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Postcritical Sensibilities for the Study of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Postcritique is the name given to a recent intellectual trend which opposes the practices of suspicion and theoretical abstraction in literary and cultural studies. Its proponents champion the alternative dispositions and epistemologies of attachment, hopefulness, and care (Anker & Felski, 2017; Felski, 2015). Embedded in a longer and broader intellectual current encompassing the humanities and social sciences, postcritique crystallizes a set of critical sensibilities particularly compelling for our contemporary historical conjuncture. We delineate these sensibilities by examining works on postcritique in literary and cultural studies, briefly discuss critical expressions of such sensibilities in the 1960s and 1970s, and link them to related work in the social sciences. We then present three vignettes from our research on the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate how an ethos of openness, hopefulness, and vulnerability may inform the study of the catastrophic experiences of an ongoing global pandemic. The three vignettes highlight the importance of documenting and understanding emotional experiences through digital media such as mobile-phone photography, audio diaries, and podcasting.

Keywords

postcritique, postcritical sensibility, vulnerability, description, COVID-19, pandemic, lockdown diary, affective listening

In her influential book *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*, Treichler argues that HIV/AIDS is not just an epidemic of infectious disease, but also an “epidemic of signification,” because it produced “a parallel epidemic of meanings, definitions, and attributions.” (Treichler, 1999: 1) Drawing extensively on cultural theories and the sociology of knowledge, Treichler’s study focuses on linguistic constructions and representations of AIDS. It is in this sense that she argues for the role of theory in understanding an epidemic.

She was, however, wary of the challenges of theorizing in the middle of an epidemic: “The very mention of theory, cultural construction, or discourse may be exasperating or distressing to those face to face with the epidemic’s enormity and overwhelming practical demands” (Treichler, 1999: 3). Treichler wrote her book over a period of a decade. By the time it was published in 1999, she had already gained a distance from what she studied. The authors of this article, like all those who have been researching the COVID-19 pandemic in the past four years, do not have the luxury of that distance from the object of our study. We are all engulfed in the pandemic as we conduct our writing and research.

Our own experiences therefore inform – and ought to inform – how we approach the pandemic. Because we were living the pandemic, our “study” is more like a form of witnessing and recording, a way of knowing through observing, listening, and feeling. The physical limits imposed on us through quarantine and social-distancing regulations mean we can only hear or see fragments of people’s experiences. Our understanding of their experiences is inevitably limited and partial. We are compelled, therefore, to approach their stories with humility and trepidation, aspiring at best to be modest witnesses (Haraway, 1996) by learning and recounting fragments of their pandemic stories.

Not everyone respects the distance, or science. Indeed, there were those who believed in conspiracy theories, denied the reality of a coronavirus, and spread disinformation. In contrast to such corona-skepticism and conspiracies, we highlight people’s everyday struggles, their emotional experiences, as well as their hard work of social justice, community building, and personal storytelling. Theirs are among the most compelling stories of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moved by these stories, we wanted to tell them, not analyze them. But storytelling is not a rejection of theory or critique; it is a different kind of theoretical practice and theoretical positioning, one that is particularly suited to capturing poignant experiences in everyday life. Thanks to its interpretive openness (Frank, 2010: 34), interpretive ambiguity (Polletta and Lee, 2006), “vernacular creativity” (Burgess, 2006), and even disruptiveness (Nassar, 2021), storytelling is especially important for research and writing about a global catastrophe that was still unfolding. It would be too hasty, to say the least, to try to draw conclusions about an extremely fluid event. The pandemic exposes the limits of critique and creates radical vulnerabilities. The critic cannot pretend to be a judge, an expert or authority, but must start with an understanding of, and respect for, forms of vulnerabilities and limits.

