

# Outside In: Chorus and Clearing in the Time of Pandemic and Protest

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## Abstract

A sonic ensemble, this essay describes how the COVID-19 pandemic cleared the way for heightened protest against racial violence. Both the pandemic and Black Lives Matter address the acoustical threshold between the inside and outside, being a call to listen rather than simply to hear. Arguing that the call exceeds the confines of the first-person subject, particularly in its chants for justice, the essay moves through auditory fragments of pandemic and protest. These fragments are connected through the fact of air, breathe, and the recognition of a shared world and its chorus.

**Keywords:** Listening; race; sound; protest; African American literature.

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*As I am writing on the last day of August, a small but resonant march passes by my window, the chants floating down the Sunday main street. Some days I leave my desk and join, marching to the park; today I sit still. The sound of chanting “I can’t breathe” and drumming dissipates, and I return to thinking and writing, after having paused to open the window and listen. As the breeze came in, a stack of papers on my desk fluttered into disarray, upset by the air.*

In one of the last evenings of June, after an unseasonable torrent of hail and rain in New York City, dozens of string players gathered in Washington Square Park for a violin vigil for Elijah McClain, a 23-year old Black man murdered by the police last summer in Aurora, Colorado. He once delighted in soothing animals in shelters with his violin. Nearly a year ago, he had been walking home from a convenience store with his headphones in, listening to music and moving his arms in time to the sound of music we cannot hear. The gift of headphones is the gift of an inner world that silences, for a time, constant signals, invitations, and interpellations. Lost in the music and waving his arms in ways that did not move with the rhythm of the outside world, McClain followed the pulse of an inner soundtrack. He was dancing. Wearing a face mask to protect himself, though it was not yet the time of COVID-19 (he was a vulnerable body with anemia), he struck a passerby as “suspicious.” The stranger deputized himself to call the police, though he conceded in the call that he doubted McClain was a threat.

When the police arrived on what was now suddenly transmuted into a *scene* — a scene of a suggested crime, with a person recast as body, racialized and criminalized — they attacked McClain for “resisting contact” and injected him with a horse tranquilizer, ketamine, sending him into cardiac arrest until his heart gave out. It took several months for the police to release the body-camera footage that captured only audio. It is an aural document of a violent spectacle. He can be heard reasoning with the police, explaining that he was “stopping [his] music to listen” to them. As they struggle, he says, “I can’t breathe. I have my ID right here. [...] I was just going home. I am an introvert. I’m just different. That’s all. I’m so sorry. I have no gun.”

It took almost a year for the public to hold [this kind of sonic vigil](#), which happened in more than one city across the United States and received global attention. I had never heard Elijah’s McClain’s name, but I had heard other names in these last months of Black Lives Matter protests, perhaps the most powerful social movement in the world at this moment. Protestors are met, time and again, with extreme and gratuitous police brutality, also being held, sometimes for days at a time, in unventilated conditions without protective masks and at extreme risk for catching and transmitting COVID-19. The protests were galvanized by (though they certainly did not begin in) the police murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Among his dying words were *I can’t breathe*.

That phrase had already been a watchword amongst Black Lives Matter protestors, chanted in unison in memorial recognition of the last words of Eric Garner, who uttered the phrase eleven times when, in 2014, Daniel Pantaleo, an officer with NYPD, put Garner in a fatal chokehold.<sup>1</sup> Derek Chauvin, an officer with the Minneapolis police, had also asphyxiated George Floyd in a showman like performance of domination. He thrust his knee into the neck of the supine man for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, which has become a memorial temporality when protestors sit in silence in the middle of city streets. This memorial is marked by a struggle for the right of Black and brown people to breathe amidst pandemic and ongoing environmental catastrophe.

1. The Black Lives Matter movement was founded in 2013 by three Black women (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi) on the heels of the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin.

At the same time as the protests are taking place, the pandemic has meant a quieting of the city largely cleared of the noise of the activities that define it. In the early days, when the deaths in New York City were rapidly raising, the outside world made a punctuated intrusion into interior spaces in the areas closest to the hospitals, people often describing the experience of hearing sirens every twenty minutes into the night. Microphones on downtown New York City street corners installed by researchers captured a change in decibel level, from 76 decibels on April 16, 2019, to 69 on April 18, 2020. They were aiming to capture the ebb and flow of noise pollution, yet the timing meant that they unwittingly captured among the sharpest cessations in sound emitting activity in the history of the city. *The New York Times* reported, “The coronavirus quieted city noise. Listen to what’s left.”<sup>2</sup> It was the sound of day becoming the sound of night.

In the news, we still do not see images of those dying from COVID-19, which ransacks the respiratory and vascular systems. One mark of the virus has been the physical separation of loved ones from those who die alone in the isolation of quarantine or the ICU — it is an unrecorded sound. As the awareness of the scope of the pandemic was dawning in the United States, one terrifying image surfaced from around the globe: the satellite image of mass, empty graves in Iran, so vast they were visible from space. This and the image of empty streets are, above all, “images of absence,” as a friend of mine observed at the time.<sup>3</sup> In the face of what has been, for me, an invisibility, the sense of hearing has become more acute and heightened.

