

From *Currere* to *Ambire* An Ambient Curriculum

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It is 5 p.m. on a Thursday in October, still light enough in the early fall for a walk
 fall of 2020
 the soft whistle of wind instruments and chimes honks of traffic
 string instruments thrum ever-present rumble of buses
 there on the threshold of the park dissonance
 orchestral sounds unceasing, unrelenting blare of ambulance sirens
 the way the sun glints over the water
 the rustling in the trees the lilting tones of a flute
 at the edge
 beyond this one the sounds skip ahead
 crisp autumn air
 months of teaching online rush to return to school nauseating pit of
 election anxiety
 the makeshift hospital on the east field.
 And then a warm weekend in November
 a jazzy trumpet the Frederick Douglass sculpture at the traffic circle
 drivers tooting their horns in a call and response with passersby
 the sidewalk
 one more body amid the crowds in the unseasonably warm air

Curricular Conversations in a ‘New Normal’

THE SCENE IS NEW YORK CITY, autumn of 2020. After a term that ended with the chaos and anguish of the coronavirus pandemic, schools are mere months into various states of teaching through in-person, remote, and hybrid settings and navigating school closures and quarantine policies. Ms. S’s school is set on returning to in-person teaching. It is safe, they say, though she has never felt more unsafe and fearful for her more vulnerable students and their family members. “No, you’re not listening!” she wants to shout. If they heard, they gave no indication; Ms. S has “never felt more gaslit.” She finds herself in the classroom some weeks later, crestfallen at the desks in rows with plexiglass between them—even as the privilege of having resources such as plexiglass dividers creates a knot in her gut. She swore she would not be this teacher with desks in rows, she mutters to herself, as she fiddles with wires and mics. She is crushed when her fourth graders joining virtually tell her to mute them so they can better hear her. After teaching to silent screens for months, it pains her to see bodies in person and then be required to enforce silence because to shout and sing is to increase the risk of spreading a deadly disease. How does she navigate this scene in relation to the progressive principles of her teacher preparation program and commitment to social justice?

Feeling unheard and missing the sounds of her students, Ms. S left her apartment one day after school to listen to *SOUNDWALK* by Ellen Reid (2020), an orchestral audio-scape in Central Park. The poem that opened this essay was derived from Ms. S’s account of that experience. This article considers how this piece of site-specific sound art enters the complicated conversation of curriculum—a conversation that is as aesthetic and playful as it is dialogic and biographical (Latta, 2012; Pinar, 2008). When everyone is worn out and just trying to survive, it might seem Pollyannaish to argue for aesthetic explorations. It was a year that readers of the *Washington Post* described as exhausting, lost, chaotic, relentless, surreal, stifling, suffocating: a “dumpster fire” (Goren et al., 2020)—they might as well have been speaking from the perspective of teachers, school leaders, parents, students.

Berlant (2011) used the term “crisis ordinary” to refer to this state of protracted trauma, when the ‘new normal’ is an ordinary marked by ongoing crisis and its wake. A new ordinary created by crisis could be characterized by affects associated with the politics of trauma, which others in this special issue might take up as they intersect with sounds: grief, depression, anxiety, anger, numbness, and a general feeling of just trying to survive and get through it. As Berlant wrote *Cruel Optimism*, the context was the AIDS pandemic; 9/11, which precipitated the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the then-ongoing Iraq War and the War on Afghanistan; and the Great Recession of 2008. Berlant might just as well have been writing about the coronavirus pandemic though, when they observed that “mediated political sphere in the United States transmits news 24/7 from a new ordinary created by crisis, in which life seems reduced to discussions about tactics for survival and who is to blame” (p. 225). Through the pandemic, teaching life became centrally concerned with tactics for survival and who was to blame: face masks, hand washing, six feet, Fauci, Trump, administrators, teachers.

The parallels in these contexts—‘new normal’ or “crisis ordinary”—led me to Berlant’s (2011) essay, “On the Desire for the Political,” in *Cruel Optimism*, an analysis of how an individual and a body politic might maintain a desire for the political while detaching from a relationship of cruel optimism to politics as usual. Cruel optimism is a structure of attachment to something that, while promising to improve a situation, hinders those aims. For example, cruel optimism structured both an attachment to returning to in-person learning *and* an attachment to stalling that return.

