

Pandemic Listening: Critical Annotations on a Podcast Made in Social Isolation

Due to the changes in nearly all modes of communication during the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, we no longer sound the same to each other, and we listen to the world differently than we did before. Our sonic environments and our “listening ears” have changed, and continue to change.¹ This article presents a series of reflections upon the implications of this dominant audiovisual environment for how we have been listening to each other and to the world around us, during this pandemic period of 2020-2021. The reflections were first articulated *within* a media production: the podcast episode, “How are we listening, now? Signal, Noise, Silence,” as part of *The SpokenWeb Podcast* (Camlot and McLeod).² This episode was produced in March and April 2020 during the first months of pandemic restrictions, as an early intervention that aimed to understand the significance of telecommunications during a global pandemic. Our reflections continue now, a year later, in the form of a written article that performs critical annotations on an audiovisual media production that precedes it and of which it is a critical extension. The format invites readers to read while listening to segments of the podcast to which it refers (indicated throughout with timestamps). Our reflections are positioned with degrees of temporal distance from each other (from podcast to article), and from situated moments that represent historically specific effects of the pandemic upon our sensory experience. While social requirements of the pandemic have altered our perception of time, the pandemic period itself now seems

divisible into sub-periods (early pandemic, first wave, second wave, etc.) determined by shared and individual experience. So our very sense of when “now” has taken place is an effect of pandemic experience. Our reflections in this article are also positioned within the broad disciplinary frame of literary studies, and within the networked shape of pedagogical and literary communities in settler Canada. Our reflections in this article are by necessity speculative, but move towards the thesis that pandemic listening represents an opportunity to identify and transform systemic, habitual listening practices.

The podcast episode explores how our contexts and practices of listening to voice, signals, noise, and silence change during the first weeks of the public health emergency of COVID-19. In the episode, Jason asks graduate students in his literature and sound studies seminar at Concordia (via Zoom teleconferencing) how their listening practices have changed and, meanwhile, Katherine notices that readings are moving online as she updates the listings for *Where Poets Read*, a web resource for poetry events (McLeod). We also notice that our shared experience of social isolation seems to have us craving the comforting sounds of noise around the signal. Three months after making this episode, we organized a virtual event with participants from the podcast—“How are we listening, now? A conversation with SpokenWeb”—through Concordia’s 4th SPACE (a public research showcase environment) in order to revisit the question of how we are listening, whether as individuals, as teachers/learners, and/or within literary communities. Much like that online event but in written form, this article revisits questions posed in the podcast episode concerning 1) the implications of our increasingly pervasive Zoom-based methods of communication and 2) the connection between how we are listening and how we are feeling, individually and collectively. In revisiting these discussions as they are transcribed and at a temporal distance from the events themselves (while still being in the pandemic), this article theoretically unpacks the discoveries about signal and noise made performatively within the podcast, expands upon the continued relevance of these discoveries to a characterization of pandemic sound and silence, and theorizes a concept of pandemic listening within literary contexts defined by talking, teaching, and performing.

Pandemic Listening: Technique, Mode, Condition

Many theorists have approached the question of listening through historical discussions of culturally and professionally informed ways of listening (what Jonathan Sterne has called “audile techniques”), and through the identification of discrete, formal *modes* of listening. Beyond the matter of which audile techniques predominate under the conditions of a pandemic, we ask, Is pandemic listening a “mode” in the vein of Pierre Schaeffer’s “Four Listening Modes,” or Michel Chion’s “Three Listening Modes”?³ Does the critical project that pursues a modal anatomization of listening capture and explain how we have been listening during this pandemic period? Such critical acts of identifying and naming distinct modes of listening are useful for understanding what may be happening within a situated listening scenario (as in the case of pandemic listening), and are especially useful for defining what we are listening for, and why, and even for proposing listening methods to be deployed for descriptive or critical purposes within specific disciplinary or media contexts. Chion’s categories of causal, semantic, and reduced listening, and the idea of the acousmatic in some of its more recent applications (as in Nina Sun Eidsheim’s book *The Race of Sound*), are especially useful for describing current listening methods and experiences, and the preconceptions we bring to our encounters with sound and the voices of others. Still, as Tom Rice has observed, “thinking in terms of distinct listening modes may not accurately reflect—and indeed may at times distort—the perception of listening as it occurs within the holistic context of lived experience” (108). We do not wish to propose pandemic listening as a thickly contoured listening mode or style. We are not yet prepared to think about the potential future value of listening “as if” in a pandemic, as a strategic listening mode, although we are not denying the possibility of defining how we have been listening in modal terms. The formalism of the critical gesture seems less relevant than other concerns.

