

Listening and Falling Silent: Towards *Technics* of Collectivity

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Abstract

This piece reflects on the politics of listening practices and technologies during the 2020 COVID-19 confinement and the ensuing protests against racialized police violence. During this period, two ruptures have occurred in sonic environments and temporalities: first, one of isolation and confinement and, next, one of protest and refusal. I make two points. First, drawing on Hannah Arendt's work connecting loneliness and totalitarianism, I argue that isolated silence is much more dangerous politically than collective silence. I then begin to show that corporate online communication tools are not designed to facilitate the forms of democratic listening and empathy required to overcome this isolation. I argue that this greater danger of isolated listening forces us to rethink remote listening and communication technologies, as we become ever more aware of the need to coordinate collective action, resource distribution, and democratic listening at a global scale.

Keywords: Listening; confinement; social movements; sound studies; digital democracy.

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Paris, 13 June 2020. I am standing with two friends on the corner of Boulevard de la Villette and Rue du Faubourg du Temple, at the end of the *Vérité pour Adama* (“Truth for Adama”)¹ manifestation, discussing the rise of socialism in America. A large group of protestors had departed from the *Place de la République*, where the rally was held, and was currently being broken up with teargas by the police. As the planned march route had been blocked, we made our way up the hill of the Rue du Faubourg du Temple, to the northwest of the *Place*, swarming traffic. The cars stopped in this part of the street — a “*quartier populaire*” section of the city filled with Asian *traiteurs* and Halal *boucheries* — were largely in solidarity, raising fists, clapping, and honking. The streets filled with these sounds of horns, chants, singing, conversing, and occasional cheers. The joy of solidarity and public life mingled with rage, frustration, and mistrust: of the government, and of each other to really be in solidarity across difference. The ambivalences of coming together layered on top of a general sense of anxiety about the virus that may be lying dormant in our city, contagious but unexpressed in any one of us. Roughly one month after the confinement began to lift, noise had rushed back into Paris in the form of demands for truth and justice.

Our conversation on the street corner was disrupted when a group of about ten *BRAV-M* — motorcycle police, colloquially called *voltigeurs* (Poyet, 2019) — passed by the march at the intersection. These police have only recently returned to the streets of Paris during the *Gilets jaunes* protests in 2018. The *voltigeurs* were banned in 1986, having been implicated in the beating and eventual death of a student, Malik Oussekiné, at a demonstration that year (Mouillot, 2018). They are used to move smoothly between protestors and to infiltrate marches at the pedestrian level.

We immediately broke off our speech, as if the words were ripped from our mouth mid-birth, and turned to watch, gaping. They glided slowly across the intersection, inhuman in their helmets, caught behind the traffic, not yet fracturing us physically, no sirens or lights, just hovering at the edge of the crowd. And as they did so, we stood in silence watching them until they drove away. A rupture occurred in the rhythm of the city.

We awkwardly tried to resume our conversation... where were we, what were we saying, who was speaking? In this moment, I was struck by the feeling that, for as long as the police were stuck in traffic across the intersection from us, the world was on pause.

Why do we fall silent as the police pass?

One friend speculated that it is to preserve our privacy: he doesn’t like the idea that they would hear what he was saying. Not that they could hear us from that distance — but somehow it was important to him that his speech was not *for them*, in fact it was too sacred to be shared in their presence. Althusser (1971) famously has described the power of the police state in a proactive way from the perspective of speech theory: the cops “hail” us, they call out “hey you” into the street, and each one of us feels addressed, and immediately guilty. We hear “you” as “me,” respond with guilt and fear because we have internalized their authority over us, feeling that the accused is always already within us, we are all the subject of this address.

Yet in these moments of falling silent, something inverse occurs. We stare at them, we want to make them uncomfortable, to *other* them, we are hostile to their earshot and refuse to normalize their presence among us, to go about business as usual. The refusal is a small, quiet resistance to the weaving of these forces into our everyday life, at the level of the street and the

1. The *Vérité pour Adama* movement protests racist policing in France and demands truth and justice after Adama Traoré, a 24-year old black man from the Val-d’Oise department just outside of Paris, died in police custody. After four years of medical exams the autopsies have been inconclusive (Bock, 2020).

feet. In falling silent, we attend to this insertion into the fabric of public life and refuse to accept it.

I would like to contrast this collective refusal to be heard with another rupture in time and public sounding: the quiet isolation of the confinement. I will make two points. First: that isolated silence is much more dangerous politically than a collective silence. Second: that this greater danger forces us to rethink remote listening and communication technologies, as we become ever more aware that we need to coordinate collective action and democratic listening at a global scale.

Here in Paris, during confinement, the streets feel silent in another way. Illness and fear filled the air. We were humbled under nature, and a blanket of quiet settled over the city. Those of us who were lucky enough to do so hunkered down and hoped to live. We were confined to a 1-km radius from our homes. Cars disappeared from the streets. Cafés and bars shut, marches stopped, as did most forms of in-person collective sounding or listening like lecture-debates, assemblies, music-making, conversations with friends.