In what follows, I present a piece of writing that is, by necessity, aleatory and an ensemble. It is a collage of sounds, images, and acts of listening that zig zag in time. When I began this essay, it was by writing my way through the anxiety of turning inward during the pandemic and sheltering in place, keeping a sensory journal of observations, a series of notes on the changing conditions of listening to my environment and the mediascape while also contemplating their acoustical possibilities in a moment when being outside, traveling, and moving were severely restricted.

The reverberation between moments is such that chronology itself becomes inverted, or its direction reversed, for the meaning-making function goes both backwards and forwards. I want to begin with two audiovisual documents of protest and pandemic that pair in my memory; to my sensibility, it’s as if one resonates in the other, the vibration of one continues to act at a distance or make itself felt within the spatiality of other and long after the event has taken place. On June 13, 2020, the streets of Paris in Place de la République filled with bodies in protests for Black Lives Matter. On March 11, 2020, a video captured the streets of an unknown city in Italy that had been emptied of bodies during the pandemic — a group of young Black men, African immigrants, stepped through the deserted streets with great freedom (“racism free”), gliding with large strides to Janet Jackson’s *The Pleasure Principle*. Why present these recollections in reverse, going from June to March? There is something about the second sound-image (chronologically first, but second in my narrative), that prepares the first sound-image (chronologically second, but first in my narrative). A street emptied in one

2. See Quoc Trung Bul and Emily Badger, “The Coronavirus Quieted City Noise,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/05/22/upshot/coronavirus-quiet-city-noise.html> (Accessed June 30, 2020). The article cites a researcher with SONYC, the NYU project that has been recording and monitoring noise pollution: “To me, it’s the sound of the city aching [...]. It’s not a healthy sound in my mind. Even though I’ve been hoping for quiet in many ways for all these years thinking about noise, being obsessed with noise — somehow this is not quite what I was hoping for.”

3. Thank you to Todd Barnes who used this suggestive phrase in describing the media sphere of the early days of the pandemic. Thank you also to Naomi Waltham-Smith and David Copenhafer. Their generous responses were crucial to revising this essay.

European town has been emptied of the activity that used to define it to make space for another kind of activity and rhythm — a choreography — that is usually prohibited, if not legally, then socially. When I watch this video and hear the sound of joy, even in the midst of so much loss, my senses tell me that only through that emptying out, a clearing, did the mass demonstration, a gathering and rhythmic chanting of the masses, become possible. In the pandemic's clearing away of mundane sounds and encounters, the sidewalks became a perfect site for the amplification of an anthem and with it, the free expansion of black vernacular gestures.

How can pandemic and protest, quieting and sounding out, be heard together? How does the one sound the depths of the other?

In the spirit of Pauline Oliveros' "Some Sound Observations", written in the late 1960s during the Vietnam War and on the heels of Civil Rights uprising, I was keeping a journal of these audio-visions, turning outward, toward the acoustics of my ordinary spaces in an effort to quell and contain. I was noting the changing conditions of sound, light, and air and wishing to document an acoustics that I knew bore some index of something outside of me that I cannot see and only touch obliquely. At stake in these sensory observations has been something like the threshold between inside and outside. That is a common and perhaps constitutive stake in listening. But this stake is often muted when the "who" of my listening subjectivity is put on hold, as it were, in order to concentrate on its object.

At first, I was documenting through writing and field recording neighborhood streets. On April 20, unable to go anywhere or see anyone, I simply walked for a mile just as the sun was setting in a direction I had never walked before. Suddenly I was confronted with the most profound quiet I had ever heard in the city. There was only the sound my foot fall on the pavement, and the closeness of distant sounds that would usually be lost in their reverberation: across the street, a dog's collar and his feet trotting on the pavement, a piano wafting out of an open window, girlfriends giggling on a stoop, evening birds in the magnolia trees, and then two men talking loudly and boisterously, enjoying the echo of their voices on the pavement. Later on, in mid-May, I wrote that I could sense that the hum of the city was returning, but I didn't yet know to what it was returning — the protests had not yet begun, demanding the shared world. When I got home from the walk, I opened my window to hear the thump of a drum being struck with a mallet; dull, low, and resonant. I didn't yet know what I was listening for.

I only understood later that, in documenting the experience of quieting, I had been unwittingly recording the sound of uprising, that is, a sound about to rise up. To record is a deliberate act: I sense the signal and capture it, in word or with a device. How do we also record what we cannot fully register, the hearing coming first and the understanding coming later, if at all? Listening itself becomes, in this way, multiple in its dimension.