The assertion of something called “pandemic listening” may be neither a technique nor a mode, but rather a condition that can be understood and characterized as a loose historical container for these two other, very useful ways of describing and understanding what listening may be as an action, and as an experience, at a given historical moment. Pandemic listening can involve listening to sounds of the pandemic and to sonic effects produced by

the pandemic. But pandemic listening is more than this act of listening *to*; rather, pandemic listening is a phenomenological and psychological state of being that is conditioned by the pandemic itself. The idea of a condition may evoke, for some, Jean-François Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (1979), whose object was a critical report on "the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies" (xxiii).⁴ We acknowledge the evocation, but with a far more contingent and plural meaning than is sometimes associated with Lyotard's use of the term. The conditions informing our lives in this global pandemic are extremely diverse depending on geography, and on social, cultural, and political contexts. There is no single pandemic condition, and so, equally, there is no single condition of pandemic listening. We are not describing *La condition d'écoute pandémique*. But our article is a report, of sorts, on the conditions under which we have been listening within pedagogical and literary communities in settler Canada during what we recognize as a conditional period of exceptional social and cultural disruption and arrest. In making this podcast, *we* listen as individual listeners: Jason hears the pandemic through his students' voices and in the sound of the "pivot" to the online classroom; Katherine is encountering the pandemic as a scholar without permanent employment but not without academic community, all of which inform how this collaboration came about. The idea for the podcast began at a SpokenWeb Concordia team meeting held on Zoom after the work-from-home directives were first issued. Our individual voices are audible as distinct in the podcast recording, even as we narrate from the perspective of a shared voice, a "we" that persists even more strongly in the present article due to the levelling of tone and timbre by print. Reflecting back upon our original choice to narrate the podcast with the *we*, we cannot help but notice that, for all this diversity and particularity of experience, at the root of the word pandemic is the idea of something "belonging to the whole people" ("Pandemic"). Anyone can catch it. Everyone is vulnerable. It belongs to all of us, albeit with different local effects and under different local conditions.

Within the specific conditions of our report, pandemic listening is most certainly informed by the telecommunications media technologies that have become a generalized platform informing our protocols of listening, and by the changes in our sonic environments that may require us to rely more

explicitly on one discernible mode of listening (causal listening, for example) than others, due to the audibility of sounds (say, in urban environments) usually not heard due to greatly reduced circulation and activity of people and machines. It is informed by our need to teach and discuss literary works with students from our homes via cameras, computer screens, microphones, speakers, and headphones, and to “gather” to hear writers read from their work on virtual platforms rather than on material stages. It is informed, in great part, by how we are *feeling* now, as a result of the major social changes we are experiencing, including the pervasive sense of geographical restriction and social isolation, financial precarity, caution and fear of contagion, and a challenged sense of purpose in work, life, and self. So, pandemic listening is informed by a set of geographical, social, cultural, and technological conditions that result in a conditional set of phenomenological experiences of listening that, in turn, enable new kinds of reflections upon *how* we listen.

Pandemic listening is characterized by a phenomenological condition that estranges us from our habituated sensory practices and circuits, and from our assumptions about the sounds of others and the world by which we oriented ourselves, made distinctions and judgments, and generated knowledge, before the new, disruptive conditions arose. The ground of sound has shifted, and so, then, has our experience of listening. The pandemic has altered the global conditions under which we may make phenomenological observations and assertions. Phenomenologist of sound Don Ihde has suggested that “the auditory field”—the constancy against which we come to discern and attribute significance to sound events and provide phenomenological accounts of what we hear—is silence (205). Never a static field, the mercurial nature of silence has become increasingly evident to us in these conditions. Any phenomenology of pandemic listening must recognize that the basic context within which sounds are perceived has changed drastically, and that our descriptions and assertions are, at once, contingent—subject to a unique and historically specific set of conditions—and yet also global in their potential reach and implication. The title of our podcast, “How are we listening, now?” signals the superimposition of historical contingency (the idea that the “now” will change as relief comes in the future) with shared immediacy (the “we” that is listening within this temporally framed set of global conditions).

Pandemic listening, happening in this historically situated *now*, is characterized by a strange combination of the most basic use of our senses for the purpose of survival, and a disorienting meta-critical disruption within the scenario of panic that allows us to see the shape and seams of our own listening assumptions. Panic, not etymologically linked to pandemic (despite the shared prefix), evokes the sudden sense of fear or alarm triggered by strange, acousmatic sounds. Roland Barthes dramatizes a scene in which such alarming sounds are heard in lonely natural spaces (mountains, woods, and caves), and in retrospect are attributed to the god Pan. *Panic* is a sudden wild and unreasoning sense of terror evoked by the sounds of a half-wild, half-human entity. “*Panic* listening”—a Dionysian mode of listening that Barthes refers to following the introduction of his own triad of listening types (listening as “an alert,” listening as “a deciphering,” and modern/psychoanalytic listening)—figures listening as a form of “playing over unknown spaces” and ultimately, listening as “*release*” (258). But the question is, Release from what? Panic (as once defined by Arthur Kroker in a tone of dystopian glee) is the feeling that “everything now lies in the panicky balance between catastrophe or creation as possible human destinies” (125). Perhaps that is one of the defining oscillations of pandemic listening: the feeling that we are released from our stability of habits, from the comfort of thinking we know how, what, and why we hear, into the fragile, uncomfortable, exhausting, yet potentially creative and critically generative condition of “*listening to how we listen*” (Eidsheim 57-58, emphasis original).