While one can write more generally about the experience of listening and sound in public space, listening during confinement was painfully privatized and individualized, and therefore even more unequal, making solidarity even harder to access. Experiences of confinement fractured baldly across class, race, gender, migration status, health, and profession. Some left the city for country homes. Some lived in close quarters with multiple generations of their family, wandering the streets when possible to get fresh air and peace and quiet, often to be confronted by the police. Some worked long hours in the hospital and lived in sanitized and impersonal hotel rooms nearby, separated from their loved ones in their few moments of rest.² Some were locked-down amidst domestic violence, physical or otherwise. Those with more vulnerable health or disabilities were especially isolated and continue to be. Parents, especially women, often shouldered triple burdens of full-time remote jobs, full-time childcare, and full-time home-schooling (OECD, 2020). Some of us were very lonely, as our communities were not located in normative nuclear family homes. Some did not have internet access and struggled with isolation even more. As Matteo Winkler (2020) wrote mid-confinement: “some homes are more equal than others.” Each of these cases, and myriad others not listed here, constitutes a different sonic environment and different listening conditions.

Estalella and Corsín Jiménez (2016), in their writing on urban assemblies in Madrid, argue that listening — to the city (as a social space requiring care) and to each other (as strangers and neighbors) — is the fundamental political practice in direct democracy, rather than speaking. Politics becomes the (exhausting but liberating) effort to attend to a shared environment: “The assembly installation weathers its own atmospheric politics, one whose democratic impulse is not antagonist, not quite agonistic either, but that ought best be described as weary.” In our current moments of crises — democratic, environmental, and health — atmospheric politics encompasses collective attention, on a visceral level, to: the climate, an ineffable sense of a place and community, and a proximity at which we breathe the same air.

2. Or, in places like the U.S., barrier methods and hygienic, quarantined domestic spaces have not always been available for health-care workers, further endangering them and those who live with them (Alaniz, 2020). In France, at least, there is a vestige of a welfare state which has provided a safety net for many workers, parents, and elders, and provided universal health care through the pandemic. It has made a huge difference in the degree to which we have been able to confine and survive. In addition to fighting against a racist police system, recent protests in France have also addressed the ways in which this welfare state has been eroded over recent years, calling for more and sustained funding for public hospitals and research (Al Jazeera, 2020; Peoples Dispatch, 2020).

Without a shared atmosphere — a vulnerable one in which ideas, secrets, and chants could collide with each other — listening changes its political valence. When we meet as a group during confinement, it is usually online using tools like Zoom or Teams. As opposed to the crowd on the street, or the assembly in the *Place*, this is an aggregation of individuals, each with their own little digital square and profile pic, bringing with them their own bubbles of sonic space and particular social-economic circumstances and private lives. Such forms of online listening lend themselves more easily to certain political formations than to others.

Lincoln Dahlberg (2011) delineates four “positions” on digital democracy: liberal-individualist, deliberative, counter-publics, and autonomist Marxist. The first two are provided for much more easily by existing online spaces. In the first, we are atomized individuals voting for, sharing information on, or directing funding in favor of our particular interests and values. Certainly, digital tools easily provide for this in the form of petitions, donation platforms, and voting algorithms. In the deliberative model, which hues closely to Habermasian theory, online spaces are imagined as facilitating rational conversation towards a consensus. However, the Habermasian (1989) dream of a perfect public sphere has been shown time and again (Fraser, 1992; Warner, 2002) to be unequally accessible to those with privilege, and not really public at all. Under confinement, these inequalities were even more exaggerated.

But there is something additional and essential to consider when we discuss confined listening: the problem of loneliness, and the struggle for empathy. These issues are rarely weighed for their political consequences, but in fact they form the basis of true collectivity. They transcend pure reason and are more easily handled through listening, as an (often embodied) practice of relationality. Nancy (2007) writes that listening is *always* an act of mutual recognition, and thereby a deconstruction of the solid bounds of the subject. Ochoa Gautier (2014) introduces the concept of “acoustic assemblages” to describe a “mutually constitutive transduction (in two directions, let us say) of notions of sound as well as notions of who listens, as well as potentially transformative processes of inscription of sound that interrelate listenings and sounding ‘objects.’” These assemblages, then, include not only the human subjects who relate to each other through hearing and voicing, but the natural world which carries, emits, and reflects sound, and technologies of inscription and transmission, which, in their design, always create assumptions about the relations and roles of those who use them. Ochoa Gautier calls our attention to the ways in which listening breaks down the barriers between the human and non-human, as well as between individual humans. Listening is culturally and technologically constructed, and through these constructions both empathetic connections and political subject positions can be solidified or challenged, at the level of discourse as well as the transmission of sound in its vibrations within us.

Therefore, it is better to talk about the political *possibility* provided by listening to enact intersubjectivity, a possibility which is not always achieved by all listening practices or tools. When we look back historically, mid-late nineteenth century listening (and viewing) stances often sought to solidify and externalize the individual as a rational observer of unwieldy emotional hysterics (what Donna Haraway (2004) named the “modest witness”) or of the wildness of nature. By contrast, in the 1970s, Pauline Oliveros pioneered practices and exercises in listening, such as her *Sonic Meditations* (1974), designed as social justice projects to train participants in deconstructing these boundaries and towards “healing” (O’Brien, 2016).

