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Archival Listening

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Archival listening, to start with, is the act of listening to archives. That listening can happen in places such as a public archive or outside of archival spaces, such as listening at home to online archival collections or listening to saved audio files on headphones while walking. But archival listening is more than listening to archives.

Archival listening is listening to archives while reflecting on how you are listening and how you intend to share what you have heard.

That sharing could take the format of a published essay, podcast episode, classroom lecture, playlist, or simply telling a friend about what you have heard, all of which require a degree of editorial curation. Archival listening listens with that future listener in mind.

Archival listening listens with the aim of making something new out of archival audio. One such making is *ShortCuts*. Released monthly on *The SpokenWeb Podcast* feed, *ShortCut*s explores what can be made with literary audio archives by cutting, splicing, and reframing their digitized contents. What kinds of new stories and audio criticism can be produced through the selection and arrangement of short archival clips? What kinds of scenarios of listening across time arise through such acts of archival listening with the goal of creating audio-based criticism in the present?

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As the writer and producer of *ShortCuts*, now in its fourth season, I have developed a practice of archival listening in the making of over thirty episodes. But when I started to write a version of *ShortCuts* for this forum, I realized that the sound clips are often what respond to the prompts, arguments, and questions posed in my critical narration. When editing the audio, I can play the same clip again—and again; I can overlap my voice with a recording, as though re-enacting it, which is a technique I started using in an episode based on a recording of Muriel Rukeyser (*ShortCuts* 2.4 "Connections). Would it work to write about these techniques of archival listening, or do they have to be performed?

Playing clips of archival audio can demonstrate affective, sonic entanglements all at once in ways that a linear text cannot; yet, in writing about archival listening, I will try to perform it too.

[Tape rewinding]

… and I say that while holding out my arms gesturing as though I am attempting to hold the sound …[1]

[Tape rewinding ends]

Archival listening is a practice of attending to the archival apparatus holding the sound. *Holding* because that action gestures to the physicality of these contexts, both archival and original, and to the embodied agency of the listener selecting audio from the archives. *To hold* can be an act of care and an act of containment. For instance, to be held is to be supported or carried, implying the body doing this physical and emotional work; likewise, to be held can mean to be held back, to hold one's attention, or to be kept, all implying an assertion of power. An audio archive holds sound.

While you were away, I held you like this in my mind.[2]

1 Katherine McLeod, voiceover from McLeod, "Archival Listening" *ShortCuts* 4.1 (17 October 2022). In writing this piece, I have used minimal in-text citations as a way of mirroring the podcast episode's archival remix. Also, I have intentionally not referred to the names of the speakers in the text to keep the focus on the clips as recordings and the absence of the sounds of their voices. If you were listening to the audio of a *ShortCuts* episode, archival sources for audio would be available via links in the show notes (see McLeod, "Archival Listening"). Including such information in the audio work would disrupt the critical flow. Print criticism has developed solutions for such problems, and readers of criticism have developed a tolerance for the presence of citations within the text, or as nearby paratexts.

2 Phyllis Webb, recorded at her reading (with Gwendolyn MacEwen) in Montreal on 18 November 1966, and excerpted in McLeod, "Moving, Still." When poets are quoted, as in this quotation, the words and punctuation are transcribed as they are heard in the recording and not as they appear in the published poem.

If this were audio, you would have heard those italicized lines spoken by Phyllis Webb. You would hear the sound of her voice. (You might also have heard her voice resonating in the room in which it was recorded and the sonic textures of a recording that was recorded on a reel-to-reel tape in 1966 and converted into a digital audio file.) That sound of her voice is entirely hers and impossible to describe or to recreate through writing.

Her written poetry is her voice too, of course. But her voice on the page is not Webb's voice as *her voice*. Not as her sonorous voice. Not as her voice that says *like this* as though she is showing you something—with tenderness. Not as her voice that invites an imagining of her reading in 1966. When listening now, we must remember that the sound we are hearing, which we understand as her voice, was constituted and recorded in that moment in time.

Archival listening is hearing the body in time.

Archival listening is situating oneself as a listening body in time.

Archival listening recognizes that a listener has agency in choosing sounds from the archives to reanimate, along with choosing how much context to provide for those sounds. With those choices comes responsibility because replaying archival sound will have an unknown yet real impact on listeners. Archival listening recognizes that listeners can have varying degrees of intimacy with the sounds and the contexts in which they were recorded. Hearing a recorded voice again can move one to tears.

Archival listening understands that there are limits of knowing and makes room for what cannot be heard, too.

Archival listening takes time. It involves pausing when something needs contemplation, paying attention to sounds around the sound, noticing the traces of emotions, talking about discomfort, imagining the room and what it would have felt like to be there, and rewinding when something needs to be heard again.