The Pandemic Podcast: Signal, Noise, Silence

00:02:39	Oana Avasilichioaei:	Can you hear me?
00:02:40	Klara du Plessis:	Yes.
00:02:41	Oana Avasilichioaei:	Alright!

At the opening of “How are we listening, now? Signal, Noise, Silence,” an audio collage previews many of the voices heard at greater length in the episode, and sonically performs the episode’s key themes. This sonic introduction dramatizes movement from signal to silence, as the imperative to be heard (and the disposition to hear) is recurrently disrupted by signal distortion, and increasingly so as the audio collage proceeds. The collage

opens with poet Oana Avasilichioaei asking if she can be heard—a question commonly asked by a poet speaking into a microphone before a live audience, but in this case, this interrogative tuning of the communications circuit is performed in response to the perceived tenuousness of the telecommunications connection. When fellow poet (and PhD student) Klara du Plessis confirms that Oana can be heard, her response is a near-joyous affirmative declaration, “Alright!” The joy of connection is audible in this most basic, by now familiar opening exchange, an exchange that articulates the gratification of the temporary grounding of a speaking subject and a listening subject, the setting of the table for all manner of future conversation. As it weaves between signal and noise, the collage also mixes the sound of official, public discourse (the voice of the Prime Minister telling the Canadian public, via national airwaves, to stay home), with discursive sounds of interiority, privacy, and domestic intimacy (poet Alexei Perry Cox reading a poem about an absent lover as her infant can be heard “speaking” an intonational recitative in response). It mixes the sound of a listener (poet and student Isabella Wang) pronouncing her love for a poem that she has just heard (virtually) and the sound of the co-host’s voice becoming delayed and chopped into fragmented packets of digital audio, thus contrasting the powerful possibilities of reception across a distance with equally plausible failures to send and receive. The opening audio collage establishes the sonic range of the issues pursued in the podcast and dramatizes the relative ground of silence in relation to noises and audible signals as all in tenuous flux.

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| 00:04:14 | Jason Camlot: | Thursday, March the 12th: that was the last time that I had an in-person conversation in close proximity with someone other than my wife or two teenage children or one of our two little dogs. . . . |
| 00:06:10 | Katherine McLeod: | My own thinking about questions of how we are listening now came from noticing that some of the poetry reading events that had been scheduled for the spring were starting to move online in different ways. . . . |
| 00:07:56 | Jason Camlot: | Right, so we’re both thinking about how we’re listening now under the present circumstances of social distancing and self-isolation, and thinking about our new experiences and practices of listening, especially within a range of literary |



contexts, including reading literature silently at home, teaching and discussing literature in the classroom, and performing literature on a stage at a poetry reading. . . .

The episode is framed by a disciplinary question about how our listening practices have changed “within a range of literary contexts.” That framing question informed the examples and cases around which we developed our discussion of listening at the time. While our thinking about pandemic listening travelled a continuum between quotidian and performative contexts, the literary event (poetry reading) and the literary conversation (literature seminar discussion) were the two main case studies around which our explorations of listening were organized. What are the implications of having used this disciplinary lens, the literary, as the occasion for exploring pandemic listening? That literary studies is often silent on listening is one of the primary issues we have had to encounter and think about in pandemic listening. As a discipline, literary studies can no longer ignore sound, what we hear, how we listen. By forcing us to adapt to doing these activities with new technologies, the pandemic has exposed the structures through which events of teaching and reading literature have been taking place. The poetry reading represents a public event, often (but not always) of an individual before an audience. That individual is often (but not always) presenting formally constructed texts that to some extent communicate their perspective, and perhaps even a representational, vocalized version of their interiority. The poetry reading may be fairly characterized as an “existential practice” (Fredman 182), in which the poet performs affective and reflective utterances that would otherwise be unavailable within a public context. As an event it has cultural protocols in place for the reception of such utterances that would, in most other public contexts, be deemed odd, inappropriate, or even mad. The poetry reading is thus a cultural mode that lends itself to critical reflection upon the relationship between private and public encounter when its more common (yet still quite flexible) material platforms (the stage, the mic, the room of seated listeners) is replaced by digital teleconferencing platforms that reconfigure our relationship to each other’s spaces, and consequently to our experience of privacy and publicity. The same can be said of teaching within the space of an established institution of higher



education, a university seminar room, with its moodless fluorescent tube lighting, its rectangular seminar table with classroom chairs around it (so unlike a dining-room table, despite the similarity in shape and size), its white- or blackboards with marks and traces of the graphs, quotations, and keywords from other classes that have already met in this same space. This is a public, institutionalized space in which discussion of texts about the meaning of life, feeling, and human relations (humanities education) takes place. Again, the seminar room is an institutionalized platform that authorizes and renders public and professional all kinds of discussions about our experience and understanding of literary expression, form, and character.