It is impossible to present my sonic observations to you in a chronological fashion, in part because the dynamic of this listening has been both a harkening backward and forward, or what, in *The Fact of Resonance*, I have described as a "preaudition" and "retroaudition" (Napolin, 2020, p. 195). These neologisms underscore a divergence from premonition and its Latin root *monere*, or to advise, warn, and remind: premonition never quite loses its ecclesiastical register of a monitoring authority (Napolin, 2020, p. 83). To monitor is to see and hear from afar, to measure the visual and audible signal for signs of disturbance, but so that they can be quelled and contained. What I want to try to put into words instead is the sense of a calling across the span of my sensibility over time, a call and response, and the air in between. As I was hearing, writing, and recording, there were portents, notes of warning. These were the sounds of things to come, both personally and collectively. McClain's cry, for example, had been over a year ago, and yet it was already an echo of Eric Garner's last words. Both voices — and still more

that have gone undocumented — demanded to be heard again when the cry of George Floyd struck the memory of those familiar with McClain. Others had already long been hearing in the pandemic the portents of uprising, but this sound not yet been sensible to me.

During one of the first nights after New York City instituted a curfew (for the first time in multiple generations in an effort to quell rebellion against the racial state), the police arrested a Broadway singer and her husband, a white couple, on their stoop in the Upper West Side. They had come out to cheer for a march that, in an act of civil disobedience, gathered and mobilized in the street past curfew. While police arrested the couple for violating curfew, their neighbors shouted from the threshold of the door. The threshold stood newly erected as a politicized, a sounding site between inside and outside. The Fourth Amendment protects American citizens from unlawful search and seizure. In his oral arguments regarding this protection, Justice Scalia once described the front steps as a “codicil” to the home, rendering it part of its inside.

Watching and listening to the arrest unfold on Twitter, this word “codicil” rang in my ears. Thinking about it now, it is suggestive for the act of writing (we add a codicil to a legal document, like an addendum to a will). It is also a supplement to the subject itself. For, in listening, the subject moves to its threshold, into a codicil. It has perhaps not yet amounted to any sort of change or action, but some additional room is there, not because the inside has expanded, but because the outside has come in.

Oliveros writes:

As I sit here trying to compose an article for *Source*, my mind adheres to the sounds of myself and my environment. In the distance a bulldozer is eating away a hillside while its motor is a cascade of harmonics defining the space between it and the Rock and Roll radio playing in the next room. Sounds of birds, insects, children’s voices and the rustling of trees fleck this space (Oliveros, 2004, p. 102).

Returning to Oliveros’ essay now, I am struck by the way it bears little trace of the radical demands of her moment, one that may be heard in the still-ongoing sound of uprising. She attuned herself to the meditative practice of listening to “myself and my environment.” Where does one end and the other begin, and what are the limitations of each? They are marked by their own beyond, a codicil, the one not being simply exterior to the other, as if there could be a single dividing line over which sounds tip toe or rush in. The attention to sonic detail gives rise to questions of *where* the listener — self and environment — is situated, that is, along what kind of social and political threshold. What sounds do not fleck a room simply because they also cannot pierce it?

For some, in listening to the recordings of the quieting of New York City streets collected by researchers in mid-April, six weeks before the city was to break out into massive protest, it was as if the sound of the pandemic itself had been captured. Such an observation, made by the scientific researcher with an ear for objectivity, positions the microphone — a mechanical ear — as a kind of objective witness that receives what human ears cannot. In the recording of the quieting of the city there is more than one clamorous and perhaps unrecordable omission. The sense that the recording captures the sound of the pandemic itself fails to recognize what the sensor, sequestered and sheltered-in-place, cannot hear, the unbearable sounds of lost life on the other side of a threshold, the *cordon sanitaire*.

The recordings of the body-camera that captured McClain’s last words are so horrific precisely in the way that the microphone crossed a threshold, making his plea public and disseminated. The body-camera recording of McClain captured not only death, but the authorities’ unhearing. Officials believe that the body-camera, when necessary, will controvert the police

eye and ear before a neutral judiciary. At best these recordings are twisted through description to validate the police narrative. At worst, it doesn't matter what the camera ear and eye present. Nor can the fall in decibel level recorded on April 18, 2020, in itself, tell us that the quieting of the city, its clearing out, was existential in proportion, a preparation for an astonishing articulation of togetherness.

During the early days of quarantine across American cities the 7pm shout out began (an echo from Italy where, during quarantine in March, [people took to terraces to sing and play music](#)). In New York City, people lean out their windows or go to their stoops and doorways to clap and make noise during the hour that medical workers are leaving their shift and being bussed across town to their hotels. While sheltering in place, I wrote on April 27:

Tonight's shout out in the East Village was for the ER doctor who committed suicide. It was cold yet still a good turnout. On Avenue A, one of the churches rings its bells, and tonight was the second night that a horn and a siren played Marco Polo with each other across the neighborhood. As the days go on, it becomes possible to attach faces to sounds, and the young person with a snare drum on a fire escape becomes more skilled at a drum roll.

