

ARTICLE

Listening to Epilepsy and *SoundCloud*: Re-examining Sonic Subjectivity and Affective Labor

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Abstract

While many patients who are ill form significant networks of support online, I argue that describing experiences in language over social media is not always desirable for someone with epilepsy. My line of inquiry instead explores the tension between music creation and fragmented subjectivity, and folds in a critique of *SoundCloud*, the music sharing and networking site. I first analyze what it means for the subject to compose and produce electronic music, and then analyze my own music on *SoundCloud*. I investigate affective attachment in relation to our entanglement with music and social media, and I extend this to a survey of subjectivity, physicality and networked capitalism. In the article, affect and listening are related through their materiality and space, and by their capacity to mediate sound and meaning. I examine listening for its potential to expand critical activity in accord with embodied processes that are relevant to situated disability. Listening and affect guide my argument as concepts, and I conclude that distinct facets of listening can be connected to an ethics of living in the information society.

Chilianis, M. (2018). Listening to Epilepsy and *SoundCloud*: Re-examining Sonic Subjectivity and Affective Labor. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 4(1), 1-37. <http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312
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Introduction

While many patients who are ill form significant networks of support online, I argue that describing experiences in language over social media is not always desirable for someone with epilepsy. My line of inquiry instead explores the tension between music creation and fragmented subjectivity, and folds in a critique of *SoundCloud*, the music sharing and networking site. I first analyze what it means for the subject to compose and produce electronic music, and then analyze my own music on *SoundCloud*. I investigate affective attachment in relation to our entanglement with music and social media, and I extend this to a survey of subjectivity, physicality and networked capitalism. In the article, affect and listening are related through their materiality and space, and by their capacity to mediate sound and meaning. I examine listening for its potential to expand critical activity in accord with embodied processes that are relevant to situated disability. Listening and affect guide my argument as concepts, and I conclude that distinct facets of listening can be connected to an ethics of living in the information society.

I explore affective attachment and misrecognition in relation to epilepsy and narrative rupture. Epilepsy is among other conditions or impairments such as schizophrenia, and agoraphobia that can impact the everyday self while not appearing to explicitly physically disable a person. Although there is a danger in conflating epilepsy with agoraphobia or schizophrenia, they share some qualities. With schizophrenia, agoraphobia and epilepsy, there are degrees to which an individual will feel their personhood impaired. This may relate to the episodic and unpredictable nature of events that appear 'outside' a bounded 'self'. In terms of epilepsy, impairment may pertain to frequency of seizures, type, intensity, location, or age of onset, and the disabling impact these have on daily activities. Mary Elene Wood (2013) argues that the "often useful distinction between impairment (a limiting physical difference) and disability (the prejudice and social construction of living that excludes, ignores, and demeans those with impairments) can become fuzzy when

dealing with schizophrenia” (p. 23). This acknowledges that the social model, a long-used disability studies framework, is not necessarily suitable for minded impairments. Minded ‘impairments’ directly impact how one is received as a rational subject and these conditions can threaten individuals’ status as valid communicators (Price 2011). This has implications in the areas of activism, academia, the arts, and social media. I am therefore interested in the ramifications of narrative rupture in a communications context.

Affect is also a phenomenon that inheres in configurations of biopower, throughout media, labor and networks, and these “scientific, affective, and linguistic forces of the multitude aggressively transform the conditions of social production” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 366). In this sense, affect is something subjective as well as something that veers toward the impersonal (Koivunen, 2010). Lauren Berlant (2007, 2008, 2011) elaborates affect through a Marxist lens, and extends her analyses to readings of feminist, queer, race and class focused case studies. Affect reshapes subjectivity, including the possibility of co-operative subjectivity in relation to technology, which I shall visit later in the article. Affect and listening are related through the ‘materiality of mediation’, in terms of sound’s provocations (Grossberg, 2010). However, affect cannot address the configuration of the situated epileptic subject with music online. Therefore, I enlist the modality of listening as it incorporates several foci in this essay: a situated and specific mind-body, online electronic music, and technoscientific space.

Aspects of music become ways of knowing analogous and interruptive to discursive structures, even ones of a fluid polymorphous character such as social media. A music-based approach enhances our preconceived notions of “illness” and provides a novel account distinct from many aesthetic perspectives in disability studies which focus on representations of the disabled body in visual art and literature (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Lacom, 2005; Siebers, 2005; Anolik, 2010; Straus, 2011; Watson, 2012). Much of this literature is concerned with the art forms that disabled people produce within a normate milieu, or with representations

of disabled people created in literary texts by the nondisabled at various points in history. While valuable, these approaches center on high-impact narrative in linguistic, visual, and even musical form, and they favor a certain intelligibility about revealing or uncovering selves either in language or visual art. I do not wish to denigrate first-person perspectives that have informed so much feminist and disability scholarship. As Tobin Siebers (2008) puts it, “Suffering is a signal to the self at risk, and this signal applies equally to physical and social situations” (p. 20). Suffering puts the subject on the outside of social norms; writing about how the disabled or impaired self experiences some of these norms, can disturb them. However, my point is that illness is often messy and makes little sense.

Instead, I offer an account of illness as caught in affective, informational networks — specifically *SoundCloud*. Such an account is relevant to disability studies and feminist science and technology studies because it provides a snapshot of a social media platform in the neoliberal society as connected to aural media and epilepsy. I argue that there is a gap in critical communication accounts of the information society (Lash, 2002; Fuchs, 2016) as well as in disability studies auto-ethnographies that I hope to help fill here by bringing affect into conversation with listening and epilepsy. By placing the subjective act of electronic music production in contrast to a later critique of *SoundCloud*, I show why media platforms are problematic, in the sense that they embody a competitive information market. While some scholars see social audiovisual media in positive terms for citizens, where non-monetary rewards such as satisfaction, pride in one’s work, social capital, and cultural capital on platforms such as *YouTube*, *MySpace*, and *Indaba Music* exist (Jenkins, 2006; 2013; 2016; Suhr, 2012), I argue that these ‘rewards’ are, at best more complex and, at worst, elusive not only for people with an impairment or chronic illnesses, but for many people. These rewards tie the subject to an intimate compositional process, both private and public, which I elaborate on in the following sections. Seeking out and participating in public commenting, networking and exchange

online is not always a primary or pleasurable focus for someone with a neurological illness – someone who is ill may not gain much social capital from social media. Furthermore, people with severe and ongoing illness are often unemployed, underemployed or face interruption to their career; therefore, to expect musical social media to grant non-monetary rewards as a kind of cultural citizenship, or to result in social belonging does not gel. I connect electronic music production and listening as these pertain to epilepsy and affective transmission. I survey *SoundCloud* below, and analyze how the network has changed over time, as well as how engaging with *SoundCloud* has both benefitted and detracted from me as a user with epilepsy. Finally, I look at the role of listening in ethical configurations.

