LISTENING WITH TINNITUS

In *The Hum of the World: A Philosophy of Listening*, Lawrence Kramer invites his reader to "contemplate what would happen if we heard the world as attentively as we see it." Seeking to connect sound to the tangibility and perceptibility of life through a series of poetic and theoretical vignettes, Kramer provocatively posits that "the sense of hearing grounds the sense of being" (Kramer 2019: 2). Of particular importance is what Kramer calls the 'audiable' – that is, "the material promise of sound," heard as "the hum of the world" (ibid.: 4). It is this "undertone of auditory culture" to which Kramer wishes to direct his reader's attention, asking "what is lost when we don't hearken to the audible, and what might be gained if we do" (ibid.: 4-5).

Kramer's book is symptomatic of the recent proliferation of interest in listening's ontology and ethical potentiality, manifest in humanities scholarship, feminist theory, and artistic and curatorial practice. In a culture where the eye is purported to dominate, listening has been understood as revelatory. Salomé Voegelin, for example, argues that while listening will not automatically provide us with a better world, it can nonetheless be politically and epistemologically useful in revealing "the world in its invisibility: its unseen movements beneath its visual organisation" (Voegelin 2014: 165). These revelations, however, may require a position of vulnerability. Brandon LaBelle describes listening as "a condition of weak-strength" inasmuch as the "dialogical moment" requires "always listening beyond myself, moving my own views in consideration of another's, giving my attention to opinions different from my own while finding ways to resist and counter their power if need be" (LaBelle 2018: 145).

As both these descriptions suggest, an open, vulnerable, and attentive listening that makes apparent our relationality and responsibilities is deemed ethically and politically valuable. Yet listening has also been deemed something that is neglected: it is habitually done badly. In the field of acoustic ecology, exercises such as 'ear cleaning' are deemed necessary in a noisy world that does not does not listen carefully enough. Ear cleaning activities such as soundwalks and directed listening exercises aim to create a heightened sense of sonic awareness: to 'open ears' so that listeners are able "to notice sounds they have never really listened to before, to listen [...] to the sounds of their own environment and the sounds they themselves inject into their environment" (Schafer 1967: 1).

For Schafer, ear cleaning is akin to a surgeon's habit of washing their hands before operating: "Ears also perform delicate operations and therefore ear cleanliness is an important prerequisite for all musical listening and musical playing" (ibid.).

While these practical and poetical approaches to listening have been influential in offering novel aesthetic experiences and alternative understandings of social life, they have often been based upon an unacknowledged and unimpaired ideal ear. There has been comparatively little attention as to how those whose ears will never be clean, or indeed whose ears are *too* clean,[1)] relate to the promises made of listening – its capacity to connect, reveal, and reconfigure. Just as oft-repeated claims about the primacy of the visual tend to obscure differing ocular capacities, listening's advocates have often silenced the spectrum of aural capacities through which sonic experience takes place and through which auditory knowledge is formed. Kramer, for his part, seemingly finds himself caught between the actual and the ideal. Thus he tempers his attachment of sound to the sense of aliveness with an acknowledgement that sensory experience is distributed unevenly between and across cultures; and the heterogeneity of subjects that apprehend the world. Kramer also seeks to include Deafness within his philosophy of listening: in a remark that appears in parentheses, he notes that "the profoundly deaf cannot hear most sounds, but that does not mean they have no auditory experience. In hearing less, the deaf hear differently" (Kramer 2019: 31). The bracketing of this comment is revealing of a wider structural tendency of Kramer's argument and those similar to it: while listening or aurality may be 'expanded' to incorporate those who have historically been marginalized within auditory culture, their inclusion seemingly has little impact on the argument that is pursued. If, as Kramer suggests, the D/deaf hear differently, then the question remains as to what implications this difference has, if any, for the primary connection of sound and life, of hearing and being.

