NOTES ON MAD LISTENING

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ABSTRACT

This essay takes shape around a selection of autoethnographic scenes detailing what I call 'mad listening.' The notes below take a mad first-person standpoint, drawn from my own experience of obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and generalized anxiety, among other crazed aspects of my unruly bodymind that evade diagnosis. Challenging the power that diagnoses hold—but not negating their importance for some people—I propose alternative ways of retheorizing these idiosyncratic experiences, through abstract intensities such as 'stickiness.' By de-medicalizing and de-pathologizing madness, my goal is to emphasize the persistent ambiguities and slippages of auditory perception that are not so easy to taxonomize. As such, I aim to chart a poetics of the perceptual glitch in relation to mad listening, without the footholds and straightjackets of psychiatric terminology. Linking mad praxis to other intersections of radical unreasoning, this essay presents further challenges to audist and phonocentric assumptions, which tend to abound where listening subjectivities are concerned.

KEYWORDS

sound, listening, madness, affect, phenomenology, autotheory

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Prelude

In her famous treatise on camp, Susan Sontag introduces the topic by saying that many things have been named but not described. This essay concerns the opposite: something described but not named. I am inclined to call it "mad listening." For me, this umbrella term encapsulates a wide range of neurodivergent orientations to sound, from hallucination to phobia to synesthesia to other experiential modes that you will not find in the DSM.

Mad listening should not be thought of as an essentialism or a universalism, nor does it occupy a binary with saneness. In articulating "mad" listening, I follow La Marr Jurelle Bruce (2020) in treating madness as a "floating signifier," which ranges from unruly phenomenology to psychiatric pathology to states of anger and rage, or any sense of difference experienced as a result of living within a psychonormative society (8). By mobilizing this term, I work toward centring people with lived experience, combating stereotypes, holding space for irrationality and unreason, troubling psychiatric discourse, and celebrating Mad Pride. This essay also moves alongside recent work by John Levack Drever (2019), whose concept of "auraldiversity" names and celebrates a wide range of hearing subjects and listening practices, while challenging "auraltypical archetypes" (20).

Following Kathleen Stewart (2007) and her theorization of ordinary affects, I present this essay as a loose assemblage of notes, riffs, anecdotes, vignettes, and fragments, in order to form a noncoherent "mass of resonances" (6). To that end, it would be most accurate to say that I am interested in conjuring an atmosphere rather than an argument—provocations and attunements and residues rather than "evaluative critique" (4). Much like Stewart, I want to create a "contact zone for analysis" that is not dependent on closure and clarity (5).

In the notes that follow, I attempt to illustrate my lifelong experience of non-normative auditory perception, which sometimes takes the form of an active practice (in listening "against the grain" of neurotypicality) and, at other times, comes on suddenly in a moment of disturbance and disorientation. To quote Sara Ahmed: "disorientation could be described here as the 'becoming oblique' of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior" (2006, 163). Ahmed insists that it is a matter of irresolvable tension as to whether "the strangeness is in the object or in the body that is near the object" (163). Following Lisa Blackman (2017), a

majority of the scenarios described below are concerned with "anomalous experiences or threshold phenomena," wherein distinctions are unsettled between inner and outer, near and far, real and imaginary, material and immaterial (para. 6). If such thresholds are spaces of epistemic uncertainty, as Blackman suggests, then to listen madly is to inhabit such indeterminacy, perhaps even to embrace it. Though threshold phenomena are part of everyday experience, this does not mean that everyone is equally attuned or sensitized to them. Far from invoking a universal mad listener, this essay is ultimately a personal history, or an "autobiographical topography," to borrow a term from Kier-La Janisse (2015).

As topographies go, my position as a researcher, and my points of intersection, are as follows: I am a white settler scholar who identifies as mad and genderqueer. Appropriately, I would stress that this piece of writing only speaks to my experience of madness and mad listening, and although I aim to incorporate a plurality of critical voices in my work, I cannot claim to speak as one for the many. Nonetheless, Lauren Fournier (2021) reminds us that "the singular can be a gateway to the multiple. And in theorizing together we may, after all, hear ourselves" (319). In this way, I consider this research to be a means of adding my voice to the mad movement at large, rather than an impossible distillation of mad thought across numerous cultural contexts. Though I cannot speak for anyone else, I hope to signal-boost other critical voices, to welcome other mad-affirmed narratives, to open up space for further discussions and disruptions within academic practice, to question the processes and forms by which we produce knowledge, and to challenge the criteria by which particular kinds of knowledge are deemed valid. Quoting Robert McRuer, Mel Y. Chen (2004) defines cripistemologies as "seriously twisted ways of knowing in the current global order" (McRuer qtd. in Chen 173). The notes below seek to develop a twisted cripistemology of sorts, a partial and provisional perspective on madness and sensory knowledge working in opposition to sanism and stigma.

Notes on Mad Listening

> Is it the sea you hear in me,
> Its dissatisfactions?
> Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?
>
> —Sylvia Plath, "Elm" (1962)

1. Wherever you are right now, I invite you to pause and listen, taking a moment to situate yourself. Whenever you are ready, try to pick out five sounds or felt-vibrations in your environment. A dripping faucet. The humming of an appliance.

A garbage truck backing up. Trees shaking in the wind. The call of an unfamiliar bird. Dull footsteps from the upstairs apartment. A buzzing off in the distance that could be a blender, or a circular saw, or a vacuum, or a pressure washer. It is hard to say. Doubt always creeps in.

