. Some makers then decided to create multi-tonal instruments from it.

The story of the steel pan is as important as the music itself. It is a story of defiance and resilience. Artists, thinkers, and writers are the ones who get to speak about this history. Jean La Rose, for example, will speak about the importance of that history being known both outside of the instrument and within the listening of the music.

When it comes to sound art and music, it is good to be able to straddle multiple arenas from a practical standpoint. It means you are not limited to the gallery context; you can also participate in festivals. In contemporary art, there are prizes; there is competition, whereas the music context is a little bit different. Also, I think audiences for music come to be entertained, so they may come with less of a critique than an art audience would. In music, there is an immediacy—audiences do not need prior education to engage with it, unlike in the art world, where knowledge can feel like a requirement.

**SY** You mentioned being drawn to sound because of its presence in your family's history. How does this deeply personal and familial tradition surface in your practice? How does it tie into a wider political and historical context of culture and diaspora?

**SO** I am from Montserrat, a small Caribbean island that is still a colony of the UK. It is a volcanic island, with an active volcano. During the 90s, a lot of families fled from the island, and our diaspora is wide. However, we carry so much of the island with us, especially its sound tradition.

Growing up, I always used to say that DJs were more important figures than politicians. My brother was a DJ, event producer and promoter



***Called to Respond*** (detail), Active speaker, chicken bones,  
Cell Project Space, London, 2020.



in London. He brought with him the sensibility of the Montserratians gatherings, spaces where we could connect and keep alive the sound tradition of Soca, a genre related to Carnival. Carnival is more than just a street party—it is a festival, a ceremony, a gathering. My brother used to play pirate radio stations, which is another tradition that is very rooted in the UK and London. My family used to gather late in the night to listen to his DJ set and his radio shows. His room in our house had something like ten stacks of loudspeakers. So while people might recognise those sound systems from Carnival, I know them instead as something I can sit on, have breakfast, or fall asleep amongst. I always say that my brother's speakers were my first sound installation.

When I first came across artists like Janet Cardiff and Bernhard Leitner and their sound installations, I thought, 'Oh, I know that!'. It felt familiar because we had something similar in my family. Those speakers were not just for show. My relative would carry them out of his room to parties and events, often with a parade of people helping. This is something I am currently working on in my work, to see this parade again.

Sound systems themselves have such an interesting history. They became so integrated into Caribbean everyday life across the islands. People stack their systems and everyone has different parts of the system within their home. When I recently went back to the Caribbean, I took some photos of people with a speaker outside the house with slippers on top of it, almost like it was being used as a shoe rack.

**SY** Like a piece of furniture.  
**SO** Exactly. It is a relationship to technology that is not often spoken about. It is also often heavily policed because again, people know the force of



***Rootwork***, Performance as part of *ASSEMBLY 2024*, Somerset House, London, 2024.  
Photographer: Anne Tetzlaff.





***Dearly Beloved*** (detail), 4 speaker bodies, 4 speaker stands, brass tambourine jingles, black vinyl string and air, Espace Arlaud for Les Urbaines, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2019.  
Photographer: Guillaume Baeriswyl, Konkord Photography.

amplification once a voice, once a sound, or once a song catches in the air. It is a device of mobilisation. It carries power.