In listening, my mind came up against these emotionally distant truths, unable really to compass them. In my walks, I often took my phone with me, using it as a recorder, but could not capture what I was hearing and feeling, in part because what I was hearing was quiet, or the new resonances of emptied out spaces that only made sense to me when held against other sonic memories. I felt that if I could write it, I would better remember this sound of quieting that I knew would never be there again. I will never be able to reproduce the sensation, the overwhelming feeling, of what it was to walk two blocks in late May in Brooklyn into the center of protest for George Floyd — I tremble, even remembering the sound — and to hear hundreds or perhaps thousands of people, after having been separated for two months, gathered and chanting in rhythmic unison, their voices reverberating against Barclay's Center. It's threshold space of entryway had suddenly become an amphitheater, its architectural flourish — a metal awning — repurposed for its reverberant potential. For us, the fear of contact had suddenly washed away simply because it was now politically impossible to stay separated. The underlying demand of public protest, particularly in its noise making function, is to say "you're not listening."

The heart, its diastole and systole, are the fundamental rhythm of body, emitting from the inside a low sound difficult to hear except through auscultation. In *The Right to Privacy* (1890) legal scholars Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis find grounds in common law for "the right to be let alone," and it is a right to quiet certain kinds of noise in the outside world, understood as a violation of privacy. This common law right, literary theorist Stephen Best has shown, is deeply entangled in American legal code with the poetics of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850), which enforced the capture of runaway slaves: it presents a foundational understanding of personhood, that it cannot coincide with property (the slave, not being "person," was property). "The violation of personality can be prevented by surrounding the personality with a buffering space of 'solitude and privacy' to insulate emotions and sensations from the world," wrote one legal commentator of the right to privacy (Robert Post, quoted in Best, 2004, p. 51). In the moment the passerby questioned McClain's movements, followed by the police attacking this acoustical buffering space created by headphones, they divested McClain of personhood and privacy insofar as they are contiguous with the right to quiet. Cultural critic Kevin Quashie suggests of the demand for black publicness that quiet instead originates in "the

sovereignty of the interior” (Quashie, 2012, pp. 11–26). As the body cameras of the police attacking McClain went blank, they captured a perverse soundtrack of an authoritarian outside that insisted upon its absolute right to command the rhythm of the world. This command is to be found in one of the categories that organized “Stop and Frisk,” the practice in New York City of frisking Black and brown youth without probable cause: “furtive movements.” Move in a way that seems strange or “off,” and some people may be frisked.

In thinking of this commanding rhythm, recall that a police officer first forcibly stopped and yelled at Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, because he was standing in the middle of the street. The police car moved in one rhythm, and Michael Brown walked in other. The officer demanded that Brown move in a different time. But if someone is in the middle of the street, why not wonder if something is wrong, if that person needs help? The first question is not “are you okay?” In such a question, outside comes in and it requires a moment of listening. When someone called the police on Elijah McClain, again, that was not the question. The question was, who is the outsider and why has he come in?

For the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, the police hail — “Hey, you! Stop” — and its twin in response, turning around to stop, are a kind of bare minimum, a quantum tying the legal subject to subjectivation. For Althusser, there is an inventiveness of the moment of the hail; something is created that wasn’t there before. But it’s crucial that this scene of call and response also exists, for Althusser, within a structure capable of redress. I can question why you question me, or if I am wrongfully arrested, I can count on the fact that I will be arrested, and I will demand an explanation and adjudication later. For Frantz Fanon, the postcolonial psychologist who theorized a similar scene, the call brings into being the racialized subject. “Look! A Negro!” has a particular charge of being triangulated. It is not directed at the Black body, who comes into being as the object of the call rather than a subject of listening and response (Fanon, 1986).<sup>4</sup> The police gave McClain no possibility of response (nor to Breonna Taylor, when the police sprayed her home with bullets after a “no knock” warning raid). *You should comply when the police command you*, people often say. But to imagine such a scene is to imagine oneself in a peculiar sort of way, as both the addressee (the compliant object) and the addressor (a reasonable subject).

In the structure that Althusser takes for granted — in some ways imagining a body without skin — response and redress are a priori unavailable to the black subject, who has been pulled away into some other scene before there can even be a call. For Fanon, this scene is equally inventive to the extent that it repeats over and over again, the black body being historically re-instantiated, one body echoing others that came before it. Fanon wonders how it can become possible to speak in the first-person and feuds across his writings with a series of quotations, citations, and voices, that haunt him. He reinscribes among the most injurious off these voices — the one that hurdled the racial slur — because it is politically efficacious to do so. To deconstruct it, he had to recite it.

A refrain across African American thought and letters is the critique of the chasm between white American’s hearing (which is passive) and listening (which is active), but also the notion that the senses are politicized, hearing neither neutral nor given. A foundational moment of this thought appears in W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) when he describes his hope for his book: “And now what I have briefly sketched in large outline let me on coming pages tell again in many ways, with loving emphasis and deeper detail, that men may listen to the striving in the souls of black folk.” He concludes his book with a plea (from *appeler*, to

4. I describe the acoustics of this scene as the “echo of the object” in *The Fact of Resonance*, pp. 67–102. As I note there, Fanon is a disavowed source of Althusser’s theory.

call but also cry out): “Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world wilderness.” He is uncertain that his reader has received the possibility of the first demand, also a hope for the future that wraps itself in the anxiety of being dashed: “that men may listen.”