2. Perhaps the most famous of all mad listeners is the "very dreadfully nervous" protagonist of Edgar Allen Poe's short story, "The Tell-Tale Heart" (121). After murdering a man, he is driven to confess his crime because of an unsettling sound that torments him from beneath the floorboards, where the body lies. He describes the sound as a low pulse, like that of a watch wrapped in cotton. In this story, Poe describes an insect called the deathwatch beetle, a critter known for making a very distinct hissing noise which resembles a heartbeat. The composer and sound theorist François J. Bonnet describes this fictional listening situation as an example of "panic listening." According to Bonnet (2015), hallucinations arise from the moment when "affects, desires, and phobias act directly upon perception, subjecting it to their own prerogatives" (170). If those five sounds you noticed earlier are still perceptible, what do they sound like now? What kind of affects, desires, and phobias are present? In what ways do they shape the noisy world around you, and vice versa?

3. In the early summer of this year, one of my neighbours backed over and flattened a baby crow with his truck—gruesome, I know. For weeks afterwards, two adult crows made relentless alarm calls in the tree outside our window—a much harsher cawing than usual, paired with strange dances upon the branches. I learned that this was an elaborate funerary ritual of sorts. Still, the sound was unbearable to me, and I entertained a number of desperate measures. Maybe we could face some speakers out the window and shout them away, like an auditory scarecrow (notwithstanding the environmental ethics of upsetting nature's acoustic balance in this way, but I hope you will forgive me). It was only a few hours later that I had completely forgotten about these schemes. At noon, I logged onto my online therapy appointment. I was having—still am having—a tough time with dissociation. My therapist and I talked about grounding techniques, strategies for reconnecting to the physical world, being present in sensation. Just then, as if conjured by thought, a bald eagle let out a majestic peal above our apartment. I could hear the crows battling with it, probably as it tried to raid their nest. The high-pitched piping of the eagle was impossible to ignore. Both of us took off our headphones and listened intently. The sound went on for a few

minutes like that, and I remember thinking: O.K. universe, what message are you trying to send me? There was something deeply earnest and spiritual about the moment, accompanied by embarrassing tears of wonder. My embarrassment was about to multiply, however—and you might have already guessed where this is going. Some germ of wisdom concerning my dissociation was extracted from the eagle scenario: *when in doubt, return to the birds, return to the birds, return to the birds*. I logged off with this thought circling profoundly in my head, stumbling into the living room like someone struck by a miracle. "Wasn't that incredible?" I said to my partner. I asked if she had seen it. She had no idea what I was talking about. "The eagle!" I said. Outrageous laughter ensued. Behind her, facing out the window: a portable speaker, connected to a laptop with the YouTube video still pulled up: "10 Hours of Eagle Sounds." For such a sophisticated organ as the ear, it is remarkably susceptible to mishearings. I could have sworn that the eagle was not a speaker in the opposite corner of my house but a creature of blood-and-bone whose piercing voice was conducted cleanly through the air and not bent through electrical circuits and distorted by apartment walls. Mad listening makes fools of us all.

4. To listen madly is to listen to things on the edge of perception and discernibility—the faint buzz of a dimmer switch or the sound of distant traffic through closed windows, or the false eagle circling its circuitry. To this end, Brian Kane (2014) reads one of Franz Kafka's short stories, "The Burrow," as an example of acousmatic listening, which refers to sounds whose sources cannot be determined (147). In Kafka's story, a mole tries to locate the source of a humming noise that reverberates throughout its underground channels. This mole comes up with seven possible explanations for the sound, but none of them are substantiated. Mad listening exists here, in the uncertain and uncomfortable threshold of unknowingness.

5. As Kane (2014) notes, one of the key features of acousmatic listening is that "under-determination of the sonic source encourages imaginative supplementation" (9). This is not to conflate madness with an overactive imagination, however—and yet, some have suggested as much. Drawing on the nineteenth-century historian Hippolyte Taine, Robin Mackay (2010) argues that hallucination could be considered "the basic fact of mental life" (12). Here, Mackay takes a universalist position in suggesting that all listening is inherently inflected with madness. "The potential for extravagant delirium," he writes, "is constitutive of the basic mechanisms of cognitive synthesis" (2010, 19). On the other hand, one should acknowledge that madness entails much more than divergent cognitive processing. This is evident in the heavily-pathologized concept of hallucination, which carries radically different connotations and consequences depending on its

usage, which is undoubtedly fraught. For people with the lived experience of voice hearing, so-called "auditory hallucinations" might result in institutionalization, incarceration, and other violent forms of psychiatrization. So as not to conflate everyday phenomenological quirks with lived experience, then, one must hold the exceptional and the common in constant tension.

6. At times, I experience this very tension within myself. The period of stillness before bed, for example, is often one of heightened and distorted awareness. My entire being is full of leftover energies from the day. Residual neurons seem to fire like the tiny pings of a warm engine after it is turned off. As a light and restless sleeper, I have become dependent on a steady drone of brown noise to help me shut off. Sometimes, when I am lying awake, I hear hushed voices, and sometimes faint music, emanating from within the static. But I am always less than sure that these sounds are coming from the speaker and not, in fact, someone in the next room or a conversation on the street far below. Certainty is not part of the equation. On a few occasions I have heard looping melodies that I am unable to distinguish as mind sounds or room sounds. The noise machine seems to create a bridge between these two spaces of mind and room. When this happens, I usually become quite anxious. It does not help that my partner never hears what I hear. I turn off the noise machine to see if these sounds might be coming from another apartment, or I put my head right next to the speaker in an attempt to locate these phantasms. Voices speak or sing in the soft hum. There are words, but not intelligible words. My first guess is that some kind of stray signal is cutting through, not unlike the way that old dental fillings would sometimes pick up radio signals. But there is also a long history of people hearing ghosts in the machine, otherwise known as Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP). The parapsychologist Konstantin Raudive, a student of Carl Jung, collected thousands of recordings of white noise, from which he extracted an abundance of uncanny phrases. According to Raudive (1971), "the voices often maintain that we do nothing but sleep. This is repeated under many different circumstances" (270). One of these radio voices, speaking in a combination of Swiss German and Latvian, was reported to have said to the experimenters: "Good day, we are the mad ones here" (1971, 111).