What happens to literary conversation when it takes place on a new platform—say, a Zoom platform—from each of our home living spaces? The sanction of the public context for the discussion of literature changes, perhaps requiring more control or constraint over discourse of the literary discussion itself, since it no longer has actual institutional space to guarantee its professionalism. Or, maybe it doesn't change all that much (in cases of synchronous teaching) because the conceit of the university seminar room is still present through some kind of tacit consensus, an agreement that *we are in class*, even when, in real time, we are at once in our homes and in a virtual teleconferencing session. The shared understanding that *we are at an event* also happens during literary events such as readings or book launches, raising the question of how this differs from the pre-pandemic understanding of belonging to a literary community and enacting that community in a planned, eventful gathering. But even without seeing each other, the engine of literary production has continued and so has its communities—in real and imagined ways. What the pandemic has shown is that there are structures holding up these communities, literary or otherwise, that go beyond physically gathering in one place. These otherwise largely invisible structures may be more discernible in pandemic conditions.

Beyond the fact that our literary examples in this podcast have, arguably, provided us with sites and cases for analysis that are already actively dramatizing the relationship between private and public identities and modes of communication, this movement between public and private, professional and personal, is further dramatized in our episode by the fact that 1) we move between scripted, high-fi discussions (albeit home-recorded,

in solitude), and lower-quality Zoom-recorded conversations, and 2) we have presented our ideas in the form of a podcast, a form of (in this case, scholarly) communication that is generically identifiable for its blurring of official and personal perspectives. Podcasting can be a kind of proxy for person-to-person connection precisely because of its ability to combine the public and the private, and due to the media technologies through which it is consumed. As Dario Llinares, Neil Fox, and Richard Berry observe,

[p]odcasting culture thus manages to be both personal and communal, a sensibility that is related to the active choice the listener has to exercise, and the modes of consumption—through headphones, car sound systems, home computers, mobile phones etc.—which imbue a deeply sonorous intimacy. To be a private, silent participant in other people’s interests, conversations, lives and experiences, relating to a subject you are passionate about, generates a deep sense of connection. (2)

In the following scene from our podcast, listeners are transported into the private spaces in which this unscripted Zoom conversation took place and they hear the stress and exhaustion in our voices that we would try to mask in more public forms of discourse:

00:08:40	[Sound Effect: Zoom Teleconferencing Chimes]		
00:08:41	[Zoom audio]	Jason Camlot:	Hello?
00:08:42	[Zoom audio]	Katherine McLeod:	Hello, can you hear me?
00:08:44	[Zoom audio]	Jason Camlot:	Yeah, hi Katherine.
00:08:46	[Zoom audio]	Katherine McLeod:	Hi.
00:08:47	[Zoom audio]	Jason Camlot:	Wait, let me turn my video on. Where are you, in your kitchen?
00:08:54	[Zoom audio]	Katherine McLeod:	No, actually I’m in my office-room.
00:09:02	[Zoom audio]	Jason Camlot:	How’re you doing?
00:09:04	[Zoom audio]	Katherine McLeod:	I’m good, given the situation. But yeah, today felt definitely more like a challenge to get started. Yeah, just. . . . It took more energy to get going. . . .
00:10:10	[Music: Instrumental Piano]		[. . .]
00:11:01		Katherine McLeod:	We did have a real conversation, though, after this affective, close- listening warm-up. I asked you how your class went.
00:11:10		Jason Camlot:	We had to go back to teach online this week, so I held my seminar again. . . .

During the recording of the podcast episode in March 2020, we spoke with students, colleagues, friends, writers, and literary event organizers. Their most immediate concerns about how we were listening were related to the changing methods of communication amid social isolation and its impact on our connection to each other and to our communities. When recording the podcast, sounds heard on the news, and our continuous talk about the noticeable changes in our sonic environments, loomed large in our auditory imaginations of what a pandemic sounds like. Sounds of the body in medicalized environments, and of the body breathing, in particular, were part of this audible imaginary—with all that talk of chronic coughing, ventilators, and dyspnea. For the podcast, these sounds remained somewhat removed because we, apart and at home, were hearing only transmissions of pandemic sound from a medical perspective, a perspective from which one was (ideally) distanced. What was present in our lives was the feeling of being disconnected—disconnected pedagogically, disconnected socially, and disconnected from performing art live before others. Our focus on these literary contexts informed the determination of our keywords for the podcast because all three terms—signal, noise, silence—inform the way we process and discern the meanings of sounds through relational auditory practices.

