Earwitnessing Detention:
Carceral Secrecy, Affecting Voices, and
Political Listening in *The Messenger* Podcast

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Australia's offshore immigration detention centers are characterized by a culture of secrecy that keeps human rights abuses hidden. Yet, detainees are employing new technologies and media to narrate their experiences of incarceration. This article examines the potentials and limitations of bearing witness and exercising acoustic agency through podcasting. It provides a case study of *The Messenger* podcast in which a refugee detained on Manus Island exchanges voice messages with an Australian journalist. It finds that podcasting can breach the secrecy that sustains a punitive detention regime and evoke empathy in listeners through the affective nature of voice. However, podcasting is limited by the sense of distance produced by prerecorded and edited sound and by the risk of creating echo chambers through the selective nature of podcast consumption. Finally, we adapt, develop, and argue for the concept of *earwitnessing* as a practice of responsible and political listening to injustice.

Keywords: podcasting, earwitnessing, immigration detention, carceral soundscapes, political listening, Manus prison

We have been locked away in a place where it's an isolated island and far away from the other world. When you cry or when you scream, no one can hear you, so I thought it is a

better idea for me to be the messenger. Like what I mean by that means to be the voice of everyone in here. (Abdul Aziz Muhamat, *The Messenger*, Episode 1)

Abdul Aziz Muhamat is a Sudanese refugee who has been detained on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG) for more than five years under Australia's offshore detention regime. Under this regime, all people who have sought asylum by boat in Australian territorial waters since 2012 have been detained on Manus Island or the Pacific island of Nauru. The system of offshore detention is highly punitive and has been criticized for its devastating human rights outcomes, which are in part enabled by its "pervasive culture of secrecy" (Nethery & Holman, 2016; Parliament of Australia, 2015, p. 124). In March 2016, Muhamat began reporting from "Manus prison" (Boochani, 2018b) in a series of 30-second WhatsApp voice messages, sent from a smuggled phone to Australian-based journalist Michael Green. Green used their exchange of more than 3,500 disjointed "conversations" throughout 2016 to produce the award-winning podcast *The Messenger* in 2017. Although there are numerous news stories about Australia's offshore detention regime, this is one of the first audible accounts of life in detention from a refugee's perspective. The result is a powerful account of the daily monotony and damage of detention for Muhamat and fellow detainees.

The Messenger podcast raises important questions about new technological and communicative possibilities for overcoming a lack of institutional transparency. To what extent have these technologies transgressed the repressive restrictions enforced under Australia's offshore detention regime? What are the potentials and limitations of the podcast medium for bearing witness to injustice and challenging state secrecy? How does this new technology facilitate self-representation and alter the politics of voice and listening? And, finally, how might hearing an account of detention, and the development of a relationship between an incarcerated refugee and an Australian journalist, affect listeners and shape understandings of the offshore detention regime?

Numerous studies have focused on the relationship between bearing witness and media, including journalism, televisual media, and photography (Chouliaraki, 2008; Sontag, 2003; Tait, 2011; Zelizer, 2002). There has been no analysis, however, of the role that sonic media such as podcasting might play in the act of witnessing. Podcasts are an increasingly popular media form that engages audiences in new ways: They are mobile, intimate, highly selective, and participatory. Bringing together insights from sound, media, and critical carceral studies, we analyze the podcast medium as a way to construct, witness, and make sense of carceral environments and experiences that are otherwise obscured and "hidden" from the "outside" (Jewkes, Slee, & Moran, 2017). *The Messenger* demonstrates that, under the right conditions, podcasting can allow detainees to narrate their own experiences of incarceration. As such, podcasts can facilitate a form of "acoustic agency" (Waller, 2018). Podcast consumption may also activate emotional responses in listeners that promote a sense of ethical responsibility. Beyond simply the exchange of knowledge and ideas, there are significant affective dimensions to tuning in to the carceral soundscape—or the "sonic environment" of the camp—which have the potential to disrupt existing "hierarchies of attention" (Dreher, 2009), so that a plurality of voices and experiences can be heard (Bickford, 1996). The acts of podcast creation and "political listening" (Bickford, 1996; Dreher, 2009) can remind, reinforce, and rekindle the audience's political opposition to unjust practices of incarceration and contribute to the humanization of carceral subjects (Brown, 2014).

Drawing from Peters' (2001) ideas on bearing witness to suffering, we adapt and develop the concept of *earwitnessing* (Schafer, 1994) as a practice of responsible listening to injustice (Bickford, 1996; de Souza, 2018). Earwitnessing was originally conceived by Raymond Murray Schafer as a way of gleaning historical knowledge from written descriptions of local and historical soundscapes. Rather than relying exclusively on written texts, we take up this concept in a contemporary context in which significant advancements in the quality, accessibility, and mobility of audio-recording technologies and the diversification of sound production and dissemination allow us to listen to voices and soundscapes that are otherwise inaccessible. Used in the present sense, the notion of earwitnessing encompasses a form of listening that is attuned to the specific social, cultural, and political manifestations of sound and voice. To "earwitness" is to attempt to "hear within history [as it unfolds], through an extended ear" (LaBelle, 2010, p. 108). Much like Ellis's (2000) argument in *Seeing Things*, that to witness is to become responsible, we consider the politics and ethics of "hearing things."