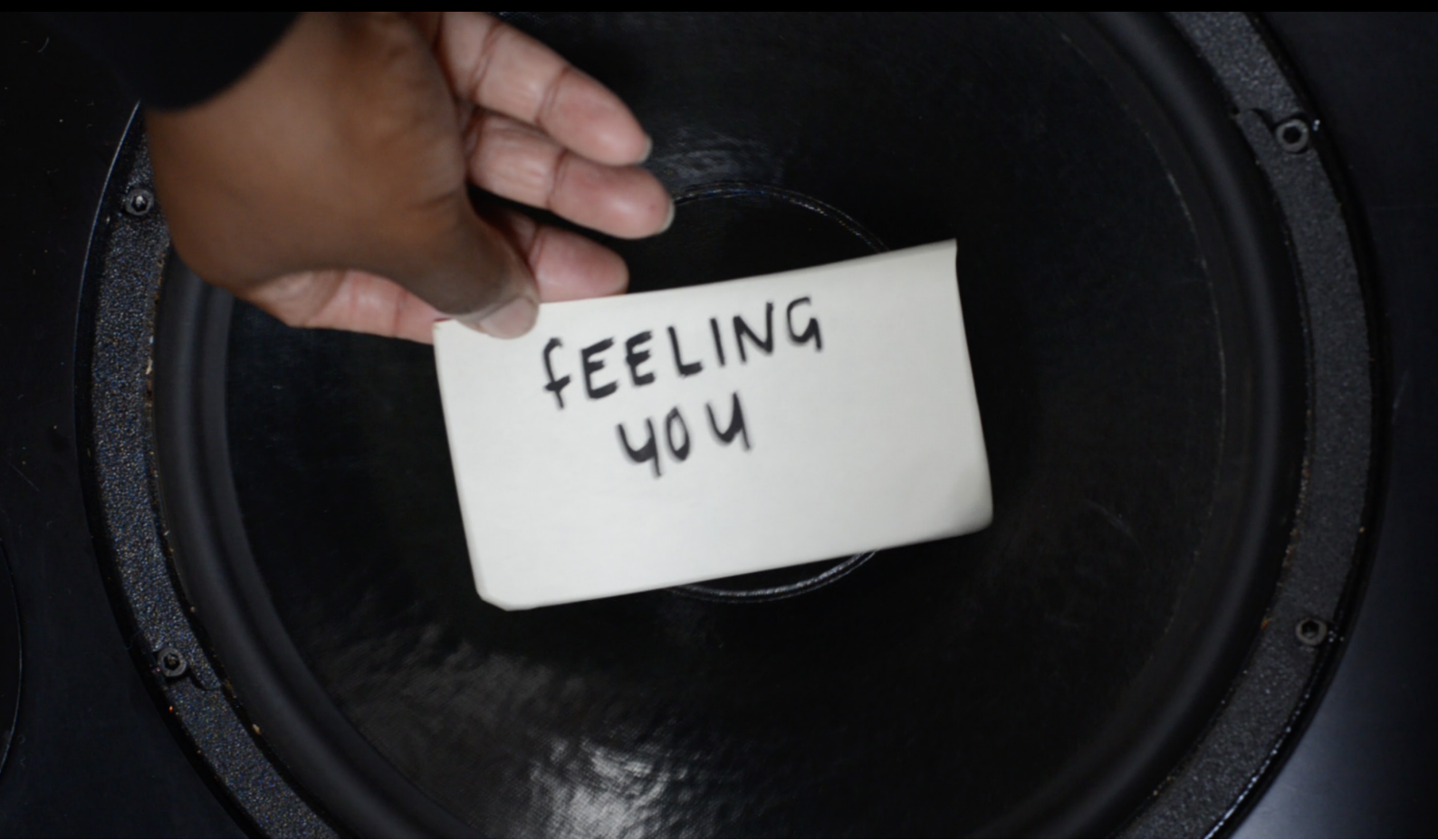
When people returned to the Caribbean after fighting in the war in the mid-20th century, they brought the knowledge and technology to build speakers. The creation of sound systems in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean was like reclaiming power. When you come from a people that are massively oppressed, how do you make something that is your own, to say something about how you are experiencing life? The connection between that wider history and that familial resonance is something I constantly draw upon in my work.

**SY** Even as you explore these profoundly rooted traditions, there is something starkly contemporary about your approach, especially in how you engage with technologies. To me, this points to a need for conviviality in our present moment of technological hyper-evolution. Do you see these technological accelerations as something you work with, or do you find yourself working against it? How does it play into your work?

**SO** In our highly weaponised, highly surveilled technological environment, the question for me becomes how we can return technology to the people? The wonderful thing about seeing speakers being used as a shoe rack is that it is a reminder of the speaker as a shrine. Especially as a person who cannot go back too far—I can go back to the Caribbean but I cannot go back further than that—I am always interested in what surfaces in my practice and seeing images, drawings, and objects that I feel a deep connection to but I cannot trace.