7. According to an experimental theory collective called The Occulture, "whether phenomena such as EVP are real or not is never really the question, entrenched as they are in the manifestation of differing hallucinatory registers of possibility" (Goodman et al. 2019, 111). The authors suggest that even the biggest EVP skeptic

"may also be playing with pareidolia"—a term that refers to a form of heightened pattern recognition wherein people tend to find meaning in random stimuli (Goodman et al. 2019, 111). The EVP skeptic finds a negative meaning, or what The Occulture calls a "negative hallucination" (Goodman et al. 2019, 111). In other words, the skeptic hears nothing but white noise because this is the only pattern that such a person can recognize. By turning hallucination inside out in this way, perhaps we might remove some of the stigma and pathologization from voice hearing.

8. If you were online in 2018, you probably heard about the "Yanny or Laurel" phenomenon. A short recording features a man pronouncing the word "Laurel," which can also be heard as "Yanny." Remarkably, the general population seems to be divided fifty-fifty on which one of these words is most audible. This glitch in the Matrix exposed not just the perceptual instability within us, but also the perceptual gaps between us, reminding us that listening is highly contextual and provisional, dependent on countless factors such as age, speaker placement, musical background, cultural context, and so on. We have a tendency to think that what is heard is a mirror of something concrete in the world, but this is not so. As one study from *Current Biology* puts it: "Sensory information is always fragmentary and noisy, so by nature it cannot unambiguously reflect the state of the world at every instant. Rather, perception must make inferences, which are often unconscious. These inferences draw prior information from past experience, be it long-term expertise or immediate context" (Pressnitzer et al. 2018, 741). Another study from Stanford suggests that 2% of the top 10,000 words in the English language could be polyperceivable, including pairs such as frank/strength, claimed/framed, settle/civil, or floral/family (Chandra et al. 2021, 1). If polyperceivability is so prevalent in spoken language, then perhaps to listen madly is to recognize that all hearing involves mishearing, and that the binary of mad and sane is confounded by the persistent presence of one inside the other.

9. People like to say that certain noises "drive them mad." I for one have no problem with nails on a chalkboard, whereas the very mention of this auditory image might make you wince. Recently, I read an article in the Harvard Health Blog that describes rain as a neutral sound, as compared to the disturbance of a crying baby (Cartreine 2017, n.p.). But really, if you think about it, there is no neutral sound, no neutral rain. You can bet that somewhere on the news, a meteorologist is shouting over a thunderstorm. In my experience, neutral-seeming sounds can be the most unpleasant. Take this scenario, for example: I recall sitting with my friend at the breakfast table one morning as he ate a plain bagel with jam. It was

not that he chewed with his mouth open, but that the muffled chomping of his cheeks was unbearable for reasons that are impossible to explain. The sound of the bagel overtakes one's entire body. I imagine it like a lifebuoy thrown over my head, pinning my arms to my sides. I feel trapped inside this sound. It is annoying enough to have been invented by someone who knows what they are doing. The hair on the back of my neck stands up, and I want to flee the room. I try to concentrate on other things, but the sound overrides my efforts. It bypasses my ears and goes straight into my spine. If I try to ignore it, I am drawn deeper into it. The background refuses to stay backgrounded. In moments such as this one, it almost feels like the most trivial stimuli could leap out and kill you. The house is full of potential triggers. A dripping faucet, a ticking clock. Just typing this makes my heart speed up, and I feel the urge to retreat to the soundproof room I have constructed in my mind, the room that no sound can enter, not even the neutral rain.

10. Even if a sound were neutral, it can quickly lose its supposed neutrality through repetition, which is a formal archetype—if not a cliché—of mad sound. The TV Tropes website, for example, has pages devoted to the "Madness Mantra" ("All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy") and Incessant Music Madness ("This is the song that never ends. Yes it goes on and on, my friends"). Whether we are talking about looping or chanting or muttering or stuttering, the idea of madness is often implicit. In Tom Murphy's 1985 play *Bailegangaire*, an elderly woman repeats the same story to her granddaughter every night without finishing it. The incessant repetition of the unfinished story starts to wear on her until, at last, she says that she is going crazy. She pauses to reflect on this statement, however, and decides that she is not crazy after all. Or rather, it is implied that she is not the crazy one. Her grandmother Mommo speaks in crazy-coded sentences: "The aspect silver of moon an' stars reflecting off the new impossibility" (2014, 79). One reviewer of this play, Bruce Weber, describes the grandmother as a "maddening and enraging" storyteller, whose incoherence is "tough to tolerate" (2002, n.p.). "There's a pretentiousness," says Weber, "about the playwright's insistence in letting Mommo try the audience's patience as well as her granddaughters'" (2002, n.p.). Let's agree that Weber's reaction is uncharitable at best. I use this example of *Bailegangaire* to model one of the ethical demands of mad listening—namely, that incoherence must not be simply tolerated, but also celebrated. To listen madly is to listen with madness, and not against it.