In this, we were inspired by an ethos of postcritique, the name given to a recent intellectual trend which champions the dispositions of affective attachment, hopefulness, and care as opposed to a hermeneutics of suspicion (Anker & Felski, 2017; Felski, 2015). As we reflect on the insights and sensibilities of postcritique, we begin to see its connections to a longer and broader intellectual current encompassing the humanities and social sciences. Going back to the criticisms of intellectual elitism of the 1960s and 70s and re-vitalized in the calls for publicly engaged scholarship in the first decade of the 21st century, scholars in this intellectual current try to imagine new ways and styles of knowledge production, which are articulated most forcefully and most recently by scholars of postcritique. Below, we first delineate these postcritical sensibilities and then show how they have informed our own research by presenting three vignettes of our own work on the COVID-19 pandemic.

The three vignettes tell stories of people’s pandemic experiences in Cambridge (Massachusetts) and Philadelphia in the USA, and Shanghai in China. In understanding and recounting their experiences, we were informed by the postcritical sensibilities we discuss below, especially an ethos of openness, vulnerability, and hopefulness. The vignettes do not focus so much on explanation as on storytelling. They try to convey the moods and emotions of people under pandemic lockdowns. The vignettes are meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive. In fact, we believe postcritical sensibilities would counsel against attempts to produce “exhaustive” research, because

exhaustiveness conveys a kind of mastery and control that is no different from the interrogating and indicting practices of suspicion that postcritical scholars reject.

Postcritical sensibilities

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, many literary scholars have criticized the role of suspicion in the practice of literary and cultural critique (Anker & Felski, 2017; Best & Marcus, 2009; Felski, 2015; Love, 2010; 2021). As Felski (2015: 2) puts it, this practice has the following features: “a spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on its precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces, the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is NOT critical must therefore be uncritical.” Felski notes that practitioners of critique try to dig deep down into the texts in order to expose hidden motives. They have “a penchant for interrogating and indicting, a conviction that deceit and deception are ubiquitous and that everyone has something to hide, a commitment to hunting down criminal agents and a reliance on the language of guilt and complicity” (Felski, 2015: 86). As a result, this kind of critique leads to “explanation-as-accusation, where accounting for the social causes of something serves as a means of downgrading it” (Felski, 2015: 23; see also Latour, 1988).

Although the “hermeneutics of suspicion” has a long and august intellectual lineage reaching back at least to Marx, Freud and Nietzsche (Ricœur, 1977; also see During, 2017), scholars have emphasized the Cold War origins of the disposition of suspicion. Castiglia (2017a: 12) argues, for example, that the Cold War was “a battle of dispositions”:

Among the dispositions encouraged in citizens during the Cold War, none was as powerful as suspicion, which became the epistemological center of the Cold War state’s authority.... Convincing citizens that dangerous ideological agents lurked behind surface innocence, the state made suspicion a national disposition.

This Cold War disposition of suspicion lives long past its moment, casting a shadow even on the practices of literary study: “Like the ever-wary Cold War citizen, critics operating within the hermeneutics of suspicion treat the text’s surface as a deceptive cover below which they discover and reveal dangerous ideological complicities in which critics themselves are unimplicated” (Castiglia, 2017b: 215).

A key aspect of postcritique thus concerns the relationship between the knowledge-producer and the object of knowledge. For scholars of postcritique, this relationship is not only unequal, but at its worst is hostile, such that the object of study becomes “a criminal suspect” (Felski, 2015: 101). The result “can be a regrettable arrogance of intellect, where the smartest thing you can do is to see through the deep-seated convictions and heartfelt attachments of others” (Felski, 2015: 15-16).

The critique of theory and the theorist’s relationship with the object of study goes back a long way (During, 2017; Felski, 2015; Serres, 1989). Theorists of the New Left in postwar Britain, especially E.P. Thompson, were highly critical of the theoreticism and elitism of Althusserian theory (Hamilton, 2011; Samuel, 1981; Thompson, [1978]1995). In the wake of the global protest movements in 1968, many scholars who were part of the movements reflected on the lessons of theory and the role of theorists and intellectuals in political practice. The American philosopher-activist Grace Lee Boggs was acutely aware that a dogmatic faith in theory can blind its followers to changing realities (Boggs, 2012: 55). The French philosopher Jacques Rancière trounced theory as the cultural capital of the elites to build and maintain their own positions of power. He argues that the Althusserian theoretical enterprise was one of domination, not of emancipation, and Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction derives its authority from the presumed ignorance of the objects of the study. In Rancière’s words (2012: viii-ix), “the science that claimed to explain subjection and guide revolt was complicit in the dominant order”.