Adornment is especially interesting in terms of taking something and situating it through affect as a part of the cultural history. Adornment





is one of the ways we can find tangible clues to Caribbean pre-history and African Cultures that are not easily reconciled due to historical destruction carried out during Transatlantic slavery and colonialism. Adornment practices are knowledge that couldn't be severed as we carried them with us and therefore you can see visual history that can be traced back. When people arrived on the shores of the Caribbean they carried visual cultures with them still, not in the object but within their minds, and were able to continue to adorn their bodies and homes in small ways. Though they were banned and restricted, these visual cultures were defiantly reclaimed. When more freedoms were claimed you see the forms of adornment become more elaborate and incorporated again.

**SY** Does it feel like you are accessing latent memory through this process?

**SO** Yes, latent memory, or perhaps body memory. As a maker, you find difficulty and ease with different parts of your hand. For example, when I garden, I feel so deeply rooted and connected, like I know it and it knows me. I have felt similarly when creating art. I have noticed that a particular kind of beading comes naturally to me.

But back to the idea of technology and who it is in service to: I love the science of sound engineering because it is all about attunement to others. They aim to make the song, the singer and the voice sound good, while creating a sense of audition on the body that envelops. Julian Enrique, in *Sonic Bodies Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* (Bloomsbury, 2011), speaks strikingly about the sensory audition on the skin.

For me, the speaker is a lovely conduit for breath and air. It takes breath, turns it into an





***Conspiracy: After Jeanne Lee***, Speaker bodies, speaker stands, sound and spotlight, Jerwood Arts, London, 2021-2022. Photographer: Eva Herzog.



electronic signal, and the woofer turns it back into air, altering the air around you. That is sound. When I make these pieces about breath, rattling, or shaking, they become meditative and healing tools. They remind us to tune in to ourselves, rather than being overwhelmed by technologies that surveil or steal our attention.

This is the case with *Conspiracy: After Jeanne Lee*, a piece featuring two speakers that start with a breath—the deepest breath you have taken that day. Then it goes into a *hmmm*, grounding you as you feel it in your naval, this kind of body awareness, followed by an *ahh*, an exhalation, a moment of release. Every six minutes, the speakers repeat this cycle like a metronome. They invite you to join in because it is such an easy sound to make. It draws your awareness to those three sounds, to people making them and coming into harmony for a minute. Technology can do that. It does not have to be something that pushes us out.

SY

SO

Are you particular with the speakers you use?

Some of my latest works explore the intricacy and shapes of wires. While people see these sleek installations where I hide the wires well, everything begins as a tangled web of lines. I often create my own wires. I love the poetry of it and the process of untangling them. At the same time, I see wires as a tool for drawing, shaping space through line and form. For example, in *In Counter Harmony*, presented at the Brent Biennial in 2022, I ran hundreds of metres of cables to create a multi-channel sound installation inside the vast, historic Tin Tabernacle, a former church made out of metal. I also used active speakers, which needed to be powered in order to play the role I give them.

The sounds I make often are neither voice





*In Counter Harmony*, Installation view, Brent Biennale "In the House of my Love", 2022. Photographer: Thierry Bal.

nor music, but they are about music, or something akin to music, such as the tech, the tone, the texture, or the movement of sound, which is a form of music in relation to the rattle or the shake or bass. Some of my work attempts to make sound move other objects, such as jingles from a tambourine or seeds on the drums, the air that pumps in the steel drums in my performance titled *Rootwork* for the Assembly 2024 programme at Somerset House. In the studio, I adjust what it takes to make things move and sound. For a wonderful group show we did in May last year for the Blue House, which took place in June 2023 at Sutton House and Breaker's Yard in Hackney, I embedded speakers beneath the false floorboards of the old house and behind the plants in its garden courtyard. The speakers were behind rosemary and mint and had to blow and shake these plants. I wanted them to release their aromas in the courtyard. Upstairs in the great hall, speakers were embedded in the floors. I needed to get the right sound so that people lying on the floorboards would feel this work, and feel the intended emotions. A lot of it is about a relationship to my own body and a relationship to these speakers, to try and get to feel the right sounds.