What distinguishes hearing from listening? On June 28, 2020, during the height of the pandemic in the US, President Trump amplified on Twitter the sounds of a rally for his re-election meeting the sound of backlash. One of the supporters rallying for Trump near The Villages, a retirement community in Florida, shouted “white power” from his car window in response to protestors. In recirculating the video, Trump provided that call a platform for broad dissemination. Responding on his behalf to massive outcry, the White House deputy press secretary Judd Deere said, “President Trump is a big fan of The Villages. He did not hear the one statement made on the video. What he did see was tremendous enthusiasm from his many supporters.” In some ways, I actually believe this statement, as absurd as it is, because it defines a field of selective, hegemonic audition — not simply a failure to listen, but a cordoning off of the hearing sense itself.

A hegemonic and political sensibility is evidenced by the fact that, in February 2018, Trump held a “listening session” at the White House for survivors of a school shooting in Florida. A close-up of a note, taken by Carolyn Kaster of the Associated Press, reveals the five reminders to guide his encounter. Of the five points, it was the final note-to-self that was the most intolerable: “I hear you.” It was not a reminder not to sympathize, but rather a reminder to utter the words used by the sympathetic.

It’s a common phrase whose simple utterance can be healing and bear a lot of weight in its ability to open a space for speaking. When it happens, there is an opening — one that is nearly physical in dimension — for a vibration between two people. Suddenly, business as usual is suspended, and the sense that we were meant to do, by some external pressure, must pause in the face of this weight. It can be heavy, almost atmospheric, and if it is passed over, damage to relation is done and may be irreparable. This space is, too, a clearing, in part because it orients the spatial and temporal sense that something, once there, has left and for how long, we don’t know.

Of course, the word “clearing” is highly oxymoronic in the time of pandemic, since we say an infection has “cleared up.” The idiomatic expression “all clear” indicates a dissipation of threat and the way opened for safe movement. There are also the imperial associations of deforestation and extraction, and still more associations in the history of philosophy and literature, from Martin Heidegger to Toni Morrison, that I cannot touch on here. But one bears mentioning, and that is the semantic family of the Greek work, *dechomai*, or to admit and let in, also to lend an ear to. As I’ve described elsewhere, among its semantic family are the words *chora* (Kristeva, 1984) and *chorus* but also *choreo*, from which the English language derives choreography: it is “to make room for another by withdrawing.” (John Llewelyn, quoted in Napolin, 2020, p. 155).

One can speak of this withdrawal in terms of a transformation from hearing to listening, from the passive to the active, as did the essayist Roland Barthes, who once described the distinction in nearly evolutionary terms. Human beings, he argues, share with other creatures the sense of hearing. Beyond the sense of hearing, human beings also share with animals listening, which Barthes calls a “psychological act,” the first order being “alert,” listening for prey or for the lover; the second order is a kind of threshold between human animal: “deciphering; what the ear tries to intercept are signs” (Barthes, 1991, p. 245). For Barthes, it is here that the human begins (Barthes does not consider deafness or even a spectrum of hearing that might be



nonlocalized in the ears). In a third order of listening, the human becomes modern: “such listening is supposed to develop in an intersubjective space where ‘I am listening’ also means ‘listen to me’; what it seizes upon — in order to transform and restore to the endless interplay of transference — is a general ‘signifying’ no longer conceivable without the determination of the unconscious” (Barthes, 1991, p. 246).

There is something of this passage from hearing to listening that is delimited by the terms of psychoanalysis, or by the kind of *subject* — anonymous and implicitly universal — that psychoanalysis proposes. One wonders if the kind of intersubjectivity he describes can be achieved (and, indeed, it is positioned as a kind of achievement), beyond its purview, beyond the everyday transferences it describes and organizes. What are the limitations of transference in regard to listening?

The limitations begin to pinch the expression “I hear you,” which idiomatically marks the intersubjective movement of listening. We can think of the expression in terms of “fake it until you make it.” Perhaps if you say it enough times, the intersubjective will manifest. When uttered by Trump, before the survivors of horrific violence, the expression became hollow in the truest sense of the word. It did not even meet the basic requirement for the kind of performativity that poet and critic Denise Riley attributes to so many of our redundant phrases, which she argues are guided by “impersonal passion.” Impersonal passion is a kind of lyric subjectivity where language, through the power of address, animates and brings into existence something that wasn’t there before. These forms of language, often held in idiomatic expressions, have the power to incarnate what they refer to precisely because the words themselves “are saturated in strong affect” (Riley, 2000, p. 69). “I hear you,” is one such phrase: it seems to clear a space for sympathy and the voice of the other simply by virtue of being stated. That space can be momentary and may lead to no action, but it has nonetheless been cleared.<sup>5</sup> I don’t give a precise reply to what the other says, I just say “I hear you,” and make room for the other by withdrawing.