We argue that podcasting from detention has the capacity to expose and breach the secrecy that obscures and sustains the system of offshore detention. This argument is developed in six parts. First, we examine the political and ethical dimensions of witnessing, and further develop the concept of earwitnessing to describe a reciprocal relationship of responsibility through creating, receiving, and listening to sound and voice. Second, we provide the background to Australia's offshore detention regime, focusing on its opacity by design. Third, we introduce *The Messenger* podcast, identifying how the collaboration among Muhamat and Green and the innovative use of WhatsApp technology have worked to transgress the secrecy of this regime. Fourth, we examine the distinctive qualities and potential power of podcasts to act as a medium for earwitnessing, using *The Messenger* as our frame for analysis. Fifth, we undertake a detailed analysis of voice and sound in Episode 1 of *The Messenger* to understand the affective power of this podcast. We contend that podcasting has particular emotive capacities by virtue of the sonic qualities of voice and its incidental capture of the soundscape of detention, which encourages empathy in listeners. Finally, we consider the limitations of the political and earwitnessing potential of podcasts.

Political Listening and (Ear)Witnessing

According to Wieviorka (1998), we have entered the "era of the witness" in which personal testimony has displaced "objective" historical accounts of human rights abuses. Accompanying this shift has been a developing scholarly debate on the complex relationship among visual media, news media, digitalization, human rights, activism, and bearing witness (Allan & Peters, 2015; Ellis, 2000; Frosh & Pinchevski, 2008; Hesford, 2011; Peters, 2001). As Peters (2001) explains, bearing witness is not a neutral action of looking in. Rather, it entails an ethical claim. In Peters' formulation, witnessing "suggests a morally justified individual who speaks out against unjust power" (p. 714). At the heart of witnessing is the complex and interconnected relationship among "the agent who bears witness, the utterance or text itself, [and] the audience who witnesses" (Peters, 2001, p. 709).

The three elements involved in witnessing raise questions about ethical responsibility and its implications: Who shoulders the responsibility for bearing witness, to what extent, and with what consequences? In *The Messenger*, Muhamat takes on the responsibility of witnessing for his own trauma, and that of his fellow detainees—"to be the voice of everyone in here" (*The Messenger*, Episode 1). He thus

establishes himself and his fellow detainees as political subjects whose suffering matters. Yet, it is difficult to communicate and translate the experiences of trauma and atrocity (Douglass & Vogler, 2003; Felman & Laub, 1992; Scarry, 1985). In the second episode of *The Messenger*, Muhamat describes his witnessing of detainees' self-harming practices as "the worst thing." He explains to Green,

> I'm talking to you, these are the only things that I am able to remember and describe because I feel the pain inside me, I feel now my chest is just beating up to my face or my nose, but I cannot even describe more than that. (*The Messenger*, Episode 2)

It is also impossible for many, on experiencing their own suffering or bearing witness to the suffering of others, to remain silent and not act (Boltanski, 1999; Peters, 2008). As Muhamat says, "I'm not going to stop protesting because this is my right and the rain will not stop me and no one will stop me" (*The Messenger*, Episode 1).

The prison is a particularly potent site for bearing witness to injustice (Peters, 2001, p. 714): Key historical examples include Primo Levi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King. *The Messenger* provides an important example of the potential for incarcerated subjects to use sound and audio content in creative and affirming ways, including earwitnessing. Despite the significant physical and sensory constraint of incarceration (Crewe, Warr, Bennett, & Smith, 2013), research suggests that sound can enable detainees to develop forms of knowledge and agency (Hemsworth, 2016; Rice, 2016) and to establish, maintain, and strengthen politicized relationships with the "outside" world (Russell & Carlton, 2018). Through the creation and amplification of music, rhythm, noise, or vocal testimony—all of which are audible in *The Messenger*—detainees can express a limited degree of acoustic agency (Waller, 2018), creating forms of inclusion and belonging (Hesmondhalgh, 2013) and feelings of safety within carceral spaces (Hemsworth, 2016; Rice, 2016).