Neither created space for collective re-imagining of the purpose and forms of schooling, for disrupting patterns of privilege and injustice working against those aims; neither resolved the impasse. In such an impasse, Berlant turned to three pieces of sound art as “cases in which the body politic in the politically depressive position tries to break the double-bind of cruel optimism, *not* reentering the normative public sphere while seeking a way, nonetheless, to maintain its desire for the political” (p. 230). In other words, when politics as usual are not fulfilling their promise, these artists use sonic interventions to sustain alternative ways of being political together.

They create alternative political objects, relationships, attachments. Berlant drew on the work of Cynthia Madansky, the Surveillance Camera Players, and Ultra-Red: activism-oriented art interested in the sounds of silence. Berlant argued that, “literally, by changing the sensorial experience of immediate things in the world [these works] have interfered with that pattern of treading water in the impasse” (p. 249). This is not to say that all sound art “interferes with the feedback loop whose continuity is at the core of whatever normativity has found traction” and secures an alternative genre of being in the world (p. 249). Instead, I suggest Berlant’s analysis of sonic strategies of contemporary art, in a historical present marked by ongoing crisis and the upending of any sense of ‘normal,’ has remarkable resonance with experiencing Ellen Reid’s (2020) *SOUNDWALK*, during a global pandemic, in the midst of the United States’ political turmoil and the chaos of schooling and being a student/parent/teacher in New York City and the effort to keep going on in the midst of it all, to find modes for enduring and for resisting returns to a normal that was already not working.

This “new crisis ordinary,” wrote Berlant (2011), “is engendering secular forms of something like ‘ambient citizenship’—politics as a scene in which the drama of the distribution of affect/noise meets up with scenarios of *movement*” (p. 230, italics original). As an amorphous contact zone, an affective atmosphere produced by sounds and movement, ambient citizenship draws our attention to “the way the political suffuses the ordinary” (p. 230). Ambient citizenship is a way of thinking about political belonging in ordinary scenes at the intersection of sound, movement, and affect. To understand what *SOUNDWALK* might do to and for curriculum designers and educators, I extend Berlant’s argument into an exploration of “ambient curriculum” to get at the way *the curricular* suffuses the ordinary and how sound contributes to and disrupts the stuckness Ms. S faced in navigating the challenges to her curricular commitments at the height of the coronavirus pandemic.

From *Currere* to *Ambire*

Pinar’s (2008) *currere* is a method of self-study bound up in time. It involves an examination of the past and imagination of the future to better evaluate, act within, and “awaken from the nightmare we are living in the present” (p. 5). Pinar’s (2008) *currere*, a journey run linearly, if recursively, turns to *ambire*, in Berlant’s (2011) formulation. Berlant drew on the meaning of ambience’s Latin meaning, *ambire*: “to go around,” as in surrounding and soliciting for votes, as in a movement around, a gathering, a surround, a contact zone. Emphasizing *ambire* instead of *currere* though suggests that, instead of a course run (by humans), curriculum runs around us. To go from *currere* to *ambire* is to “approach the assemblage itself as inherently pedagogical” (Wozolek, 2020, p. 122). Ambient curriculum elaborates on this pedagogical assemblage, and elucidates how, when educational leaders raise alarms over “learning loss,” they miss the way that students are already engaged in curricula all *around* them: at home, on social

media, on the news, in conversations with friends, at workplaces, on the bus, in the skatepark, in their bedroom. The idea of an ambient curriculum builds on decades of Reconceptualist and critical curriculum scholarship that theorized the informal, hidden, and null curricula. Even Ms. S's own teacher education, which likely reinforced the separation of "school knowledge" as it gave language for these categories, becomes part of the "ambience" of Ms. S's identity as a teacher and understandings of how learning happens (Britzman, 1991/2003). Scholarship in public pedagogy also advances a critical understanding of how we learn constantly from our surrounding environment, materials, media, and social relations (Ellsworth, 2005; Sandlin et al., 2010). More recent works on educational assemblages (Wozolek, 2020), ethologies (Snaza, 2019), and meshes (Springgay & Truman, 2017) emphasize the more-than-human, affective, shifting nature of curriculum, in constant intra-action with the human subject. Ambient curriculum's intervention is to bring together an analysis of sound and movement with knowledge and power, to unsettle and expand what is included in curricular conversations.