In thinking of this relay space between hearing and listening, but also address and addressee, I’m pulled back to the way the body-camera audio of the last words and mortal encounter of Elijah McClain have existed for over a year. The words were laying, as Du Bois might say, still-born in the world wilderness. To whom where those recordings addressed? Posed differently, who hears? By this second question, I don’t mean to ask *what* person can and does press play, but I mean *who*, as in the auditory subject position or addressee. McClain had an addressee in the moments leading up to his death — he spoke to the police — but that address exceeded that space and time by virtue of having been recorded.

In the days following his murder, officials surely listened to the audio, but either they could not hear or wished to suppress the audio’s significance, failing or refusing to release the recordings to the public. They sat, in a kind of indisposed state, calling out but unheard, waiting to make contact with the addressee in a time become both elliptical and proleptic, a lyric temporality. In the moments leading up to his death, McClain’s physical and auditory self made violent contact with the environment; the contact produced an acoustics that exceeds the document that inscribes and testifies to it.

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5. That we are in political moment defined by a crisis in such a space is underscored by that fact that, not long after the listening session, Trump refused to listen to the audio tape that recorded the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. “We have the tape, I don’t want to hear the tape, no reason for me to hear the tape,” he said. When asked why by a reporter, he replied: “Because it’s a suffering tape, it’s a terrible tape. [...] I know exactly — I know everything that went on in the tape without having to hear it.” The sovereign is shielded, in this case, by a cadre of listeners who take in horror on his behalf. Trump’s absolute terror of death is also a refusal to listen, the one marking the other. At the same time, it underscores his belief that all suffering — that is not his — is reducible.

McClain's family has spoken of the gratification of hearing his name chanted now, so many months later, on the heels of mass demonstrations for justice for Floyd. The two names touch along the axis of last words. In the rhythmic chant, *say his name*, an airy thread is drawn out between different places and times, heard within what literary critic Carter Mathes might call an "acoustics of unfreedom." When adequately heard or registered, these acoustics challenge "the presumption of realism in American historical documentation and memory construction" (Mathes, 2015, p. 10). The sounds of names and the chant, which are caught between multiple selves and moments, become a "narrative struggle," (*Ibidem*) that is, a struggle to say, this, here and now cannot be severed from that, then and there.

In some ways this narrative struggle and its forms of recitation exist at the limits of my commitment to a certain kind of subject. When Freud wrote in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1922) of the repetition compulsion in human experience and shell shock, he described the structure of *Nachträglichkeit*, commonly translated as afterwardsness but in this case perhaps better understood more literally as "after-the-eventness." His essential point was that it takes something happening again to elicit the traumatic registers of the first event. But Freud's subject, a reflexive one, is caught in a self-censored reality. It is an inner subject continually referencing a *fantasy* of the outside. Freud can explain a structure of a self relating to itself, but he failed to account for the puncturing of the singular by the outside, or the rhythmic structure of a repressive state in its contact with political life. If, for Freud, there was ultimately the promise of full "remembrance" in the face of repetition, then in political life, it takes another event to ask why there wasn't justice the last time. And so on. There is not only an interminable waiting for justice, but a structure where the singular, to become itself, must be tied to another singularity.

Across the protests, there are shards of names from the past-that-is-not past, shining on handmade signs, names that demand being chanted in the present. "The city is being remade in the image and sound of liberation," I wrote in my journal, the names of the dead painted on the boarded-up windows and shouted out loud, signs posted on the bridges otherwise closed to feet, and the ringing of bicycle bells as they still rally in the thousands to take over bridges and Times Square. The sound of a racial and carceral state also "attunes one to different sonic possibilities." (Mathes, 2015, p. 9).

As the recording of McClain's last words resurfaced against new scrutiny, they gave rise to the sensation of a connective tissue of utterances, of what it means to rehear Derrick Elliot Olie Scott's utterance when, on May 20, 2019, he was pinned by officers in Oklahoma City and pleaded, "I can't breathe! Please! Help me! I can't breathe!" Protestors often paint the phrase across their protective face masks, which they wear during direct actions in the midst of the pandemic (the enemy of the breath is not simply the virus, but tear gas and pepper spray.) In a photograph, I once saw a police officer wearing a t-shirt: "I can breathe," it said. I wondered to whom the statement was addressed. In some ways, it is a statement of fact. He stands there, alive, and is breathing. But it was also a statement of domination, that he never needs to fear his breath might be stolen. The phrase paints a still more perverse scene, because in some ways it is a response — a retort — to an imagined supine body who once called (perhaps even to him), *I can't breathe*. The t-shirt imagines a dialogue premised upon a failure in listening. In the midst of that failure, it is no dialogue at all, but the second statement remakes the other in the image of description, as if *I can't breathe* were simply a descriptive statement and not a request to live.

In marches, young Black leaders at the bullhorn lead us through a series of chants, commanding us, across gender and race, to say collectively the names of the departed. *George Floyd. Breonna Taylor*. At times the command turns to "whose streets?" We respond "our streets!"

