

Script for Ellen's and Paula's presentation at
Aural Diversity Workshop 4

September 16, 2022, 10:45 am ET

SLIDE Ellen's positionality.

I am a musician (flutist and vocalist) who mainly improvises. And I am also an interdisciplinary music scholar who likes to work collaboratively and in community. I'm a woman in late middle-age, and at least for the time being, my hearing is still quite good. Recently, I've begun working with Deaf musicians and have taken baby steps in studying ASL. These experiences have me questioning the audism of my performance practice. Flute playing is a whole-body experience affected by sonic, haptic, kinetic, and visual, sensory information. But although I have always had this embodied knowledge, my assumptions about music and sound have, until recently, been unquestioningly predicated on aurality. It seemed important to decentre and thus reorient audition to create an intersensory approach to listening in my practice.

SLIDE Paula's positionality

I am an ethnographer and creative writer/storyteller working in the field of arts-communication. My writing is multi-model and includes the use of texts, textiles, images and objects. I explore ideas of relatedness and the sense of freedom, occurring in moments when dominant social ideas, structures, and beliefs are lived, negotiated and felt by people, in particular, deaf and hearing people. As a hearing person I was born into the dominant auditory/spoken language group and I have since learned two sign languages (ASL and LSQ) and continue to work at the interstitial spaces that include both deaf and hearing people. I am married to a deaf person and have two hearing children. When I was a sign language interpreter, I brokered language/culture, I researched phonocentrism and oral normativity more closely in media and society during my graduate work. And, currently I am doing my Ph.D. at Concordia University looking at federal communication laws and expanding ideas of communication accessibility. Since 2009, I have worked as a founding member of SPiLL.PROpagation, an Artist Center in

sign language, and we host intercultural co-creation projects with hearing and deaf artists. This project with Ellen being one of them, and now being one of my absolute favorites.

SLIDE ELLEN: Description of the project

Bodily Listening in Place is an instructional score for intersensory improvisation commissioned by New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA) for World Listening Day 2022. I composed the piece in consultation with Tiphaine Girault and Paula Bath. The score was distributed both as English text and video with ASL (American Sign Language) and people of all backgrounds, experience, and sensory modalities were invited to record and share their own realizations online in any medium (sonic, visual, or textual). World Listening Day is an annual event held on July 18th, the birthday of Canadian composer and founder of acoustic ecology, R. Murray Schafer (1933-2021). Normally, the event focuses on the auditory dimension of listening, not surprising given that Schafer's work on the soundscape (1994) was designed to highlight the roles of sound and listening in the environment as a corrective to the dominance of visuality in Western society. The theme for 2022 "listening across boundaries," however, suggested the possibility for an expanded approach to listening through different modes of sensory experience. *Bodily Listening in Place* became an artistic research (or as we say in Canada research-creation) project through which we explored processes of intersensory and intercultural exchange across hearing and deaf experience, and through sonic, haptic, kinetic, linguistic, and graphic media.

SLIDE - PAULA discussion of iterative process

As part of our methodological thinking I looked to the anthropological work of Michael Jackson where he writes that ***No worldview ever encompasses or covers the plenitude of what is actually lived, felt, imagined, and thought.*** Given this, the thinking is it is advantageous to engage with our sense across different modalities of perception, and to allow for asymmetry of experience to occur. For me working co-creatively and interculturally means – creating in ways that also honor each person's sense of "home" - freedom, balance and cultural integrity. Starting this project, each participant's goals were different. Ellen's goal was to create her musical score for World Listening Day. Tiphaine/my goal was to assist Ellen

(a flutist/sound-based artist) on a creative journey that deconstructed her embodied phonocentrism and encouraged her, and all of us, to expand our ways of sensing, understanding and relating to each other through different mediums - visual, auditory, haptic (vibrational), metaphorical narratives, material sensory. We wanted this process to allow Ellen to then create in new ways that reached into other dimensions in addition to the dimensions she was already familiar with - such as sound and movement.

SLIDE: To do this, each artist produced a series of what I call “echoed scores” - where individually each artist created a piece of music / a score, sent it to the other, who in turn experienced it, then interpreted the piece back. To maintain a sense of “home”. Tiphaine offered her echoes to Ellen from her chosen disciplines - in the form of illustrations, narratives and metaphors, and engaging with material objects. Ellen, however, offered her echoed scores in the form of sound (flute), body movement and her physical locality in among natural elements such as wind, trees and other objects found in her natural outdoor environment.