Coming out of the movement of May 1968, Rancière developed a radical view of the relationship between knowledge and the masses, teachers and students. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, he tells the story of a schoolteacher who was driven into exile after the French Revolution and consequently developed a method of showing illiterate parents how they themselves could teach their children how to read. The lesson Rancière learned from this story is the absolute equality of intelligence between teacher and

pupil. No explication is needed for learning. In fact, Rancière argues, explanation is an exercise of power: “To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself” (Rancière, 1991: 6).

Openness, hopefulness, vulnerability

What are the alternatives to the practices of suspicion in critique? Proponents of postcritique do not reject critique per se, but rather repudiate the Cold War state epistemologies undergirding the disposition of suspicion. Urging us to “think of critique as an affective stance that orients us in certain ways” (2015: 18), Felski directs our attention to “empathy and sympathy, recognition and identification, enchantment and absorption, shock and the sublime, the pleasures of fandom and connoisseurship as they shape how and why people read” (Felski, 2015: 180). In emphasizing the affective dimensions of critique, Felski aligns postcritique with a long tradition of scholarship in feminist and queer studies which put emotion, affect, feeling, care, and embodiment at the center of knowledge production.

For postcritical scholars, the social and political conditions in the twenty-first century demand engagement and action. As Best and Marcus (2009: 2) put it, the demystifying protocols associated with the hermeneutics of suspicion and theories of deconstruction are superfluous “in an era when images of torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere were immediately circulated on the internet; the real-time coverage of Hurricane Katrina showed in ways that required little explication of the state’s abandonment of its African American citizens; and many people instantly recognized as lies political statements such as ‘mission accomplished.’” It is here that the visions and aspirations of postcritical literary scholars converge with many others across the humanities and social sciences who are similarly dissatisfied with the state of academic research and who embrace more engaged – and engaging – scholarship.

For example, sociologists have called for more public scholarship (Burawoy, 2005; Calhoun, 2005), as well as more emotional sensibilities in research (Abbott, 2007; Back, 2012). Patricia Collins (2000: 257, 262) famously developed a black feminist epistemology which embraces “lived experience as a criterion of meaning” and an “ethics of caring.” It is a way of knowing that attaches special value to individual

expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy. In the field of performance studies there have long been criticisms of the dominance of “textualism” in the academy and calls for an embodied, performance paradigm which “insists upon immediacy, involvement and intimacy as modes of understanding” (Conquergood, 1998: 26; see also Denzin, 2003; Johnson, 2003).

Anthropologist and communication scholar Jackson’s (2013) emphasis on “thin description,” as opposed to Geertzian “thick description,” reorients researchers towards the voices of communities and research participants in lieu of researchers’ *representations* of them. Wessler (2020: 139) argues that in a world of polarization, media and communication scholars might focus more on constructive engagement in communicative behavior, such as the cultivation of compassion, gratitude, and awe in public communication, as well as practices of democratic listening to other people’s perspectives.

Particularly remarkable in centering an ethics of care, empathy, embodiment and emotion in knowledge production is the work of a new generation of scholars in the social sciences (e.g., Behrisch, 2021; Brock, 2020; Cho, 2018; Nassar, 2021; van Wingerden, 2022). When she published her article “Cooking a Pot of Beef Stew: Navigating Through Difficult Times Through Slow Philosophy,” Tanya J. Behrisch (2021) was a doctoral student in the field of education. Her parents lived with her and her father had pancreatic cancer. She also had a full-time job as the manager of a team of 16 staff at a university and she had a beloved elderly friend who was ill. The pressures of life filled Behrisch with anxiety and fear. She decided to let email and work wait and instead cook a pot of beef stew for the elders. She found strength outside the “universal” concept of value: “Zen, Taoism, and existentialism suggest staying with anxiety as a viable means to live in an uncomfortable present” (Behrisch, 2021: 1). Throughout her article, she documented meticulously the steps of her cooking with photographs of peeling garlic, assembling ingredients, cutting potatoes, sharpening the knife. She recorded her emotions and reflections through these slow procedures. In the middle of these, she came to understand better what it meant to care for others, and what it means to feel with others:

