

Listening Alone Together. Political Subjectivation in the Time of Pandemic

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Abstract

This short piece reflects on the challenges of political subjectivation at a time when organising largely had to move online. It also explores the play of liveness and mediation in mediatised street actions that have erupted in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. The sense of isolation in both contexts stems not only from being physically apart from other activists but also from the loss of a common world. Following Derrida, it proposes that listening, as a form of carrying by ear in solitude after the end of the world, represents a way to interpellate caring subjects whose ecological attunement offers a possibility for repairing and recreating the world.

Keywords: Listening; politics; media.

The frivolous French rom-com *Un peu, beaucoup, aveuglement* is the perfect quarantine distraction — and, as I discovered to my delight, a confection of a film that thematizes the phenomenon that Peter Szendy (2007) has dubbed *surécoute* (a French neologism that translates the English *overhearing*). A misanthropic inventor has a new neighbour, a shy musician who has moved into an apartment in another building backing directly onto his. All that separates them is a paper-thin partition wall through which every sound permeates. Resentful of both the disturbance and the sonic surveillance, he turns to his usual tricks of conjuring up terrifying noises in an attempt to scare her into moving out, but undeterred, she escalates with her own sonic bombardment of thunderous arpeggios and tortuous metronome clicks. Eventually, they call a truce and begin to converse and then “date” through the wall, vowing never to

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meet in person, for he is no less cynical about human nature than she is determined never to tie herself to a man as she tries to flee the grip of a controlling piano teacher. The ending to this comedy of noises is all too predictable: after an eventful audition for a piano competition, the wall is dramatically torn down and they embrace to the soundtrack of a rapturous Chopin étude.

I recall this trifling *mise-en-scène* because it encapsulates in comic fashion what I imagined the political practices of listening that I study would become as a result of physical distancing and isolation rules imposed during the pandemic: what I want to dub *listening alone together*, with all the contradictions and impossibilities that syntagm implies. The effect of public health measures around the world has been to ban or severely curtail the legal right to assembly and thus render collective action in the streets extremely rare — or at least that is how it looked when I first contemplated writing this piece some weeks before the killing of George Floyd and the mass street actions it provoked. When distancing measures were first imposed, trade and community unions and other grassroots organisations were unable to congregate physically and all their organising activities, along with spontaneously formed mutual aid groups, were rapidly shifted onto digital platforms with a flurry of Zoom meetings supported by WhatsApp threads, Slack channels, and Facebook groups. In this environment, listening, even when mediated by images and text, became increasingly important especially since many of the citizens now working together from around the country had not done so before. Unions saw rapid surges in recruitment of new members and the non-hierarchical mutual aid groups that proliferated were often led by volunteers without any experience of organising. It is hard to overstate the importance of listening for the formation of new ties required for successful political organising—for bringing diverse constituencies together and for capacity building.¹

The Zoomification of organising entailed both an intensification of listening in terms of duration and effort and yet an evacuation of the spaces in which collective bonds are often built over longer periods of time. The increased volume of Zoom calls demanded a hyper-listening, sharpened by the modes of attention of digital platforms that at once promote distraction and extract more attention and affective labour. But this was a listening without contact, mediated by screens and devices, and less by bodies and commonly occupied spaces, and one in which the logic of surveillance prevailed as boundaries between public and private dissolved ever further. The sonic bombardment and intrusion experienced by the film's two protagonists seemed like an apt metaphor for this sphere of *over-hearing* — in the double sense of surveilled and excessive — into which political modalities of listening were being drawn. Making new friends over video chat yet coming to recognise them by their voices alone when people began to protect themselves from the intrusion by habitually turning off their videos — all this was done in eager anticipation that one day, in a mythical future known simply as the post-COVID world, we would eventually meet in the streets with all the ecstasy of a Hollywood dénouement.

