

English Studies in Canada



Forum on Disciplinary Listening An Introduction

Jason Camlot and Katherine McLeod

Volume 46, Number 2-3-4, June–September–December 2020

New Sonic Approaches in Literary Studies

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111326ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2020.a903564>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE)

ISSN

0317-0802 (print)

1913-4835 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Camlot, J. & McLeod, K. (2020). Forum on Disciplinary Listening: An Introduction. *English Studies in Canada*, 46(2-3-4), 259–262.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2020.a903564>

Forum on Disciplinary Listening: An Introduction

Jason Camlot
Katherine McLeod
Concordia University

AS WE PREPARED OUR CALL-FOR-PAPERS for this special issue, “New Sonic Approaches in Literary Studies,” we went back and forth about if it should be *in* or *to* in our title. We started out with *to* but then caught ourselves switching to *in* whenever we wrote or spoke about it. We decided that *in* was the word we wanted because this special issue has been designed to consider how new sonic approaches find their ways into literary studies. The sonic approaches described in the essays in this collection may not originate in literary studies, but here they are—in literary studies. That word *in* also conveys that the aim of this special issue is not necessarily to determine what sonic approaches tell us about literary studies (although we have welcomed this, too) but to learn about new sonic approaches as popping up, existing, thriving, meddling, intervening *in* literary studies through situated methods of listening within particular case studies. As such, in shaping this special issue, we have been profoundly aware of disciplinarity and how it informs the authors’ listening practices as they have approached their subjects. All of the articles enact literary studies through their listenings, but we would argue that what listening means for each author is deeply conditioned by the disciplines through which they were trained and within which they now work. The question of *how we listen* called for closer consideration and we, as edi-

JASON CAMLOT is Professor of English and Research Chair in Literature and Sound Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. His recent critical works include *Phonopoetics* (Stanford 2019) and the co-edited collections, *Unpacking the Personal Library* (with Jeffrey Weingarten, WLUP, 2022), *Collection Thinking* (with Martha Langford and Linda Morra, Routledge, 2022), and *CanLit Across Media* (with Katherine McLeod, McGill Queen's UP, 2019). He directs the SpokenWeb research partnership that focuses on the history of literary sound recordings and the digital preservation and presentation of collections of literary audio.

tors, thought that the format of a forum on disciplinary listening would afford an engaging, imaginative, and useful way to think about listening as it is practised across disciplines and for that thinking to be dialogic, in flux, moving, like sound.

We listen from positions of cultural protocol and assumption and in doing so practise listening as “cultural techniques.” German media theorist Bernhard Siegert conceives of cultural techniques in terms of media history and technological objects. Cultural techniques, he argues, incite “a more or less complex actor network that comprises technological objects as well as the operative chains they are part of and that configure and constitute them” (Siegert 11). Among Siegert’s many interesting assertions about cultural techniques is that they begin with the introduction of interpretive distinctions that work to comprise assertions of truth or the nature of the real and that these distinctions are recursive and may create new distinctions out of the single element of another distinction (so, for example, the distinction beautiful/ugly may be applied to the noise side of the signal/noise binary and produce new distinctions between beautiful noise and ugly noise) (14). Cultural techniques of listening in their more developed forms have often been advanced with critical distinctions made through analysis that aims to produce knowledge about the world. Often the nature of the distinctions has depended on the disciplinary parameters by which analysis is pursued and knowledge sought.

Much of Jonathan Sterne’s work on the cultural history of sound recording media technologies, and techniques of listening, already anticipated the cultural theory that Siegert maps out. Sterne defines “audile technique” (or techniques of listening) as “a concrete set of limited and related practices of listening and practical orientations towards listening” (90). He explores these practices and orientations in distinct historical (and, we would say, disciplinary and professional) contexts, namely, those of modern medicine from the 1760s to 1900s, sound telegraphy from the 1840s to 1900s, and then in the context of emergent technologies of sound reproduction, telephony, phonography, and radio. Sterne outlines audile technique as a combination of “a relatively stable set of practical orientations toward sound and listening” (93). He argues that these orientations of listening developed in braided relation to the media technologies that extend and instantiate their capacity and authority, and he demonstrates how they captured and integrated a wide range of disciplinary practices of listening that had been developing in different ways as practices of knowledge since the eighteenth century.

