

An Aural Version of Situated Knowledge: A Conversation with Ellen Waterman

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Ellen Waterman’s creative and research practices are all about listening together across and through distance and difference. So, when I spoke with her during our socially distanced summer of the pandemic, I was interested to hear how our current situation has influenced her thinking about what it means to create sound and sound-based work together. What follows is an interview that still attempts to be spontaneous and to listen, even in written form.

Ellen, thank you for taking the time to tell us a bit about your listening practices over these past months. During this time in which the pandemic keeps us apart, what keeps you connected and inspired in your artistic practice?

The thing I’m finding most exciting right now – in this pandemic summer – is the thirst for human connection, which is producing all kinds of musical activity online. Networked performance has simply exploded: the technologies are evolving rapidly to meet the demand and people are finding new ways to “be” together online. In this environment, I find a lot of scope for the research question that interests me most: How are we to be together across difference?

To be clear, I don’t mean “why can’t we all just get along?” Rather, I am interested in the ways that bridges, networks, risk taking, and precarious safety nets in our arts ecology contribute to critical discourses about difference and strategies for living together in society – even (and perhaps especially) when they produce productive dissonance.

Yes, networked performance has exploded, and there has been a sense that we’ve had to embrace that distance and the dissonance – the glitches on Zoom, the slightly out of sync movements on screen, or knowing that we could be disconnected at any moment – and to connect nonetheless because there are few alternatives. Our attention to the “bridges, networks, risk taking, and precarious safety nets in our arts ecology,” as you say, reminds us that those structures are always there, and they need not be inaudible or invisible to us as we move forward. Amid all of this, have you been working on new research projects, and what role does community play in them?

This past summer, I set aside the book project (out of which my paper for the SpokenWeb conference, now in 2021, comes from) in order to develop several new collaborative and applied projects. The first is related to playing in music ensembles online – the question is “how do we maintain musical community and intimacy in university music ensembles in an online environment?” It’s not just a technological and pedagogical question (though it is both of these); at its root, it’s a question about what compels us to make music together. The team, whose work is ongoing, includes faculty, technical staff, ensemble directors, and undergraduate

music students who are collaborating in an online lab ensemble to test out a bunch of ideas for jazz band, choir, and ear training. We're working in a virtual environment where things are changing almost daily and we're embracing risk and failure. I'm blown away by the energy, commitment and curiosity of the students and conductors whose feedback is informing our creation of a 'tool kit' for online music ensemble pedagogy (<https://carleton.ca/music/omer/>).

I've also just begun work on a new project that brings professional and community musicians together to co-create new works – we're calling them "resonances" – in response to two upcoming art exhibitions at the Carleton University Art Gallery in fall 2021 and winter 2022 (one is about Dark Matter, the other is based on the Dada artist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven). Resonance is funded by a SSHRC Insight Development Grant and the aim is to develop a methodology for a community-engaged approach to research-creation. We're working with some fantastically creative musicians from the 2SLGBTQ+ community and from the Deaf community.

It seems that collaborating with people on projects that are co-creative and practical is more attractive to me just now than writing!

That sounds like a fascinating project of creation through response, almost a sound-based ekphrasis with the "resonances" as echoes of the exhibitions. I look forward to hearing more about that project as it unfolds, and to hearing your paper next summer at the 2021 Listening, Sound, Agency Symposium. Can you give us a bit of a preview of the paper?

Since 2003 I've been working on a comparative study of experimental music in Canada, drawing on fieldwork at 12 festivals and artist-run centres across Canada. It's an unwieldy project (to put it mildly) but it has given me lots of scope for thinking about the ways that meaning is produced in musical performance and how that work is both constituted by and affects social, cultural and environmental phenomena in Canada. Inspired by my early work with the composer, educator, and sound theorist R. Murray Schafer, I locate this research at the nexus of ecology, performance, and music/sound (<http://www.sonicecology.com/>). In my book in progress, I examine music festivals and individual performances as ecosystems affected by all the myriad human and more than human factors that are present in that spacetime.

My paper for SpokenWeb juxtaposes an analysis of Schafer's *Patria Three: The Greatest Show* (a literal carnival produced in 1988 and 89) with Gabriel Dharmoo's 2014 one-person show *Anthropologies imaginaires*. Although the two works were conceived and performed in vastly different cultural moments in Canada, and from very different subject positions, they somehow resonate together. Both use satire and absurdity as social critique; both trade in the grotesque and carnivalesque; neither should be taken at face value. This comparison is helpful in thinking through the importance of what Dylan Robinson has recently called "critical listening positionality" (in his 2020 book *Hungry Listening*). As Sadie Couture recently described it, critical listening positionality is "the practice of interrogating our listening positionalities in order to 'listen otherwise'" (<https://amodern.net/article/sensate-sovereignty/>). I'm interested in how these works respond to listening otherwise.

You mentioned before that this paper is part of a longer book project. Where does this paper fit into that project and/or within concepts that you have been working through?

In the long genesis of my book project, of course, the topic of ecology has burgeoned. ANT [Actor Network Theory] and assemblage theory are met by a panoply of ecology theorists (e.g. Morton, Barad, Bennett, Haraway, Tsing, Massumi, Manning) and many developments in acoustic ecology and ecomusicology. We now have sharp tools for theorizing the complex ecology of biotic and abiotic factors in music and my book takes several of them up; however, Schafer, for all the much discussed limitations of his work, remains a touchstone. As a young musician (flutist) and scholar in the 1980s and '90s I had the good fortune to work closely with Schafer, to perform in several of his *Patria* series of environmental music theatre pieces. This experience led me into Schafer's work on acoustic ecology and his theories about interdisciplinary performance. I've written quite a bit about Schafer's work – some of it quite critical – but I've always been grateful for the lessons he has taught me about listening and sounding in response to performance environments. In returning to my experience performing in *The Greatest Show* (at the tender age of 23), I'm remembering how formative was the experience of performing and listening in that chaotic environment of 100 simultaneous carnival acts (buskers, carnival barkers, mummers, jugglers, etc.). It's there, I realize, that I first began to think about collaboration and co-creation across difference.