Methodology

I understand the body and mind within a feminist framework that includes debates on knowledge, identity, marginalization, and the mattering of the body, which is intertwined with discourse and signs (Haraway, 1991; Collins, 2000; Butler, 1990, 1993, 2001, 2004; Currier, 2003). I see this as a complement to disability studies' social model (Siebers, 2008). As a researcher, musician, epileptic and user of *SoundCloud*, I am embedded within the world I discuss; I therefore offer a first-person perspective. I am embodied. My bodymind interacts with social, environmental, and informational space intersecting with creative, medical, affective, attentive, and survival practices (Wiley 2012). At different stages of the research, I have aimed to be reflexive by thinking about how my actions, writing and music processes impact the meaning of the framed experience at hand (Hockman, 2010). However, I am not only dealing with my "experience," but also with music, with technological extensions, and with concepts. I therefore offer the caveat that I am positioned in various ways. Theorizing embodiment — whether one's own or others — is difficult, and I resort to using the abstraction "the body" or the "bodymind" to designate how subjectivity is entangled in the body, and possibly with other "things" (Couser, 2012). Along with Bergson (1992), I

posit that reality is mobile: things "out there" are in the making, and states are not fixed but are always in a process of change. Through my research, I work through this complexity and weave together the production of sound with concepts, rather than attempt to transcribe with wholeness my internalized picture (Grosz 2005). For this reason, my perspective is partial: I do not seek to master subjectivity (Haraway 1991; Collins 2000). Having said this, however, I do draw on auto-ethnographic and autobiographic traditions, situating my work among Eli Clare's (2001; 2015), Georgina Kleege's (1999; 2018), and Isabel Dyck's (1999). These scholars write political memoir, autobiography, and a first-person-perspective case study respectively and show how knowledge from a disabled person's perspective contributes to knowledge through powerful means.

While many narrative researchers are informed by the claim that we can all tell and understand stories, epilepsy challenges this on several fronts (Squire, 2008). According to Corinne Squire (2008), narratives are recounted in sequence and they are underscored by Aristotle's belief that we all have the ability to make meaning through language as moral subjects — essentially storying our subjectivity. Whatever the seizure experience — as a wide variety of seizures exist — epilepsy confounds the idea of linear, linguistic narrative by the way it interrupts taken-for-granted subjectivity. I argue that the body is present during the editing of digital music. By extension, the body may be perceived in online interactions and through listening to music composed, generally. Discrete events within an "illness narrative" are perceived within an ever-emerging lifestream. At times, these events have rough edges or suddenly jerk into one's body-consciousness; at others, they are gradual, bleeding the hue and taste of the atmosphere. In neurological chronic illnesses such as epilepsy and serious migraine, events cluster and subside, or surprise one. In this sense, chronic illness is a process rather than a state and involves periods of wellness as well as periods of ill health (van Dongen & Reis, 2001). This impacts the research narrative and what I choose to share. For example, it is preferable for me to seek subjective continuity

through music and formal language because the cumulative experience of many seizures is disorienting and interruptive.

I highlight the practice of electronic and electro-acoustic music-making, which includes experimenting with software and re-mediating existing samples and media (Kember & Zylinska, 2010). I value musical artifacts but not simply in the sense that Henry Jenkins (2008, 2013) has in mind (i.e., as media contributing to convergence culture). This is too optimistic in my view because media do not address disability or categorize social difference in a critical sense. Instead, I view the composition process and their products, which may yield several sonic 'versions', as a research process capable of illuminating conditions, discourses, change, temporalities, and constraints. According to Patricia Leavy (2009), music-making as a social research methodology can help researchers access, describe, and explain that which is often rendered invisible by traditional research practices. I posit that human variations and bodily sensations may be felt by listeners in electronic music and I foreground bodily gesture in electronic music, even though it may not be as easily observable or imagined as a person playing an instrument. Although not without challenge, electronic music can "suggest" a body with timbre, texture, rhythm, dynamics, and frequency (Echard, 2006). Another way of thinking about the bodymind in electronic music is akin to that of an embodied "happening" (DeNora, 2000); while Naomi Cumming (1997) speaks of the listener's role in "playing" musical subjectivities mediated by pieces of music. Various senses, emotions, affect, memory and histories are the starting points for making meaning.

I am not concerned with neurological perspectives on the *effects* of music on epilepsy, such as those of Melissa Maguire (2012) although brief mention must be made. These include music-processing approaches such as research aimed at reducing epileptic discharges in the brain by listening to Mozart (Lin et al. 2013); investigating where the auditory sensory memory is (Collins, 2014); and the detailed study of musicians' brains via fMRI in order to demonstrate how music and language share brain networks (Schlaub, 2015). Nor am I seeking to

explore a neurological basis for creativity (Chambliss, 2010) or tracing epilepsy-music connections via brain imaging. While Maguire (2012) and Schlaub (2015) undertake progressive research — Maguire reviews the impact of particular antiepileptic drugs on musicians and Schlaub investigates music treatments to "modulate" brain plasticity, including a final gesture to neurological music therapies — these approaches remain problematic. Their methodologies bring to mind the histories and current practice of being and becoming a generalizable research subject — where the person is “always already on the edge of being regarded as at best a ‘different’ kind of person and at worst not a person at all” (Wood 2013, p. 20). Here Wood deploys narrative methods to disturb this practice in mental illness to circumvent the subjecthood that takes place for schizophrenics. These studies can seem quite innocuous on the surface, but they are part of medicine's and psychiatry's methods that have a history of subjugating epileptics and the mentally ill. I now turn to the question of how the bodymindedness of epilepsy finds its way in sound and music online.