11. The prospect of listening with another person by means of sharing their sensory subjectivity is nonetheless a fantasy. Allow me to offer an example from my personal life: I am among a small subset of people with so-called obsessive compulsive disorder who experiences something called sensorimotor obsessions or "Somatic OCD." This term refers to the tendency to fixate on autonomic bodily processes such as blinking and breathing to the point where they become distressing. Another common point of fixation is the heartbeat, feeling stuck in a constant awareness of one's pulse—the way it sounds and the way it feels, in combination. Like Poe's tell-tale heart, this noise rises above all other noises, forcing its way into every interaction and every conversation, to the point where one wants to rip up floorboards. I could include a sound effect here to demonstrate to you what this experience feels like—a subtle pulse in your left ear—but what would this communicate? Would this prepared imitational attempt, voluntarily experienced by you, validate my experience, or minimize it? After all, the heartbeat I am describing is not just a sound but an interpretation of a sound. As François J. Bonnet (2015) puts it, "the sound-object must be understood at once as the object formed by listening [...] and as the *objectal projection* of listening's desire" (136). For this reason, aural experiences of madness cannot be easily represented, since auditory simulations of such phenomena tend to lack what Bonnet (2015) calls "the affective import and the signifying framework" (140). For me, OCD is one such framework. It is not such a deterministic fact that it overrides the social construction of madness, but it nonetheless plays an active role in shaping the objects of my aural attention. To share one's listening, then, must involve an understanding of the frameworks inside of which certain sounds reverberate differently inside each of us, much like spiders and their webs.

12. I have always been sensitive to sound. Even the smallest noises can make me jump. I am told that the startle reflex comes from the inner ear, where the tensor tympani muscle experiences an acoustic reflex in the presence of particular sounds. To hear oneself hearing—to feel the musculature of one's ear responding to sound—is an incredibly strange and unnerving experience. In my former job as a cashier, I would have to count the register at the end of the day, flicking coins into a plastic tray. Every time I would flick a coin, my inner ear would click like a retractable pen, accompanied by a dull noise—always a microsecond delay, too, between the coin toss and the click, an echo-like call and response. There was a certain satisfaction to the reflex, but also an immense fatigue, like listening to a ball-peen hammer gently strike an anvil. I would play with this clicking effect until I had expended its novelty, much in the same way that one's tongue keeps returning to a sore tooth. The composer Maryanne Amacher (2008) has suggested that people themselves are instrument-like, since the ear has the potential to both receive and emit sound (10). To have one's sense perception inverted in

this way can be wonderfully destabilizing. I listen with my inner ear to my inner ear—a strange aural Möbius strip. I become a lightning rod, a feedback loop, a sound experiencing itself.

13. When I was twelve or thirteen, I went through an Oliver Sacks phase, absorbing his dubious but riveting clinical tales. I was particularly compelled by his description of a man named Stephen who dreamed he was a dog and woke up with a heightened sense of smell (2021). This was one of my first indications that the horizons of perception should not be taken for granted, that they can stretch and transform at any moment. Within a few months of reading this account, I experienced such a transformation firsthand. One afternoon, my friends and I went trekking through a peat bog just off the highway. Somewhere on our way out of the woods, as we tiptoed across river stones or clambered over a concrete drainage pipe, my hearing underwent a tenfold increase in volume, which I experienced as a rapid lightning-strike event. The gentle quietude of nature suddenly became noisier than the busiest intersection, painfully and supernaturally loud, and there was nothing I could do to reverse it. The slow-moving creek, not more than a stagnant trickle, now sounded like whitewater rapids, a high-decibel assault. I lagged behind my friends, desperately tugging on my earlobes as though they were on-off switches. Regretfully, I pretended like nothing was wrong at that moment. I hid the suffering. My friend's voices, their whispers even, sounded like vivid distortions. I tolerated this as best I could, and no one seemed to be able to tell that something was going on within me. Obviously, my auditory system had changed somehow. Some kind of gate had been left open, some threshold crossed. We parted ways, and I cupped my ears the entire way home. Coming up my driveway, I remember uncupping my ears and opening the front door as slowly as if I were defusing a bomb. Upon closing it behind me, the latch met the doorframe like a firing pin hitting a bullet. I ran upstairs, jumped into bed, cried softly, and fell asleep. When I woke up, it was like nothing had happened, and I was relieved that the bedsheets sounded like bedsheets.

14. There is a constant ringing within me. I first noticed it while wearing a pair of noise-cancelling headphones. Within the muffled silence of the earpads, I noticed all sorts of subtle impingements, the most prominent of which was a small, piercing tone in the upper range of my hearing. This tone comes and goes in waves. Sometimes it sounds tinny and shrill and other times it sounds like a weak drone, like a phone left off the hook. I can hear the sound change as I think about

its changing nature. Like any bothersome sensation, the more I try not to feel it, the more it grows. The ringing seems to intensify at night, but this is really just its reemergence from beneath the clamour of the day. Earplugs do not help. If anything, they trap you inside with this annoying pest—this guest who refuses to leave, this kettle that is always boiling, this mosquito that lives in my head and soundtracks my life. Though the sound lives primarily in my left ear, I can feel it resonate throughout my entire body like a nerve being pinched and iced. It was only when the ringing started to keep me awake at night that I decided to see an audiologist. He told me to wait three months and come back if it did not go away. That was almost a year ago, now. Last night I woke up with the same sensation, another hijacking. A body being yoked to an object to which it does not want to be bound. I have surprised myself with patience and tolerance and appreciation for this sound, its musicality and its beauty. I throw my head back in mad laughter at the sound's vibrating mockery. I have compassion for my captor, since it cannot be anything other than it is. But any silver lining is liable to tarnish after hours of wear. I toss and turn in anguish and would trade anything to make this sound go away. I picture a crucifix with the ears dripping blood.