SLIDE: [PAULA Translating and communicating experience through tactile and graphic media](#)

These “echoed scores” were a series of oscillating interpretations of experiences occurring between Ellen and Tiphaine and their expressions spanned the senses and required an expanded idea of “listening”. Which Ellen speaks more of.

SLIDE: To give you a closer look at this multi-modal oscillating interpretive process, Ellen started by interpreting a painting into an improvisational flute piece and offering it to Tiphaine - both in the form of a photograph of the painting as well as an MP3 recording.

SLIDE: Tiphaine listened to the visual image. She also listened to the flute piece through a vibrational vest. At one point Tiphaine’s 9-year-old hearing son (also violinist) plugged himself into the vest and they “co-listened” together. He could hear the music and he connected for Tiphaine the different sense of vibration/sound to specific musical instruments producing such sound/vibration.

SEE VIDEO (Tiphaine and Leo co-listening)

SLIDE Next Tiphaine echoed the piece back to Ellen by way of offering an illustration that captured a metaphor where Tiphaine described the piece as “sounding/feeling” like a time - she was sitting in a car

during a rain storm and rhythmic vibrations from the raindrops bouncing off the metal sides of the car's surface and seeing the pouring pools of rain fall down the glass windows.

SLIDE Or, and one of our favorite moments, was the echo of Tiphaine offered by ringing a Tibetan bowl full of water with a Basalt stone. The stone was important as it increased the presence - visually - of vibration in the water.

SEE VIDEO (Bowl-stone-water vibration).

However, even in expanding there was evidence of limits to one's sense of "home" or balance. We had given a blank piece of chart paper to Ellen to make an illustrated echo, but it remained unused. Ellen did not venture into illustrations just as much as Tiphaine did not venture into improvisational movement. Ellen echoed back in improvisational movement and uniquely also connected her body and movement to her natural outdoor environment. Ellen provided a video and we watched the new piece she offered, this time however, with no vibrational vest and no sound.

SLIDE: ELLEN Performing expanded listening through intersensory improvisation

In order to explore the role of physical place in intersensory improvisation, I began regularly to improvise in a patch of sunlight from a south-facing window that often spills over an old wooden chest and the variegated maple floor of my music room. I experimented with concentrating on the visual and haptic qualities of sunlight, how it intensifies colours and warms the skin, and I focused my improvisation on minute and controlled movements of my feet. I documented the process in the form of a score and shared it with Paula and Tiphaine.

Improvisation with sunlight, for moving player with open and closed eyes

Go to a window through which the sun is directly shining. Explore the space delineated by the patch of sunlight streaming through the window. Treat what you can see and feel - both in front of your open eyes, and behind your closed eyes - as a graphic score. Focus your attention on feeling your body present in this space. Move around in the patch of sunlight. Make music, but let it be a by-product of your exploration of the space.

In discussing this score with Paula and Tiphaine, I realized that the experience of improvising repeatedly in this sunny spot turned a defined “space” into a familiar and welcoming “place.”

SLIDE: This insight carried over to the final instructions for *Bodily Listening in Place* which has four sections.

1. Select a place, spend time in it, document it, and get to know it through your senses over several days.
2. Before improvising in response to your place, orient your body by moving and warming up in any way that is meaningful to you.
3. Listen (the piece starts now). Listening is not hearing – it is active attention.
“Listen” beyond audition – with your eyes, skin, heart, emotions.
4. Improvise in response to the place in any way that makes sense to you.

1. Sing or play an instrument
2. Move/dance
3. Draw
4. Write

SLIDE: Video of Ellen performing Bodily Listening in Place (20 secs)

SLIDE: ELLEN Expanded listening as attentiveness/improvisation

For me, two intersecting pathways have emerged through this research-creation project. The first is reorienting the way I “listen” through an intentional focus on movement, touch, smell, and sight, and to a lesser extent taste, to expand my conception of listening. This is valuable because, as ethnomusicologist Tomie Hahn reminds us, “If we consider that we inhabit different sensory worlds--personally and culturally--then building awareness of the sensibilities *someone else* might be experiencing can expand our knowledge of self/other and open communications” (2). The second pathway is being mindful of creating scores and performances that are accessible to a wider range of sensory modalities. For example, I have experimented with a pitch shifting guitar pedal and vocalizing through the flute to create a grainier, lower timbre palette more easily perceivable by vibrotactile media. Developing a sustained intersensory listening practice as a musician, however, is quite a challenge. It has altered my listening habitus, throwing me off balance, literally leaving me in suspense.