Because podcast consumption is a highly selective, or "opt-in," process, it is unlikely to be an unexpected listening experience. It is a practice of "intentional" listening (Kapchan, 2016) that harnesses and accentuates the empathic and intimate qualities of sound and voice. Listening to podcasts indicates an "auditory awareness," as it involves "re-positioning to hear in more nuanced ways . . . moving to willfully interact with or make sound waves . . . [or] carving out spaces of stillness or silence to hear otherwise imperceptible sounds" (Blesser & Salter, 2007, p. 11; Hemsworth, Cameron, Rogalsky, & Greer, 2017, p. 148). Bickford (1996) challenges the privileged audience to take responsibility for what she calls "a politics of listening" (p. 129), which aims to disrupt powerful hierarchies so that a plurality of voices can be heard. In *The Messenger*, the politics of listening to the "marginalized voices and liminal positions" of asylum seekers might enable "a form of ethical responsiveness" (Dreher & de Souza, 2018, p. 22), provided it is grounded in acknowledgment of "our differently located listening positions" (Dreher & de Souza, 2018, p. 35). This is what Dreher (2009) terms "political listening," insofar as it involves critical awareness of the "hierarchies of attention" and dominant listening practices in settler colonial contexts such as Australia that mishear, unhear, or actively silence serious moral injuries and injustices (de Souza, 2018). As a communicative medium, podcasting provides unique opportunities for shifting how, who, and what we hear, and when. This is particularly important in situations of systematic silencing, as in Australia's system of offshore detention.

Australia's System of Offshore Detention

Since 2001, Australia has held an agreement with Nauru and PNG to detain—on a mandatory, indefinite, and unreviewable basis—people traveling by boat to Australia to seek asylum. The first iteration of this policy of offshore detention occurred during 2001–2008; after a short hiatus, it was reinstated in 2012. Since 2012, 3,127 people have been subject to offshore detention. In part, the policy is designed to deter people from seeking asylum in Australia by boat (Doherty, 2018). Several hundred people, including children, have been confined to these islands for more than five years.

These detention centers are profoundly harmful: Detainees are subjected to poor conditions, dehumanizing treatment, systematic medical neglect, violence, and abuse (Parliament of Australia, 2015). Twelve asylum seekers and refugees have died in detention since 2012 (Refugee Council of Australia, 2018). In 2016, PNG's Supreme Court found that Australia's policy of offshore detention breached the constitutional right to liberty. Despite continued concerns about a lack of safety for asylum seekers on Manus Island (UN News, 2017), the Australian government eventually closed Manus prison in November 2017 and detainees were forcibly removed to makeshift accommodation in the town of Lorengau (Doherty, 2017a). At the time of writing, refugees and asylum seekers continue to live in basic accommodation with a minimal allowance for food, inadequate physical and psychological care, and a lack of security, while they wait for a resettlement opportunity (Boochani, 2018a; Schuetze, 2018).

One of the most significant aspects of Australia's offshore detention regime is its high degree of secrecy. Secrecy is created in several interrelated ways. Treating asylum policy as a national security operation, the Australian government justifies a lack of disclosure about its activities. Media access to Nauru and Manus Island has been extremely difficult, if not denied completely (Farrell, 2014; Nethery & Holman, 2016; Tiffin, 2014). The Border Force Act 2015 legislates that all operations under the policy remain secret: Department officials and contracted staff risk two years of imprisonment if they reveal information to the media about their work. Significant democratic deficits in both Nauru and PNG have reinforced power asymmetries between these states and Australia, and Australia has provided sufficient incentives to facilitate cooperation (Nethery & Holman, 2016, p. 1029). Both Nauru and PNG have obstructed access to all external observers at Australia's behest, including the United Nations, Amnesty International, and members of Parliament from Australia and overseas. As a result, the offshore detention policy exists within what a Senate Committee has labeled "a pervasive culture of secrecy" (Parliament of Australia, 2015, p. 124).

In spite of the secrecy, multiple government inquiries and other reports (some of them "leaked") have documented the poor conditions, ongoing abuses, and devastating mental and physical health outcomes of offshore detention (Farrell, Evershed, & Davidson, 2016). In addition, detainees themselves have found ways to provide their own accounts of confined life on the islands. Most notable is the prolific output of Kurdish journalist Behrouz Boochani, who has published articles in Australian, U.S., and UK news media, and collaborated with journalists, writers, and filmmakers to produce the short documentary *Nowhere Line* (2015), the feature length film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* (2017), and the novel *No Friend but the Mountains* (Boochani, 2018b). In all of these projects, the involvement of outside collaborators and the innovative use of illicit technologies have been critical in facilitating these examples of "self-represented witnessing" to the trauma of detention (Rae, Holman, & Nethery, 2017). In a similar way,

Abdul Aziz Muhamat is able to give voice to his experience of detention on Manus Island through his collaboration with Michael Green through WhatsApp technology to produce *The Messenger*.