How Are You Listening? Affect, Event, Environment

00:12:14 [Begin Music: Slightly Distorted Techno Instrumental] [. . .]

00:13:34 Jason Camlot: As human listeners, we're usually pretty good at hearing the signal at the expense of the noise. . . . So we can speak of noise and silence in our sound environments and their effects on how we feel.

The pandemic has affected our sonic environments and our responses to them. At the start, during the time of making the podcast episode, silence became more noticeable, and noises stood out as a result of this newly perceived silence. Quiet streets and sounds of nature were observed by Jason's students. Then, they also noticed the domestic sounds that stood out amid the quiet: a family dog barking outside, conversations taking place in the next room, or even noticing and being distracted by a partner's breathing in the same room. All of these impressions characterize the listener as

attending to details within their sonic environments with a sense of awe even when they are mundane sounds: the kinds of sounds that would previously have been blocked out. Affective response to sound changed as time passed and as listeners grew accustomed to the new urban silence. This change was apparent in how participants recalled the early days of the pandemic in the online podcast follow-up event of June 2020. Three months after the lockdown, PhD student Marlene Oeffinger said she found herself “almost craving the social noise,” and poet Oana Avasilichioaei gave this account of the change:

The return of the noise of the kind of city noise has been really comforting actually because it felt very eerie . . . if I'm in a remote place and there are only natural noises that's wonderful but to have that sort of same kind of soundscape in a city is very disturbing actually because there's a deadness to it. So to me the return of the noise was, like I said, somewhat comforting. But I also think I've found myself in these past months becoming more selective to what I choose to listen to. (“How are we listening, now? A conversation with SpokenWeb”)

Oeffinger's and Avasilichioaei's observations about their changing relationships to noise and silence register difficult feelings. Avasilichioaei admits that the return of urban noises had been comforting and uses words like “eerie” and “disturbing” to describe a city without noise, yet she also voices a sense of disquiet in finding comfort in the return of these noises. “Disturbing” is a word that Oeffinger also uses to describe the silence of the backyard, without the social noises of her neighbours. This suggests that the sounds we associate with background noise and usually ignore are now being recognized as a comforting din that we miss. Noise is aesthetic, environmental, and social. The assumptions made about noise reveal the implicit structures of ideology; what is considered “noise” is often considered to be disruptive, but noise is also generative: “Noise *is* culture; noise *is* communication; noise *is* music” (Novak 133, emphasis original). Jason's explanation of the signal-to-noise ratio in the podcast reveals that what comes to the foreground (the signal) is heard as becoming interpretable whereas the background (the noise) is heard as uninterpretable (00:12:14). The changing significance of noise during our current pandemic times suggests that we should look to where this change will register in our society. As Jacques Attali puts it, “change is inscribed in noise faster than it

transforms society” (5), which suggests that listening to the changes in our sonic environment is how to learn the most immediate and accurate news of the pandemic’s impact on society.

Noise becomes signal not by being heard but rather by its perceived absence. Mark Fisher defines eeriness as an effect that occurs when there is an unmet expectation regarding presence: “The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present where there should be something” (61). In the case of pandemic listening, the absent noise of the city is most uncannily affecting. The expression of discomfort with silence expressed by Avasilichioaei and Oeffinger seems to come from the fact that the environment itself has been silenced. That is what makes this sonic time of the pandemic more complex. If “[n]oises are the sounds we have learned to ignore” (4), as R. Murray Schafer suggests (and as we quote him in our podcast [00:13:34]), then pandemic listening has us unlearn this noise-filtering process. Pandemic listening conditions have introduced new kinds of agency over what we would normally remove involuntarily from our auditory field. Such novel conditions of listening agency may suggest new ways to “craft a means of empowerment by way of sonic thought” or even new kinds of “listening activism” (Labelle 9). As Avasilichioaei reflects, “I don’t think I ever thought about my ability to choose what to listen to” (“How are we listening, now? A conversation with SpokenWeb”). That awareness of the agency of the listener is a powerful lesson that emerges from the unsilencing of noise.

- 00:19:42 Jason Camlot: [. . .] John Durham Peters and his description of the uncanniness that surrounded early telephonic communication—talking into telephones—noted the existential anxiety that came from relying on the voice to do it all. That is, to do all the work of communicating one’s thoughts, feelings, and presence to another person. . . . And he suggests that the telephone contributed to the modern derangement of dialogue by splitting conversation into two halves that meet only in the cyberspace of the wires.⁵
- 00:21:38 Audio Recording: [Audio, Katherine McLeod’s voice breaking up during a call, sounding tinny and distorted]
- 00:21:44 Katherine McLeod: Why was that happening to my voice there?

