

SpokenWeb Podcasting as Scholarly Feminist Practice

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Known for their seriality as well as their ability to provide people the freedom to vocalize their thoughts and to directly reach a public, podcasts have changed the way we listen to media since the beginning of the 21st century. While there is a plethora of podcasts available to listeners that are informed by diverse interests such as literature, sports, food, travel, and tabletop role-playing games, what happens when podcast production is deployed as a feminist practice? In her work on feminist podcasting, podcaster Hannah McGregor claims that for her podcasting can be a “fundamentally feminist research method: research not just as and through creation, but research as and through collaborative co-creation with other feminist thinkers” (“Podcasting as Feminist Method”; [McGregor’s work informs this post’s title]). Similarly, podcaster Stacey Copeland argues, the “amplified voice through podcasting as an intimate aural medium carries with it the possibilities for a deep affective experience for both the creator and the listener” (209). Podcasts such as *Secret Feminist Agenda*, *The SpokenWeb Podcast*, and *SoundBox Signals*, which are hosted by academics and address feminist issues in the everyday life and Canadian literary audio, respectively, “materialize the feminist voice” (Copeland 209) and generate feminist dialogue across soundwaves. For instance, in the recent crossover episode of *Secret Feminist Agenda* and *The SpokenWeb Podcast*, a podcast about Canadian literary audio, collaborators McGregor and Copeland discuss queer media production, intergenerational feminism, women’s voice, and Copeland’s podcast research. With the most recent episode in mind, I consider throughout this post the ways in which specific episodes of *The SpokenWeb Podcast* and *SoundBox Signals* (co-produced by Karis Shearer and Nour Sallam) foreground women’s voices. As I suggest, both SpokenWeb-affiliated podcasts discuss literary audio recordings in ways that make audible women writers’ work, develop feminist kinships, vocalize invisible labour, and facilitate the formation of listening communities. By examining these episodes, I argue that these podcasts have served a feminist function within Canadian literary criticism because they valorize the contributions of the often-invisible workers participating in the production, documentation, and dissemination of Canadian literature.

These two podcasts share a feminist imperative of listening to women’s voices to tell their untold stories. Listening to literary audio recordings featuring women, as Deanna Fong and Karis Shearer suggest, undoes their erasure and demonstrates their contributions to Canadian literature (“Gender, Affective Labour, and Community-Building Through Literary Audio Artifacts”). This practice features prominently within SpokenWeb’s podcasts. For instance, *The SpokenWeb Podcast*’s producer McGregor introduces episodes asking, “what stories will we hear if we listen to the archive?” (“Stories of SpokenWeb”). Similarly, *SoundBox Signals*’s host Shearer opens the episode by stating that the show “will consider how ... literary recordings signify in the contemporary moment and ask what listening allows us to know about cultural history.” At first listen, these introductions suggest that these podcasts are in the broadest sense literary in nature, yet what becomes clearer is that listening to literary audio archives surfaces women writers’ contributions. For instance, the episode “The Voice Is Intact” of *The SpokenWeb Podcast* focuses on Gwendolyn MacEwan’s work. Though MacEwan’s cultural importance has been mostly occluded from literary histories, as the episode’s presenters Hannah McGregor, Andrea Bennett, Katherine McLeod, and Jen Sookfong Lee claim, the episode includes an examination of her voice and in-depth exploration of her historical influence on Canadian literature. Similarly, in the episode

“Performing the Archive” of *SoundBox Signals*, Shearer, Megan Butchart, and Daphne Marlatt discuss Ellen Tallman’s role within Vancouver’s literary community. As Marlatt points out, Tallman provided support to the literary community by carefully listening to its members’ concerns and eventually supporting members of Vancouver’s gay community who were affected by the AIDS crisis, thereby providing necessary affective support for the communities to survive. In both episodes, audiences listen to women’s histories alongside the podcast presenters and discover the crucial role that women played in Canadian literary production and community building, thus exemplifying the importance of listening as a feminist practice.