Returning back to your creative practice, can you tell us a bit about what has changed since March? What does it mean to be doing improvisation right now? Have you noticed attuning yourself to the world in new ways? And by new I mean that which can be both surprising and troubling – as we are in a time when it can be disconcerting to realize that we have adapted to some extent to a dissociated state of communicating across distance.

I don't have anything profound to say about improvising – we're all doing it all the time in every area of life, and the pandemic has simply amplified that process. One of the most enjoyable things has been taking more time to improvise with my partner Michael Waterman in our duo Pama, including some recording and internet performances. Nothing like being confined to home to make you rediscover the musician who has always been right beside you! I do miss getting together with other musicians in one space and attending live concerts, but I'm grateful for this opportunity to focus on the extremely local. By contrast, I enjoyed participating with 500+ musicians in the World Tuning Meditations produced on Zoom by [Music on the Rebound](#) in March and April. In my headphones, the sound was just awful, but the experience of connecting with all those people at once singing Pauline Oliveros' music was very moving.

What a global experience of participatory listening. (And what an opportunity to improvise with your partner at home too!) Plus, I think that the first thing that you said about improvising is, in fact, profound: “we're all doing it all the time in every area of life, and the pandemic has simply amplified that process.” It prompts one to think of improvising that we do everyday – and even to what it means to think back to those networks, supports, and not-so-safe safety nets, which came up earlier in relation to society – as sonic rather than visual. In your everyday sonic life, what are you listening to, and do you find that what you've been listening to has changed since March 2020?

Hmm, I guess I'm noticing the musical sounds in the house more than usual. Michael has a decades-long practice of weekly networked collaborative audio collage with his radio show the [Mannlicher Carcano Radio Hour](#). Since the mid-1990s this group has been improvising across different cities and countries – starting with the on-air phone line at Trent Radio and then moving to video chat platforms, and most recently Zoom. For decades, I've heard bits of MC every single week in the soundscape of our home, both live and during Michael's post-show audio editing. Mostly, I've ignored it as simply part of our sonic background, but lately I've been listening more attentively. While many of us are struggling with communicating amidst the problems of packet loss and latency, Mannlicher Carcano have long since developed the capacity to jam together, separately – each intensely inhabiting the particular sonic space available to them, and no one person able to hear the whole mix. They welcome any and all participants and during the pandemic their weekly numbers have quadrupled. I think there's a lesson here about listening across distance (as well as difference): perhaps an aural version of situated knowledge?

Yes, it really does sound like they have been practising an art of being separate-but-together – a practice that involves recognizing the value in letting go of that desire to hear the whole mix and to fully inhabit that sonic space that is one piece. It really is “an aural version of situated knowledge.” There is also a sense of letting go of the perfectionism of, say, a studio recording with the recognition that interviews have to be recorded remotely and that even professionals, whether musicians, podcasters, news hosts, etc, have to broadcast from home. And, again, there is that sense of making visible and audible the behind-the-scenes that is always there in their everyday lives. With this in mind, do you have any recordings that you have made that you would like to share with listeners?

[A Map by Pama](#)

I'm so glad you chose this because this is your duo Pama with Michael Waterman that we heard about earlier. Could you tell us a bit about what we're hearing in this recording?

We made this recording for the RPM Challenge – an international movement that we first learned about when we lived in Newfoundland. People are encouraged to make a homemade album in the cold dark month of February. In St. John's, hundreds of folks do it and attend the listening parties afterwards. This version of the [RPM Challenge](#), held in April, was organized by Elling Lien in response to the pandemic. I'm playing flute and vocalizing; Michael is playing theremin, synthesizer, and crazy homemade instruments. Nothing hi-tech. Just going to the basement together to jam.

Ellen Waterman is both a music scholar with a strong focus on music in Canada and a flutist specializing in creative improvisation. She was appointed to the inaugural Helmut Kallmann Chair for Music in Canada at Carleton University in 2019 where she is developing a research program committed to investigating issues of diversity and decolonization of music in Canada through scholarship, research creation, and experiential learning. Previously, she taught at Trent University, the University of Guelph, and Memorial University of Newfoundland, where she was Dean of the School of Music from 2010-2015. Ellen was Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at McGill University (2008-9) and Bye-Fellow at Robinson College, University of Cambridge (2015-16). <http://www.ellenwaterman.ca/>

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This article is published as part of the **Listening, Sound, Agency Forum** which presents profiles, interviews, and other materials featuring the research and interests of future participants in the 2021 SpokenWeb symposium. This series of articles provides a space for dialogical and multimedia exchange on topics from the fields of literature and sound studies, and serves as a prelude to the live conference.



Katherine McLeod

Katherine McLeod is a scholar of archives, performance, and poetry. She has co-edited the collection *CanLit Across Media: Unarchiving the Literary Event* (with Jason Camlot, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019). She is writing a monograph (under contract with Wilfrid Laurier University Press) that is a feminist listening to recordings of women poets reading on CBC Radio. She is an affiliated researcher with SpokenWeb and produces audio content for SpokenWeb's ShortCuts. She is the 2020-2021 Researcher-in-Residence at the Concordia University Library.

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