**SY** You spoke previously about how you would gather to listen to the pirate radio your brother DJ'd, which resonates with the collective listening involved in your work. Could you elaborate on the thread between your past experiences and the importance of collective listening in your practice today?

**SO** It is of prime importance to my practice because the speakers and the works are not just for the individual. I always talk about how sound can mobilise a gathering space. My initial foray into sound came from the DJ lectures I used to attend, and as I mentioned before, DJs are important





*In Counter Harmony*, Installation view, Brent Biennale “In the House of my Love”, 2022. Photographer: Thierry Bal.



figures who can mix multiple ideas. They send out an amplification and transform the atmosphere for the dance floor, which I find amazing. This was my first understanding of sound as an active force, capable of bringing people together.

When I started to make sound work, it was about being together and bringing sound into art spaces. It was about exploring all the ways sound interacts with art spaces—whether in films, during jam sessions, through computers, MIDIIs, and synths, or via vocal performance and poetry readings. I became interested in sound's therapeutic scope, also in the haptic sensation of the sound and the speaker on the body. This led me to Pauline Oliveros and her deep listening methods and sound as scores. I am also a big fan of the Fluxus school methodologies using sound as a gathering site. Benjamin Patterson's *Paper Music* is one of my favourite pieces. I was invested in bringing people together in this way. I do not often move from a place of 'me'; instead, I move from a place of 'we'. I would not be here if it were not for all the people who have been with me along the journey.

Much of my practice is rooted in poetry and Black women's literature. I made a work at the ICA titled *at/Tribute*, a tribute to *Zong!* by poet M. NourbeSe Philip. One idea from her writing stayed with me since art school—she often tells the story of when a student asked her to read a text, and she responded that she would read it if they read it with her. This opened so many doors for me in understanding how multiple voices coexist in our experience of the world. It takes so much of our mind and space to focus on one voice. While making the multi-channel installation *at/Tribute*, I felt that M. NourbeSe Philip's work gave me permission to explore the



***at/Tribute***, Multi-vocal reading of *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip,  
ICA, London, 2024.

idea of voices sounding together. Collective reading was my first foray into that, as I gathered with others to read her text aloud together.

Black avant-garde poets and improvisatory music also greatly influenced me, particularly the work of cornetist Butch Morris. He developed a method called ‘conduction’—a form of body-led improvisation where large ensembles create music collectively. His approach challenges us to understand the freedom of improvisation, while remaining attuned to the music we make with others and the ways we can bring people together.

In my work, I focus on making space for multiplicity and difference within an ensemble: knowing when to speak, when to listen, and when to harmonise. This is how I approach my ten-speaker installation *at/Tribute*—thinking with Pauline Oliveros’ tuning meditation, M. NourbeSe Philip and Butch Morris. They guide me in composing, conducting, and scoring multiplicity.

**SY** You reference many highly esteemed Black women theorists and writers throughout your work. How do they inform or nourish your work, intellectually, practically, and spiritually?

**SO** This is so important to me. In a world where so many Black women thinkers, makers, and creators exist, how many can people actually name? There is a silencing at play. Their experiences have allowed me to feel my own place in the world.

At art school, Black women were absent from the curriculum. As a Black woman artist, how could I envision my place in this world if I had never seen work by others like me? I spent a whole year reading only works by Black women, building my own library and curriculum. My first piece, *Who Can't Hear Must Feel*, was a tribute to both my mother and Lucille Clifton’s poem, “won’t you celebrate with me”, in which she writes:





***Who Can't Hear Must Feel***, 10 speakers, 10 speaker stands, 50 voices, Oretha orange paint and bench, Slade School of Fine art, London, UK, 2018.

[...]  
a kind of life? i had no model.  
born in babylon  
both nonwhite and woman  
what did i see to be except myself?  
i made it up  
[...]

—Lucille Clifton, “won't you celebrate with me” from *Book of Light*  
(BOA Editions, Ltd., 1993).