For some listeners, the hum does not just come from the world but, seemingly, from within. During the current health crisis, this interior humming has been amplified, exacerbated by domestic confinement, social isolation, and unevenly-distributed affects of fear, stress, and anxiety. Some are hearing this humming for the first time during this crisis. Indeed, at the time of writing, there have been some suggestions that tinnitus and other changes to hearing may be a possible symptom, or aftereffect, of COVID-19 infection (Koumpa, Forde, and Manjaly 2020; Munro et al. 2020). Tinnitus refers to a conscious perception of sound for which there

1)
As will become apparent, I am suggesting that those with tinnitus will struggle to reach Schafer's ideal listening positionality of 'clean ears.' If 'clean ears' refers to a condition where the ear is able to "exercise its individualistic right to demand that insouciant and distracting sounds should be stopped in order that it may concentrate on those that truly matter" (Schafer 1967: 2), then many of those who listen with tinnitus will struggle to meet this ideal listening state. Those whose ears are too clean may be an accurate description of some listeners with hyperacusis. Hyperacusis refers to an increased sensitivity to sound, where certain sounds are heard as too loud. This can be to the extent that sound is perceived as painful.

is no external source. It is a common yet diverse auditory condition. Although many will experience tinnitus at some point in their lives, what this tinnitus sounds like, why it is audible, and the impact it has on a listener can vary widely. In films and television, tinnitus tends to be depicted as a high-pitched ringing in the ears that is initiated by and then fades following a traumatic encounter – manifest as either physical harm or psychic distress. Yet tinnitus may persist: it can be a near-constant accompaniment in everyday life. Alternatively, tinnitus may be an intermittent addition to the listening ear, coming and going in relation to different sonic and social situations. Tinnitus is often manifest as a steady hum or series of tones, but it can also throb, pulse, sweep, crackle, click, or distort. It can be experienced as banal, fascinating, or frightening. As a type of hearing impairment, tinnitus may constitute one of the gains of hearing loss but it may also be heard by those who are otherwise deemed 'otologically normal.'[2)]

Centering tinnitus can help to provincialize the 'normate' ear. For Rosemarie Garland Thomson, the normate refers to an idealised subject position that is 'unmarked' by disability, as well as race and gender; and which underpins Eurocentric, liberal democratic notions of personhood (Thomson 2017). It is in relation to the normate that disability becomes perceptible and functions as such: educational spaces, workplaces, the media, and medical institutions are organised around the normate. The normate is also traceable in responses to the pandemic: it informs, for example, the conflation of youth and 'healthiness;' and the apparent correlation of 'underlying health conditions' and disposability. Critical accounts of disability and its social origins tend to focus on the visible relationship of the normate and the disabled, made apparent by their representation in images, film, and television. However, the normate is also an auditory construct: it underpins and is reproduced by, amongst other things, acoustic regulations and hearing technologies. It is the perceptual norm against which tinnitus, alongside other hearing conditions and impairments, is judged as deviation. However, the normate often passes unacknowledged. Such is the case when an ontology or ethics grounded in aural communication assumes an affective and intellectual capacity to engage with sound; and when unimpaired hearing is treated as given. I want to move towards taking impairment and disability out of the parentheses and footnotes, and speculate as to how tinnitus can ground an alternative understanding of listening: what does listening with tinnitus serve to amplify, distort, and reconfigure? While what I refer to herein as normate philosophies of listening

2)
Otology is a branch of medicine studying the physiology and anatomy of the ear and its associated sensory systems. Otologically normal refers those who conform to the standard of 'good,' 'normal,' or 'unimpaired' hearing.

necessarily tend towards generalisation, tinnitus refuses this tendency, insofar as its causes, effects, qualities, and contexts vary widely. However, an attention to the relationship between listening and tinnitus can also make apparent infrequently acknowledged aspects of the latter. In particular, the recurrent emphasis on listening as a social, ethical, and relational practice provides an opportunity to rethink tinnitus's attribution as a personal and interior auditory experience. In other words, knowing listening through tinnitus, and tinnitus through listening, can generate alternative conceptualisations of both.

