Audio Time Travel: An Interview with Annie Murray

Leah Van Dyk and Annie Murray   May 9, 2023

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I rst met Annie Murray in 2017 at a job interview (she was the interviewer, I the interviewee—thankfully I got the job), and in 2018 Annie asked me to join the SpokenWeb team as a research assistant. Four years later, we sit down—through our respective laptops—to chat about all things audio. As I soon found out, when it comes to thinking about sound, access, and vulnerability, Annie approaches listening as a joyful and potential- lled practice.

Leah Van Dyk: To start with, could you introduce yourself and give a bit of an overview of your research and work with the SpokenWeb project?

Annie Murray: My name is Annie Murray, and I am the rare books and special collections librarian at the University of Calgary's Libraries and Cultural Resources.

My research interest in literary audio recordings stems from my own experience attending literary readings while a student and seeking out recordings of authors reading their work. When I was living in Vancouver many years ago, I borrowed a speci c audio cassette many times from the Vancouver Public Library. It was *Previous Canoes* by Michael Ondaatje, published by Coach House in 1989 I think. It struck me that this cassette (which can still be borrowed!) might have a limited lifespan, and that literary recordings had a certain vulnerability because of their format. I began to imagine a need for some kind of digital storehouse to preserve Canadian authors reading their work. Eventually I went to library school, and sought out work in special collections that had strong literary holdings.

I got involved with SpokenWeb early on. I was working with the Irving Layton fonds at Concordia University Libraries and wondered if any faculty members at Concordia were interested in literary audio. I actually found Jason Camlot through a Google search, and was pleased to start collaborating with him. Eventually, I joined SpokenWeb.

Since joining SpokenWeb, I have worked with Jared Wiercinksi to research and write a couple articles on the various desirable functionalities for interacting with literary audio recordings in an online environment (one appeared in rst monday and another in dhq.) In dreaming up these features more than ten years ago, it has been fun to see how rapidly web-based interfaces for engaging with audio have developed. Jared and I got very into this topic, and delved quite deeply into the challenges of working with audio and thinking about how it could be improved for scholars. Currently, I am more involved in the rights management activities around making audio recordings more openly available. Copyright is always the big scary thing.

That's fantastic that a cassette from the public library sparked such an interest for you, and shaped many of the ways you became the librarian and researcher that you are today. You mention that you've been with SpokenWeb from almost the beginning, what excites you about working with audio archives speci cally?

I think listening is an important mode of taking in information. It's fun to be read to. I like the potential of audio recordings to reveal another dimension of a literary archive, which is often a massive aggregation of written material. Audio is often an overlooked aspect of a literary archive; nonetheless, audio recordings bring huge rewards to the researcher. As students, we come to appreciate poetry largely through printed texts. We don't often know how an author might read or perform that work. And yet, poetry readings abound! We should be able to nd recordings of poets as easily as we nd their published works. This can only expand our appreciation and open up interpretive possibilities, in my view.

Yes, as you note there's a lot left "undiscovered" with poetry, poetics, and the events of reading poetry aloud that accessible audio archives really hold the potential to expand. The University of Calgary holds tapes for Earle Birney, Alden Nowlan, and Robert Kroetsch (among others) which include many recorded events and readings, as well as personal recordings, CBC radio programmes, <u>and many other surprises</u>. Prior to you and I diving into these tapes a few years ago, the recordings were in a bit of a holding pattern—with the archives thinking a lot about digitization, access, and the concerns of preservation. What do you think is the importance of returning to, or reimagining our engagement with, these tapes?

I imagine these recordings were consulted and listened to in their original formats for a certain period of time. But eventually, we recognize the fragility of a format, and it ultimately becomes somewhat rare ed and inaccessible. We fear listening to an original analog recording because there is a real risk of information loss. So digitization gives another life to the recordings and takes away our reliance on fragile formats that could go at any time. I love the do-it-yourself publishing aspect of poets with their tape recorders. It was another way to document, express, and create. It xes or captures a eeting performance somehow, thus allowing a kind of time travel for the eventual listener. I am excited for people to listen to these recordings eventually, and maybe add something to their perspectives on Earle Birney, Alden Nowlan, and Robert Kroetsch.

It's de nitely exciting to think about the potential listeners of these recordings! Where do you think this project might go in future? What hopes do you have for continued digital and physical curation of the UCalgary audio collection?

It's a luxury to listen to and catalogue these recordings in detail, which is what your research assistantship is all about. Very few archival repositories can devote resources to fully indexing the complete contents of a set of recordings, so I consider these research projects very bene cial for future scholars. Projects like SpokenWeb address the fundamental inaccessibility of audio stored in obsolete formats. I hope that by drawing attention to these bodies of recordings, other scholars can get more engaged in working with audio collections.

It's been a delight to engage deeply with these collections. So much of the work done in archival library collections is future thinking: it connects past recordings to the work we do in the present, but it also extends out into the future. And there are so many moving parts! You evoked earlier the "big and scary" spectre of copyright, what is the process like for acquiring permissions to make audio collections available to listen to? Especially with a multi-institutional project like SpokenWeb?

I think each institution will develop their process with their own resources in mind, but we all talk to each other and can advise one another. For the Calgary recordings, I have roughed out a work ow that our copyright of ce can advise me on. First, we identify who the rights holders are for our recordings, then we gure out how to contact those rights holders. That's half the battle. I have already created some template messages for when I will reach out to people. It's important to be organized and keep careful records regarding permissions and digital projects. This means preserving email correspondence and/or forms that rights holders sign, and keeping them in logical and secure places so that, years down the road, they are accessible and preserved. Perhaps this is a very librarian answer to your question. Thinking more broadly about the entire SpokenWeb network, though, we are puzzling through how to support one another with this sort of work ow and data management. Each partner institution has its own recordkeeping system, their own copyright milieu, and their own systems for management of digital assets. One size won't t all!

That's really interesting, thanks for giving us a bit of insight into all of the moving parts and your approach to working through these various processes! Finally, what are you listening to right now?

I am listening to Juliet Stevenson's narration of *Middlemarch* by George Eliot. I also just listened to Sissy Spacek reading *Carrie* by Stephen King. And tons of music, of course.

Thanks so much, Annie. It's been great chatting!

Leah Van Dyk and Annie Murray

Leah Van Dyk (she/her) is a doctoral candidate and Killam Laureate in the <u>Department of English at the University of Calgary.</u> She gratefully researches and studies as a settler on the traditional territory of Treaty 7, with her primary research interests located around the environmental humanities and radical revisionings of being in community—both pedagogically and practically—as a model of literary practice. She has recent or forthcoming publications in *English Studies in Canada* and *Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays*, is passionate about community projects, and is overly fond of tea. Follow her on Twitter <u>@leahvandyk</u>.

Annie Murray is a Rare Books and Special Collections Librarian in Libraries and Cultural Resources at the University of Calgary. Since 2014, she has been involved in overseeing the acquisition and preservation of the EMI Music Canada Archive, an initiative that is supported by Universal Music Canada and the Mellon Foundation. Her research and professional interests revolve around special and digital collections, and making primary sources more readily available to researchers.