Things are changing now, but a decade ago, that absence was my reality. Thank God for the changes.

Reading these works deeply nourished my practice. Though often unseen, the technological processes in my art are inspired by the atmospheres that I encounter in books. For example, in *Sula* (1973) by Toni Morrison, a woman grieving describes this moment through sound: ‘It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow’. That passage gave me permission to think about sound as shape, much like Philip had earlier. This idea of sound as movement, something that shifts, changes, and touches, is central to my work.

Many of my pieces are in tribute or response to the ideas in the literature of Lucille Clifton, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor. They have shown me that I can make artwork that is intuitive, emotional, spiritual, and convivial. The art school, the art market and the art world cannot give you that—but having a lineage of makers and creators to follow can.

When it comes to artists I admire, I am drawn to those who have found ways to speak to the world through their mark-making. Someone like Ellen Gallagher, particularly her

printmaking. I find her use of handwriting paper so interesting, it reminds me of school writing paper. She creates marks that sometimes resemble mouths, eyes, and hair. There is something there about the tension between the regimented or stereotypical and the personal—the artist asserting her presence within those structures. I often look at artists like María Magdalena Campos-Pons, a brilliant Cuban artist who has found a way to speak to the world through her unique visual language. While I, too, want to engage with the world, I do not feel the need to stretch myself universally. My work does not have to speak directly to everyone, but my perspective—my position in the world—is still worth expressing.

**SY** Sound can often be imposing, it can control the environment, yet we often do not get a choice in the sounds we hear. It can be weaponised as much as it can be used as a tool for conviviality. Your work seems to counter this loss of agency and hierarchy of sound, particularly through *call-and-response*—a tradition rooted in African diasporic music and storytelling, where one sound invites a reply. Could you speak to this aspect of your practice?

**SO** I am always thinking about who listens and whose voices are truly heard. I draw on *call-and-response*, ceremonial spaces, and spatial arrangements, like the circle gatherings in Walter Rodney's *The Groundings With My Brothers* (1969). Rodney, a political and political activist, created educational spaces where people could engage in open political dialogue as equals, sitting in a circle to encourage participation. My work, *Who Can't Hear Must Feel*, asks: 'What do you want to be heard? Send it to me, and I will choreograph its listening'. It was a space of multiplicity, centred on democracy. Living in the Western world often means being in a democracy



and not feeling it, so this work aimed to address that disconnect. These *call-and-response* traditions highlight the power of the collective voice. In Haiti, the *Krik-Krak* storytelling tradition emphasises active listening. The storyteller calls out ‘Krik?’ and the audience responds ‘Krak!’—signalling their presence and readiness to listen. This exchange not only initiates the story but also establishes a shared responsibility: the listeners must be attentive and engaged, making storytelling a communal experience.

None of the art I make forces anyone to stay if they do not want to be there, but I focus on creating spaces that encourage participation. I have witnessed audiences that energise performers by giving back through clapping, which is not just an ending gesture, movement of air in space, but a form of recognition and gratitude for all the giving. It says, let me give something back. That is a clap: my appreciation that we are in it together, even when somebody else is performing. On the other hand, I have seen an audience unwilling to give, almost like a wall. They are just consumers rather than equal beneficiaries.

I usually start performances or spaces by saying that what we make together is unique. We are equally responsible for what is made here at this moment. All the people and different things that we feel are going to be a part of what we make together right now. It is a reminder of the continuous mutual responsibility we have for all the spaces that we inhabit. I always think about how these performances relate to wider worlds: are we going to sit on our hands or are we going to feel mutually responsible for everything that we make together of this world?



***From Moving Speakers*** (detail), Sound sculpture, print on curtain, Delfina Foundation, London, UK, 2024. Photographer: Anne Tetzlaff.

SY

How do you use—or avoid— language in your work, and how does it play into your understanding of sound?

SO

Language is at the base of a lot of what I do. Many poets and thinkers explore where the words go, what they do, and how they fail— especially with a language embedded with violence. M. NourbeSe Philip, in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, captures this tension:

English is my mother tongue  
A mother tongue is not a foreign  
lan lan lang language  
languish anguish  
a foreign anguish  
[...]