Attending to informal and immanent forms of knowledge, curriculum theorists have long urged scholars in the field of curriculum studies to take up sound metaphors. Ted Aoki (1991), for example, argued for increased attention to sound and sonic metaphors in curriculum theorizing, dispelling Western ocular-centrism and opening the field to different ways that curriculum circulates. Janet Miller (2005) understood silence as the ambient noise of oppression; something to be interrupted by voice. Drawing on the earlier work of W.E.B. DuBois and Anna Julia Cooper, Gershon (2017) demonstrated the curricular significance of the onto-epistemological entanglement of sound and the human subject. While much scholarship on sound and curriculum focuses on music education, or using strategies of music making (improvisation) as metaphors for curriculum and pedagogy, or on music as a text (song lyrics, etc.) related to class content, Gershon (2017) emphasized the constant physical and affective presence of sound:

No matter where you are or what you're doing, you're gaining sonic information. And, regardless of what those sounds mean or their impact on your person, just as you are but a small part of the deep matrix of sonority, you are at once a node in sound ecologies and a contributor to these ever-emergent, undulating vibrations, always a medium and a media. (p. 26)

The onto-epistemological entanglement of sound and the human subject means that sound has always been part of how we know the world. This can be biological, as when tinnitus or loss of hearing induced by very loud noises affects one's orientation to people and space. It is sometimes preconscious, or affective: our body reacts before our mind thinks when a sudden sound startles us. The interpretation of sounds as dangerous or soothing, as appropriate or not, as taken-for-granted background noise or a noteworthy shift in the atmosphere of a room, is socio-culturally conditioned (Robinson, 2020; Stoeber, 2016). Dernikos et al. (2020)'s "affective scratch," which drew in turn on Weheliye's (2005) study of sound technologies and modernity, introduced a sonic metaphor of interruption—the nails on chalkboard feeling, the groove of a vinyl disc—that brings the potential of an ambient curriculum to disrupt the "backgrounding" of dominant interpretations of sound into relief. As "ambient citizenship registers the normative distinctions in terms of who has the formal and informal rights to take up soundspace" (p. 231), ambient curriculum too registers the intersection of sound, movement, power, and *knowledge*.

Ambient Sound, a Curricular Surround

To consider the intervention of *SOUNDWALK* (Reid, 2020) into an ambient curriculum, I turn to how sound scholars have discussed sound art and ambience. Brandon LaBelle (2015) also defined sound as inherently spatial and social, produced from vibrations moving through space, bouncing off bodies and the built and natural environment, and moving through and beyond bodies (the bass of a car passing on the street that causes my writing desk to vibrate; the rumble of a subway that rattles the classroom’s windows). For LaBelle, “the sonorous world always presses in, adding extra intensities by which we locate ourselves” (p. xiii). LaBelle traced the development of sound art to performance and installation art in the 1960s and 1970s: art that sought to push the boundaries (within the Western canon) of site, participation, duration (e.g., John Cage, Brian Eno, James Turrell). LaBelle (2015) argued that the “ultimate contribution of sound art [is] to make audible the very promise of noise to deliver the unknowable” (p. xviii). Such a contribution would be a curricular one indeed, though not all agree with LaBelle that sound art succeeded in that intent. This claim is rooted in a model of ambience as the dissolution of foreground and background, a feature ironically *foregrounded* in the ambient music of Brian Eno. Such an emphasis on ambience as diffuse atmospheric effect threatens to position the audience as inert passive matter and to do away with difference and agency. This dissolution is known and unknown, foreground and background, agency and passivity and is what Seth Kim-Cohen (2016) took issue with in *Against Ambience and Other Essays*. Dismissive of this impulse toward the lure of knowing what cannot be known—itself a claim to certainty and mastery—in the “ambient” style of conceptual art, Kim-Cohen wrote, “This ambient moment is a last gasp, a burst of longing for what we know is lost . . . I thought we had reconciled ourselves to our irredeemable immanence” (p. 76). The desire for this dissolution between known and unknown is there when ambience is evoked in the work of Brian Eno and others in the genre of ambient music. But Kim-Cohen argues whether such a dissolution is actually true of Eno’s work; I would argue similarly of *SOUNDWALK*, as what is unheard until the participant connects to the GPS-enabled score becomes foregrounded and as the listener contributes to the composition through their unique movement patterns in the park.