Transgressing Secrecy With *The Messenger*

Abdul Aziz Muhamat is a member of the Zaghawa ethnic group from the Darfur region of Sudan. In 2013, when he was 20, Muhamat flew from Sudan to Indonesia and boarded a boat to Australia with the intention of seeking asylum there. The boat was intercepted and Muhamat was transferred to Manus Island, where he remains at the time of publication. His status as a refugee, according to the 1951 Refugee Convention, was confirmed in 2015 (Connaughton, 2017; Doherty, 2017b). As a leader within Manus prison, Muhamat contacted Michael Green, a freelance journalist based in Melbourne, Australia. Over 18 months the pair "spoke" on most days by leaving 30-second voice recordings using the encrypted WhatsApp application on their phones. Green later used this digital archive of more than 3,500 messages to create a 24-episode podcast that was published throughout 2017. *The Messenger* is a podcast that follows the developing friendship between these two men, sustained by Green's desire to witness and broadcast Muhamat's experience of detention. As Green says in a voiceover, "I wanted to know everything he could tell me about his life in that place that's kept so secret from the public" (*The Messenger*, Episode 1). *The Messenger* is produced by the Wheeler Centre, a Melbourne institution for writing and ideas, with the support of Behind the Wire, an oral history project documenting experiences of immigration detention in Australia (Meade, 2017). Green and his collaborators provide a platform for Muhamat's voice and narrative, which is inevitably produced, edited, and compiled in particular ways. Thus, *The Messenger* cannot be conceived simply as a form of "self-represented witnessing" (Rae et al., 2017). By amplifying his account, the producers frame the capacity of the audience to conceive of Muhamat's life as "grievable" (Butler, 2009) and thus worthy of witnessing.

The first episode of *The Messenger* explores Muhamat's motivation for telling his story. In part, he is driven by the desire to overcome the exclusion and secrecy of his detention. Caught in a policy characterized by systemic injustice and overwhelming suffering, Muhamat feels compelled to speak out and bear witness to not only his own experiences, but also those around him. In becoming "the messenger . . . the voice of everyone in here" (*The Messenger*, Episode 1), he becomes the agent of witnessing in the hope that his actions and words will be heard and responded to by a distant audience. In Episode 1, Muhamat explains,

> I've got nothing to lose. . . . At the end of the day, many people they're really keen to tell their stories but they're still scared. Why should I be scared? You know, because I'm not saying anything wrong. I'm not doing anything wrong. . . . I have to do that because at the end of the day I just want to send a message. I want to tell people that, look, this is a wrong thing, there's something wrong is happening.

When Muhamat begins conversing with Green via WhatsApp, he is aware that his actions are risky. At first, Muhamat uses a smuggled phone. As he explains to Green, "The phone that we are using, it is really illegal and . . . they can confiscate the phone from us" (*The Messenger*, Episode 1). However, after a few months of stilted conversation, Green notes that "the rules changed and Aziz could use his phone freely"

(*The Messenger*, Episode 1). Their exchanges were still limited to WhatsApp voice messages because of the poor phone reception on Manus Island, and because the encryption offers Muhamat an element of protection. As Green says, "Either way [Aziz is] still locked up and speaking to a journalist might be risky for him" (*The Messenger*, Episode 1).

In an act of media witnessing (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2008), Green invites the audience to join him in learning about what life is like in a clandestine detention center. Green tells listeners, "I want to show you what it's been like for him to wait. . . . We'll go inside Australia's immigration detention center on Manus Island. . . . We'll hear his messages as the days go by. . . . We'll get to know Aziz" (*The Messenger*, Episode 1). Green describes Muhamat as "reporting from the inside": "The world is watching, and Aziz wants to tell them what's going on" (*The Messenger*, Episode 1). *The Messenger* thereby creates an intimate relationship among the agent, the media, and the audience, in which the listeners are invited to join Muhamat and Green in bearing witness to offshore detention. We now turn to the potentialities and limitations of podcasting as a medium for earwitnessing.

The Podcast as a Medium for Earwitnessing

Podcasts are mobile, intimate, highly selective, and participatory; listeners make "choices about which specific podcasts to listen to, and also when and where" (Berry, 2016, p. 12). The podcast listener may also be a "more actively engaged participant than the radio listener" (Berry, 2016, p. 2), because "when individuals select particular podcasts, what often attends is a heightened perception of personal relevance regarding that content" (MacDougall, 2011, p. 718). Researchers describe podcast fans as "super listeners" because they dedicate more time than other audio consumers (Edison Research, 2014) and contend that podcast use is "a strong predictor of political participation online as well as offline" (Chadha, Avila, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2012, p. 389). The potential for podcasting to highlight injustice is reflected in the popularity of the "true crime" genre, which often challenges institutional power by giving a voice to the accused (Buozis, 2017).

Through podcasting, existing technologies assume new roles. In *The Messenger*, the conversations between Muhamat and Green were conducted using a free messaging application on a smuggled phone. They repurposed WhatsApp (a free cross-platform messaging and voice application released in 2009) to facilitate recorded conversation and testimony (in short 30-second bursts) between Manus prison and Melbourne. WhatsApp also features end-to-end encryption. This allows only those users communicating to each other to read and hear messages, which is of vital importance for asylum seekers who have had to hide their access to mobile phones and for whom a breach of detention center rules could have serious consequences.