> *I am holding the sound carefully, knowing how difficult it can be to take a recorded voice—with all of its situated affect attached to it—out of the archives. To unarchive, carefully.*[3]
>
> [Sound of pressing play]
>
> *Lee read the epigram back to me in Montreal. And I was very honoured too, that she had written it, and I've been trying to*

3 Katherine McLeod, voiceover from McLeod, "Archival Listening."

write her back an epigram ever since. We might make a book. [Audience laughter][4]

I am playing this audio clip out of its original context in which it would have been heard in front of a live audience. But, in doing so, I am trying to bring to the forefront connections between poets that I believe are embedded within the recording. Words cannot contain all that can be heard in that laughter indicated in the transcript. The laughter signals not only the presence of the audience but also the relationship with that audience, with the warmth of the laughter sonically suggesting community, support, a sense of the room as a safe feminist space, and even the sound of shared joy, especially because the voices most audible in the laughter are the two poets themselves.

Quietness in the room. We knew. [Page turning][5]

We hear the turning of the page. The room. What would it have been like to hear these words spoken in the room where the recording took place?

The room that held you is still here.[6]

That room is the room of the poem. That room is also the room where the reading took place, or at least that is how I hear it when listening to the recording. When listening to the recording I cannot but hear that *here* as *hear*, as though reminding us that something is still *here* in sound. I think, then, of the room as a space holding the sound.

I hear that room now as speaking to what I have been exploring in ShortCuts as a method of feminist place-making. A room, an audible place in which to hear women's voices from the archives. For their voices to take up sonic space and for us as listeners to hear what feelings are made through those sounds.[7]

Archival listening is to be moved by recorded sound and to reflect on what constitutes that moving. To ask, what does it feel like to listen to this?

4 Dionne Brand speaking at a reading with Lee Maracle in 1988, recorded for broadcast on Vancouver Co-op Radio's program "radiofreerainforest" (host Gerry Gilbert), archived in "Gerry Gilbert radiofreerainforest Collection" in SFU Digitized Collections, and excerpted in McLeod, "Re-Situating Sound."

5 Phyllis Webb, reading from *Naked Poems*, recorded at her reading (with Gwendolyn MacEwen) in Montreal on 18 November 1966, and excerpted in McLeod, "Moving, Still."

6 Ibid.

7 Katherine McLeod, voiceover from "Archival Listening."

That question—What does it feel like to listen to this?— invites reflection upon what the archival sound represents, and it can lead to a reflection on the subjective and embodied experience of it, and often both are intertwined.

But what is the *this* that we are listening to together?

> *This is a lecture on phonetics [...] an impossible lone sound ... [whispered] the ghost of sound ...*[8]

This is. What is *this*? It is the this-ness of sonority itself. What we are listening to—the recording. But, of course, that recording is a trace of a live event. It is a ghost of sound from the past. An archival recording is a ghost of sound.

> *What was interesting to me hearing last night at the reading—there was so much—my voice was so much more present in those poems than I had remembered*[9]

A recording captures a person in a moment in time in their body.

I ask listeners to consider what it feels like to listen to a recording, and occasionally there are recordings of poets answering this question too, sometimes with respect to hearing their own voice. What does it feel like to hear a version of your past self in sound?

> *You asked me what it was like—what I thought about when hearing it ... and it's strange to hear that kind of reflection of yourself. I remember what I was thinking about. I remember what my poetry, my poetic preoccupations were at the time. I remember how far that poem came because it was young and sentimental when I wrote it, and then it was not like that by the time it was published. It took on a different sort of personality by the time it was published. But yeah, I remember everything that I was thinking about. I remember how excited I was about it. Yeah, it's just a—so thank you.*[10]

8 Oana Avasilichioaei performing a version of "Chambersonic (I)" at The Words & Music Show, online, on 23 May 2021 and excerpted in McLeod, "The Event."

9 Daphne Marlatt talking with Karis Shearer and Megan Butchart played on "SoundBox Signals presents Performing the Archive" an episode of SoundBox Signals that was aired on The SpokenWeb Podcast (co-produced by Karis Shearer, Megan Butchart, and Nour Sallam) and excerpted in McLeod, "Sonic Passages."

10 Kaie Kellough talking with Katherine McLeod in McLeod, "The Voice that is the Poem."

Only the recorded poet can remember what it felt like to be there on stage speaking into a microphone. Audience members will each have their own memory of the event. The recording device that captured the event in time reveals its own kind of capacity for memory. Then, as archival listeners, to what extent are we trying to remember a memory that may not be ours in the first place?

> *I wanted to forget you, so I tried to erase your name. I wanted to erase you, I forgot you, your name. I wanted you, I forgot you, I erased your name. You forgot me, I wanted you, you erased my name [Fade out recording]*[11]

What struck me in hearing this recording was how the poem demonstrates the tremendous work it takes to remember and to forget (with its emphasis on trying and wanting) and how that work runs in parallel to us as archival listeners always removed from the original event. We try to reconstruct past events. Often, the reason we try is because we were so moved by the recordings of those events. The affective impression of audio can make us wish we could have been there. (And archival listening thinks about this wish, too.)

We want to remember what the archive seems to remember.

Archival listeners are removed from the time and space of a recorded event, but, having heard its sound, a new memory of that event is formed, and the feeling of hearing it remains.

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