Kim-Cohen resolved the tension between the promise of these dissolutions and its actuality by turning to Tim Morton’s notion of *ambient poetics*, which highlights the “and/norness” of sound’s being and appearance (p. 30). Kim-Cohen elaborated on this *and/norness* of ambience:

When Morton uses the term “ambient,” he is not suggesting an undifferentiated wholeness. Rather, ambience is an experience of nowness that does not imply singularity or consistency. On the contrary, it is multiply multiple: every entity is already double—being and appearance—and ambience contains a proliferation of entities. (p. 30)

Ambient music’s diffuseness is both foreground *and* background, but to force it to be one or the other at a single moment in time misses the point. As Manning (2016) put it, “[a culture of affirmation]’s noises are not so easily parsed as positive or negative, not so easily positioned or understood” (p. 211). Ambience doesn’t deliver the unknowable, but suggests that something else might be known. An ambient curriculum is constituted by this quality of “and/norness,” a scene of sound, movement, and affect that is both attached to and apart from objects of desire that are never solid or singular to begin with, whether politics or curriculum. An ambient curriculum operates through more sensory pedagogy and sensuous curriculum (Ellsworth, 2005; Gershon, 2011), where it’s not so easy to put into words what you know.

Sounds, Walks, and Slow Ontologies

Ms. S's experience with SOUNDWALK was derived from my dissertation research, which looked more broadly at how participatory art events, the broad genres of new public art and social practice art, might suggest ways of rethinking the role of aesthetics and materiality in the complicated conversations of curriculum (Ellsworth, 2005; Latta, 2012) and intervene in the everyday assemblages of violence, and possibility, enmeshing schools (Wozolek, 2020). News of the coronavirus pandemic began circulating the day I proposed my study. By the next week, schools were closed, and the city ordered residents to stay indoors. I thought I might delay the start of this project by a few weeks and then a few months. As the next academic year began, it was clear I would need to change the study's design. No one was gathering in person for relational art events, and I certainly would not ask my participants—students and alumni affiliated with a school of education, many current teachers, curriculum designers, and curriculum researchers—to do so. I did not expect sound to play the role it did in this: how ocular-centric of me.

As artists and art institutions faced the same challenge, many turned to sound as a solution for distanced, shared experiences of art. Audio-narrated history walks and sound art proliferated in New York City. One of those projects was *SOUNDWALK: Central Park* (Reid, 2020), a GPS-enabled, site-specific piece of sound art composed by Ellen Reid and commissioned and performed by the New York Philharmonic, as well as the Young People's Chorus of New York City and the jazz ensemble Poole and the Gang. All 843 acres of the park are covered by sound cells (geographic circles of various sizes within the park) with distinct orchestral scores, jazz compositions, and spoken word poetry. Listeners access *SOUNDWALK* through a free app, typically using headphones, and compose their own experience as they move through the park; each unique path will result in a different sonic experience. A small group of curriculum designers and educators, including myself, took part in *SOUNDWALK* asynchronously and shared our experiences over Whatsapp, Padlet, and Zoom. In the following discussion, I follow one upper elementary school teacher, Ms. S, as she participated in *SOUNDWALK* while navigating the pandemics' disruptions to her principles of teaching and learning. Through her case, from which the introductory ambient-poem is derived, I sought to understand how participatory sound art might affect an educator's relationship to knowledge, particularly in the context of widespread trauma felt throughout the first year of the coronavirus pandemic.