These transformations of political listening also revealed something about the quality of solitude and its relation to the aural sphere. In the film, listening through the wall serves a quasi-psychoanalytic function insofar as it allows the two protagonists to be together while remaining apart, pointing to the acousmatic character of the analyst's listening and of the affective structure of attachment more broadly that constantly negotiates between closeness and separation. Telephone wires have traditionally played this function; hence they have been likened to umbilical cords as metaphors for regulating our attachments and therefore as technologies for negotiating between individual and collective subjectivations. This is, after all, the stuff of politics

1. See, for example, Bassel (2017).

and of politicization in which listening plays a decisive role both vertically between grassroots and leaders and also horizontally among activists or citizens. As the pandemic continues with no end in sight, many have begun to express an aural fatigue. Far from satisfying a need for sociality, all the Zoom meetings have risked reinforcing a sense of atomization whose collective experience could not be effectively channelled into a communal belonging or purpose, not least because this distance was a luxury not afforded to the most marginalized — those who work on the front line and cannot stay at home or those whose only “home” or “shelter” is a prison, a slum, or the humiliation of a patch on the pavement. Against this backdrop, there was, moreover, a danger that in rapidly accelerating the demands placed on the ears of those free to meet remotely, the digitalization of solidarity and mutuality would itself become a form of collective loneliness from which one would have to escape in order to rebuild any sense of sociality or collective political agency.

As stay-at-home measures were being introduced, leaving her confined in California away from her home and family in Paris, philosopher Catherine Malabou penned a reflection on the need to find a solitude that would make confinement bearable — “to isolate from collective isolation, to create an island (*insula*) within isolation” (Malabou, 2020a). Siding with eighteenth-century robinsonades, Malabou rebuffs Marx’s contention that solitude cannot be the origin of society, arguing instead that it is only by withdrawing into oneself, away from meaningless chatter, that one can discern the alterity within — an alterity that we all share and that thereby unites us in our isolation. Once she was able to retreat into the solitude of writing, conversations sparking genuine dialogue and collective imagination grew out of that secluded immersion. The experience of society inside could blossom into sociality outside.

Malabou’s meditations continue to resonate strongly with me as I yearn for time simply to be with my own thoughts. But what are the political stakes of this desire for isolation within isolation, especially when such solitude is the preserve of the privileged? An atomized collectivity foreclosing the possibility of class solidarity is entirely in keeping, of course, with the pandemic’s tendency to exacerbate and lay bare the conditions and contradictions of neoliberal capitalism — its inequalities and its fragmentation of the working classes — and thereby to intensify its organic crisis. Listening has not escaped this capture of the social since the logic of marketisation and competition has infiltrated every part of social reproduction. The affective labour of listening to Spotify playlists, for instance, is lucrative, sold as big data and valued for its distinctive behavioural and psychological insights.² As white-collar workers were suddenly compelled to work from home, music-streaming services reported significant changes in consumption patterns with increased demand for “chill,” “wellness,” and other playlists typically associated with activities such as cooking, chores, and relaxation (Flynn, 2020). But personalized music-streaming services also witnessed a dramatic decline at the outset of the pandemic and are only just beginning to recover. By contrast, radio listening saw a significant uptick during the pandemic, likely sparked by a demand for more information and also education (*Radio Today*, 2020). Left media, such as *Novara* and *Jacobin*, have increased their news and educational programmes and organisations including Momentum and The World Transformed, as well as podcasts such as *Talking Politics* and *The Funambulist* have responded to the appetite for more political education during this time, with a never-ending stream of content for aural consumption. The political stakes of these surges in listening alone together and whether they can produce an experience of the social beyond that of the networked society remain deeply

2. For a discussion of music-streaming imbrication of contemporary technologies of surveillance see Drott (2018).

uncertain.³ It is possible to speculate, however, by probing Malabou's notion of solitude more deeply.