15. Earworms are strange little mind-vampires. They are stickier than other songs, and if you hear one, it will play on a mental loop for hours, possibly even years. Like con artists they have tricks to get in your head. They are often tiny splinters of melody, and like splinters, they have a tendency to lodge under your skin. They are the musical equivalent of the hiccups, an involuntary and ephemeral glitch. Some of these earworms come from songs you actually know but cannot place—I am thinking of an insistent tune that I hummed for a couple of months that turned out to be a version of "Ticket to Ride" by the Carpenters. The song's outro, in particular, buried itself deep in my brain, the part where Karen and Richard repeat the words "think I'm gonna be sad," "think I'm gonna be sad," "think I'm gonna be sad," "think I'm gonna be sad," "think I'm gonna be sad." The lyrics have been expertly crafted to exploit a breach in one's consciousness, since they are literally disguised as a thought; and because the song slowly fades out on these words, failing to arrive at a final resolution, the melodic hook sinks even deeper. Fortunately, this is one of my more tolerable earworms. If they are good songs, like this one, then it is like a nice little bird that lands on my shoulder and sings to me. But if they are bad songs, then the earworm is like a gremlin that jumps on my back and zaps my brain repetitively with an electric cattle prod. Either way, the earworm becomes louder than anything else. It becomes everything I am, filling my world completely. It loops and loops and loops and, in its looping, it epitomizes the notion of going loopy. Earworms are one heightened phenomenon of my particular affliction; my mind is a sticky trap. But, eventually, even the stickiest of traps will dry up. Even the stickiest songs, even the stickiest thoughts, will release their hold.

16. Are earworms an empowerment or a vulnerability? The philosopher and sound studies scholar Eldritch Priest suggests that they can be both a technique of resistance and a product of contemporary capitalism's demands on one's nervous system. For Priest, earworms can be a form of inutile thinking—and thus an affront to cognitive capitalism—but they can also be a form of affective labour. In either case, he frames them not as a mental pathology but as a side effect of living in a "chaotic media sphere" that constantly places demands on one's attention (Fraser 2020, n.p.). As such, Priest (2020) wonders if the earworm could be thought of as a means of re-capturing one's attention "from the constant tug of outward distractions" (n.p.). The critical theorist Tang Yan (2016) similarly looks for liberatory potential in the earworm. According to Yan, "being worm-ized is being weak and abject and mad. Being worm-ized is being happy and strong and dancing like a dragon. Being worm-ized is being free from making a decision" (152). Priest goes even further to suggest that earworms "might actually arrest the flow of desire," by reclaiming a person's attention from capitalist forces of distraction (Fraser 2020, n.p.). Though this is a compelling idea, I am not convinced that negative attention is inherently better than positive distraction. There are some earworms so corrosive that I cannot even bring myself to name them, in case they latch on to me again—and when this happens, I am thankful for distractions, and long for them. If earworms are a threat to capitalism, perhaps it is in the sense of having laid awake all night, singing songs by the Carpenters, too tired to perform at one's job the next day. This formula requires a person to be expendable, however, in order to submit completely to wormization. Is it worth surrendering the sovereignty of one's attention for this political gesture? Perhaps not.

17. Mad listening is a multisensory, if not synaesthetic, affair. Sometimes, when I am wearing my headphones and I hear an unexpected high-frequency pitch, like the highest possible harmonic overtones played on a violin, I start to notice a burning smell in my nostrils, as though my brain has been poked with a hot needle and some of the smoke is coming out my nose. Researchers call this "smound," a portmanteau of smell and sound.

18. If the ear is the dominant sensory organ of hearing, then to listen madly is to detach hearing from this default site and locate it elsewhere—in other words: a non-cochlear listening. In the composer Peter Ablinger's 2010 piece, *Palastmusik für Infra- und Ultraschall* (2010), a wooden bench is fitted with special loudspeak-

ers that produce sub-auditory sound, which listeners experience as vibrations in their bodies. More recently, the composer Christine Sun Kim produced a work called *Elevator Pitch* (2019), which was "inspired by Kim's childhood memories of crowding elevators with her Deaf friends, and shouting so loudly that they could feel the vibrations of each others' voices" (Smithsonian, n.p.). Another example comes from David Cecchetto (2020), who describes wearing a pair of shoes with microphones attached, with audio signals being routed in real time to headphones, thereby creating a sense of listening through one's feet (n.p.). Cecchetto's account resonates with a passage from Daniel Paul Schreber's journals, published in 1903 as *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, in which he describes two little men whose voices he can hear in his feet (2001, 135). Though the former example should not serve as a direct simulation of the latter, both cases of foot-based hearing support a mad agenda. Whether through bench or elevator or shoes, to listen from a non-dominant point of reference is to unsettle one's given mode of listening, or what Ablinger (2010) calls "the spoon-fed patterns of human perception" (n.p.).