As a genre of sound art or public pedagogy, soundwalks involve an engagement with environmental sounds or what's commonly understood as ambient sound. Andra McCartney (2014) traces the notion of "soundwalk" to the *World Soundscape Project*, based in Canada in the 1970s. Many of these soundwalks involved the participant as a recorder-researcher, listening and capturing environmental sound. Walks might happen in natural or urban environments, in group or individual settings. Hildegard Westerkamp, a feminist composer associated with the WSP, invited participants to record sounds in public spaces according to guidelines in a score—a practice seen in the work of John Cage and Pauline Oliveros, as well as artists in a range of media influenced by the Fluxus movement, from Yoko Ono to education and arts researchers Stephanie Springgay and Sarah Truman. McCartney's (2014) *The Soundwalking Interactions Project* restaged one of Westerkamp's scores, as part of a series of sound installations, interactions, and collaborations that underscored how a soundwalk is composed by unique arrangements of listeners' bodies, sensibilities, negotiations, and interactions with their environment (McCartney & Pacquette, 2012). Similar to works in this tradition of soundwalks, Reid's (2020) *SOUNDWALK* involves the listener and environment (in this case, Central Park), in the

composition of the piece, through the listener's movement in the park, how long they stay in a single sound cell, which cell they move to next, and the conditions of ambient sound at the time of their experience. The role of listening in the performance of *The Soundwalking Interactions Project* and *SOUNDWALK* owes much to Pauline Oliveros's deep listening practices, developed from her sensitivity to the role of the body, affect, and environment in listening, as a feminist and lesbian composer. Reid herself overlapped with Oliveros in a year-long workshop for new pieces with the Wild Up band and The Industry Opera Company. Oliveros was cited as a "thought mentor for the group" of emerging composers, who "love the way she heard music in the world, where she found it—everywhere around us all, and how she approached all new music as practicum in finding ourselves in nature" (Rountree, 2013). This approach to music "everywhere around" and Oliveros's own commitment to the knowledge all sounds involve dovetails with an *ambient curriculum*.

Movement is a crucial feature of ambience, and soundwalks literalize *ambire*. Recalling Berlant's (2011) explanation, "as movement, as ambit, [ambience] is akin to ambition (whose Latin root means 'to go around,' as in soliciting for votes), but even then, it's a gathering modality" (p. 230). Soundwalks place a particular emphasis on listening in conjunction with movement through a space. The significance of movement and gathering resonated with Springgay and Truman's (2019) critical scholarship and research-creation on walking as methodology and pedagogy, which emphasizes an understanding of

movement as inherent in all matter, endlessly differentiating. Movement as force and vibration resist capture. This understanding of movement is indeterminate, dynamic, and immanent and intimately entangled with transmaterial theories and practices. (p. 6)

This indeterminacy, dynamism, and entanglement of movement with matter was critical for thinking about how to approach *SOUNDWALK* methodologically. As participants engaged *SOUNDWALK* asynchronously, we each experienced a different sequence and duration of musical scores; we each experienced *SOUNDWALK* at different times, making the material environment unique for each of us. In short, each participant co-created their own ambient curriculum as they walked through the park and listened. Photos, text, and transcripts from Whatsapp and Zoom conversations generated a composite sensory image of those experiences.

According to McCartney (2014), "Soundwalks take the everyday action of walking, and everyday sounds, and bring the attention of the audience to these often ignored events, practices, and processes" (p. 215). Early soundwalks placed an emphasis on teaching audiences to slow down, listen to, appreciate, and analyze their acoustic environments. This slowness became part of the methodological orientation of this research, aligning with what Ulmer (2017) calls a "slow ontology" for qualitative inquiry. Not only does *SOUNDWALK* compel a kind of slowing down in space, the effects of the pandemic on academic production (particularly a dissertation) compelled an investment in slow scholarship. Ms. S spontaneously visited *SOUNDWALK* in October, when the event was first suggested, and then inadvertently missed an effort for the group of participants to listen to *SOUNDWALK* together in November. I also experienced *SOUNDWALK* multiple times over the course of nine months—twice alone and twice with colleagues or students. As Ulmer does in "Writing Slow Ontology," I write with the local landscape—in *SOUNDWALK*'s case, Central Park—and sensory images to evoke the ambient curriculum during which Ms. S listened to *SOUNDWALK* and in which the orchestral score participated. For months, I walked while listening to recordings of my conversations with participants on Zoom and while listening to