Music, the Subject and Epilepsy

I am interested in the composition process and engagement with sound. Throughout this process, the bodymind is involved in an electronic music production, listening, feedback, and revision cycle, shaping and being shaped. I place versions of a composition online at or near the end of such a cycle. In this section I am concerned with how music and the subject are entangled, and how these embody understandings of epilepsy. As a starting point, Aden Evens (2005) gives an evocative description of sound and worlds as perceived by the composer:

The composer and the performer capture percept and affect in sound, implicating worlds of forces not yet unleashed but whose reserve powers the music, driving it along. Personal histories, impersonal events, an intake of breath, a bloody battle. An entire history of music insists implicated in every note, every phrase,

every contraction. A sonic history in every utterance, whose most contracted, whose clarity is the specificity of the sound but not its sense. It is this contraction, the contraction of all sound, the contraction of all vibrations, which gives sense to sound, contracting clearly just this vibration, this sound wave, and letting the rest remain obscure, implicated in various degrees of relaxation (p. 35).

Contraction and relaxation parallels contrast, as unheard and unattended-to frequencies fall away; one listens to this particular vibration and others recede. Depending on the compositional approach, the composer may have a degree of volition in the creating process, which gives sense to her sound; however, the epileptic does not when a seizure visits her. There may be a “bloody battle” – between a need to keep going and seizures. When I am next in a production session, my body resets, finds a balance with determination, and carries on composing. I expand on the embodied and affective process of creating in this section and its relevance to “chronopolitics” (Virilio via Sharma, 2012), while I link this to affect in the *Affective Attachment* section below.

My composition, *Swiqos*¹ (Chilianis, 2017) responds to the selection process evoked by Evens (2005) above. I will now describe how I made this piece, in a fragmented way, rather than a linear fashion. This example is an abrasive piece of electronic music that pinpoints aural sensations and convolutions. I actively worked with some of these sonic vibrations, which produced a range of subjective and bodily affects in me — from irritation to laughter. To begin with, I used a frenetic drum file that I had improvised in another audio application. I then I worked the area that straddles production and audio mixing. From my music journal:

Making so fast I don't want to stop ... Something that made music, *made rhythm jump for me*. Just now I solo-ed the middle band, as I felt the tom was over loud, I solo-ed it on and off and it produced quite a distinct audio effect, ... because of the eddies of modulation in the other tracks. *I may use this*.

I italicize these phrases as they stand out for me. The music-making

seems bigger than I am, it seems to have more volition and will than "I" do. A buzzy saw synth enters at 20" and is not pretty — it is in harsh contrast to the "bubbly", soft-edged and bouncy opening. This saw synth fades in and out through the piece and was a late addition by myself. Perhaps it embodies an attempt to involve more "volition" against some of the more collaboratively, even passively made sound background. Overall, I am at the controls: I am the one who solos a track, I can fade one sound down against the others if its vibrations grate; I select (but not if I have a seizure).

I incorporated some random computer processes during the production of *Swiqos* and one might point out that this indeterminacy is akin to the uncertainty of epilepsy. However, random selection out of a group of possible sound events still returns a specificity of sound in the final mix. In this instance a computer program randomly selects drum sounds, which are sometimes pitched randomly; in this case, the software is the selector. In another instance (in the arranging and mixing stage of production), I interact with the audio editor,² seeing a potential for sound and rhythm. The level of complexity occurs through polyrhythms, layering, and the signal processing chain where at times I lost track of where or why sounds occurred.³ Both happy accidents and sonic failure can occur during this kind of making process, which I occasionally cultivate in order to find sonic timbres previously unknown to me. In this instance, I allow sonic layers, timbral change and effects in addition to the mixing desk-like emulation in the software to guide me in my composition. Throughout the production process, there is a distinct spatial positioning between the subject, the software, musical structure and the sonic shapes as they grow. The chain of musical sense that results from highlighting and sequencing sound from the mass of potential vibrations applies to both compositional approaches 1) random software algorithms, and 2) my interaction with music software.

When I am held back by something that "feels" involuntarily outside the self, the "I" of the everyday can be suddenly nowhere, or can seem filtered with another substance (light, sound).⁴ "I" can be

momentarily inarticulate — but sound or noise of varying velocities and timbres makes sense to me. During these periods, conversations seem jarring and may proceed with delays on my side and uncertainty and wariness on the other. This excerpt from Helene Cixous's (2004) work *Neuter* demonstrates a loss of language through the paradox of William who kills off his character as he almost arrives at the Symbolic (through the melted mirror). Cixous questions how Wilson can author his story, even though as readers we are asked to listen to a narrator without a subject, which destabilizes his voice.

The reader will have to lend an ear to a narrator-sans-Subject ergo sans *voice* other than that ear which, echo of its muteness, the admission of its loss feebly raises: indeed, at the moment in which William Wilson writes he has already killed with his own hands the other William Wilson he has scored out the Name-of-William Wilson from among the living at the time of a bloody scene in which the mirror melted on him, he lost access to the symbolic ergo it is impossible for William Wilson to arrive at language, still more impossible to be the author of a brief story (p. 49).

Cixous (2004) takes us on a cochlear route arriving at a character's authorial impossibility. I do not align myself with Wilson's character per se, except to acknowledge how poststructural subjectivity shares some qualities with the states associated with the seizures I experience. What I want to suggest is that when I place the "sonic body" online, the expectations and norms, both on and offline around strength, reason, career, ability, communication, and femininity usually result in my actively "killing off" the self in language. Facing an Internet where people place their best and boldest, or even loudest selves online is dissonant,⁵ and not always appropriate for the eroded or fragmented self due to epilepsy. In this sense, it is safer to position subjectivity online via music.