19. One also thinks of eye music or *Augenmusik*, visual scores that cannot be played by any classical standard. I remember sitting in the car as a child and waiting for the ticking of our turn signal to synchronize with the blinker of the car ahead—or watching the second hand of my old Seiko watch, with its fluorescent hands, tracing time's inaudible rhythm. These are but the simplest forms of seeing sound. In 1995, the poet Ella Mae Lentz conceived an ASL poem called "Eye Music," about the visual rhythms created by passing telephone poles along the roadside, a sine wave of rising and falling wires (Cripps 2017, n.p.). This form of visual listening is not inherently mad, but it shares a key feature of mad listening in its resistance to audist assumptions. If mad listening is to be a political strategy, then it must intersect with Deaf culture in challenging stigma and expanding the definition of listening itself.

20. Mad listening has an affinity for unwieldy compositions, repurposed and reappropriated technologies, imaginary sounds, and speculative instruments. As for the unwieldy, consider the famous pianist Éric Satie's 1893 composition, "Vexations," which asks the performer to repeat a motif eight hundred and forty times. As for acts of détournement or creative repurposing, consider the media artist Nam June Paik's 1963 installation, *Random Access Music* (1963), which disassembles a cassette deck and allows the listener to wave the playback head over numerous lines of tape that have been glued to the wall in a weblike pattern. Also consider the composer Raven Chacon's 2015 performance called *Report*, "a composition scored for an ensemble playing various caliber firearms" which seeks to turn instruments of power and violence "into mechanisms for musical resistance" (n.p.). As for sounds that do not exist, see the minimalist composer Tom

Johnson's collection of unplayable scores in his 1974 book *Imaginary Music*. And as for the speculative, see the experimental musician Tom Mudd's 2019 album *Brass Cultures* which was created with "digital models of physically impossible brass instruments" (n.p.). Each of these works radically disobeys the laws of listening, creating a possibility space for mad subjectivity—a liberated space of ambiguity, excess, and paradox.

21. Put it this way: mad sounds prompt mad listening. Things that are hard to say are often difficult to hear. Songs that are hard to sing are often difficult to harmonize with. Music that is hard to play is often difficult to follow.

22. In his book *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*, La Marr Jurelle Bruce (2021) listens to the singer and rapper Lauryn Hill in the context of her fast-paced live performances. "Hill's manic delivery," writes Bruce, "like her occasionally hoarse vocals and cacophonous arrangements, resists *easylistening*. She solicits a nimble, attentive, difficult listening instead" (212). Here, Bruce does not romanticize mania, but treats Hill's music as an example of "madtime," a mad temporality that the author situates within black expressive culture and conceptualizes as a form of resistance against antiblack admonishments to pursue justice slowly and reasonably (2021, 206). In another chapter, Bruce writes about a mad jazz musician named Buddy Bolden, who is thought to have invented jazz, but whose life is scarcely documented. Bruce shares an anecdote from one of Bolden's greatest fans: fellow jazz musician Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton, who claimed that Bolden was such a loud cornetist that his playing could be heard from twelve miles away, though this reminiscence defies the laws of physics and human physiology (Bruce 2021, 42). Bruce upholds Morton's story as an example of black radical creativity in the face of normative psychiatry, which seeks to denigrate, pathologize, and discredit such fantastical accounts. "Upon reading Morton's twelve mile testimony," writes Bruce, "a devout rationalist might dismiss it as deliberate fabrication, or a failure of memory, or a miscalculation of distance, or perhaps the product of delusion" (2021, 42). The task of mad methodology, according to Bruce, is to take such accounts seriously, and to find metaphysical truths in them, if not physical ones—to listen as an affirming earwitness to sounds that exceed reason and distance and probability. To paraphrase Bruce, the truth is that Bolden's cornet call "echoed across epochs" in order to influence future artists and writers such as himself (2021, 43).

23. Following Bruce (2021), we might discern other instances "where disclosures of pathology are also articulations of philosophy" (60). Take, for example, the phenomenon of the talking breast pump. According to Christine Cooper-Rompato (2013), "many women who pump their breast milk report that their pumps speak repeated words or phases" (182). She describes these phrases as auditory illusions, or examples of pareidolia (not unlike the electronic voice phenomena I mentioned earlier). Many of the phrases that Cooper-Rompato (2013) documents involve one bisyllabic word or expression repeated over and over again, such as "nipple," "get her," "fresh milk," "not yours," or "pump me" (186). "Several mothers," she tells us, "report hearing taunts about their insufficient milk production," including "no milk" or "no hope" (188). One woman reports hearing the phrase "crazy lady" (89). Another hears her pump speak the name of the comedian Tina Fey (194). Altogether, Cooper-Rompato understands the pump voices as an externalization of a mother's anxieties, which can take on a wide range of subject matter. Along these lines, one blogger understands the breast pump as "a window to her unconscious, a kind of supernatural or spiritual connection seeking to advise her" (199). In validating the perspectives of her research subjects, Cooper-Rompato depathologizes such acts of mad listening, highlighting instead the significance of the talking breast pump as an example of unruly phenomenology.