Both podcasts also generate and solidify feminist kinships. In discussing the affective possibilities of podcasting as a “critical approach to scholarship ... based on love” (“Podcasting in Plain Sight”) McGregor claims that podcasting could “look an awful lot like fandom — engaged, enthused, uninhibited, critical but lovingly, and very very uncool” (“Podcasting”) Though McGregor is referring to her podcast *Witch, Please*, a podcast she co-produced with Marcelle Kosman about the *Harry Potter* series, what surfaces in the *SoundBox Signals* episode “Only the Imagination Carries Forward” reflects what McGregor describes. In this episode, four generations of feminist writers (Sharon Thesen, Nancy Holmes, Shearer, and Amy Thiessen) come together to discuss a literary audio recording of Thesen reading in a class taught by Warren Tallman at The University of British Columbia in November 1986. The recording richly documents Thesen’s role as a poetry teacher in that classroom and her larger contributions to Canadian literature. It also creates a social space in which Shearer, Holmes, and Thiessen can share their admiration for Thessen’s work. For instance, towards the end of the episode, Holmes tells Thesen and the audience how she came across her work and asserts that “I think that you are so important to me and I think to many other Canadian poets. You are of that generation that showed young women in the 80s ‘you can be a poet too’ and you were such an important figure for that, you were a role model, a torchlight in the darkness.” Holmes’s admiration for Thessen speaks volumes about the latter’s importance as it records how she created more space for women’s writing in an androcentric literary landscape and how it has continued to resonate with her. Listening to Holmes speak about Thessen’s influence in the 1980s and sharing her “love” for the poet comes close to what McGregor identifies as “fandom” Also, because Holmes has shared these feelings with Thessen before, this moment highlights how the shared experience of being in the podcast recording booth creates possibilities for strengthening women’s relationships, thereby indicating how the social space of the podcast creates the potential for building and strengthening feminist kinships.

SoundBox Signals | S1:EP3

Only the Imagination Carries Forward

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As part of their feminist ethos, the *SpokenWeb Podcast* and *SoundBox Signals* teams have vocalized the often-invisible labour grounding the digitization and production of audio recordings. In *The SpokenWeb Podcast* episode “Invisible Labour,” members of the UBCO SpokenWeb team (i.e., Karis Shearer, Craig Carpenter, Megan Butchart, Evan Berg, and Lauren St. Clair) address the work that makes a literary audio recording available to the public. One by one, team members fill the episode’s soundscape with documented testimonies of their contributions to the discovery of content (Shearer & Carpenter), creation of metadata (Megan Butchart), creative transformation (Evan Berg), and digitization (Lauren St. Clair) of literary audio recordings. As researchers, we often experience joy or surprise when we encounter archival objects for us to carefully consider and help us answer our research questions, yet we do not always know what type of labour was necessary to make this moment possible. As a feminist act, the episode counters a capitalist logic that erases the labour behind cultural objects by demystifying their origins, documenting the work involved in digitizing recordings, and valorizing the labour of UBCO’s undergraduate student researchers. Karis Shearer, as principal investigator of The Amp Lab at UBCO, continues her feminist intervention in her follow-up blog post “On Producing SpokenWeb Podcast Episode 3 Invisible Labour” on her Lab’s website. As she reflects: “In co-producing an episode on invisible labour that tries to make that collaborative labour audible, I want to give a shout out to folks who contributed to the making of this episode.” Shearer continues her work of making invisible labour visible, but this time with a focus on the podcast recording, by thanking team members for setting up equipment (Mahshid Alinoori and Mathieu Aubin), troubleshooting tech (Carpenter), managing the project (Amy Thiessen), and generously offering their podcasting expertise (Marjorie Mitchell,

Hannah McGregor, and Stacey Copeland). As a result, the "Invisible Labour" episode and the follow-up blog post make an important feminist intervention in the erasure of labour involved in audio recording digitization and production by giving team members an opportunity to vocalize their contributions.