(TRYING TO AVOID) LISTENING TO HEARING It may appear as if tinnitus and listening cohere to different aspects of auditory experience. While the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, hearing and listening are frequently distinguished from one another. Where hearing is thought of as the physical perception of sound, listening pertains to a cultural practice of auditory attention. Hearing is somatic, automatic, and passive, where listening is learned, cultivated, and directed. Hearing can be thought of as the sensory substrate that grounds different and diverse practices of listening. It is the material means through which oft-romanticised, sonic intersubjectivity occurs (Sterne 2015, Rice 2015).

Tinnitus tends to be thought of as an impairment of or modification to this sensory substrate. Yet it also highlights the complexity of distinguishing listening from hearing. Indeed, the experience of tinnitus is often one of listening *to* hearing, with attention being drawn to (what feels like) the ear's private sound. However, where some listeners with tinnitus find habituation relatively straightforward, attention can also serve to exacerbate tinnitus: focusing on or listening out for tinnitus can intensify it. Tinnitus requires that the aesthetic and moral virtues frequently attributed to careful and attentive listening are qualified, insofar as listening carefully and attentively to tinnitus might be experienced as harmful. Furthermore, where normate accounts of listening emphasise its associations with sociality and relationality, listening to tinnitus might be experienced as a withdrawal *from* social life. It can distract from intersubjective encounters, taking the listener inside themselves. However, as a result, tinnitus may ground other practices of listening. The use of low-level background sound, for example, is often suggested as a strategy for masking tinnitus. This masking involves not only making tinnitus more difficult to hear but also directing the attention of the listener away from it and towards other sounds.

Where theorists and artists often advocate for a capacious listening – the feminist composer Pauline Oliveros's description of her creative practice of deep listening as "listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear no matter what you are doing" (Oliveros 2000) is illustrative of this tendency – listening with tinnitus makes apparent the need for a selective aurality. In her critical analysis of cultural theory's turn toward relationality, Eva Haifa Giraud has argued for greater attention to be paid to the exclusions created by ethical and theoretical formations that foreground entanglement. For Giraud, exclusions are not only created by systems that foster oppression and marginalization. All epistemologies, including those that advocate for a recognition of complexity and connectivity, create omissions. Making these exclusions perceptible is important in denaturalising the normative (and, by extension, the normate). However, as Giraud argues, exclusions, separations, and disengagements can also, in some circumstances, be ethically beneficial or necessary. Exclusion is not simply the opposite of relationality, as the pursuit of some kinds of connection requires the exclusion of others (Giraud 2019).

Listening with tinnitus illustrates this final point. Directing the listening ear towards some types of sound can, in some instances, help to facilitate a disconnection from tinnitus and its associated affects. This disconnection, furthermore, might be considered ethically beneficial if tinnitus is a cause of distress. While normate philosophies of listening have often embraced sonic relationality, connectivity, and capaciousness, to listen with tinnitus is to take seriously the need to *not* listen.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE EAR

While often held as a physiological 'fact,' tinnitus also acts as a reminder that hearing, as well as listening, is historically and culturally contingent (Sterne 2015). Research into tinnitus has primarily stemmed from Western Europe and the USA (Baguley, McFerran, and Hall 2013). Furthermore, there are racial differences as to who reports as having tinnitus. In their study of tinnitus amongst US adults, Josef Shargorodsky et al. suggest that 'non-Hispanic whites' report a higher prevalence of tinnitus than non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic populations (Shargorodsky, Curhan, and Farwell 2010). The reasons for racial differences in reported prevalence are not reflected upon by the authors. However, the widely-reported inequalities that Black people, Indigenous people, and people of colour face in access to healthcare, quality of care, and health outcomes is one possible factor. These