During and after illness we must become intelligible through whatever the symbolic and discursive registers are around us. Judith Butler (1999) has drawn attention to the "difficulty of the 'I' to express itself through the language that is available to it" (p. xxvi). The logic of the

dominant linguistic and economic registers, particularly those that rely on speed and efficiency, can sometimes alienate the epileptic bodymind, particularly in verbal interactions, when seizures slow or pause speech. Epilepsy can thwart the rules of everyday communication. In response to this, I turn to music-making to regain continuity over rupture. As Naomi Cumming (1997) argues, “A person does not just move towards something but does so with ‘urgency’ or ‘hesitation.’” (p. 149). Here, a relationship between gesture, subjectivity and object — in this case, a musical instrument or the sonic potentialities in a piece of music software — are evident. With gestures affected during seizing, and feelings of energetic release that burst through during wellness, there is no regular pattern; so I experience an inexplicable, zigzagging existential situation. This is reflected in the changing rhythms of *Swiqos*.

Epilepsy often involves compromised social identity, despite what neurologists and positive narratives on the illness state. For example, many underestimate the felt and physical effort it takes to be around normed others during seizure and post-seizure periods: the annoyance of stares when I reach into my bag for medication after a seizure on the train; the confusion post-seizure that descends affecting everyday interactions, where strangers sometimes butt in to “correct” me. All these and more have a social cost, which I endure. Some of these frustrations are routine repetitions — they can be heard as collisions, rhythms, buzzy timbres and intensities in my music. *Swiqos* has identifiable boundaries, locations, transfers, ruptures, places, collisions, senses, repetitions, surprises and affects. Trinh Minh Ha (2011) likens these boundaries and edges to twilight, where people’s identity slips and transforms, where a “dog is taken for a wolf.” This is particularly salient for the person with epilepsy who may well understand the instability around subjective and bodily transformation. The temporal boundary animates a problematic for epilepsy, denoting the in-between yet obscured time period between body and mind states. I have framed an appreciation of the electronic music composition process so as to gain understandings of the subject and epilepsy from a different angle. I now turn to the notion of affective

attachment to place the subject online.

Affective Attachment

Berlant's (2011) notion of misrecognition is useful for comprehending the subject caught within the stickiness of the digital economy because it outlines a process where the subject seeks affective ties and attachment as well as perceiving musical meaning. She speaks of optimism in terms of attachment, where the subject compensates for what is difficult in a variety of ways. Misrecognition is vital to exploring "the relation" and also to our relation to a "something": "To misrecognize is not to err, but to project qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having these qualities – which it might or might not have" (Berlant, 2011, p. 122). For Berlant, this process is part of shaping an optimistic life, whatever the constraints, and resolving "ambivalence" so that "we are not defeated by it" (p. 122). *SoundCloud* is part of both the culture industry and facilitates connected intersubjective social worlds. In this way, there are multiple points for possible projection and relation, and they occur at distinct temporalities. The time it takes to upload a track, the period over which a collaboration takes place (including shared audio files and messages), the years spent on the platform, new algorithms that enable a piece to be "discovered" and shared (and subsequently buried again). It could be argued that *Swiqos* embodies the temporalities of misrecognition and that it is perhaps the outcome of the spatial processes of attachment.

Teresa Brennan's (2004) interpretation of misrecognition is one of interlocking fantasies that are physical and grounded in a spatial configuration.⁶ As a spatial "image," misrecognition is one's self "image ... deflected back to the self from an other, one's ideal image, which also gives one a perspective on oneself" (Brennan, 2004, p. 108). Both Brennan's and Berlant's notion of misrecognition are spatial, but I see Brennan's conceptualization as allowing for growth in embodiment and as a form of the imagination.

According to Brennan (2004), the “force of the imagination is material and physical,” and this can be within the subject or projected outside the self to other “things” (p. 109). In this sense, the interlocking fantasies of misrecognition that are bound up with music and the body can be a desire for a more reliable body, competence within an acoustic network, or connections with other composers or musicians. We may strive to hear our loved thing; or, it may grate on us and grind us down. These fantasies of one’s self, one’s image, and the other also unfold sensorially in electronic music, in the cycles of production and desire within which we can be caught.

In thinking about how we accommodate ruptures — be that in consciousness or narrative — Berlant (2011) contends that the “sensual experience of self dissolution, radically reshaped consciousness, new sensoria, and narrative rupture can look similar” at a remove from both trauma and optimism (p. 44). As we compensate, we produce predictable habits that “defend against losing emotional shape entirely” (Berlant, 2011, p. 44), and we wear tracks in our lives. To compensate is to find ways to counteract those things which are challenging, abrasive or unpleasant to living. However, the terms “compensate” and “defend” may not always be appropriate for the subject with epilepsy or mental illness. How does one compensate for seizures that interrupt one’s personal and professional life? If we were to speak of compensating for this radical gap, the very rupture a seizure creates, then I would prefer to do so in the productive sense to which Berlant (2011) alludes (in reference to the “production of habits”). It is here I would defend the possibility of music in two senses: 1) as a habit — in terms of an everyday practice, as it is one I have *felt* I have a need to rely on — and 2) as a speculative affect. The former may often be interrupted by illness itself, or by doctors who curb the desiring self; the latter is a theoretical and practical tool ripe with possibilities, and therefore able to interrupt discursive configurations.

Despite the physical, psychic and emotional dimensions of the self that may be threatened during the range of epileptic experience, if there were to be a common thread, it would be in terms of the qualities of

unpredictability, myoclonic involuntariness, and cyclic irregularity. A subject who is routinely interrupted, even momentarily by "self dissolution," is perhaps more likely to seek temporal chains of compensation, in addition to the need to re-steady and locate her body in the spatial world. This reorientation is often done in the context of particular places among bodies, smells, and more specific or nameable emotions: all up, an affective scene (Davidson & Milligan, 2007).

In what follows, I build on affect and I argue that listening is partially responsible for locating and orienting subjectivities that endure interrupted diurnal narratives and rhythms, not only for epilepsy, but for an ethics of relational media participation.