- 00:21:46 Jason Camlot: I was wondering about that myself. . . .
- 00:23:24 Ali Barillaro: My Internet connection is not the best. . . .
- 00:24:06 Jason Camlot: [Audio, from a video call with his class] [. . .] It's frustrating when you feel like you can't have the confidence in the voice continuing. . . . It's kind of existentially traumatic and troubling. It's like that we don't know that we can count on the continuity of the person and the communication that we're engaging in.
- 00:24:49 Jason Camlot: Still, we are relying on Zoom and Zoom-like platforms as best we can for the social encounters that we crave. Here, I'd say we're feeling the absence of a different kind of noise that we're also very good at ignoring and not hearing under normal conditions, but the absence of which we notice in a strong way in these dangerous times. We are noticing the absence of social sounds and that absence becomes a distracting kind of silence.

We hear a version of this kind of silence as we read this podcast now transcribed onto the written page. However, despite keenly noticing the sounds that are not there, we also agree that the podcast has a new effect when transformed into written text. It explains where the pieces of sounds come from (e.g. “[Audio, from a video call with his class]”) and it structures the arguments in time-stamped sequence. Looking at the transcription while listening to the podcast allows for the comparison of two media formats.

Similar kinds of comparative thinking featured prominently in conversations with students in Jason's class. How many times have you caught yourself comparing a Zoom meeting with a “real” meeting, a FaceTime hangout with a “real” hangout? Particularly in the first phase of the pandemic, this rhetoric of comparison was rampant in our daily thought processes as we constantly measured our communication methods against that which we are, or were, most used to. In Jason's class, students compared the affordances of phone calls to those of text messages, often preferring how the phone call provides a sense of interpersonal proximity.

- 00:28:08 Klara du Plessis: I have definitely been phoning a lot more, like every day. . . . So there's definitely this move towards trying to communicate more or to de-distance ourselves, I guess.

- 00:28:25 Jason Camlot: Voice is that medium made up of accent, intonation, and timbre that carries the message but disappears in the process. Usually we don't notice it because we're so focused on the message. In this instance, voice is the noise and the meaning is the signal. It's like what [Mladen] Dolar says about voice and a heavy accent. A heavy accent suddenly makes us aware of the material support of the voice, which we tend, immediately, to discard. Well, now we seem to be craving the accent.⁶ I'm speaking metaphorically here using Dolar's account of voice as an ever-disappearing, yet undeniably present entity to help describe what we feel when we try to be together on Zoom or Skype or something like that, and sort of together, but at the same time really aren't together.
- 00:29:19 Katherine McLeod: The sounds around the signal, the sounds that add the vibrancy to the social, the sense of a real unique person speaking are what we're listening for. . . .
- 00:29:37 Jason Camlot: Because I've been on Twitter a lot more than usual, I read a tweet—this was early April—posted by Gianpiero Petriglieri that suggested we're so exhausted after video calls because we're experiencing "the plausible deniability of each other's absence. Our minds [are] tricked into the idea of actually being together when our bodies feel we're not" actually together.⁷ He's suggesting it's the dissonance of being relentlessly in the presence of each other's absence that makes us so tired.

Petriglieri made that observation on Twitter *before* the world had a term for "Zoom fatigue," a point worth remembering now that there is an ever-growing body of criticism on the pandemic such that, at some point in a post-pandemic future, it will be read as a pandemic archive. Back in March 2020, when we were making the podcast, Petriglieri's description of how we were striving to relate with each other immediately felt like a truly accurate insight into what we were experiencing but could not yet describe (lacking adequate language) in our new pandemic work lives. His expertise as a researcher of the psychodynamics of organizational systems, and the

dynamic relationships between the identity formations of workers, social networks, and workspaces, prepared him well to identify what we desired, but were not getting from our social interactions that had now moved online.⁸ Petriglieri is right that being relentlessly in the presence of each other's absence is a demanding scenario for our senses and imaginations and makes us tired during otherwise enlivening social gatherings. Being away from each other is what our bodies notice most, like the background "noise" that suddenly rings clear as the signal in its absence. In relation to the *now* of writing this article, compared to the *then* of making the podcast, Salomé Voegelin writes about how increasing use of AI to "clean up" audio in a Zoom call depletes it of the Barthesian vocal grain: the noise that would otherwise connect us in a "real" conversation: "Online, this grain might be all we have left to touch each other, to leave a trace, and enter into a reciprocal encounter." In making the podcast, we were talking about the absence of noise in our sonic environments while using a platform that would contribute to the (increasingly) global removal of noise and grain from vocal telecommunications.