geographic and demographic inclusions and omissions suggest that the treatment of tinnitus as a distinguishable and nameable medical symptom – one that coheres with a population of identifiable tinnitus 'sufferers' – is a culturally-informed designation, underpinned by a Euro-American and white-racialised perspective. This is not to suggest that the spectrum of auditory experiences categorised as tinnitus are not experienced outside of 'the global North' or 'the West,' as is highlighted by Victor De Andrade and Eleanor Morris' study of Black South African traditional healers and their understandings of and approaches to hearing impairment. 'Ringing and other sounds in the ears' was one of a range of hearing issues that was reported to and addressed by traditional healers (de Andrade and Ross 2005). However, the effects, diagnosis, and management of tinnitus tend to be articulated in relation to notions of optimization, productivity, normalcy, and economic value, which are by no means universally shared nor applicable (see Steingo and Sykes 2019).

Hearing and listening are not only co-constituted by cultural difference, they are also formations of power. However, in the rush to get to an affirmative ontology and ethics of listening, there is a tendency to leave unaddressed the ways that listening and its sensory substate are imbricated with Capital and coloniality, and their accompanying hierarchies of the human.[3)] Tinnitus and other hearing impairments, by comparison, require a consideration of the geopolitics of the ear. Noise exposure, for example, is a common cause of tinnitus. Primarily defined in terms of sound volume and duration, noise exposure may occur in recreational settings, workplaces, residential environments, or elsewhere. However, there is some correlation between noise exposure and social inequalities, insofar as those who are recurrently exposed to noise are more likely to also experience socioeconomic deprivation (European Commission 2016; Keizer 2010). Some European and American studies have also found that tinnitus is more likely to be reported by those with a lower level of education (Unterrainer, Greimel, and Leibetseder 2001) and from a low income background (Mahboubi et al. 2013). Furthermore, there is a correlation between tinnitus and hearing loss. The World Health Organization reports that 'disabling' hearing loss – defined as a reduction in hearing greater than 40dB in the 'better' ear for adults and 30dB for children – is four times as prevalent in South Asian and Sub-Saharan African regions than in 'high-income' regions. Although these populations are underrepresented in both tinnitus research and scholarship about sound and listening, the geopolitical distribution of hearing

3)
This relative absence is suggested by Voegelin's discussion of a Chris Watson's soundscape composition and installation at Kew Garden's Palm House. Voegelin rightfully notes that the palm house is a relic of colonialism and empire. The usual silence of the Palm House is compared to a museum. For Voegelin, Chris Watson's piece transforms her perception of the Palm House as a colonial place: "the sound implodes this frame and hints at the plurality of the frames that we inhabit contingently and simultaneously: Kew Gardens, the colonial, the historical, the contemporary, the personal, knowledge, knowing, experience, and contradiction." She continues: "I have a different awareness of the palm house now. I cannot ever enter it as a glass cabinet of colonial exploration and collection again but will always see the wood for the trees, the movement the whispers [...] It is not a display but an environment, a sonic place, which I have seen [sic.] other layers of, other slices, whose reality remains in their possibility influencing the present actuality for me" (Voegelin 2014: 17–18, my emphasis). The implication of this seems to be that listening with Watson's composition shifts the perception of a place as 'simply' colonial towards other possibilities. While this may be Voegelin's experience, and while she is keen to emphasise the contingency of listening, what is missing here is a consideration of positionality: who is and isn't able to move 'beyond' the conception of the Palm House as colonial place and why; who might be prevented from perceiving the 'plurality of frames' upon which the perception of alternative possibilities is predicated?

loss illustrates how auditory impairment and disability cohere with global economic inequalities. The conditions through which listeners develop and experience tinnitus can therefore raise important questions about the uneven distributions of risk and debilitation: whose ears are in need of protection and whose hearing is considered disposable.