SOUNDWALK in Central Park. These were, in a way, my ambient curriculum—my surround of audio data, through which I moved and with which I thought. During my writing process, I turned to these audio clips again and uploaded them to an audio editing program. I slowly sifted through fragments that, for me, evoked this atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, celebration, and wonder. The following soundclip contains audio from *SOUNDWALK*, alongside Ms. S’s reflections on her visit to Central Park and audio from other participants. For me as a researcher, these creative efforts were “differently productive” (Ulmer, 2017, p. 201) and allowed me to inhabit the ambient curriculum in which Ms. S was situated—my hope is they evoke some of that ambience and spark other reflections for the reader here.



Listen to SOUNDWALK alongside environmental recordings and participant audio clips.

Scenes from *SOUNDWALK: Central Park*

It is 5 p.m. on a Thursday in October, still light enough in the early fall for a walk—the only activity, except for groceries and the periodic protest, for which she permits herself to leave the apartment in the fall of 2020. As she approaches from the east side, the soft whistle of wind instruments and chimes lures her further in, as the honks of traffic recede. String instruments contribute their thrum, nearly masking the ever-present rumble of buses now behind her. She stands there for a moment, on the threshold of the Park. The dissonance between these orchestral sounds and the unceasing, unrelenting blare of ambulance sirens stills her. As she continues her walk, she takes a left instead of her usual right. She cannot say what caused her to veer this way: perhaps it is the way the sun glints over the water or the rustling in the trees or the lilting tones of a flute. She glances down at her phone. The GPS marker on an aerial map of the park shows her location at the edge of a pulsing pink circle, and she wonders what the lighter crescent beyond this one might proffer. The sounds skip ahead. She finds her chest expands with crisp autumn air, her shoulders rise, her feet spring more with each step. Her breath puffs out a bit in the cold air ahead of her. She walks forward feeling a sense of excited anticipation, of curiosity and wonder that she had forgotten in the exhausting months of teaching online amid her school’s rush to return to school, the nauseating pit of election anxiety, the grief and anger at relatives who send articles filled with falsehoods, the sight of the makeshift hospital on the east field. She will re-enter that so-called “new normal,” but for now, she is here. Later, she describes the feeling as “solace.” Ms. S calls her mom as she walks back toward home. Conversations with family on the other end of the political spectrum had been difficult, but she said, “Mom, you have to visit when this is all over and experience this; you’d love it.”

Nearly a month later, on a warm weekend in November, she is crossing back through the Park from the northwest side: a familiar and pleasant path from the university to her apartment. If she had plugged into that same app and put on her headphones, she might have heard a jazzy

trumpet sound, a nod to the Frederick Douglass sculpture at the traffic circle by this intersection. She deliberately leaves her headphones in her bag; she does not even recall the app with the music that changed as she walked through the Park a month ago. Instead, she is caught up listening to the drivers tooting their horns in a call and response with passersby on the sidewalk, an exuberance that cannot be contained at the election's final call as the Saturday celebrations in the city spill over to Sunday.¹ She strides through the park, just one more body amid the crowds that have assembled to revel in the news, in the unseasonably warm air, in what might be the last chance to gather in a group with family and friends outdoors for a volleyball game, a birthday party, a high school photoshoot, until winter passes, and, with it, they hope, the rancor of this political climate and the devastation wrought by another wave of the pandemic. The crowds are oblivious to the composed soundscape, having created their own, and she has forgotten it too, every cell of her skin soaking in the chance to join them.