Besides quarantine, Malabou's references to Rousseau and Robinson Crusoe evoke another kind of community born of solitude — that is, mourning. Jacques Derrida, who was her doctoral supervisor and who remains an influential voice even or especially in his absence, devoted his very final seminar before his death in 2005 to the themes of solitude, world, and mourning, with a parallel reading of *Robinson Crusoe* and Heidegger's *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt, Endlichkeit, Einsamkeit* (1992 [1983]). Derrida (2010) painstakingly interrogates the declaration "I am alone (in the world)" in relation to the concept of sovereignty that is the topic of the two-year seminar on *La bête et le souverain*. Moreover, this statement is understood to be intimately linked to the task of mourning figured as carrying the other after the world is gone in a reading of a line by poet Paul Celan: "Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen." It is significant that this carrying is directly associated with listening in another little phrase that Derrida (1994) analyses, this one by Heidegger: "Hören der Stimme des Freundes, der jedes Dasein bei sich trägt [hearing the voice of the friend that every Dasein carries with it]." Derrida unpeels the various possible meanings of being alone in the world and of being alone together. "I am alone with you" could either express head-over-heels love or stifling suffocation in which I would prefer to be alone *by myself* (which sadly often turn out to be two sides of the same coin, of course, as theorists of attachment know). And being alone can signify either to be withdrawn from the world and community or it can mean the more radical experience of being alone, by oneself or with another, before or after the existence of any social bond — after your death when not just you but the world itself is gone or even, according to the more radical formulation that Derrida proposes in *H. C. pour la vie*, after the exhaustion of the sun that precedes even daybreak — the end of the world before even the coming into being of the world (2002, 116/134).

In the third session of the seminar, Derrida turns to the question of whether solitude distances or brings one closer to others, examining a passage in Rousseau's *Confessions* that comes much later than the one quoted by Malabou, in which he admits that "perhaps he would have liked even better *always living alone* than always living with them." What intrigues Derrida is that Rousseau embraces voluntarily the isolation imposed upon him by his persecutors and masochistically imposes that solitude upon himself. Bringing out the double sense of "I am alone" as solitude and as exception, Rousseau claims that he *alone* is alone in this way. He alone willingly subjects himself to this self-destructive attack on himself. As Derrida reads it, Rousseau thus seeks to gain sovereign mastery over the originary alterity and alienation of the self, right at the point where it is threatened with disintegration — precisely in its isolation.

Put differently, Rousseau wants to be the subject of his own subjection. Could there be a better definition of neoliberal entrepreneurial subjectivation which internalizes capitalist violence as the self-inflicted cruelty of the superego constantly enjoining one to work harder and do better? Against this, Malabou insists that her voluntary redoubling of isolation, far from being a individualistic or nihilistic retreat from political or social life, is akin to the care of the self that Foucault sought in his later years as a space to isolate himself from the isolation that was AIDs and as such necessitated an attitude of care to others and to the world. Without adopting this Foucauldian interpretation wholesale, it is possible to discern another politics in the listening-together-in-solitude that has proliferated during the pandemic. What makes political organising over video chat rather than in the streets a greater challenge is the seeming absence

3. On society as a broadband network, see Davies (2020).

or fragility of a common world to be (re)built — a common world that is rapidly vanishing as the pandemic becomes an occasion to delay decisive action on the climate emergency and to accelerate the already asymmetrical transfer of wealth from the poorest to the most powerful fractions of rentier capital.

It would be a mistake, though, to attribute the contemporary attenuation of political listening simply to its digital mediation, for listening is always already irreducibly prosthetic and technologically articulated, as David Wills (2015) has shown. There is no listening, even the apparently internal monologue, that would not already have crossed some distance or some time lag. The self is originally telephonic (Derrida, 1987), which means that the call can always go answered or the wires get crossed. And, notwithstanding the frequent appeal in sound studies to an immediate sympathy or communality rooted in resonance or vibration, aurality is irreducibly mediated and mediatized — collective not because of some common ground but because it is always a call that comes from the other.