These questions become particularly pertinent during the current health crisis. Where much has been made of the quietude initiated by various government lockdowns – March through to May 2020 has been designated 'the longest period of quiet in recorded human history' due to the reduction of seismic vibrations (Basu 2020) – these auditory imaginations of the pandemic risk silencing those for whom the world did not stop. This includes those designated 'key workers' – a term that, in a UK context, has been used to refer to a labour force within which the low-paid, precarious, and racially-minoritised are overrepresented. Furthermore, according to the Women's Budget Group, of the 3 million people in what are deemed 'high exposure' jobs in the UK during the pandemic, 77% are women, and Black, Asian, and migrant women are over-represented within this group (Women's Budget Group, 2020). Given the range of serious risks associated with COVID-19 infection, its potential impact upon hearing capacity, which I briefly mentioned earlier, may appear as relatively trivial. However, this potential impact can also be situated within a wider context, where the inequalities associated with race, gender, poverty, and precarity cohere with a distinction between those who can stay at home to stay safe, and those who cannot.

Listening with tinnitus can therefore make apparent that it is not just an issue of who and what is perceptible that is predicated on the asymmetries of the world: "what voices are heard, what accents dominate the landscape, what interests are represented in its soundscape and what in turn remains inaudible, unable to make itself count, silenced, muted and even ignored" (Voegelin 2018). The hearing and listening capacities that, in Voegelin's account, enable the perception of these asymmetries are also shaped by these asymmetries. Furthermore, these asymmetries are concealed by the normate listener, but also risk being concealed if listening with tinnitus is subject to abstraction and generalisation. An ethics or ontology of listening – or indeed an ontology of listening with tinnitus – therefore needs to be grounded in an acknowledgment of the relationship between listening positionality, hearing capacity, and the geopolitics of the ear.

TINNITUS AND AURAL RELATIONALITY In March 2020 Dia: Beacon launched *Party/After Party,* a sound installation and exhibition by the techno DJ and producer Carl Craig. The work, which has partly inspired this Special Issue, is predicated around a dialectic of euphoria and loneliness. The piece contrasts the joyous connectivity of the dancefloor with the disconnections faced by the touring musician. Craig suggests that he "wanted to reflect the isolation of the many hours spent alone in hotel rooms and the tinnitus that I, and many other artists, have to contend with as a result of our work" (Dia: Beacon 2019). Consequently, dissonant music interjects at various points, marking the shift from party to after-party. In his review of the exhibition, which draws out the resonances between Craig's work and the radical pandemic-induced social transformations that occurred shortly after its opening, Jace Clayton describes the high-pitched sine-wave drone as the exhibition's "most poignant sound." The sound of tinnitus, Clayton explains "is one that becomes more piercing when we are alone, after the afterparty, when the world has quieted down" (Clayton 2020). Indeed, tinnitus may be akin to a hangover, exacerbated by overdoing it, that is, listening for too long and too loudly. The effects are not noticeable until the morning after.

Such presentations of tinnitus will always be contradictory, insofar as it involves sharing the unshareable, reducing the complexity of tinnitus to a symbolic sound. However, Craig's staging of listening with tinnitus vis-à-vis the dialectic of aloneness and togetherness, work and play, serves as an important reminder that the ears of attentive listeners – such as DJs and producers – are often 'unclean.' Where theoretical imaginations of audition often omit these possible consequences of a life's listening work, Craig's exhibition foregrounds them.

While Craig's work positions tinnitus as symptomatic of being alone, it can also be understood as a reminder that tinnitus itself is relational. Although I have suggested that tinnitus can amplify common points of omission from recent poetics and practices of listening, and while I have sought to temper the celebration of connectivity and capaciousness found in normate philosophies of listening though an attention to selectivity and exclusion, the recurrent emphasis on listening as/and relationality, and the co-constitution of the hearer and the heard also provides an opportunity to reevaluate listening with tinnitus. If, as LaBelle suggests, "listening does not so much discern, point from point, body from body, rather it registers *all* that surrounds us, creating links and connections between ourselves and our environment"

(LaBelle 2012), then how does tinnitus figure in this relationship between audition and milieu?