Listening Online and Offline

In this section, I outline what it means to listen for epilepsy and whether the concept of listening may open alternatives to dominant linguistic and technological systems. Attentiveness to listening as a process may destabilize potentially loaded, rational language and the terms on which ableist stories are told, including those used to soothe and ask questions of patients. In place of dominant medical narratives, we could be listening to the epileptic bodymind as music, tones, textures, and rhythms such as those I have discussed above in combination with musical subjectivities. Or we could pay attention to the "sensual operation" of the affective voice with care (Kanngieser, 2013, p. 237). In positioning listening in this way, I foreground disabilities — in particular, people with neurological and mental illness. I acknowledge the limits of the listening sense as a practice for deaf and hard-of-hearing communities; my inclusion of one modality as a way to attune sensitively to some bodies in the world is exclusionary to others.

For Jean-Luc Nancy, listening has its root in subjectivity, and underlies an opened Being-to (Devisch 2006). Nancy's (2008) work, *Listening*, highlights the tactile and resonant relations amongst the subject and world, and directs attention away from thought in visual form.

This is a significant and valuable approach for renewing sonorous thinking about both the sound of language and of music itself. Sounding is also key to subjectivity and Gritten (2014) locates sound-listening in cognitive development as part of “mother-infant interaction”, contending that Nancy’s analysis of music helps us to learn to trust each other (p. 26). While Gritten assumes a woman in the mothering role (and, presumably, a heteronormative configuration), the role of sound in this relational context should be noted. I shall revisit listening’s promise in terms of how the sonic can assist moral, ethical, and aesthetic contexts in the final section. For now I focus on how Nancy (2008) explores the time of the subject as a *referral*, and in this way investigates how meaning and sound share that time, which is also the time and space of the self:

A *self* is nothing other than a form or function of referral: a *self* is made of a relationship to self, ... and the point of occurrence of a subject in the substantial sense would have never taken place except in the referral, thus in pacing and resonance, at the very most as the dimensionless point of the *re-* of this resonance: the repetition where the sound is amplified and spreads, as well as the turning back [*rebroussement*] where the echo is made by making itself heard. (p. 25)

Subjectivity is enfolded with sound and sense. Nancy (2008) encourages a listening subject beyond a phenomenological “point of view” insisting that listening is “always still yet to come, spaced, traversed and called by itself, sounded by itself” to a resonance of being (p. 21). Key to Nancy’s argument is his appropriation of two French verbs from electro-acoustic composer, Pierre Schaeffer,⁷ *écouter* and *entendre* (Kane 2012). *Écouter* denotes “distance and spatial location (where) identifying objects on the basis of their distinguishing sonic characteristics” assists us in situating sound (Schaeffer 1966, p. 106, cited in Kane 2012, p. 440). This is significant in everyday, embodied sonic scenarios. But in Nancy’s (2007) words, *écouter* becomes an “intensification and a concern, a curiosity or an anxiety” (p. 21). The sensing self listens and “perhaps it is necessary that sense not be content to make sense ... but that it also wants to

resound” (Nancy 2008, p. 22). Nancy here speaks of *entendre*, which for Schaeffer had been a way to focus on the quality of sounds away from their original contexts.⁸

Nancy (2008) extends *entendre*, and unfolds a perceiving self-in-world; for him differences in human senses are evidenced by the immense variety in musical shifts across history and genre. His work also “resists re-inscribing a listening subject and a listened to object. Instead, the audible appears affirmatively as the perpetual flux of a shared sonorous world” (Hickmott, 2015, p. 482). However, a call to listen should not envelop every person in the same way, which a perpetual flux could hide. Indeed, a call to listen is dependent upon who is telling whom to listen; it can be redolent of discipline, school, official directives and — as Nancy (2008) himself points out — an imperative to understand or a command to be silent. Furthermore, Nancy’s work effaces not only sexual difference quite explicitly by using the male pronoun, but also assumes someone who listens with ease of attention and ability at all times. As Sarah Hickmott (2015) argues, most of Nancy’s arguments are based on “great Western art music” and are aligned with the conscious will. While his anti-foundational listening space routes dualism differently, it disguises power relations a person with a disability faces during an encounter with the medical establishment, if I am to bring this back to self-in-world. I am also concerned that Nancy maps much of his ontology onto the empty womb of Venus and he relies on this visual metaphor of the female “belly” “which reduces feminine and maternal sexuality to an ultimately unproductive womb” (Hickmott, 2015, p. 488). The resonating womb, the “empty belly” or the “empty vessel”, then becomes the *re-* of the above, repeating, spreading sound; the depoliticized, decontextualized feminine form carrying masculine ideas (Hickmott, 2015).

My own listening is sometimes affected by seizures; remembering or tracking the order and sequence of a verbal message can be difficult; musical listening too can be compromised. I briefly add Schaeffer’s (1966) first two listening modes to complete the four to assist with the

impact epilepsy has on listening in these scenarios. Schaeffer's first word for listening is *Ouïr*. It describes distracted attention to background sound and noise, where everyday sounds pass us by unnoticed; with the second meaning, *comprendre*, we aim to understand messages from utterances and languages, including "musical grammars" (Kane, 2012). *Comprendre* emphasizes listening as understanding, perceiving messages from others and the media. Playing in ensembles is a challenge if I "drop out" during the middle of a piece, or an improvisation. The seizure time may be short, up to two minutes, but in returning to the situation I play without *entendre* (full intention), because I am yet to *écouter* — identify sound objects, and spatially locate with precision my body and the sounds around it, including my fellow musicians. I am for a time submerged, the listening state returned to *ouïr*, (described by Kane (2012) pejoratively as the "least developed" but filtered at a distance (p. 440). For me, having a good rehearsal is not necessarily about disability pride (for example, not caring about my impairment and seeing society as disabled), it does actually depend on whether or not I have a seizure during the real-time flow of musical time. How quickly will the muscles in my embouchure recover so that they will have the flexibility and resilience of the musician I was yesterday.⁹ Am I able to play through all the movements of a Mozart duet? Will I remain sensitive to other improvisers and acoustic events in a jam session? Muscles and consciousness will be affected, but sometimes they are not: therefore, there are inconsistencies in my abilities. However, if I do have a seizure during playing, "I" "keep going" as soon as possible in order to flout biomedical expectations that living with epilepsy leads to "learned helplessness" (Hermann, Trenerry & Colligan, 1996 in Bishop & Allen, 2007). Through listening, I build a multilayered aural picture of myoclonic epilepsy. I now vary the focus to technological concerns, to the music network site *SoundCloud*.