The filtering of noise in a virtual reading removes much of the sound of audible sociality that contributes to the atmosphere of an in-person reading: gone is the buzz, the sonic interruptions of spontaneity, and the din of being there together, and so gone is the experience of listening to and through a wide spectrum of sound. What constitutes an event has drastically changed with the onset of the pandemic. Virtual events are still events, but the "real" events in our lives can end up being a conversation on a park bench, or a chance encounter while walking down the street, usually accompanied by exclamations about how nice it is to see each other in person rather than on a screen. The scale of what constitutes an event has changed, and pandemic listening registers that shift. What we are listening to under such conditions is not exclusively the scheduled "event" around which there is consensus as formal entity. Rather, we are listening to how otherwise mundane instances of small social interactions now function as events, discernible as such due to a changing scale in our perception of eventfulness, and their affective impact in our daily lives. A socially distanced one-on-one visit can energize us as though we had just attended the most exhilarating concert. Literary events have shifted online and the experience of them as events has inevitably

changed as a result. One thing we have noticed is that we seem to relish the chance interactions, smiles, and waves we experience across screens as much as the scheduled activities themselves.

- 00:48:10 Isabella Wang: What's really changed is the interactive environment. . . . I think part of the literary experience is that interaction, that engagement with poets like before and after they read. . . .
- 00:58:36 Katherine McLeod: Back in the first week when everything was changing, I remembered feeling relieved that people like Isabella [Wang] and rob [mclennan] were creating online readings, but I also remember feeling that I didn't have the concentration to sit down and listen. And I remember thinking that when I feel more focused, or really when I feel a bit better, then I look forward to listening. When you don't feel like listening, that says something about how you're feeling. When you ask someone how they are listening and, if that's changed, you're really asking them how they're doing.

Listening back to this part of the podcast recalls those uneasy feelings in March 2020 when we found ourselves trying to adjust both to the pandemic and to the idea that the pandemic would most likely mean unprecedented change. There was an urgency to maintain human connection—to host virtual readings, to organize virtual hangouts, and to constantly read the news (the bedtime doomscroll)—and, at the same time, there was a need to step back, take care, and tune out. While making the podcast during the pandemic, we interviewed two reading series organizers who either moved their series online right away (Isabella Wang's Dead Poets Reading Series) or started an online series (rob mclennan's Virtual Reading Series: Periodicities). We were aware too that we ourselves were producing media content of the podcast episode during a time when listeners may or may not have wanted to engage in introspective reflection on our changed reality. After all, pandemic listening is an uneasy and uncomfortable listening in that it is a listening in and to a time of mass (*pan-*) emotional and mental distress, loss of jobs, and loss of life.

By the time we organized a re-listening event around this podcast episode, it was June 2020 and Black Lives Matter protests against police violence and

structural anti-Black racism were taking place across North America, which also brought heightened awareness to the fact that the pandemic was having a greater impact on Black lives, even if governments were resisting the collection of race-based data. That sound of protest—from the protesters’ voices to the sonic deterrents to protest—has remained an important element of pandemic listening. It is a component of pandemic listening that reminds us that so many of the inequalities exposed by the pandemic were there, waiting to be heard, all along. Once again, the pandemic creates a silence that, unintentionally, allows for something to be heard with an eerie kind of clarity. As Dionne Brand has written of the experience of 2020, “[t]ime in the city is usually taken up running around positioning oneself around this narrative of the normal. But the pandemic situates you in waiting. So much waiting, you gain clarity. You listen more attentively, more anxiously.”

Pandemic listening is attentive listening, but it is also anxious listening.

What does the podcast offer for pandemic listeners, waiting, who may in fact want to reject “the normal” of the past but cannot yet feel optimism or even imagine what could be ahead? Podcasts may reflect the conflicted state of anxious attention felt by the pandemic listener: “[P]odcasting provides a mechanism by which producer/consumers use the medium to define and enact their own agency within the highly fractured subjectivity of the internet age” (Llinares 125). The intensity for our listeners of listening to a *pandemic* podcast is doubly felt as the audio conveys unsettling sounds within an already intimate form of media production. Stacey Copeland describes the podcast’s generic affordance of intimacy through Sara Ahmed’s theory of affective economy: “There is an inherent intimacy in voice-driven soundwork that seems to be soaking in affect. The listener puts on her headphones, presses play and becomes immersed in an affective discourse of human experience through listening and connecting” (211-12).⁹ One can write about pandemic listening in a print article, as we are now, but the medium of the podcast, with its presentation of voice and soundscape, allows one to hear it, and to feel it.