Podcasting has been successful not because it has been a radio disruptor, but because it has breathed new life into preexisting tropes and forms (Markman, 2015, p. 241). For the purposes of earwitnessing, podcasting should not be treated as an entirely new medium: Radio and podcasts are likely to have more in common than not. For instance, podcasting from within detention is an evolving form of

"prisoner radio" (Anderson & Bedford, 2017).[2] Other historical examples of broadcasting injustice, such as the radio coverage of the Second World War (Douglas, 2004; Tester, 1997) and the Eichmann trials following the Holocaust (Pinchevski & Liebes, 2010), reinforce the idea that radio has been and remains a powerful and parallel form of earwitnessing. Indeed, Peters (2001) argues that live broadcasts such as radio may best facilitate witnessing because it provides more of a sense of "access to truth and authenticity" (pp. 719–720). In contrast, prerecorded media make for "dubious witnesses," because the production process can involve "time-axis manipulation, stopping, slowing, speeding or reversing time" (Peters, 2001, p. 718). However, all broadcasting arguably involves mediation and selective recording on the part of producers and, as Markman (2015) points out, producers often work to "infuse a sense of 'liveness' into their podcasts, whether through the use of social media, blog comments, chat rooms or other technological fixes" (p. 241). Although podcasting undoubtedly shares many qualities with traditional radio, it is also distinctive as a medium and mode of communication (Berry, 2016).

Podcasts can be created independently from commercial media and public broadcasters and without highly professional studio equipment and technology. In addition, they are not subject to state regulation that governs other forms of broadcast media. This means that producers can "do radio on their own terms—free from industry and/or legal restrictions" (Markman, 2011, p. 555). Such independence was important for the producers of *The Messenger*. Once the WhatsApp voice recordings were retrieved and stored in Melbourne, their release in podcast format bypassed media exclusions and rules that prohibit visitors from making recordings in the detention center. *The Messenger* therefore represents an unauthorized exposure of the conditions and experience of detention.

Although there has been a trend toward more professional and highly stylized podcast productions (Bonini, 2015), the podcast medium still enables a relatively lo-fi, ad hoc, and sometimes subversive approach, such as the one taken in *The Messenger*. As McHugh (2016) observes, "Podcasting is fomenting a new, more informal, genre of audio narrative feature centered on a strong relationship between host and listener with content that is 'talkier' and less crafted" (p. 65). The rapport between hosts, in what Shapiro (cited in McHugh, 2016) calls a "chumcast," can make the listener feel included in a private conversation. In *The Messenger*, the warmth, curiosity, and affection that marks the developing friendship between Muhamat and Green filters through to the listener.

Because audiences need to make a conscious choice to download and listen to *The Messenger*, this may limit the potential for a wider audience to earwitness detention. It risks becoming more a form of narrow-casting than broad-casting. This "opt-in" factor can create an "echo chamber," especially as listeners are likely to already be sympathetic to the experiences being presented. Rather than reaching a wider audience, then, *The Messenger* may serve to reinvigorate already sympathetic audiences. There is also the potential for small podcasts to generate a strong sense of community between creators and listeners (Markman, 2011) and create a horizontal politics of listening that becomes an autonomous space of solidarity

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[2] The prerecorded, back-and-forth vocal exchanges between Green and Muhamat in *The Messenger* are reminiscent of a much older (often political) communicative practice of written exchange between prisoners and those on the "outside," further highlighting the permeable nature of the carceral boundary (e.g., Jackson, 1994; Wilson, 2000).

(Bassel, 2017, p. 72). Like many other podcasts, *The Messenger* has online discussion boards and forums, the hashtag Episode messengerpodcast, and a series of reviews from listeners on iTunes (where it can be downloaded). These additional platforms allow producers and audiences to expand their connections and dialogue and build new online communities (Wrather, 2016).

Ultimately, the nature and appeal of podcasts are that we can listen to them at a time and place that suits us. As podcasts transform earwitnessing into a mobile act, this mobility may have a different impact according to the particular context in which it is heard. MacDougall (2011) argues that the qualities of mobility and personal selection make podcasts a more participatory medium than radio because listeners "cannot help but bring the world he or she confronts into the unfolding monologues or conversations cached on a digital audio device" (p. 717). Podcasts might therefore create a more immersive and holistic experience and connection among the witness, the audience, and the environment. Compared with traditional radio consumption practices, podcasts may be "capable of a deeper level of intimacy" (Berry, 2016, p. 13). The capacity of the mobile podcast listening experience to generate intimacy is, according to MacDougall (2011), "at least akin to having someone speaking to or with the listener while walking, sitting, or standing next to him or her" (p. 722). Especially when heard through headphones, podcast consumption can be "deeply personal and highly privatized (and intimate)" (Berry, 2016, p. 13). Indeed, the "intimate nature" (Lindgren, 2016, p. 24) of the podcast has been credited as a source of its popular appeal. As LaBelle (2010) argues, "Sound operates by forming links, groupings, and conjunctions . . . [that] weave an individual into a larger social fabric" and "infuse language with degrees of intimacy" (p. xxi). Sound media therefore have a unique ability to generate affects and activate emotional and experiential responses.