SoundCloud and the Digital Economy

SoundCloud is a social media network that allows users to upload audio and share their content with listener followers. Listeners follow musicians and those musicians appear in a timeline on the users' home screen. It spans the globe and hosts a range of musical content in a vast array of styles, from first-time makers to commercial artists. *SoundCloud* is now one of the world's largest audio media platforms:

Since launching in 2008, the platform has become renowned for its unique content and features, including the ability to share music and connect directly with artists, as well as unearth breakthrough tracks, raw demos, podcasts and more. This is made possible by an open platform that directly connects creators and their fans across the globe. Music and audio creators use *SoundCloud* to both share and monetise their content with a global audience, as well as receive detailed stats and feedback from the *SoundCloud* community (About *SoundCloud*, n.d.).

SoundCloud has been through many revisions and upgrades, particularly since Web 2.0. I have used the platform since 2010, when the promise of "monetizing" content was not in the "About" page. *SoundCloud* is celebrated by many in the music industry, for example, "the platform's deeply social nature — based around following artists, labels, and curators, liking and resharing tracks, and adding comments at specific times within a song's waveform — makes *SoundCloud* feel more personal and interactive than other streaming services" (Titlow, 2017). In recent years, when people online heard that *SoundCloud* might fold, there was worry, disappointment and a rush by some to archive the entire site (Hagerdoorn 2017)¹⁰.

As a platform, many music and audio creators use *SoundCloud* to share their audio or in the hope of finding an audience. It now attracts commercial artists with expensive PR campaigns and major label interest. At the outset, co-founders Eric Wahlforss's and Alexander Ljung's ideal target user was the semi-professional artist. As an artist or creator, it was

easier to find, attract and keep audiences for one's work when the network was smaller. But the effort to attract new audiences has declined over the years and Wahlforss points out that the returns for creators are indeed "marginal" in terms of membership in the network; for him, investing in this demographic is limited:

For instance: we always focused very hard on the creators. We still do. But eventually the marginal returns of improving things for creators goes down. Except for things that help them expand their reach among listeners. So product wise, I think we're shifting more towards discovery than other product features. (2017).

Content made through embodied-technology chains, supplied by creators and uploaded to the Cloud adds value to information networks. Content supplied in this way is part of an affective network known as digital labor because it benefits, or is exploited by, start-ups or corporations; it is unpaid (Terranova, 2004; Scholz, 2013; Hardt & Negri 2004). Users on *SoundCloud* are well aware of this, as the community protests every time the platform upgrades to new versions. For example, when *SoundCloud* launched *SoundCloud Go* in 2016, there was much negative response from the artist community about the geoblocking of some content. Indie musician Dave Wiskus's open letter to the start-up also demonstrated this:

You've been running ads for a while now without paying us. ... But now you're charging people for access to our songs, rolling out the red carpet for the major labels, and saying you'll get around to us eventually. ... So not only are you getting our music for free and paying us nothing, we're actually paying you to take it. What an excellent deal (Meadow, 2016).

There are a number of affects projected onto *SoundCloud* by Wiskus and, while it may not be possible to conclude whether this is misrecognition, *SoundCloud* and playing music are certainly bound up with his subjectivity. There is disappointment here, and thus something of Berlant's "cruel optimism". And *SoundCloud* co-founders have stated to the tech community that they are not interested in investing in creators

despite the unique value that community generates (from new music from Palestine and Nairobi to archives of happy hardcore from the 1990s). In Wahlforss's words: "We rely on a community of audio creators, and that's something that nobody else has.... and it's used in so many different ways. It's less about search and listen. *SoundCloud* is audio that reaches you in various ways" (2017). His language here is very much that of corporate ownership (Wahlforss recently stopped the Internet Archive backing up the network). A listening of the one-to-many. To contrast, a *DataHoarder* user believes that "sites of cultural importance should be constantly archived" indicating a potential listening site for the many-to-many outside of those who "own" (fullouterjoin, 2017).

It is ironic that Wahlforss and Ljung won a *European Web Entrepreneur Award* in 2013 for their work with *SoundCloud*, with the European Commission recognizing their goal to democratize music online beyond this listening experience (European Commission, 2013). As Jodi Dean (2012) puts it, networked media such as *SoundCloud* are a part of "communicative capitalism", a material-symbolic order that promises limitless opportunity for connection, participation, and contribution. An entrepreneur award from the European Commission — an established organizational body that acts in Europe's interests with the power to manage EU policies, allocate funding, and discuss international trade — recognizing *SoundCloud* through its democratizing, even revolutionary qualities that the early Net had is an idealizing of a network that I question. My critique comes from the perspective of a creator participant and I build on this perspective in the next section. Affective attachment and disappointment can power — or stimulate — the need to produce and therefore enlist digital labor, keeping the Net afloat with audio content. This is also about desire, making the "object or scene powerful enough to have magnetized an attachment to it" and involves relations of proximity and approximate exchange (Berlant, 2011, p. 48).

An example is the *SoundCloud* groups feature, which the platform terminated in 2016 amid much community protest. Over the years, I participated in several groups. In an ocean of content, groups were a way

for like-minded creators to find each other, listen, perhaps collaborate and comment with respect. A user moderates a group, but there is a possibility among many user-members to exchange material that ends up in a new work. I considered this most valuable, for example, see my remix of flautist Andrew Bishop, *Repeater* (Chilianis 2013). Although the groups, *Australian Experimental Music* or *the Flute Group* do not exist now, the comments by three others and myself were made while the piece was shared to these groups. In this way, *SoundCloud* acted as a kind of “promise”, and as subjects in a network we perhaps leaned “toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter” (Berlant 2007, 33). The encounter is a sonic, communicative one. During these times, *SoundCloud* enabled me, sometimes very quickly, to show work to collaborators located in spatially distant areas and continents, I shared fragments of sonic work to installations overseas, it functioned as a portfolio when applying to calls for work, and I have enjoyed listening to musicians I would not otherwise have heard. When Wahlforss and Ljung removed the group function, I noted the social media outcry against it. Sam Barte (2016) a group moderator argues that:

SoundCloud claims that groups are ineffective in growing an audience. On the contrary, groups are one of the few remaining ways to grow an audience if the music you create isn't mainstream. I can personally confirm this, as my audience growth has been almost exclusively through groups, rather than curated playlists, reposts or other methods. I have tried these, but there simply isn't an audience large enough for these methods to work (Barte, 2016).

