

EDITORIAL

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the ear is uncanny
 (large or small)
 it is the most open organ.
 i tell my life to my self
 (i recite and recount)
 but become what i am
 through the ear i borrow
 (through the ear you lend).
 we proceed
 seeking out the edges
 (the inner walls, the passages).
 these labyrinths come down
 to the ear you hear me with
 (to the ear I hear you with).
 we recite and recount
 and become what we are.

In the summer of 2014, I woke to the sound of ringing and buzzing in my left ear. My hearing drowned in this sound, and I struggled to listen to anything else. As though infectious, the ringing quickly began in my right ear and as time passed, everyday sounds became intolerable, conversations were difficult to follow, and public places came to be a source of fear and panic. I was eventually diagnosed with chronic bilateral tinnitus and hyperacusis – a condition characterised by a hypersensitivity to sound – and they have been my constant companions ever since, fluctuating in severity but ever present. I shamefully admit that in my tinnitus-free years I took my hearing for granted, and I did this despite embracing listening as the primary contact between my *self* and the world. Whether I was performing, practicing or consuming, listening, sound and music were the foundation of my identity. I found adjusting to life with tinnitus and hyperacusis challenging. The auditory worlds of everyday life – a dropped plate, ambulance sirens, a car engine left running, children shouting, coffee shops, jangling keys – became threatening. I sought relief in music, only to find that music I had loved and listened to for years sounded distant and incomplete; familiar yet unfamiliar. I couldn't play my instruments without pain and sudden hearing loss, and I learned quickly that going to a gig, festival or concert was impossible. So, I worked to create an impenetrable safe space around my ears only to find that I couldn't listen through the cacophony of phantom sounds emanating from my own body. I was overwhelmed by a feeling of loss, and I longed to hear how my ears used to hear.

Reimagining my relationship with music and sound, I started to meditate on what it means to listen, its importance in the creation and expression of selfhood, its role as a practice of social and cultural engagement, and its significance in the production of knowledge. Of course, these questions are not new, and I turned to writings dedicated to exploring philosophies, theories, and practices of listening to help me *make sense* of my changing relationship with sound in all its forms. Several of these texts impacted my thinking greatly, for examples Steven Feld's canonical work with the Kaluli tribe of Papua New Guinea and his theory of "acoustemology", or sound as a way of knowing (2012); Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy of the "listening subject" (2007); Don Ihde's phenomenological study of sound (2007); Ana María Ochoa Gautier's work on the role of listening in the production of knowledge in nineteenth-century Columbia (2014); Eric Clarke's ecological formulation of musical listening (2005); Denise Von Glahn's exploration of listening and the compositional practices of nine American women composers (2013); Nina Sun Eidsheim's conceptualisation of music as vibrational sensation (2015); and Lawrence Kramer's recent phenomenon of the "audible" and the hum of the world (2018).

The pieces in this edition of *Riffs* intersect with existing debates on listening, and we asked contributors to reflect upon the role listening plays in their creative endeavours, regardless of discipline or approach. The prompt is a poem I compiled from short passages and fragments of Derrida's "Otobiographies" lecture and the subsequent roundtable discussions (1985). Of all the theories and philosophies on listening I could have picked, I chose Derrida's otobiographies because of the interconnections he makes between the life of the living subject, listening and writing. For readers unfamiliar with the lecture, in "Otobiographies" Derrida explores Nietzsche's autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, to unravel the idea that an autobiographical text gains authority with the declaration, or self-signing, of a name. Instead, Derrida claims a text gains authority when the hearing other receives the message:

"Nietzsche's signature does not take place when he writes...it is the ear of the other that signs. The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography" (1985, pp.50-51).

In the mutual dependency of the self upon the other, the autobiographical signature does not happen until it has been received by the ear of the other. Crucial to the formation of identity is the forced deferral to alterity, which is both a necessary and persistently recurring process.

The "Otobiographies" lecture represents some of Derrida's key concerns—for example, the relationship between the living self and its textual representation, textuality, play, translation—but what I find particularly fascinating is the importance placed on the listening ear as the maker of selfhood. Where self exposed to alterity begins with "hearing oneself speak" (Derrida 1985: 49), it is the reception of the message by the ear of the other that brings presence and plurality to selfhood. There is something tentative, patient yet intensely immersive in the processes of making, unmaking and remaking that Derrida describes. They express a materiality of hearing and listening that trace the physical structures of the ear: "It would suffice, that is, to lead all the affiliated threads of the name astray in...the labyrinth of the ear. Proceed, then, by seeking out the edges, the inner walls, the passages" (ibid: 11). It is by leading the autobiographical subject into the labyrinths of the ear that the writer's "I" is reinscribed as "we", and it is the combination of the ear's perceptive capacity and the changes inscribed upon selfhood by listening that enables Derrida to transform autobiography to otobiography, or "earbiography" (Smith 1995: 75).

Whilst the "Otobiographies" lecture feeds into Derrida's larger deconstructive project, it is one of the least discussed in Derridean scholarship, and yet, it presents an opportunity to explore

the role of music, sound and listening in the writing of our individual and collective lives. The poem, therefore, attempts a crystallisation of the vitality present in “Otobiographies”, of its key insight into the ear as an organ that both initiates connections and embroils us in the persistently emerging and re-emerging entanglements of life.

The contributors to this issue of *Riffs* have opened the theory of “otobiography” to new contexts. The ties that bind these pieces is the prompt, however the responses to this recombination of Derrida’s words could not be more diverse. As the reader you will be drawn into poetic meditations, theoretical musings, autoethnographic reflections and intersensorial ruminations. You may meet Derrida along the way, you may find him hidden, or he may hardly be present at all. Regardless, these pieces share a fascination with the conditions of listening and how our listening practices shape our identities, the identities of others and the worlds we create and inhabit. They also reflect upon how we, as individuals and communities, talk about and document our listening experiences. Faithful to the space *Riffs* has created, convention gives way to experimentation, and in this free space, new expressive possibilities unfurl. Give your ear to the different voices you will encounter; listen generously, and I hope you find your attentiveness rewarded by the new ideas and perspectives shared within these pages.

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