English Studies in Canada

Blind Mode/Blind Listening Techniques

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

New Sonic Approaches in Literary Studies

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111332ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2020.a903554

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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

Mills, M. & Slater, A. (2020). Blind Mode/Blind Listening Techniques. *English Studies in Canada*, *46*(2-3-4), 297–302. https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2020.a903554

Blind Mode/Blind Listening Techniques

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Blind people are often assumed by the sighted to have remarkable organic listening powers, yet blind ways of listening are learned through schooling, improvisation, and community protocols for using sound to infer and hack environments built for vision.[1] Scholars in sound studies have shifted attention from instruments and soundscapes to listening techniques and rigorously-tutored sonic skills, but they have mostly not considered blind students who have been subject to formal listening curricula for decades.[2] Blind people have taken some elements of these lessons, rejected others, and amalgamated them with tacit blind expertise to generate counter-sounds and blind soundscapes within and around sighted architectures.

Just as deaf sound artist Christine Sun Kim describes her work as "unlearning sound etiquette" (Kim quoted in Weisblum), blind listening techniques—often linked to blind sound production—contravene sonic norms, even when the goal is access to conventional visual landscapes and texts. Andy Slater is a blind sound artist who records, transcribes, and otherwise documents these techniques, from the clicks and echoes of cane

1 We borrow the concept of inference here from Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich.

2 On sonic skills see Karin Bijsterveld.

ESC 46.2–4 (June/September/December 2020 [Published May 2023]): 297–302

navigation, to the "background sounds" of subways that act as keynotes for identification and safety, to screen readers like VoiceOver for converting text to speech. Mara Mills is a media studies professor and historian of electronics, electroacoustics, and disability. For this forum on disciplinary listening and new sonic approaches, we talked about blind aural discipline and "blind mode"—past and present, learned and unlearned.

Mara Mills is Associate Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, where she co-founded and co-directs the Center for Disability Studies. She is also co-founder and editorial board member of *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*. With Rebecca Sanchez, she recently co-edited *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method* (NYU Press, 2023).

MARA: I love the liner notes for your album *Unseen Reheard* (No Index records, 2020). A manifesto on blind listening! Like the passage where you describe sighted hearing people as passive listeners:

> When a visually impaired person listens they are employing their ears in many ways. Safety, spatial identification, problem-solving, navigation and wayfinding, and of course pouring a drink. Our hearing isn't magical, but if you ask I will tell you that it is. It is safe to say that my listening practice and routines are different from most sighted people because of how I've trained my ears. Installation artist Christine Sun Kim, who is deaf, has stated that hearing people are all passive listeners. I would like to up the ante and claim that sighted hearing people are the passive ones. Many of us blind folks are hyper-active listeners including yours truly. I use this accusation to drive the work on this album and ask that the viewer keep my magical hearing in mind. (Slater)

I want to know more about your listening practices and how you document them. Your work offers such a rare instance of listening itself on record.

ANDY: I have two modes of listening when it all comes down to it. There's the Deep Listening aesthetic which is something I learned in school, and then there's Blind mode which is intuitive. Deep Listening (Oliveros) is a practice familiar to a lot of people serious about music and soundscape experiences. It's a neutral way of exploring sound, letting it happen and accepting what you hear. Blind mode is judgmental. What is that sound and is it going to run me over? Will it bite me? Can I put it my pocket? How will it influence the rest of my day? You can't really toggle off Blind mode. Every sound is defined and requires investigating. The similarities between the two modes are things like pinpointing tiny sounds hidden in a crowd, following sounds as they move. Both can evoke emotions, but Blind mode insists that you pay attention to those emotions.

Both natural and built environments can be exciting sonically, but they can also be boring. One benefit that a blind person has is the permission to disrupt the soundscape. There is a phonology of the blind body. Our hands, our mouths, our feet, our canes, and our dogs create a language of mobility through touch and sound. It's choreography. A sighted person can tell that they are in a marble room with a bunch of windows just by looking around. I figure that out by moving through the space, tapping my cane, clicking my tongue, and touching the surface. It's like throwing a big rock into a still lake. Blind people have permission to disrupt in order to figure out where we are. I like to record those disruptions. It's a way of gauging the size of a space as well as its characteristics. Then I can turn my Blind mode recordings into a Deep Listening experience coming full circle.

Andy Slater is a blind Chicago-based media artist. His work focuses on accessible art and technology, the phonology of the blind body, and sound design for film, dance, and XR. Andy holds a Master's from Northwestern University and a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

MARA: I first learned about your work when I was researching the history of the C-1 cassette player (figure 1). This machine was released by the NLS (National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled) in 1981, and it included a time-stretching or pitch restoration feature so that blind people could speed-read Talking Books without distorting a narrator's voice. To my surprise this tape player, which is no longer in production, still has a fan base in noise and other experimental music scenes. You use sounds from the C-1 among many other access tools, old and new, in your own compositions. Tell me about blind sound production and the ways you work with, or rework, accessibility tech.