Along with Barte, most of my small audience (186 followers) grew several years ago when I was a member of a few groups. But there are other factors that impact audience growth, such as changes to the interface (many users objected to changes in interface, thus impacting the listening experience), whether listeners in other countries have access to your work (geoblocking), and anti-piracy algorithms. Over the last few years my initial involvement with *SoundCloud* diminished when the

network grew too big to be meaningful for me. A search for particular genres, subcultures or experimental music was less likely to yield results and more likely to return the generic search of the day. In other words, *SoundCloud's* "discovery" algorithms overrode a manual search keyed to creators' tags. Additionally, many of my followers, particularly those who were experimental musicians or composers were now rarely active, perhaps also discouraged by these features.

Individuals have their own many and varied listening and affective relationships to digital music. This article is not an empirical study of the differing depths to which people listen online; however, I argue that there is a distinction between Wahlforss and Ljung's discourse and the economic purpose for the platform on the one hand, and the subjectivization of an individual through online sonic media, on the other. For example, Sean Cubitt (2013) states that "a traditional condition of subjectivity is awareness of the relations one has entered into. Such awareness may not be a property of immersion into social networks" (p. 76). While that may be the traditional view, there are more relational views of subjectivity more in accord with minority identities. For example, Wendy Brown (2005) argues, the neoliberal body politic is not seen as a body, rather, as a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers. This occurs even if we are expecting something akin to "community" voice or a listening public. Therefore, it is somewhat of a fallacy that social media is conceived of as a democratic space or publics, as it embodies the values and logic of neoliberalism. Even when recognition seems possible, it is "only on the terms that govern a competitive market of appearances" (Couldry, 2010, p. 131). Bodyminds feel and sense, and music and sound can be vital to subjectivity, but this subjectivity is not immune to appropriation in entrepreneurial terms. It is time to grapple with the idea of multiplicity, multiple others breathing and sensing.

The Role of Listening in Ethical Configurations

To begin at the smallest scale, listening on *SoundCloud* occurs through a network where one is connected by one's followers and those whom one follows. Kate Crawford (2012), who likens listening online to paying attention, investigates the ways individuals share — or withhold — to social media with a variety of listening stances. I can listen to other artists with attentiveness, sometimes I take notes on a composition and give feedback or a review, I send the musician a message; or I can listen distractedly akin to flicking through television channels. I am open to the newness of the music or sonic world presented to me, or I am not. Then there is the entire (always unfinished) acoustic field *SoundCloud*, a possibility made of listeners inhabiting a condition of plurality and intersubjectivity (Lacey, 2013). This is seen as valuable by music bloggers, reviewers, and record labels in addition to *SoundCloud*. However a more detailed investigation is necessary in order to grasp the flows and surges in power.

A wider notion of listening encompasses social and economic inequalities. Through listening, I invite multiple voices, non-traditional narratives, and unusual ways of being to participate in an acoustic sphere. I highlight the temporal implication of human and technological interdependence. I now conceptualize the singular disabled body as part of the “social fabric” where “individuals’ and social groups’ senses of time and possibility are shaped by a differential economy, limited or expanded by the ways and means that they find themselves in and out of time” (Sharma, 2014, p. 3). For, the vagaries and multiple tempi of chronic illness lend the possibility of understanding vulnerability in others. The quality of this understanding involves limits, and to understand “the limits of ‘knowing’, ‘understanding’, and ‘acknowledging’ others is to render a disposition of humility and generosity” (Butler, 2005, p. 53). As Judith Butler (2005) says:

As we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally or definitively, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an

answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition then this version of recognition will be based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits. (Butler, 2005, p. 53)

I believe these epistemic limits can be approached, not by an immersive overflowing sense of listening, but through listening in a register that is somewhat filtered. Despite claims that sound is all-immersive, sound is also locative and we can face toward another's account, should they wish to give it.

This kind of listening may take the form of "a willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgement itself" (Butler, 2005, p. 53). There can be different qualities of listening, as Nancy and Crawford attest. I do not propose that the listening register I am thinking of here is the same as a fan's moving and "soulful" experience (van Maas, 2012), but I suggest that we can recognize the other by curbing the master "I" and even the cognition, momentarily. For me, this kind of listening is sometimes most possible after the "I" is interrupted by a single seizure or during "wait time" before doctors' appointments. I am more aware of unfair labor practices, I hear the disrespect in an escalator boss's voice when he shouts to his older worker, I imagine populations who work in electronics factories in China and workers on undersea cables. While there are certainly limits to a listening stance that engages with others in the global media and technological labor force, I argue it is possible to listen for the temporalities that constrain diverse, mostly outsourced, populations from call center workers, to *iPhone* factory workers, to those who work on Internet infrastructure, or in Western countries, to the working poor or those seeking more employment in the West.

I am mindful of Sarah Sharma's (2014) intertwining of temporalities and power relations, which "must be set again and again. They are expected to recalibrate and fit into a larger temporal order" (p. 8).

Listening means I am willing to face toward the other, to listen to accounts of debility, exhaustion, overwork, underwork, and social difference with an openness; to understand, partially, that some others slow while many speed. As a result, certain labor forces suffer from changed posture, long-term pain, poisoning, accidents — including death — that result in disability. In these situations, illness and debility can become the new norm in entire working populations (Puar, 2009). I discussed the notion of the temporal boundary in my own music above as it related to my bodily changes. Here a temporal boundary points to a class separation between those whose time matters and those whose time does not. An example of people for whom time matters is international business people who demand taxi drivers drive fast to the airport through peak hour (Sharma, 2014).