Because pandemic listening is a distracted form of listening, distracted by the conditions in which we listen, namely the affective conditions, it seems nearly impossible to answer the question: “How are you feeling?” The question, “How are you listening?” allows for a greater possibility of focus

upon the phenomenological experience that is informing how we feel at the present time. What we are choosing to listen to and how we are choosing to listen are, in their own ways, answers to that question of how we are feeling. Our podcast, pursued by seeking to sound possible answers to this question, represents an equally focused, media-specific way of attempting to understand that feeling.

- 00:59:33 Jason Camlot: Hey, let's try that out. Hey Katherine, how are you listening?
- 00:59:37 Katherine McLeod: I'm listening . . . fine, thanks. How are you listening, Jason?
- 00:59:42 Jason Camlot: I'm listening pretty well. Thanks for asking. But let me ask you this. How are you *really* listening, Katherine?
- 00:59:50 Katherine McLeod: Well, Jason, how am I *really* listening? [Audible deep breath, slow exhale, and pause] [...] We are listening differently now. Here. Hear. Here.

Pandemic listening is experienced as a combination of anxious, attentive listening *and* (supposedly) analgesic, distracted listening. The fact that we are still in the pandemic (at the time of this writing) means that pandemic listening persists under a condition of awaiting its end. It is a listening in which the body is on high alert for potential distortion, even if we may try our best to pretend otherwise. We, the authors, hear sounds of disruption, distortion, and affective excess prominently when we listen back to the podcast episode over one year later. In March 2020, we did not yet understand the implications of what we were doing in documenting and recording a state of fearful, anxious listening. Listening further under these conditions, and listening back to the sound of how we were listening then (during our historically documented *now* of the early pandemic period), we have come to understand pandemic listening as a condition of estrangement from our habitual modes of knowing what we hear. This condition of pandemic listening is uncomfortable, troubling, and we want it to end. But it may also provide new conditions from which to learn about our ways of listening in some very elementary and elemental ways. It is difficult for us to think our way out of the cultural formations that have trained us to hear, and thus to teach our way out of our perceptual biases of listening. Pandemic listening, among its many other affective and social implications, may be

providing us with new space to listen against inherited and ingrained sonic assumptions. As Eidsheim suggests, in an encouraging spirit of hope and belief in the powers of pedagogical agency, even the most seemingly natural sounds—the timbral qualities of voices and instruments and the meanings we attribute to them—“may be interrogated” and “can be deconstructed as reflective of ways of listening that reproduce, or return, the listener’s historical, cultural, social, political, moral, ethical, academic, or any other positionality” (58). Pandemic listening may be a new, tremulous classroom within which we will come to hear, unlearn, and transform our understandings and practices of listening.

NOTES

- 1 All senses of Jennifer Stoever’s phrase “the listening ear” apply to what has changed in 2020 both for listening practices and for the audibility of race, in that Stoever defines “the listening ear” as “a figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line’s norms” (7). With the disruptions of the pandemic, accrued listening assumptions and practices become stretched and strained, and the figures of sound they generate and depend upon to construct social norms and our sense of “the normal” have become newly apparent as figures.
- 2 We encourage readers of this article to listen to the podcast, available here: www.spokenweb.ca/podcast/episodes/how-are-we-listening-now-signal-noise-silence/.
- 3 Schaeffer’s listening modes differentiate between dispositions to listen (*écouter*), to perceive aurally (*ouïr*), to hear (*entendre*), and to understand (*comprendre*). In relation to such modal dispositions, silence, thought to be universal, is broken by a sound event, and the event itself divided into objective and subjective categories, the former determined by whatever material knowledge we can purport to glean about the actual sonic phenomena that interrupt silence, and the latter by our experience of that phenomena (84). The act of listening is further divided by Schaeffer into categories that combine subjective and situational qualities, which he refers to as natural, cultural, ordinary, and specialized modes of listening (86-87), as performed by three categories of listeners: ordinary, acousmatic, and instrumentalist listeners (113). Chion streamlined Schaeffer’s reflections on listening modes into the three useful categories of causal, semantic, and reduced listening, the first characterized by the attribution of a causal source to acousmatic (unseen) sounds, the second by the inclination to discern meaning in sound, and the third more notional attempt to listen to the nature of the sound itself (25-34).
- 4 It also evokes David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989).
- 5 See Peters, pp. 195-99.
- 6 See Dolar, pp. 20-21.

- 7 See @gpetriglieri.
- 8 For one good example (among many) of Petriglieri's approach to understanding workplace dynamics from a psychosocial and spatial perspective, see Petriglieri, Ashford, and Wrzesniewski.
- 9 Alternatively, the pandemic may also contribute to an aversion to such immersive listening experiences, and manifest a new trend in tuning out. Even an expert podcast listener such as Andrew Bottomley confesses—on a podcast (*New Aural Cultures*)—that his podcast listening decreased during those first months of the pandemic.

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