SLIDE PAULA New Listening habitus

For me, Ellen's experience of being "thrown off balance" resonated with me and uses of similar metaphors relating to the sense of falling or experiences of equilibrium/disequilibrium. Jackson, influenced by the work of Binswanger and Merleau-Ponty, writes that meaning is *experienced* in the environment before it becomes a symbol of language. Jackson explains this as our sense of "being in the world" which is a way to say that being off balance is not pathological, it is a means to examine our habitual patterns of body use as well as our conventional ideas about the world. Our sense of "uprightness" is a way to define our relationship, both physical and psychological, to our world. And our sense of loss or disturbance of balance is a way to describe our relationship with the very ground of our being.

This metaphor of equilibrium/disequilibrium resonates with the work of DeafSpace researcher Robert Sirvage, who is Deaf and Blind, and explained to me one day society's general incorrect assumption about the lived experiences of deaf people. Robert (2019) signed to me once *"How misguided it is for people wanting to understand the lived experience of deaf people to plug their ears. If you want to understand how deaf people perceive and experience the world - walk backwards."* However our work with Ellen was not to have her understanding how deaf people perceive or about Tiphaine not having access to sound, or other common notions of accessibility. We work with a social ecology perspective, seeing communication not as an experience of gaps and disconnections, but as continuous and interconnected. We don't consider there to be a "gap" and find it a mischaracterization to establish our social world based on a series of differences and social disconnections. Rather, we find it to be evidence of what David Howes, a sense-based Anthropologist, would say is how the senses are constructed and lived differently in different periods and societies and that this reflects how people understand their environment and the people and things in that environment.

ELLEN - Conclusions - improvisation and mid-embodiment

The practice I'm calling "bodily listening in place" requires something akin to what Natasha Myers and Joe Dumit have called improvising in a state of mid-embodiment. Writing about the intra-active practices and responsive bodies of scientists engaging with experimental media and communicating their findings through narrative and embodied gesture, Myers and Dumit observe that new insights and forms of dexterity are acquired in the process. Their concept of the "responsive excitability of bodies" is used to "account for how it is that experimentalists acquire new kinesthetic, affective, and conceptual dexterities as they engage in the process of learning to see, feel, and know" (250). Their description matches my embodied experience. I am learning, all over again, how to *listen*.

Of course, Myers' and Dumit's article is implicitly ableist. It assumes a seeing, hearing, mobile subject, and in that respect, it is like most writing about music, sound, and listening. We need to account for the complexities of working across Deaf and hearing music cultures, and what I'm attracted to is precisely what can be learned in this reciprocal intercultural encounter.

SLIDE For example, my work with SPILL Propagation has made me attuned to vibrations (seen and felt) with an intensity that I've never experienced in five decades of making music in all kinds of environments. When I listen to music through the vibrotactile vest, I can only discern a generalized buzzing and rhythmic thumping. My haptic sense, it seems, is woefully under-developed. What does it mean to acquire dexterity in a sensory mode? Or better, what does it mean to adopt an intersensory approach to listening that encompasses multiple possible sensory modes? And what happens when we foreground interdependence as a valid and

precious ground for musical creativity? These questions animate my desire to reorient audition through bodily listening in place. Following Myers and Dumit, I situate this intersensory practice as “hovering in a space of not knowing, mid-embodiment.” And I concur that “this is the space in which improvisation and creativity flourish” (255).

As both a process and a composition, *Bodily Listening in Place* is deceptively simple. Like many exercises in meditation and mindfulness, and within a tradition of instructional scores for improvisation, it calls the participant to pay active attention to their surroundings and to focus on sensory data. Performing *Bodily Listening in Place*, however, raises complex questions that merit continued thought, dialogue, and musicking. What does it mean to ‘make’ music? How does music engage the senses asymmetrically across different modalities of perception, across different bodies? How does the privileging of a particular sense (hearing) and a particular medium (sound) work to limit our conception of music? By attending to the diverse ways in which we “listen,” and by expanding our own multi-sensory ranges, we, in turn, expand our opportunities for interconnectedness across both arts practices and human cultures.

SLIDE - thank you