The techniques and quality of our listening matter a lot. Many have noted how exhausting and frustrating remote listening has been (Supiano, 2020) — endless Zoom meetings and Skype calls with loved ones provided some kinds of connections but were lacking or alienating in other

ways. The tools we have on hand are not great for empathy and collectivity.

As I have written elsewhere (2018a), the political listening practiced in in-person assemblies, in protests and rallies, is both wonderful and also limited. It is limited in that it is localized, but more importantly, as with the Habermasian public sphere, it easily and unintentionally reiterates hierarchies of participation. It takes disposable time to participate in an assembly, confidence and comfort speaking, facility with the language, the ability to hear, the legal and actual right to feel safe in public space. As such, these practices of assembly, like protest, can differentially exclude or endanger anyone who lacks all of the above. However, this experience of embodied “active listening” in the true sense of the term — imagining and resonating with the other’s experiences, through shared stories and concerns, as well as shared space and vibrations in the air, in the body — allows for a *felt* dissolution of neoliberal individual subjectivity. This dissolution of the primacy of the individual is essential to cultivating the sense of empathy and community required for a successful democracy and the sharing of resources.

By contrast the theoretical subject of liberal-individualist models of governance — the self-serving atomized individual — actually is a product of a psychic environment that favors totalitarianism, *not* democracy, as Arendt (1954) shows. Recent work on the rise of the right wing surveillance state in the U.S. (Feldman, 2018b) and on the political damages of the confinement (Gessen, 2020) returns to Arendt’s ideas connecting loneliness to the rise of fascism. In her *Essay in Understanding* on totalitarianism, she describes loneliness as a “the very disease of our time” (1954), creating an isolated subject who labors at home, theorizing and predicting the actions of others as potential threats, rather than living as a part of the ever-changing, unpredictable human milieu. This subject (thinks that they) are longing for a kind of governance that can deploy “ice-cold logic” to fix and predict human behavior towards inevitable outcomes — in the case of fascism, this allegedly “natural” inevitability is always the survival and triumph of a superior race. It is fitting that we have emerged from confinement to fight specifically against racist policing.³

Yet, during confinement, we had to self-isolate as an act of solidarity, to protect others as much as ourselves. While this seems tragic — and it is — the mandate for remote communication is an opening to think about a more enduring political problem, brought about in part by technological innovation, that very same thing that is claiming to bring us closer together. Our atmosphere is globalized. Climate change extends beyond the bounds of the quartier, city, nation-state. Viruses know no borders (although their human carriers are acutely and differentially subject to them). Our economies and supply chains, for better or worse, are international. And this means we need to organize ourselves to practice democracy and empathy *at this scale*. Thus far industries and militaries have been much more successful at globalizing their power and paradigms than social movements or democratic communities.

Why is this? There is the obvious answer of wealth: these types of organizations can put money into technology and labor that coordinates decisions, connections, and resources globally. Digital organizing platforms, internets, and online meeting spaces have been designed for the business, the military, and the police. These organizations also have internal political structures that are not particularly democratic or empathetic. They are built for efficiency and hierarchy — listening to the other, connecting to their suffering and needs, coming to collec-

3. To be clear: I am not at all suggesting that *scientific* predictions and prescriptions regarding the behavior of COVID-19 and the need for confinement are a form of fascist control. Arendt makes a strong distinction between fascist *logics* — which are *not* based on facts or knowledge — and intelligence (1954). Epidemiology is quite the opposite of fascism — it is based on observed data and has the ethical aim of preserving all of human life equally. The aim is to predict and control the behavior of a virus, not of the human soul.

tive decisions based on these recognitions — are not important to the bottom line of a multi-national supply chain. It's no wonder that Zoom meetings don't allow more than one voice to sound at once (Folse, 2020), or that automated "justice" uses decision-making algorithms modeled on racial stereotypes rather than individual struggles (Anguin et al., 2016).

As Safiya Noble recently (2020) wrote, "we cannot automate the tough decisions, the re-distributions of power and the everyday behavior it will take to make just societies. We will not compute our way out of these crises to the better future we want." The challenge, I believe, will be connecting the everyday behavior to a global redistribution of power. This is a challenge for listening and communication technologies as much as it is a challenge for economics and geopolitics. Waltham-Smith (2018) argues that "small-p politics requires the harnessing and redirection of ordinary social listening" by digital tools that can expand and connect local struggles. As we collectively create ruptures in the fabric of the "new normal" — falling silent to attend to the growing pervasiveness of the police state — we also need alternatives, technological and political, which allow syndication and coordination of these ruptures, and the cultivation of more radical listening, to combat atomization within and across these spaces, globally. Going forward, the confinement has forced us to ask more acutely: how can these anti-fascist, democratic practices of listening that we cultivate in the street make their way into global networks?

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