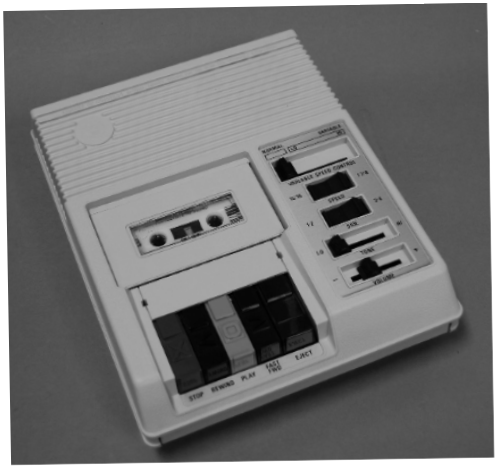

Figure 1. NLS C-1 "Cassette Book Machine." A bulky yellow plastic tape player, with large push buttons and slides for controlling volume, playback speed, rewind, and more. Courtesy of The Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind.

ANDY: The NLS tape decks and the 8 rpm record players were ugly and bulky. They were meant for home use, out of sight from embarrassment. There was a stigma attached to them much like large print books and the white cane itself. Some of us knew the glory of the Talking Book players: everything could sound weird if we let it. Reading is fundamental, but any Paul Anka song could sound like sword-fighting Tiamat the Chromatic dragon on those players. This is how many of us discovered that sound itself can be an alternative to photographs and paintings.

These tools, purposely ugly so no one would want to steal them, were also phenomenal noise-makers. They are antiquities of Blind culture and not that different from contemporary assistive tech—both can be used creatively and can annoy /disrupt. Wayfinding apps beep constantly, phones talk aloud, light detectors double as Theremins, and object recognition apps are always wrong. Blind folks can process multiple sound sources at once because of our use of this tech. When you compose and perform using these tools as instruments, filling the room with Blind people sounds and requesting attention from all who hear it, you're most likely making some people uncomfortable and anxious. That is usually the motive of any noise artist, but in my case it's deconstructing my own culture and using tools made specifically for me. That gives more meaning to the art and experience. It's political and anti-ableist and not just some noise-bro showing off their thrift store find.

Figure 2. Four young students listening to records and radio and making tape recordings. Jean Marie Rathgaber, *A Sound World: Experimental Listening Curriculum*. Washington D.C. Office of Education Bureau of Research, 1969.

MARA: For this forum on Disciplinary Listening I started thinking about the history of listening curricula at blind schools, which included a lot of audio equipment, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. I looked back at some of my files from archival research at the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and came across a 1969 pamphlet, *Experimental Listening Curriculum*, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. On the one hand, these lessons emphasize obedience to oral instructions and socialization in things like non-distracted listening habits and "appropriate telephone experiences." But they also embrace blind techniques, like echo production and perception or comparisons between tactual and aural discrimination. And the teachers set the kids loose in an A/V room (emphasis on the A) with all sorts of telephones, radios, record players, and tape recorders. This is a K-6 curriculum and they are asking kids really smart questions about auditory memory, what speed or snow does to sound, and how to gauge distance aurally. It's unusual to see such explicit and precise attention to auditory skills—even though, as the authors of the pamphlet state, "educational studies have consistently demonstrated that the major percentage of children's class time, and of adult communication time, is devoted to listening." I'm curious what you make of this pamphlet, and how you navigate or appropriate sighted attempts to train blind listening.

ANDY: This pamphlet has easily become one of my favourite things. It expresses how important sound is to mobility, which is obvious, but also ventures into practices of critical access (Hamraie). It asks teachers to bring in recorded sounds of traffic and sounds local to the campus. It suggests how bouncing balls can strengthen echo perception, how to identify trees based on how the wind sounds through the leaves, and how volume intensity is crucial to pre-cane training. They even go so far as to play back household recordings in the classroom to simulate the students' own homes so they can learn the navigate them. It also teaches how these skills can help a student measure how distracting their study space is, critiquing its sonic environment. What can students do to free their study space from disruption and how can they share these ideas with others?

The concept of mapping the soundscape was introduced in this booklet long before R. Murray Schafer proposed his version, proving that Blind folks are the original soundwalkers. It is not even worth mentioning that we're going on a soundwalk when we do. I lead them all the time, happy to get my steps in. Acoustic ecology has become more popular over the past two years, and I'm glad to see that. We can measure bird populations or the

erosion of a beach by listening. Astrophysicists sonify our galaxy to learn about it. But on a local and macro level, blind people notice what's changing and can identify the nuances that measurement mics can't. Many of us taught ourselves and have unique terms for how and what we hear. Others have learned from their communities. None of this is new to us. I think we should be teaching the sighted what we know about sound because it's a lot simpler than you may make it seem.

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