24. My own unruly bodymind becomes similarly stuck on repeated words and phrases. A few years ago, the expression "gravy train" came into my head suddenly and parked itself there. The phrase was meaningless to me, though this did not prevent me from ruminating on it. These two words fascinated me for reasons unknown. Perhaps it is the assonance of "gray" and "tray." Or perhaps there is some deeper psychological reason related to the semantic content. Though I had no emotional connection to this image, the thought was so relentlessly repetitive that I was forced to interpret it in every possible permutation. I looked for inciting events at the crossroads of food and finance. I thought about gravy and trains as separate entities. I discovered that the phrase belonged to a popular brand of dog food. I searched for evidence of childhood trauma. I wondered if maybe I felt that I was undeserving of success at the time this phrase dawned on me, like I was taking the easy route, riding the gravy train. Unlike the sounds of the talking breast pump, however, these words had no direct relevance to my life, that I could tell. They simply produced in me a kind of aesthetic frisson, of the "cellar door" variety. Like earworms, these intrusive phrases are another example of sonic stickiness, but the difference here is that instead of an external sound clinging to me, I hear these sounds intrasubjectively as internal dialogue, in my own voice. Not only are the words heard mentally, but they are also embodied as subvocalizations in the larynx, where small vocal muscles move in correspondence with internal speech. If you have ever experienced intrusive thoughts, especially those that are

far less benign than this example, you will know how hard it is to accept them and not try to suppress or neutralize them. They are called trains of thought for a reason. Even while talking to someone, or trying to read, this particular phrase would chug along beneath the surface of consciousness: gravy train, gravy train, gravy train, gravy train, gravy train, gravy train. In this way, mad listening is often a multifocal listening, being with two or more sounds at once, the ones in here and the ones out there, and everything in between.

25. Mad listening involves such literal acts of sonic subversion as the spoonerism, wherein the first letters of adjacent words are swapped: "to tease one's ears" becomes "to ease one's tears," and "to listen here" becomes "to hiss and leer." Such wordplay does not just undermine the hegemony of normative grammar, but tears at the roots (or perhaps "rears at the toots") of linearity, rationality, and order. This time last year, for a matter of weeks, I was so immersed in the habit of spoonerizing that it became something of a mad praxis, to the extent that I could not stop mentally swapping letters around, and this caused me a great deal of anxiety. In my head, other people's words echoed in reverse-order, mostly as nonsense, with occasional blips of meaning—the title of a movie like *First Cow* becoming *Cursed Foe*, for example. Often, these semi-successful spoonerisms will send me into lateral thoughts of cursed cows and first foes, then onward to first curses and first kisses. At the expense of my ability to focus while falling down deep wells of distraction and abstraction, this habit of listening for altered combinations of sound emerges as a potent reminder of language's power to remake reality.

26. In his essay "Earslips: Of Mishearings and Mondegreens," the literary scholar Steven Connor (2009) echoes my earlier claim that "all hearing is mishearing" (par. 29). Tracing the etymology of the word "mishearing," he notes that early uses carried a more active connotation, implying deliberate acts of auditory disobedience, unlike the simple mondegreen or the misheard song lyric. The poets and coauthors David Huebert and Andy Verboom (2017) have characterized deliberate mishearings as "full mondegreens," which refers to their formal approach of misconstruing and reshaping canonical poems in order to challenge their representational politics, or as Verboom puts it, "to bite the heads off some fathers" (par. 4). They rewrite William Carlos Williams's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," for example, with the misheard title: "The Dead Feel Narrow." On the other hand, routine and systematic mishearings are fraught with epistemic violence and can be a form of silencing. The legal scholar James Parker and curator Joel Stern re-

mind us that mishearing is also "an auditory effect of colonialism," wherein white ears disregard Indigenous testimony (2019, 19). Speaking to the ethics of the full mondegreen, Huebert (2017) acknowledges that "there are many other poets and poems whose mondegreening by me would be a violent colonizing enterprise" (par. 4). As such, he chooses his mishearings carefully, grappling with source poems whose politics warrant thorough pushback. Rather than an unwillingness to hear, then, mad listening should model a willingness to hear differently—in defiance to, and not compliance with, systems of oppression. In doing so, the mad listener might work toward rethinking, rewriting, and re-sounding mad representation. Recently, I heard Elton John's "Madman Across the Water" for the first time, and searched for the song on a misheard lyrics website. There, someone has written the following mondegreen: "get a load of him, he's sewing sand."

27. In a recent article by Lennard J. Davis (2021), the author suggests that Deaf culture is less concerned with unheard sounds than it is with questions of access: "availability of interpreters, less discrimination, and better ways to communicate using technology," for example (par. 3). Davis goes on to say that his Deaf parents would sometimes "recount the inevitable story about someone who got their hearing back and was driven crazy by all the ambient noise in the world—cars, trucks, horns, rumbles, and even, yes, loud music and screeching birds" (par. 3). Here, as you might have noticed, Davis runs a red light through the intersection of deafness and madness. As Christopher Krentz (2006) reminds us, these two categories have been conflated since ancient times: "Aristotle is credited with saying that, of all the senses, hearing contributes most to intelligence and knowledge. The Romans classified deaf people who did not speak with the insane" (41). Moreover, many deaf people were incarcerated in nineteenth-century "lunatic asylums" (41). Mad listening must attend to this shared history of deaf madness and mad deafness.

28. In his autobiographical novel *A Journey Round My Skull*, Frigyes Karinthy provides a firsthand account of a craniotomy (or what used to be called trepanation), which he underwent after experiencing auditory hallucinations of passing trains. His description of the procedure is one of the most evocative and haunting sonic testimonies that one could imagine. Karinthy (2008) writes: "There was an infernal scream as the steel plunged into my skull. It sank more and more rapidly through the bone, and the pitch of its scream became louder and more piercing every second" (216). Then, he reports a "straining sensation, a feeling of pressure, a cracking sound, and a terrific wrench," as pieces of bone are broken off from his skull (220). "Each cracking sound," he says, "reminded me of taking the lid off a jam-jar, while the process as a whole was like splitting open a wooden packing-case, plank by plank (220). Karinthy's account provides invaluable historical

context for an exceptionally brutal example of mad listening. As the early modernist Dolly MacKinnon (2017) tells us: "The historical archive remains redolent with recoverable aspects of historical soundscapes," and "the political economy of sounds, silences, and noise is an innovative way to reclaim diverse cultural voices through partial past soundscapes" (101). Accordingly, mad listening should attune to this wider project of reclamation by way of centering the testimonies of people who have survived psychiatric and medical intervention.