The Affective Potentialities of Earwitnessing Detention

Listening to *The Messenger*, we begin to earwitness the soundtrack of offshore detention. At times, Muhamat's recordings evoke and reflect the harsh landscaping and deprivations of Manus prison. In other instances, they capture the passionate refusal and desperate protests of detainees, whose resistance and survival interrupt and expose the brutality of the camp and the "carceral circuitry" (Gill, Conlon, Moran, & Burridge, 2016) of which it forms a key part. Sound is inextricably spatial: It generates environments in which knowledge is produced, and undergirds and forms the power structures it participates in (Kanngieser, 2015). The acoustic environment of the site of incarceration "can be read as an indicator of the social conditions, which produce it" (Schafer, 2004, p. 7). Sonic methodologies—or those premised on listening—therefore offer a novel way to construct, perceive, and make sense of carceral environments and experiences that are otherwise obscured and "hidden" from the "outside" (Jewkes et al., 2017).

Radio sound has the ability to engage with people's emotions and can be used to maintain or alter mood (Tacchi, 2000). Voice and speech represent particularly powerful acoustic phenomena. Although the "acousmatic voice" is one without a source (Dolar, 2006), it has the power to construct sociocultural spaces and produce imaginary bodies (Connor, 2000). Listening is a way to make sense of the world through the resonance of sound:

>   When one is listening, one is on the lookout for a subject, something (itself) that identifies
>   itself by resonating from self to self, in itself and for itself, hence outside of itself, at once
>   the same as and other than itself. (Nancy, 2007, p. 9)

Voices are thus "the most immediate means of expression," as "voices and how we listen to them, reconfigure our relationships to each other and to our shared worlds" (Kanngieser, 2012, pp. 336–339). The social, the oral, and the aural are thoroughly intertwined (Wood, Duffy, & Smith, 2007). Speaking and listening create public dialogic spaces (Bakhtin, 1986), as "utterances open up spaces for different ways of being through dialogue . . . [and the] anticipation of a response" (Kanngieser, 2012, p. 337). Thus, voice is much "more than a conduit for the transfer of information"; it is also "the soundings . . . and affective transmissions that make up our different relations" (Kanngieser, 2012, p. 337). *The Messenger* affirms the importance of voice as a mode of communication, as Green comments early in the podcast,

>   I thought we'd have to communicate entirely by text. Then I realized that on WhatsApp
>   you can send these little voice messages that get delivered whenever you're in range.
>   . . . I just thought that I would leave a voice message so that you could hear my voice.
>   (*The Messenger*, Episode 1)

The exchange between Muhamat and Green in *The Messenger* is made all the more moving by the tone, pitch, cadence, and pace of their voices, despite being mediated (and often delayed) by unpredictable and unreliable technology and telecommunications signals and the restrictive carceral regime.

The sustained dialogue between Muhamat and Green reflects the unique capacities of this new technology to carry sound across (carceral) boundaries and create spaces of connection and intimacy. Scholars have noted that sound is "fluid, mobile and relational" (Gallagher, Kanngieser, & Prior, 2016, p. 621). In *The Messenger*, this is true only of the two last descriptors: It is mobile and relational, but it is certainly not fluid. The messages are stilted, cut short, and arrive at the other end in jumbled order. Rather than detracting from the podcast, however, the awkwardness of the communication serves as a reminder of the significant obstacles that Muhamat and Green have to overcome to communicate.

Like all sound, voice and speech do not exist in a vacuum. Speaking and listening relationships are shaped by social and political inequalities and conflicts (Dreher, 2009). In *The Messenger*, Green often mentions his own environment (for instance, that he works in the backyard shed that serves as his office) that emphasizes the contrast with the unfreedom Muhamat experiences. This spatial aspect is sonically relevant, as the physical and geographical location of each speaker (and listener) fundamentally affects the acoustics of the recordings. Because sound is manifested through space, through reverberation and reflection, material densities and gaps, specific spaces "modulate and refract sounds and voices" in particular ways (Kanngieser, 2012, p. 345). In several recordings, Muhamat can be heard pacing on the crushed limestone that we learn covers the entire outdoor area of the fenced-in camp: The intense white ground is hot, quickly wears through flimsy footwear, prevents any greenery from coming through, and creates bright glare in the heat of the day. The aural architecture of the camp allows us to hear the repetitive crunch of Muhamat's footsteps on the gravel in the middle of the night, evoking the frustration of immobility and containment. These sounds are earwitnessed and mediated by Green, who narrates,