The body is inherent in listening equations to the extent that it interacts and senses human interdependence. It is this sensitive-ear, attuned as much to atmosphere (Brennan 2004) as to online networks, which enables imaginary publics in diverse geo-locations. Bîrneanu, Alexiu, Baciuc, Sandvin and Fylling (2016) conducted research “in Timiș County, in order to explore the ‘lived’ experiences of 24 people with disabilities both from cities and countryside regarding problematic aspects of disability or community/economic factors likely to influence the disabled person’s status on the labor market” (p. 57). Although this discourse from a Romanian ethnography appears to see people with a disability as a “problem” in relation to the economy, the researchers do unpack parental and career opinions regarding the limitations of what it is like to live in isolated rural areas with a lack of access to medical treatment (Bîrneanu et al. 2016). A further consideration is how the nation is conceptualizing some of the guiding principles of disability around educational and workplace inclusion, as received from the United Nations and UNESCO charters. I believe it is important to be aware of concepts of disability outside of the West, and I only touch the surface here. There are two limitations to what I have called my listening imaginary: 1) Butler’s epistemological reserve regarding the limits of “acknowledgement”, and

2) during times of prolonged ill-health I am more vulnerable. Thus it is challenging to maintain this particular "feminist stance." A more general listening, tactile sensitivity is possible.

Conclusion

In this article I have focused on epilepsy, musical subjectivity, and affective attachment on the one hand, and the musical network, *SoundCloud* and digital labor on the other. I have brought these two perspectives together through attention to listening, which has allowed me to subvert linear narrative to some extent. Linear and traditional narratives are not necessarily appropriate for epilepsy and other sporadic or episodic illness which present interruptive and non-linear qualities. The experience of the epileptic seizure and the subject's compromised "felt self" during that time allow for a poetics of attachment associated with electronic musical play and, initially, an engagement with *SoundCloud*. I often seek compensation through music for the sudden "loss of control" caused by an unpredictable flow of electrons. By listening out for the discontinuity and fragmentation with which the subject lives, we may be able to gauge an uncomfortable sense of "dis-ease" that is called for when thinking of the many. For it is through attention to rhythms, shifts, and swerves in music that we may become attuned to these temporal variances and collisions in multiple subjectivities.

While *SoundCloud* promises global reach and the possibility of "direct connections" or even money as a platform, it cannot offer this equally to every user. In the case presented here, a small array of sonic-aural connections do exist, and music sharing, occasional collaborations, remixes and genuine comments also occur, suggesting an intimate sonic publics. I also listen on *SoundCloud* and follow many people from different continents. In this way, especially with small-scale artists, I enact a listening beyond the (epileptic) body, in order to imagine the body in the Internet. This is not an unproblematic stance (since this is bound up in digital labor), but it is a starting point for exploring musical participation.

Musical participation online is complex and needs further investigation, particularly around the area of illness and disability. I am thinking about the multiple routes sonic information takes within a listening public and the meaning that is made by others. From a critical perspective, it may not be possible to control *SoundCloud*'s production process, including the means and outcomes of media production (for which Christian Fuchs (2016) argues we should aim). As a musician and epileptic I can be critically reflexive about online listening; I can also withdraw. Modes of listening take many forms (Nancy, 2008) — in both on- and offline spheres — and while there are so many sounds that catch us, patterning back and forth, passing us by, hooking into our attention, our desire, interacting with the other senses, we may, in the midst of the network, turn our listening ear toward an other. I imagine a practice, habit, or culture that is more striated and accommodating for the multiple temporalities of disability and illness.

Notes

¹ <https://soundcloud.com/melchil/swiqos>. Retrieved 27 March 2017

² Digital Audio Workstation or DAW as these applications seem to be referred to.

³ In DAW the emphasis is on 'workflow', 'control', and knowhow.

⁴ I have generalised idiopathic epilepsy, which denotes that the cause is unknown and that the epileptiform activity arises from all parts of the brain. My generalised tonic clonic (grand mal) seizures are 'controlled' on medication. I have myoclonic seizures monthly to daily.

⁵ The exception is groups on social media, such as Facebook, where people with epilepsy are members. They may discuss recent seizures or the side effects of medication. I do not discount such groups; I only wish to describe another phenomenon.

⁶ Based on Lacan's mirror stage: "Lacan caught its nature in the mirror-phase or moment when the subject has an image of itself in the eye of the other." (Brennan, 2004, p. 108).

⁷ Schaeffer had four verbs for listening. 1) *Ouïr*, 2) *comprendre*, 3) *écouter* & 4) *entendre* as I will elaborate below.

⁸ For a discussion about how Schaeffer and Nancy's use of the French verbs differ, see Kane 2015 in Martin Scherzinger ed. *Music in Contemporary Philosophy*, 2015.

⁹ Embouchure refers to the way the mouth and facial muscles are used to play a wind instrument. The muscles around the mouth and lips form a shape to allow air flow. Sound resonates in the body of the flute and the body of the player.

¹⁰ See also discussion on datahoarder group:
https://www.reddit.com/r/DataHoarder/comments/6oisam/soundcloud_said_no_a_call_to_arms/
 & ArchiveTeam
https://www.reddit.com/r/Archiveteam/comments/6ohytf/soundcloud_requests_the_internet_archive_cease/

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Bio

Melanie Chilianis is a composer and independent scholar from Melbourne, Australia. She has work permanently (commissioned) in the Goldcoast Exhibition Centre audiovisual alcove and her solo sound installation *Days of Our Lives* was represented in *Contemporary Composition: From Avant-Garde to Experimental* curated by Stéphanie Kabanyana Kanyandekwe in *Now Hear This*, part of *Melbourne Now* at the National Gallery of Victoria. Her acoustic compositions have been performed and broadcast live on ABC-FM (Australia) and Radio 3 (National radio, Italy).

She holds a Doctor of Philosophy in film and communication studies where she explored the concept of the epileptic body through electronic music. She published an encyclopaedia entry on drum'n'bass music in Australia, co-authored an article on children's engagement in art and music (Australian Art Education), and presented at the first Sound:Gender:Feminism:Activism symposium in London (Creative Research into Sound Arts Practice, London College of Communication). Melanie's sound work *MCVox*, published by Winchester University Press, is archived in the British Library.

Her recent electronic and electroacoustic music explores the tension between interruption and a desire for continuity. Melanie currently collaborates with Iranian composer and santour player Atefeh Einali.