29. A phenomenology of mad listening risks locating madness squarely within the individual, whereas the outer world of sound can be seriously crazy-making, from the idling of diesel engines, to the advertisements that play at double-volume, or the once-innocuous hum of the refrigerator, which now moans and wails like a vengeful ghost. The list goes on: there's the evil laughter of seagulls, the nightly sirens, the neighbour's bad taste in music, the everlasting construction noise, the hundred-decibel squeal of the skytrain, not to mention the sound technologies that have been weaponized and turned on the public, like the infamous Mosquito Device, which the company describes as an "ultrasonic anti-loitering solution used to disperse unwanted homeless and youth gatherings" (n.p.). Writing about this device, Mitchell Akiyama (2010) notes that young people in the twenty-tens found a way of reclaiming this sound by using it as a cellphone ringtone that most teachers were unable to hear (466). Akiyama concludes, however, that "this détournement does not amount to any real or practical immunity to sound," but instead has the unintended consequence of increasing prejudice against these antiauthoritarian youths. To listen madly is to take such risks, in full awareness that acts of resistance will always be met with resistance. The master's tools, in this case, may not be able to dismantle the master's house, but they might prevent him from overhearing our plans to strike when the moment is right.

30. Mad listening and queer listening share many qualities. The transdisciplinary scholar Nick Walker (2015) coined the term "neuroqueer" to identify the point at which queerness and neurodivergence meet. To engage in neuroqueering, writes Walker (2015), is to queer "one's own neurocognitive processes (and one's outward embodiment and expression of those processes) by intentionally altering them in ways that create significant and lasting increase in one's divergence from prevailing cultural standards of neuronormativity and heteronormativity" (n.p.). According to Sara Ahmed (2006), a queer politics of disorientation seeks to make the familiar strange, and "might even find joy and excitement in the horror" of

disalignment (4). As the philosopher Karoline Feyertag (2017) puts it, "at the core of the question of dizziness and queerness we find trouble in the sense of not feeling at ease with or in a given situation, feeling discomfort, disorientation and tumult—and also feeling a certain 'gender trouble,' a trouble of knowing where to belong" (par. 13). I relate this compound description to my own experience of dizziness and queerness, partly owing to an inner-ear impairment that I have had since childhood, in combination with partial hearing loss, leading to bouts of mild vertigo. These auditory phenomena are analogous to my sense of genderqueerness, to my vertiginous sense of self, which often feels confusing and overwhelming, but also joyful and exciting, in Ahmed's sense. Vertigo can be played with in the same way that gender can. I walk across the room as though strutting in stilettos for the first time, reaching out to walls and chairs to hold myself upright. I further relate this sense of disorientation to seeing the film *Call Me by Your Name* for the first time, and later hearing the song by Lil Nas X. What better example of mad listening is there than to be hailed by someone else's name, and to respond accordingly—and, in that exchange, to revel in disorientation.

31. Another recent film, *Memoria* (2021) by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, follows a woman named Jessica Holland who hears a mysterious banging noise that cannot be heard by others, and consequently she believes herself to be going mad. Like Kafka's mole, she tries to locate the origin of the sound to no avail, going so far as to recreate it in a recording studio, where she tells the audio engineer to imagine an enormous ball of concrete falling into a well. To my ears, it sounds like a combination of a bass drum, a door slam, and a controlled explosion. As it happens, I experienced a similar sound three months ago, which continues to haunt me. I can only describe it as a "crashing noise." If I close my eyes and focus, I can mentally recreate the sound's characteristic reverb profile, a sharp impulse response with a long echo. As if to taunt and trigger me, my fireplace has recently begun to make a very similar sound. In an unpredictable span of time after being shut off, the metal vent of my chimney will suddenly expand, creating a tremendous boom. After many nights beside the exploding fireplace, my startle response has not acclimatized in the slightest, even as I wait in nervous anticipation. And yet, in some sense, I am grateful for this disturbance, since it has helped me to retrain and reprocess the earlier crashing noise—as if to befriend it—not unlike the woman in the recording studio, trying to seize control over the sounds that seize us.

32. As a veteran of panic attacks, I know when one is about to arrive by the sudden muffling of the world, like invisible hands held over my ears: a sense of fullness, an accompanying feeling of dizziness, and a familiar walls-closing-in sensation. My sight seems tilt-shifted and my hearing seems phase-shifted, and for

a few minutes, everything is indistinct and unreal. Then comes the feeling that something worse is about to happen, though it never does. From the experiences I have collected in this essay, one should not get the impression, however, that mad listening is always panic-driven or pathological. Indeed, there are thousands of playlists available online devoted to calming anxiety. I prefer to listen to binaural beats in the delta range, a low tone that pulses at 2.5hz, which helps me to regulate my anxiety. For good reason, these tones have been called digital drugs, and some even claim that binaural beats can simulate the effects of actual psychedelics. Predictably, this trend has been subject to moral panic from parents who are wary of the potential dangers of so-called "i-dosing." As a freely-available resource, binaural beats are at once a form of self-care and a mad methodology, allowing listeners to experiment with perception and delight in disorientation. This essay has been one such experiment, and I hope you will consider conducting and sharing your own.

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