Other times the command turns to reciting “I can’t breathe.” I have always held myself back with this cry, unable to understand what it would mean for me to chant it when, in fact, I can breathe. The chant *our streets* is plural and desires unity; we share a goal. *I can’t breathe* is the singular; its object is identity. I can’t speak for something that only happens to Black people. In some ways, I wonder if holding myself back from recitation is part of the problem. Does it stage something irreducible about my subjectivity as it has been culturally constituted? I can consent to the utterance or not. Elijah McClain or George Floyd were afforded no such right. It is literally not true when I say it. But is it right to say it when I am invited? The reinscription of the last words is a memorial citation, but it is also a reinjury, particularly when uttered by white people. Why is this injurious speech, no doubt painful and traumatizing to some auditors, worth re-inscribing and by whom?

When I participate in chants and sonically observe, I am being a witness, which is important for white people to do precisely because many of us have no direct knowledge of this kind of loss. In chanting the phrase, I am marking it. But beyond that, it is important to reflect on the meaning of the words and on how these men — and this phrase is largely attributed to Black men — have been killed. I am not sure that I have heard of such a story involving a Black woman being choked to death by the police, though my thoughts turn to Sandra Bland, a Black woman whom the police report hung herself after she was arrested during a traffic violation. No guards were present during her death and the surveillance cameras cut out: Sandra Bland had no witness, her last words unrecorded and inaudible. Through a perverse power of imagination, I can wonder after these last words and shudder at the thought of their addressee. The phrase, as uttered by her, floats in some airy space that is even more indeterminate, more difficult to compass than that of lyric address. No one can hear it. (It is this forgetting of Black women that first galvanized the chant, *Say her name*.)

I am not in a position to reflect on what it means for Black women or women of color to chant *I can’t breathe*, but I can reflect on the significance of the phrase being uttered and then picked up by white people in the street. If I were to say, *I can’t breathe*, I am quoting the last words, but also quoting a ubiquity, quoting the very fact of their repetition and iteration. If I were to say it, I would require as a condition (for my own psychological comfort) the kind of distance afforded by the technical fact of citation and quotation, or what is known as direct discourse. Perhaps some white people, especially those who never stand to be racialized, do actually feel themselves to be shouting a phrase that *could* come to them where they to be confronted with an authority powerful enough. That is a powerful fantasy, and it is one that relates to a situation that historian and philosopher Saidiya Hartman treats as being at the heart of the psychic economy of white abolition in the nineteenth century in the United States (Hartman, 1997). Looking across journals and other historic documents, Hartman found the reiteration of a sentiment of white abolitionists when confronted with the spectacle of the suffering body of the enslaved person. *What if that were me? What if that were my family?* These rhetorical questions, Hartman suggests, rest upon a commodity-form where the enslaved person is “fungible,” that is, continually exchangeable and replaceable. In feeling for the other, I have stood in the other’s place; I am only feeling for myself and have bypassed the place of the other.

There are still more rhetorical dimensions and transferences of the chant. It is as if I say, *it is not me who says this, but someone else*. It is an instance of language trying to separate the speaker from the violence. It is “hard to state an excluded middle,” Riley writes, “difficult to balance inside a pressing thought and not tilt and collapse onto one side or another, either the self-importance of guilt or the insouciance of self-exoneration” (Riley, 2000, p. 69). This tilting and collapsing is not merely represented in forms of language, she continues, but incarnated

by them, for example in the potent rhetorical question, “why me?” Such questions don’t really seek an answer nor do they have an addressee, and their strength lies in “the ardor of utterance itself” (Riley, 2000, p. 70), or hearing ourselves cry out. Riley wonders if the same kind of affective valence of the refused middle — neither guilt nor exoneration — can also be found in the slogan that appeared on the protest posters and banners in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan: *not in my name*, in the singular, or *not in our name*, in the plural. Such a phrase “flourishes” precisely because it incarnates “their askers’ dilemmas of wanting to be effective yet also sensing that they are not,” being both present and “helpless” (Riley, 2000, pp. 68–69).

*Not in my name* censures oneself from the scene of invasion. It is perhaps too easy, carrying too great a sense of what language can actually do. Uttering the phrase does not separate me from the invasion. With *I can’t breathe*, the opposite occurs, and I insert myself into a violence from which I was absent and will continue to be absent. Any chant reminds us, but also plays on roles of inclusion/exclusion and the work of fantasy. It is dangerous to cut myself off (*Not my President!*) and an equally dangerous fantasy to imagine that I am with the other who was killed: maybe the chant is important precisely because it makes a space for this excluded middle, neither guilt nor exoneration. It is also important to the extent that *I can’t breathe* is also a citation, a form of memory.