Feeling Like it Might Get Better

When Ms. S left her apartment to listen to *SOUNDWALK* for the first time, after the school day ended in October of 2020, she sought a feeling that things might be okay, if not better—that something else might still be possible. Anxiety and grief accumulated in the wait for a verdict on Breonna Taylor's case, and the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and the morgues outside Mount Sinai Hospital, and the 2020 election debate coverage that Ms. S's students insisted on tuning into during lunch. The coziness cast by the twinkling lights strung in her apartment from where she strove to creatively teach and care for her students could not dispel the pressing sense of doom; nor was participation in periodic protests a sufficient outlet for pent up political feelings. Berlant (2011) observed that

amidst all of the chaos, crisis, and injustice in front of us, the desire for alternative filters that produce the sense—if not the scene—of a more livable and intimate sociality is another name for the desire for the political. (p. 227)

The orchestral sounds accessed through *SOUNDWALK* provided an alternative filter to the shouts of outraged headlines and the despairing, nearly eerie silence of online teaching. The music in Ms. S's earbuds and the trees lining the empty paths of the park created an intimate, if solitary, experience. A performance for one, it still produced “*the sense*—if not the scene—of a more livable and intimate sociality” (Berlant, 2011, p. 227) and made it possible to conceive of occupying common public spaces with others: to desire the political again, to desire teaching and curriculum again as Ms. S stared at seats set up in rows separated by six feet; the classroom she swore to herself that she would never have in her progressive teacher preparation program years ago.

An ambient curriculum is ambulatory and ambitious—it goes around, surrounds, gathers. What an ambient curriculum gathers are the ways of knowing created and conveyed by “ordinary affects ... a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges” (Stewart, 2007, pp. 1–2). In *SOUNDWALK*'s response to the melancholy mood pervading NYC throughout most of 2020, its collision with the celebrations following the November 2020 election results, and design as a solitary experience, *SOUNDWALK*'s ordinary affects consist of “public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of” (Berlant,

2011, pp. 1–2). For Ms. S, as she listened to *SOUNDWALK*, those ordinary affects included the strain of relationship with relatives whose politics differed from her own; the stress of teaching through the pandemic and taking care of herself; the concern for her students; and the anxiety of the 2020 election. A few weeks later, after Biden defeated Trump in the Presidential election of 2020, Ms. S walked through the park again. This time, she forgot about *SOUNDWALK*, joining the city’s revelry. It was the soundscape of people gathering in groups and celebrating, the soundscape of a “scene of a more livable and intimate sociality” (Berlant, 2011, p. 227) that fed and fulfilled (at least in that moment) a desire for the political and hope that her classroom might again meet her curricular commitments.

Affects and Knowledge in an Ambient Curriculum

While deeper, more careful listening is often held up as the ideal of what *sound* curriculum might achieve (Gershon, 2017), scholarship in the field of sound studies has done much to disrupt normative, White, settler modes of listening (Robinson, 2020; Stoeber, 2016). These scholars argued for reinterpretations of what is received as sonic information or noise (Hagood, 2019; Thompson, 2017) and posited the value in mis-listening (Schmidt, 2012). Ms. S did not claim to have become a better—more attentive, thoughtful, deep—*listener*. Instead, she described having her own patterns of moving through space interrupted; being emotionally affected by sound; and becoming hyper-attentive to the movement of other bodies in space (such as light, other people, music and voices, flora and fauna). An ambient curriculum, while involving sound, does not privilege listening. Instead, it works in a minor key, more like Manning’s (2016)

minor gesture within frames of everyday life [which] creates the conditions not for slowness exactly, but for the opening of the everyday to degrees and shares of experience that resist formation long enough to allow us to see the potential of worlds in the making. (p. 15)

SOUNDWALK created a sense of possibility in Ms. S’s everyday routines by injecting a sense of curiosity and play (Dolan, 2001): what sound is around the next hill? What happens if I linger here? And, the ambient curriculum of walking through Central Park *without* listening to *SOUNDWALK*, on the day Biden was announced winner of the 2020 presidential election, and instead hearing the noise of celebration, made one of those other potential worlds—something better for Ms. S than the Trump presidency, if not a utopia—feel a smidge closer.