> The audio quality of Aziz's messages isn't always great. There're often other detainees in the background or snatches of a song being played nearby, or maybe the sound of heavy rain on tin roofs. . . . I could hear his footsteps and the rhythm of his breath. (*The Messenger*, Episode 1)

All of these sounds contribute to an "auditory spatial awareness" that "influences our social behavior" (Blesser & Salter, 2007, p. 11) and shapes our listening experience. Listening is an active and embodied experience, rather than the passive activity it is frequently assumed to be. As Kanngieser (2012) contends, "Listeners actively contribute to the spaces that utterances compel" and "there is a constant relational interplay and reciprocity between the speaker and listener" (pp. 337–340). Listening—in contrast to simply overhearing—evokes empathy, as "we are drawn into worlds of sound and vibration that are shared, though not always equally or in the same way" (Kapchan, 2016, p. 117). In listening to *The Messenger*, we are privy to the intimate exchange between Muhamat and Green. It is a conversation that was not necessarily and originally intended for a larger audience. This differentiates "our" listening from the prior listening between Green and Muhamat, and to that of the podcast producers. Listening, like speaking, is always "socio-culturally contextualized" (Kapchan, 2016, p. 117), and thus sound is unpredictable in its reception.

Reviews on iTunes indicate that listeners were highly receptive to bearing witness to the subjugated experiences of detainees on Manus Island.[3] For example, one reviewer wrote, "So deeply moving to hear a real voice, straight from the source. An actual human being speaking his truth, helping to open our eyes *and ears* [emphasis added] to the reality of detention" (iTunes, 2018, para. 6). This listener positions Muhamat as a "real voice" or moral authority who provides a truthful account of life in a prison camp. Importantly for our study, this listener explains how on "hearing things," his/her ears have been "opened" to this experience of injustice. Another listener wrote, "This is vital listening for all Australians and for anyone who is concerned about treatment of people seeking asylum" (iTunes, 2018, para. 2). These reviews indicate that the audience members giving feedback on the podcast are highly active listeners who responded to earwitnessing with a sense of responsibility. Overall, according to the 84 reviews posted at the time of publication on the iTunes app, the audience responds enthusiastically to *The Messenger*. Many listeners appear emotionally impacted by the podcast and deeply engaged with the practice of bearing witness to experiences of detention. One listener describes *The Messenger* as "compelling and rare accounts of life in detention. Forcing humanity into a politically charged and often faceless issue" (iTunes, 2018, para. 12). Although Muhamat largely remains "faceless" to the audience (although his image is available online), listening to his voice constitutes a deeply personal and impactful account of injustice. Positive responses to *The Messenger* suggest that earwitnessing detention may aid in humanizing detainees and evoke empathy and compassion for their plight. In another review, a listener expresses feelings of gratitude, regret, and optimism for change after earwitnessing Muhamat's suffering: "Thank you Aziz for giving us a glimpse of what detention is like. I'm really sorry that Australia treats refugees so poorly and I'm really wanting this to change. This podcast will help!!" (iTunes, 2018, para. 11). This comment invites consideration of the

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[3] iTunes reviews are a limited measure of audience reception as they are likely to be written by listeners who have strong opinions. However, these reviews give an indication of how the audience responded to the podcast.

relationship between witnessing and the desire for social change (Boltanski, 1999). Although we are unable to determine from these comments whether and how listeners engage in different forms of social and political action, it appears that earwitnessing detention through *The Messenger* is an important and moving experience for many listeners, one that broadens and refines their understandings of the experiences and injustices of offshore detention.

The Limitations of Political Listening via Podcasts

Despite the capacity for the podcast to connect the agent, media, and audience in an act of earwitnessing, there are some significant limitations to what it can achieve. At the most practical and individual level, Muhamat remains on Manus Island with an uncertain future. During the podcast, Muhamat expresses a desire for "being there" or a liveness (Peters, 2001) beyond the mediated voice messages he and Green send. He says, "I'm sure that when we get out of this place, I don't know where we're going to end up, but if it doesn't matter to end in Australia or somewhere else it will be lovely that we can sit and talk and tell more and more stories" (*The Messenger*, Episode 1). For Green, the technological frustration of having a conversation in short jumbled recorded messages also provides a challenge to bearing witness. He describes it as

> More like writing notes for each other than having a normal conversation. . . . I got to know him in short 30-second bursts. . . . Imagine having a pen pal but you're only allowed to write on post-it notes and they arrive in a totally mixed up order and some of them are scribbled all over so you can hardly read them. . . . I could only get little glimpses of Aziz . . . it was strange not to speak normally. (*The Messenger*, Episode 1)

There are times when the media or audiences fail to bear witness or take responsibility for suffering. The concept of the "veracity gap" is useful for explaining why there can be disconnect between an audience and suffering elsewhere (Peters, 2001). Broadcasting through audiovisual media can create a distance from the audience that breeds distrust and doubt; it is the "liveness" of an event or a physical presence as it unfolds that gives audiences a feeling of access to "truth" and authenticity (Peters, 2001).