George Floyd uttered his dying words in a moment when breath has become a worrisome and politicized sign of contagion and fear. “Momma, momma,” he also uttered, calling to his dead mother (neither a murmur to himself nor a statement to his murderer, the utterance was a “sacred invocation” caught somewhere between inside and outside, without a stable addressee).<sup>6</sup> In repeating *I can’t breathe*, perhaps what I am saying is, *I am listening*. All of this has to do with the claim, or what it means to claim that I am listening. It doesn’t constitute a subject per se, since the classical grammatical form — subject, verb, object — is undermined. I am not identifying, which is to appropriate the subject positions of the ones who are dying.

I’m thinking back to the month of April, when the hospitals in New York City had reached capacity, and a colleague, also a psychoanalyst, responded to a call for a social worker willing to conduct volunteer palliative care in a hospital. Her job was to hold a tablet up to the faces of the dying, those whose loved ones wished to see them and hear last words. “There has to be someone,” she wrote of the experience.<sup>7</sup> Holding the electronic device, she had become a medium for dying words and looks. I wrote in my journal about how the *someone* who will listen is not a first-person subject position per se, but empty in its waiting.

For me to chant *I can’t breathe* is to listen to people who’ve said these words. I listen not as a subject, but as “someone,” also an echo chamber, a clearing. In the echo, the phrase’s subject, the first-person singular, and its imputed source (a single person) continue to be re-anonymized by the names and voices of others. The repetition amongst these men is repoliticized when it is seized by the chorus. It becomes in that moment a demand by the collective for the right for Black people to live. And it has to be uttered every day until it is true. Unlike other slogans, this form of language does not incarnate: it listens. Are there limitations to this act of listening? Do I have it more in my power to record and report but to intercede? In chanting, we are listening

6. Lonnae O’Neal, “George Floyd’s Mother Was Not There, But He Used Her as A Sacred Invocation,” *The Undeclared*, May 28, 2020. <https://theundefeated.com/features/george-floyds-death-mother-was-not-there-but-he-used-her-as-a-sacred-invocation/> (Accessed June 29, 2020).

7. Jamieson Webster, “End Notes: What Palliative Care Looks Like in a Pandemic,” *The New York Review of Books*, April, 24, 2020. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/04/24/end-notes-what-palliative-care-looks-like-in-a-pandemic/> (Accessed June 30, 2020).

to the voices of the dead, but in the moment of seeing the stranger, it demands another form of listening, and something, perhaps, in excess.

By the sixteenth day of protest, New York City had become a place where one could simply wander around until finding a demo. They were multiple, decentralized, and convergent. Wandering to Washington Square Park, I listened to a group of young organizers speak in an empty fountain, which has not yet been filled (water perhaps seen as a hazard during COVID-19). The fountain had instead become a place of amplification. The event was already nearing its end when I arrived, and I don't know whether they had marched or convened there, or a mixture of both. Some people were surely in the park relaxing, and listening to the organizers and the chants in unison was casual rather than purposive.

In the fountain (which has since been blocked off by police gates), the group of young Black and Latinx activists each took turns speaking into a bull horn. The crowd became very hushed in order to receive a voice of a Black woman, which the device — designed for the male register of the voice — could not carry strongly. She asked if she could please pray over us, which slowly became an act of spoken word. She spoke of the police blaspheming against God in a series of poetic verses that culminated in the cry, *If God had a pistol, he would blast-for-me*, the subtle turning of the sound of the word. The crowd responded uproariously.

The space of the fountain had been cleared for its mundane purpose to make way not for the Voice, a master signifier that is, in principle soundless and abstract, but for a chorus of voices. It was surrounded by the kind of gathering that had been forbidden during the pandemic. A young man took to the bull horn, educating listeners that gathered around of the fact that the Mayor is selling public housing to a private developer and in the midst of an affordable housing crisis. He spoke of his grandmother's daily words to him as she watches him walk to the elevator, *Be safe*. "When I see a police car...and my heart starts beating faster," he shouted. "I'm going to say that again. My heart starts beating faster!"

They were each speaking from a radical tradition demanding that we listen. They were some of the most clarifying voices I've heard in a long time. Another young man addressed the threshold between inside and outside:

Little by little they're talking about, "oh, we're going to reopen." They're talking about Phase 1, Phase 2... But we can't allow that to happen. Because we know the people united will never be defeated! [the phrase then folded into a collective chant]... The brain and the nervous system wants to hold on to the past. It doesn't want to go into the unknown. It's afraid to change because it doesn't know what's going to happen. Right now, we are in the unknown. We got to embrace the unknown and reprogram our minds, because they try to control our minds, but they can never control our spirits [applause and police helicopter hovering over the scene]. Right now, our spirits are speaking loud. That's our intuition. We had an opportunity to go within, with this COVID situation happening. It allowed us to really face that mirror, whether we're looking at a mirror or looking at a mirror from the inside. We are realizing who we truly are, and we are meant to be sharing resources. We are meant to be together as a community. That's right, momma. You feel the energy and I feel it, too! [applause and cheer]... So right now, what I would like everyone to do, we can just close our eyes for a few moments and take a few collective breaths for those that cannot breathe anymore, to be grateful to our planet as a source of life that connects us all.

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