A loud and clear example of such a disciplinary practice of listening that falls within the history of audile technique Sterne has presented is that of auscultation, the technique of listening to sounds from the lungs, heart, stomach, gut, and other organs, usually with the use of a stethoscope—a listening medium that extends and instantiates the expert capacity of the professional listener—with the instrumental aim of medical diagnosis. Medical listening of this kind was done for decades before listening media were introduced to the process. In other words, listening was long a part of the techniques doctors used in examination of their patients. But, as Sterne notes, the introduction of mediate auscultation (the use of listening tools for this process) helped reshape the field of medicine, imposing new special and social relations between doctor (listener) and patient (sound emitter), reconstituting sound as a field of precise data for medical perception and knowledge and elevating the practice of listening to a body to that of a science (103). This is one mature example of how listening as technique may develop into a full-fledged form of disciplinary listening. To unpack the history of such mature examples helps us to understand and reflect on the cultural formations that develop around something we may not even think about, that is, listening, how we listen, why we listen that way, and what implications and consequences come with *those* methods of listening. We have developed this forum to invite further reflection of this kind from experts who have worked with sound *in* and *across* a variety of disciplines of study. How does your discipline teach you how to listen? How has it “entrained” you into a listening disposition, such that I hear this person, this thing, this sound, in *this* way? (Eidsheim 30–33). We asked our contributors to reflect along these lines in response to some prompts we prepared, and their responses constitute this Forum on Listening. As a way of orienting them to the question about what sound and/or listening means within the disciplinary context of work in the arts and humanities, we asked:

- How has your discipline taught you to listen?
- What does *listening* mean within your discipline(s)?
- How do you understand *sonic approaches* in relation to disciplinarity?
- What aspects of sound studies as an interdisciplinary field do you translate/transpose into the approaches you take as a researcher and teacher within a more specific discipline of knowledge and university department?

KATHERINE MCLEOD is an Assistant Professor, Limited Term Appointment, at Concordia University. She is the principal investigator for her SSHRC-funded project “Literary Radio: Developing New Methods of Audio Research.” She has co-edited the book *CanLit Across Media: Unarchiving the Literary Event* (with Jason Camlot, 2019), and she has published on poetry, performance, and archives in journals such as *Canadian Literature*, *Feminist Modernist Studies*, and *Mosaic*. She produces *ShortCuts*—a monthly series about archival audio—for *The SpokenWeb Podcast*.

We requested “a reflection of 1000-ish words,” which was purposefully vague so as to encourage an openness in formal approaches to our questions. Reflection, as a form, implies a self-reflexivity, and we hoped it would invite a criticality infused with personal narratives of listening. And it did. We received spectacular responses with more generosity in creativity and sensitivity than we ever could have imagined. Their reflections are often serendipitous in how, without knowing, our respondents created a conversation between each other by quoting the same thinker, such as LaBelle and Furlonge both, by chance, citing the influence of Gemma Corradi Fiumara—and how respondents such as Eidsheim, Fox, and Mills each asked if they could send us a reflection written in the form of a conversation with current collaborators, emphasizing dialogue and listening as a key mode for their contributions.

Now, we invite you to listen to this forum as a conversation and to consider what you would write in response to these same questions. How do you listen? How have you been trained to listen? Trace how listening-as-practice weaves itself into each reflection. Notice the constellations of listeners evoked, the resonances in reflections. Immerse yourself *in* the listening that each writer educes on the page.

Works Cited

- Eidsheim, Nina Sun. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. Duke UP, 2019.
- Siegert, Bernhard. *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*. Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. Fordham UP, 2015.
- Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Duke UP, 2003.