Tinnitus complicates the implication that what is heard comes from the surrounding environment 'out there' and animates the resonant 'in here' of the ear. It scrambles the delineation of interiority and exteriority, sonic object and listening subject. Yet tinnitus can also exemplify the ways that aurality is predicated on and produces relations between listener and environment. Although the subjective sound of tinnitus is often objectified – it is often pinned down to a particular frequency or set of frequencies with particular acoustic characteristics – various environmental, affective, and physiological factors can mean that the perception of tinnitus changes over the course of a day, over a period of weeks or years. Indeed, as Carl Craig's piece makes apparent, different auditory environments can shape experiences of tinnitus. The noisy shared space of the club may provide relief from tinnitus, particularly by comparison to the quiet hotel room. Alternatively, tinnitus may be manifest as 'the afterparty': the ringing may be initiated or exacerbated by the main event, but is only really heard once it has passed. The wider milieu therefore shapes and is shaped by listening with tinnitus.

Tinnitus is recognised as a personal auditory experience. With the notable exception of objective pulsatile tinnitus, tinnitus cannot be heard by others: it exists for the ear of the beholder only and specific to them. Recognising that experiences of tinnitus are partly constituted by the wider context in which audition takes place, by contrast, extends tinnitus beyond the ear of the beholder: it, too, becomes relational. This is not to deny that tinnitus is often experienced as highly individualised: indeed, the inability of others to hear it can be part of what makes tinnitus so disconcerting. However, this individual 'affliction' might be rethought as both subjective and relational: subjective in the sense that it is heard by and impacts upon the individual listener, relational in the sense that experiences of tinnitus are partially constituted by different sonic and social environments. In other words, tinnitus is mediated.

As a theoretical line of argument, this rethinking of tinnitus as relational might seem rather inconsequential. Yet in practice, it raises some challenging ethical questions for listening's practitioners and advocates. What does it mean to take seriously that the acoustic qualities of different spaces can serve to exacerbate or mask tinnitus? What implications does this have for listening practices and sonic meditations that are grounded in quietude?

What unintentional harms might arise in listening to 'everything possible'?

In this short intervention, I have sought to contrast the normate listening embedded in many critical and creative accounts of auditory experience by amplifying tinnitus. Where philosophies of listening grounded in the normate aim to 'include' aural impairment, I have instead sought to consider how listening with and through tinnitus can provide an alternative perspective on the former. If listening is to be understood as an ethically and epistemologically valuable practice, then attention is needed into the omissions that are produced when unimpaired hearing is taken as given.

// Abstract

Listening has often been a source of philosophical interest; and there are a growing number of publications and artistic projects dedicated to its ethical potentiality. Yet what tends to be assumed in this work is an unimpaired 'normate' listener. With reference to the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis and Carl Craig's art installation *Party/After Party* (2020), I ask: What does listening with tinnitus serve to amplify, distort, and reconfigure in relation to 'normate' philosophies of listening? Tinnitus, I argue, requires us to take seriously the need to *not* listen. It also requires an attention to the relationship between hearing capacity, listening positionality, and the geopolitics of the ear. However, despite their limitations, 'normate' philosophies of listening can themselves help provide a different perspective on tinnitus. In particular, the recurrent emphasis on listening as a social, ethical, and relational practice provides an opportunity to rethink tinnitus's attribution as a personal and interior auditory experience. Understanding listening with tinnitus, and tinnitus with listening, can thus generate alternative conceptualisations of both.

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// About the Author
Marie Thompson is a Lecturer in Popular Music at The Open University, UK. She is the author of *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (Bloomsbury, 2017) and co-editor of *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience* (Bloomsbury, 2013). Marie is currently the Principal Investigator of the Arts and Humanities Research Council project, Tinnitus, Auditory Knowledge and the Arts (2020–2022). She is also a founding participant, with Annie Goh, of Sonic Cyberfeminisms, an ongoing project that critically and creatively explores the connections between sound, gender, technology, and cyberfeminism. A 'sonic cyberfeminisms' special issue of *Feminist Review* is to be published in March 2021.

// FKW is supported by the Mariann Steegmann Institute and Cultural Critique / Cultural Analysis in the Arts ZHdK
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