The podcast represents a prerecorded, curated, and sometimes disjointed account of events that is disseminated sometimes months after the fact. This presents a challenge to Muhamat's ability to witness, potentially creating a veracity gap. For audiences, the time lapse between these recorded conversations and the release of the podcast can restrict their capacity to bear witness and act on the suffering in the detention camp. As one reviewer writes,

> Some constructive criticism though, it's too long between actual events on Manus and the episode relating to it, maybe this is purposeful to try and give us a true sense of time moving so painfully slowly for those detained on Manus, but I feel that it is slowing the conversation that is sparked by listeners of this podcast. I feel like maybe it is almost a disservice to Aziz and other detainees because his voice is not being heard nearer to "real time." . . . I feel that in this modern world of the 24 hr news cycle and instant information gratification that I'm afraid we will lose many people in the discussion if we don't try to be a little more up to date.

> . . . Often I feel like it might be too late to do anything meaningful by the time we hear his
> voice. (iTunes, 2018, para. 1)

This comment reflects how audio recording can create a distance between the witness and the audience that compromises the latter's perception of "truth" and authenticity. Although this listener does not doubt the veracity of Muhamat's account, the concern is that the audience cannot be part of the "real-time" relationship and conversation between the agent and the media. Given that podcasting by nature is not "live" (like radio is), by the time the audience does bear witness to suffering inside Manus prison, there is a perceived "veracity gap," which can lessen the imperative to take "meaningful" action as it might be seen as too late. However, there is also the possibility that a "proper distance" (Khorana, 2018; Silverstone, 2007) is required for audiences to move beyond an empathetic response to a form of ethical witnessing that mobilizes action. Indeed, the time lag in hearing *The Messenger* reflects the protracted temporality and everyday banality of incarceration (Crewe, 2011). This suspension of time underscores Bickford's (1996) claim that political listening gestures toward a commitment to openness, duration, and continuation, rather than empathy based on sameness. Therein lies the possibility that the frustration that we do not hear Muhamat's voice in "real time" compels us to listen (and potentially act) differently.[4]

There is further concern that podcasts speak into an echo chamber, in which the audience selects and listens to information that conforms to its own beliefs and values. It is highly unlikely that someone opposed to the rights of asylum seekers would actively seek, download, and invest time listening to this podcast. So, short of achieving an end to the policy of offshore detention, what is *The Messenger* for? We argue that it serves to amplify Muhamat's voice; to remind, reinforce, and rekindle the political commitment of the listener; and to provide for posterity a permanent audio testimony of the human impact of Australia's punitive immigration policy.

Conclusion

Institutionalized power relations typically dictate "who gets to hear what" (Thompson, 2004, p. 1). However, the innovative use of new technologies can enable sound and voice to transgress the carceral boundary and reveal the limits of secretive regimes. Although Manus prison was profoundly controlled and "closed off" from mainland Australia, it was made audible—should one choose to position themselves to hear—through the combination of mobile phones, the audio recording, sending capacities of a messaging application, and the production and dissemination of an online podcast series. In the production of *The Messenger*, these technologies become vital tools in the exercise of acoustic agency, as they allow Muhamat to narrate his incarceration on his own terms. The audience is "moved" by Muhamat's account and in some

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[4] A more recent audio project from the producers of *The Messenger* grapples with a more direct and unedited form of earwitnessing injustice on Manus Island. The sonic artwork, *how are you today*, formed part of the 2018 "Eavesdropping" exhibition in Melbourne; it was updated daily to feature a new, 10-minute audio message from one of five different asylum seekers. The men were asked to "share the sounds of your life on Manus Island." By the end of the exhibition, in October 2018, *how are you today* had generated 14 hours of recordings and created a diverse archive of everyday sound and voice, much of it banal and atmospheric (see Dao, 2018).

cases, the podcast reinforces their commitment to "close the camps." For the Australian government, *The Messenger* represents a breach of the secrecy and security it has so expensively pursued.

In this article, we have adopted and developed the notion of earwitnessing detention and posited the podcast as a medium for earwitnessing with powerful potential. Given the various flows, connections, and exchanges of audiovisual information and data that traverse carceral boundaries, there are significant opportunities for critical research on carceral spaces via new (and traditional) forms of media and communications emerging from, through, and about them (Rae et al., 2017). Further research on the audience response to podcasts should examine who, where, and why audiences engage with podcasts. There is also a significant need to test the role of podcasts in the practice and potential of earwitnessing, especially the creation of relationships of responsibility and action.

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