The pandemic has perhaps revealed that listening consists in what Pooja Rangan (2017) has dubbed “immediations.” The fetishization of immediacy and physical contact is a red herring. Or, rather, what is most interesting about investment in immediacy are the mediations at work precisely when mediation appears to be in retreat. Derrida’s point is that neither connection nor disconnection can be the basis for sociality (and to that extent he agrees with Marx). Glossing Celan’s phrase, he reflects:

The world is far, the world has gone, in the absence or distance of the world, I must, I owe it to you, I owe it to myself to carry you, without world, without the foundation or grounding of anything in the world, without any foundational or fundamental mediation (Derrida, 2010, BS2 160/105).

This carrying by ear without the foundation of a common world or once that world has gone to hell is the force of bearing life (*austragen* also means to bear a child to term) or the bearing of life after death by the living and thus also the courage of bearing death, of looking it in the face. It is the fidelity to the deceased loved one by which I carry you in me and address myself to you in me regardless of whether you hear me or not. It is, Derrida suggests, a goodbye (*salut*) for your safety (*salut*). At a time when the common world is in rapid retreat as the pandemic shock doctrine deepens existing inequalities between workers and the rentier class and creates new divisions in a world that has become more unsafe for the poorest, this is what becomes of the politics of listening and to the individual and collective subjectivations that it bears. Listening alone together means a militant carrying of the other by ear even and especially when the world is far away, almost gone.

The murder of George Floyd by three police officers in Minneapolis changed everything. Or at least it did for the white middle-class spectator. For black communities who have borne this struggle for decades, the problem was that *nothing has changed*. And what is heard continues to be refracted through the lenses of gradualism and respectability, reducing abolition to reform and systemic change to “diversity and inclusion.” But within the particular frame of the pandemic, the noisy politics of the street that seemed unthinkable only weeks earlier returned in force as the calculus shifted: racism is more lethal than COVID-19. But what is remarkable is not simply the conviction exhibited by bodies and voices in the streets as the contagion of this wave of Black Lives Matter protests spread around the world, facilitated to no small degree by social media. This is not the same as saying that we are witnessing a Twitter Revolution 3.0. The role of digital platforms in orchestrating and publicising protests has already been resoundingly put in context and is no substitute for on-the-ground organising. Nor

can watching a protest on Periscope politicize in the same way as living through the terror of a horse charge or the deafening pain of an LRAD can. And yet the experience of watching street actions in real time via digital platforms such as Instagram Live or even consuming historical protest songs on music-streaming services will be a defining one of this political conjuncture whose contradictory immediations demand careful analysis.

Similar immediations are entailed in the far-reaching changes to media ethnography at this time. For researchers like me, whose site is the street, fieldwork has become a matter of listening in — of over-hearing — from afar. This is especially the case when that street is in another country (much of my work is normally in Paris), but it is also a similar alienation even when nearer to home to the extent that public health risks, exacerbated by the enthusiastic use of kettling and the very real threat of far-right violence in central London, kept me on sidelines watching on my phone the skirmishes and acts of care happening only 50 or 100 metres away. My approach to documenting street actions using field recording and photography has been premised on the close-up character of street politics. The in-ear binaural microphones that I use are discrete and generate a highly immersive soundstage placing the listener in three-dimensional space almost as if they were inhabiting my body, experiencing every turn of my head and the sounds of my own vocalizations with disquieting intimacy. Like many street photographers, I shoot with a wide-angle prime lens, close up to subjects, darting quickly on my feet in multiple directions while the movement of this footwork can be heard in the roving spatiality of the audio recording. This immediacy, though, is no less “live” and no less mediated than that of watching the massive demonstration against racism and police violence in Paris on 13 June on social media or replaying the much-retweeted clip of Edward Colston’s statue being thrown into the Bristol harbour.