As they create feminist content, solidify women's relationships, and acknowledge workers' labour, these podcasts also interpolate listeners who may identify with their values and facilitate the formation of listening communities. Though I cannot concretely speak about who is listening to these podcasts as a whole, I can at least speak to the ways in which I have been interpolated to listen to the episodes, how I have participated in communal listening parties, and how I have become part of their online communities. As part of the two podcasts' listening communities, I am compelled to listen to the voices of the researchers and carefully consider the new insights that they bring about women's literary histories on a monthly basis. The seriality of the series makes space for exploration and is part of the social contract between the producer and the listener who make the podcast community possible and creates the possibility of a momentum in dialogue that addresses ongoing discoveries and pressing concerns. Though listening to the episodes is made possible by their online availability, the podcasts also create one-off events of literary engagement, which have been organized in large part by McGregor, Copeland, Shearer, Jason Camlot, and McLeod. Specifically, in October 2019 and May 2020, I attended *The SpokenWeb Podcast's* listening parties held at UBCO in Kelowna, British Columbia and over Zoom from my apartment in Montreal, Quebec, respectively. These events generate listening communities by inviting people to gather in person or virtually (during this pandemic) as well as to listen to and discuss podcast episodes on their release date. To borrow Camlot's language, in being together, listening becomes a relational activity. Listeners participate in a shared affective experience where they pay attention to people's voices and respectfully engage with their ideas. What is remarkable about these listening communities is that they are not only generated through these events but also concretized over social media such as Twitter. Through live tweeting of the listening events as well as asynchronous tweets, people are able to learn about and engage with people's responses in spite of geographical differences and create a public dialogue. Traces of the records of these events can then be revisited later on by searching for hashtags like #SpokenWebPod (see images below). Social media therefore becomes a way of further solidifying the two podcasts' listening communities. Ultimately, these podcasts are able to interpolate a community of like-minded listeners and generate public dialogue in person as well as across social media, hence contributing to a growing feminist dialogue about literary audio recordings in Canada.



Thanks [@VehiculePress](#) for featuring this! "In this episode, SpokenWeb podcast host Hannah McGregor reflects on why MacEwen's voice continues to haunt so many of us, alongside authors Jen Sookfong Lee and andrea bennett, and SpokenWeb researcher Katherine McLeod."

[#SpokenWebPod](#)

Latest on our blog: No one concerned with Canadian poetry can afford to miss @hkpmcgregor's podcast on Gwendolyn MacEwen--a Canadian original. bit.ly/2RwVBpO

6:11 PM · Apr 13, 2020

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Explore what's happening on Twitter

Where Poets Read

@poetsread · Follow

Yes! Do check out The SpokenWeb Podcast, with many episodes exploring the sound of literature and a new Audio of the Month out this week. **#SpokenWebPod #listening**

Dr. Felicity Tayler @ftayler

Time to catch up on all the literary audio podcasts!

1:09 PM · Mar 17, 2020

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Explore what's happening on Twitter

Michael O'Driscoll

@odriscollmike · Follow

Here I am, late to the party. Listening to **#SpokenWebPod** gives me chills: the many brilliant voices of this project, the deft editing and design of the premiere podcast. This is wonderful.

12:31 AM · Oct 8, 2019

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Explore what's happening on Twitter

As SpokenWeb’s podcasts have shown, podcasting can be deployed as a scholarly feminist practice. The potential of these two podcasts as they continue to engage with archives of literary audio recordings featuring women and LGBTQ2+ people is exciting. As Kate Eichhorn tells her readers in *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, the archive can be “a site and practice integral to knowledge making, cultural production, and activism. The archive is where academic and activist work frequently converge” (4). As the feminist cultural workers of the SpokenWeb podcasts have indicated so far, exploring literary audio archives can facilitate feminist dialogue that generates alternative ways of understanding Canadian literature. Whether it be by listening to women’s voices, strengthening relationships amongst members of literary and academic communities, acknowledging invisible labour, or encouraging community building, SpokenWeb’s podcasts are actively mixing academic scholarship with activist initiatives. And in doing so, they are enabling listeners to gain better insight into women’s historical and ongoing contributions to Canadian literature.

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