—Excerpt from *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, M. NourbeSe Philip (Wesleyan University Press, 2015).

At the same time, I am amazed by the ways in which language can serve our needs. I am interested in the texture of sound. Some of my favourite performances come from artists like Elaine Mitchener, a wonderful vocalist who stretches, changes, strains, and makes words do more than what you might expect of them through speech. I often use the expression “sounding out” instead of “read” because this is how you get taught to read in the phonetics, to speak to the building blocks of language.

When we collectively read *Zong* by M. NourbeSe Philip, we brought the language back into the ocean from which it comes. *Zong* is a book-length poem built from an insurance claim. When read by multiple voices, the fragmented words evoke the sea where enslaved lives were lost—the language comes back into its original



form. I love onomatopoeia because it connects directly to the essence of things.

In 2024, artist Flora Parrot invited me along with cavers, artists, practitioners, and food medicine experts to visit a waterfall to do something together. My piece, *How to carry a waterfall* with you takes the form of a score, asked the guests to translate the waterfall into phonetic sounds, instead of describing it in familiar terms such as ‘sublime’ or ‘grand’. How could people achieve the sonic experience without it being just recorded? I gave each person a scroll for them to write what they heard. Children are especially good at it, because they still remember the phonetics of the alphabet clearly. A waterfall might sound like ‘guh-guh-guh-guh-guh’, and that play between this rattle-like sound and the bass that moves away from language fascinates me.

Right now, I am trying to make my own vocabulary. I often research the etymology of a word I am working with. ‘Conspiracy’, for example, comes from *con* (together) and *spira* (spirit or breath), meaning ‘to breathe together’.

**SY** That is so lovely, although it has such a negative connotation now.

**SO** Well, people use their breath in twisted ways. Language emerges when there is a need to say something about what is around, and I am making my own vocabulary with what I have—whether speaker shapes, words, breath—to say something about the world around me. Phonetics allows me to explore the beauty of the world but also the pain and the hurt: an ‘h’ could be a scream, while a ‘ha’ could be laughter.

**SY** What are you working on now, and what is next?

**SO** I am currently in residency at Delfina Foundation, where I am exploring movement in relation to sound, specifically, putting speakers in motion.



***Rootwork***, Performance as part of *ASSEMBLY 2024*, Somerset House,  
London, UK, 2024. Photographer: Anne Tetzlaff.

I am singing, vocalising, and sounding out while moving and recording to see what happens when the speakers are in motion. Through these exercises, I am trying to think through the Doppler effect, exploring how sound shifts as it moves, this kind of flip flop, this back-and-forth, this oscillation between progression and retreat. I see sound as a compelling way to express how I experience the world, as a seesaw of emotion, a cycle of advance and recession.

Building on some of my previous work with natural materials, I will also be incorporating elements from my garden, dehydrated materials and grains, to create rattles and installations where sound can expand into space. I might use the seeds I worked with before, but on a larger scale, provided I can source them ethically. Also, I am developing my work with steel, drawing inspiration from the craftsmanship of the steel pan makers and the hammering techniques that they have used to create multi-tonal instruments. I want to apply that process to new sculptural works.

**SY** Do you have plans to show these works yet?

**SO** Right now, the focus is on making the work first—then finding the right spaces for it. I want to move away from traditional gallery settings and explore alternative sites, perhaps even securing land where people can travel to experience the work. I am thinking about playgrounds and other unconventional locations. After five intense years of non-stop exhibiting, I am more interested in a period of deep making—then inviting people into those works. Instead of creating pieces to fit specific spaces, I want to make the work first and then find spaces that truly suit them. While I have enjoyed site-specific projects in the past, this time, I have a clear vision for what I want to create.





***From Moving Speakers*** (detail), Sound sculpture, print on curtain, Delfina Foundation, London, UK, 2024. Photographer: Anne Tetzlaff.



Shenece Oretha, Figure Figure 2025  
Courtesy of the artist

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