Moreover, Berlant (2011) argued,

it is minor work of political depression that both demonstrates a widespread sense of futility about slowing the mounting crisis of ordinary life in the present, and still, makes a world from political affect in which practices of politics might be invented that do not yet exist. (pp. 228–229)

SOUNDWALK entered this scene of political depression. A “widespread sense of futility” was in the air (ambient, we might say): a sense that no one wants to hear the curricular conversation; that the dominant curricular conversations (debates over critical race theory, “back to basics” [again], learning loss) make it nearly impossible to draw attention to other scenes of study. And, alongside

that slow despair, there was a tremor of hope that we might have an opportunity to make worlds where different curricular practices might exist. *SOUNDWALK*'s interference with this scene offers a “minor” mode of curricular practice, creating the potential for something else to resonate (which, as Gershon [2017] pointed out in the technical understanding of resonance, can also produce dissonance). It interrupted the fear and frustration that educators felt and spoke of in the beginning of the audio clip above, offering, as a participant reflects in the end of that clip, “space to do that work, practice these skills of imagination and care in creative and different ways.”

Typically, sound—and ambience—is taken as an inherently social experience. It impacts people together in a concert hall, on a live walking tour, through speakers installed in a park, as they pass a room or street, whether they intended to hear a particular sound or not (Gershon, 2017; LaBelle, 2015). That individuals share the experience of vibrations moving through all bodies at the same time (if not interpreted in the same way by each body) causes some to argue that sound produces a “visceral immediacy,” an affective bonding over a shared sensorium, whether a site-specific orchestral piece or crowds gathering in a park (Berlant, 2011, p. 231; Dolan, 2001; LaBelle, 2015). Due to the coronavirus pandemic and technological affordances, *SOUNDWALK* was designed to be accessed digitally and listened to individually through headphones. Participants are literally not listening to the same thing (LaBelle, 2015, p. xiii). This might be better heard through Andra McCartney's (2016) framework of intimate and improvisational listening in her *Soundwalk Interactions* project. Such a framework, which assumes the agency of listeners or audience members and to some extent the environment, allows McCartney to attune to the creation of unanticipated knowledge, which emerges from situated and partial perspectives of participants in a particular place and might spring from “productive confusion” that ensues from those intersubjective meetings. Reflecting on the experiences of *Soundwalk Interactions*, McCartney (date) wrote that

what excites [her] about intimate listening is that it is neither purely about contemplation nor about mastery—it is very much an in-between place, about touching and being touched, resonating, while realizing that that moment of touching is ephemeral and partial, ungraspable in its totality. (p. 52)

This position of the listener—one suspended between mastery and ceaseless mulling, felt and fleeting—resonates with the learners and teachers intuiting an ambient curriculum characterized by the quality of *and/norness*. Ambient curriculum can feel like dissonance or consonance or simply “abeyance”: the lulls, hmms, sighs in a conversation (Berlant, 2011, p. 230). Ambient curriculum accumulates movements in the ordinary ambit of headlines and memes; school announcements and Facebook posts; school scenes that spill into home spaces through online learning or a child's story of the day (or the story withheld); the email from a parent on your walk to work. Ambient curriculum is there in the too-warm December day and other affective weather patterns (Manning, 2016); and it is there in the tension in the streets when police cars cruise by or residents spill out of apartments to join a protest. While a variety of people might share the same physical space of soundwaves, they experience that ambient curriculum differently. As one participant reflected in the audio clip above, “What are the sounds I'm not hearing, as a teacher, that learners are experiencing? ... What does that do for them, and for me?”

It is significant that Ms. S's second interaction with *SOUNDWALK* is not listening to *SOUNDWALK* at all. Her headphones lie in her bag, as she deliberately listens to the day-long celebrations of Biden's election in November 2020: honks, cheers, grills, a rare sense of ease and

relief. But this scene of sociality, sound, and movement created its own ambient curriculum, in contrast to the one composed as Ms. S listened to *SOUNDWALK*, alone, tired, and anxious, in the same park a month earlier. Berlant (2011) writes that “ambient citizenship is a complicated thing, a mode of belonging, really” (p. 230), and I venture to extend this idea that both forms of ambient curriculum through *SOUNDWALK* affected Ms. S’s relationship to her identity as a curriculum designer and sense belonging to a community of educators, as in the first case anxiety subsided and in the second a vision for the future was replenished. Soaking in both ambient curricula began to dislodge the stuckness of going on amid it all.

Notes

1. Celebrations over the 2020 presidential election results continued through the weekend in most of Manhattan and Brooklyn. See Hartmann (2020, November 7), “Watch: New York City Erupts in Celebration After Race Is Called for Biden.”

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