And yet for all those, like me, listening alone together to La Vérite pour Adama’s live feed on Instagram as Assa Traoré rallied both protestors in Place de la République and also auditors all around the world to fight for justice for her younger brother who died in police custody in 2016, solidarity was now mingled with solitude. The length of the demonstration and the inconvenience of watching on a small phone screen meant that I exclusively listened for the most part, but even without visual cues — of the *cortège de tête* moving en bloc, organisers pushing the banner forward, coloured flares streaking the sky, and feet scurrying away from tear-gas canisters — the spatiality of the field was dramatically transformed. On the one hand, the digital platform put my ear closer than it ever could have been in the field, but it also striated the sonic field setting the single voice of a leader into relief against the noise of the crowd. This is after all what the technology of the telephone does: at once collapsing and articulating space and time, it entangles intimacy and separation, community and solitude. The telephonic fantasy of unmediated nearness is predicated on spatial extension and technological prosthesis.

The more tangible and more tangibly complex nature of mediated im-mediacy during the pandemic acquires a critical function in relation to the ordinary ethnographic documentation of direct actions, pointing up the risk of remaining trapped in activist tourism and of reinforcing hegemonic narratives that recast diversionary tactics and mutual aid as the directness of shocking spectacle. The increased immediatisation of organising during the pandemic has on the one hand intensified the deliberative sociality of activism and on the other threatened to elide the non-discursive, bodily affinities of collective action. What is at stake here, though, is not the allure of liveness or real presence, as the conclusion of *Un peu, beaucoup, aveuglement* would suggest. What is lost and mourned is not raw, physical contact but the expiration, brutally exposed by the pandemic, of a common world in which organising can take place — the unavoidable realisation that the shared promise and struggle for a good life of the post-war years

is exhausted.⁴

When the common world is over, done, done for — when the world is *fichu*, we might say, since this word in French means both a headscarf or kerchief and to be worn out, written off, shot, rotten, damned, screwed, fucked — all that remains is to carry the other by ear in our isolation. And here *alone together* also refers to the relation between recent French philosophy, especially in its contact and retreat from decolonial thought, and the black radical tradition. It is the necessity for solidarity with the very brokenness beyond repair that just is the world for black people (Harney & Moten, 2013). The *alone* foregrounds that such solidarity would exceed the horizons of recognition, identification, and empathy with the other, which reduce listening to a function of market liberalism (Kelley, 2018). As such it also signals, without fully embracing an autonomist retreat into other worlds, an audibility that cannot be (re)appropriated by the capitalist state or any other institution, nor even by the sovereignty of self-possession, but is always somewhat unheard in being heard. It perhaps approximates what Harney and Moten describe as “the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you” (2013, p. 98) — listening in what they call the “surround” outside the visibility and surveillance of liberal democracy — but with the qualification that this “hapicality,” far from being immediate, is the incalculable “self-touching-you [*se toucher toi*] that Derrida describes in his book on Nancy and touch:

One must first of all speak of *reflexivity* and not *specularity*, since the contact (the *self-touching* and the *self-touching you* of the two borders) does not submit to the paradigm of sight or the mirror, or the speculum, or something like: “the eye can hear.” (2000, 317/281).

This *listening alone together* would therefore not consist in the amplification or speaking up of the unheard as if merely recalibrating the unequal balance of (in)audibility and mis(recognition). Nor does the current global balance of forces permit the interpellation of a revolutionary call to liberation in the way that Fanon heard the *Voice of Free Algeria* over the radio. Rather, politicization would be the interpellation of caring subjects in attunement with the more-than-human world around them.⁵ In another short piece that Malabou published during her isolation (2020b), she elaborates on her current work on mutual aid in the anarchist tradition, highlighting its basis in non-reciprocal altruism rather than competition and also its prefigurative character whereby it invents its own forms. The listening that carries the other in our solitude, without duty or debt, responsibility or gratitude, would be the way to be together in *a* world — one of many collective inventions, human and non-human — and to keep inventing and repairing that world through solidarity in solitude.

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4. For a discussion of the affective dimensions of this failure, see Berlant (2011).

5. On this kind of care, see Puig de la Bellacasa (2017).

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