I’m fully conscious of the detailed care work I do all the time; preparing food, creating meals that will nourish, satisfy, and delight. The delight of

others is nourishment for me, deriving from more than the stew's taste, texture, and savory smell; it will confirm for my elders that they're loved and cared about, creating a virtuous circle between them and myself (Behrisch, 2021: 9).

In Behrisch's case, emotion, care, and embodiment were an integral part of her new understandings of the meaning of navigating a difficult time, as well as the meaning of care work more broadly in a society of fast culture.

Enrike van Wingerden (2022) was a doctoral candidate in international relations when she published her article "Unmastering Research: Positionality and Intercorporeal Vulnerability in International Studies". In this article, she joins the efforts of many others (Nassar, 2021; Singh, 2018) to challenge the established norm of "mastery" in academic writing and research. In normalizing the control of the subject matter, rather than learning from it, the norm of "mastery" is no different from the disposition of suspicion rejected by postcritique scholars. Van Wingerden, however, goes further in her emphasis on how bodies and emotions are essential to the processes of knowledge production. Building on Sara Ahmed's (2004) work, she demonstrates how knowledge is cultivated through bodily relations, or "the intercorporeality of research practice" (van Wingerden, 2022: 3). As a participant in Palestine solidarity protests and activism, Wingerden analyzes her own bodily experiences of being there, being moved, and being vulnerable as central to cultivating knowledge. In the context of our discussions of critique and postcritique, these experiences of being there, being moved, and being vulnerable constitute a clear rejection of the detached, all-knowing, and accusatory postures of the practices of suspicion. The experiences of being moved and being vulnerable are an affirmation of an ethos of receptivity and openness in the processes of learning and knowing. As van Wingerden (2022: 13) puts it, "Passive experiences, such as pain, (dis)comfort, or fatigue, do not mark the end but the starting point of cultivating knowledge. This intercorporeal vulnerability is more than injurability and also means attending to the experiences of pleasure, joy, and fun". She cites Harrison (2008: 424) to stress that being vulnerable should be understood not a "weakness to be overcome", but as the fundamental condition of being susceptible and receptive to others and to the cultivation of academic knowledge.

Across the humanities and social sciences, therefore, scholars have articulated and practiced new dispositions and styles of research and scholarship to better meet the social and political contingencies of the contemporary world. Because they are aligned with the ethos of postcritique, we will refer to them broadly as postcritical sensibilities. These sensibilities include the following features:

- Rejecting an epistemology built on suspicion, they treat the objects of study as equals rather than as intellectual inferiors or suspects.
- They are wary of theoretical abstraction and critical of pretensions to totalizing knowledge.
- They see lived experiences as an essential criterion of knowledge.
- More than a matter of representation, they see scholarship as action.
- They embrace an ethics of care, openness, listening, hope, and vulnerability.
- In presenting research findings, they value description, performance, multi-modal storytelling, and diverse genres and styles.

In the remainder of this article, we present three examples of how we have brought postcritical sensibilities to the study of the COVID-19 pandemic in our own work. Each of the three vignettes confronts people's pandemic experiences with an "affective stance." Vignette One depicts how the researcher documented life in West Philadelphia through photographs of the signage neighbors displayed in or outside their residences at the beginning of the pandemic. By studying an archive of audio pandemic diaries, Vignette Two highlights the importance of archiving human experiences during the pandemic. More importantly, the researcher illustrates one creative way of interacting with the audio archive – by listening to the entries to build emotional connections with the audio diarists. The researcher in Vignette Three practices "affective listening" as she tuned into podcast diaries produced during the pandemic lockdowns in Shanghai, paying special attention to the voices of women in these podcasts. Because all our work has a distinct personal voice, we keep the first-

person “I” in the sections below and identify the authors of three vignettes in the brackets.

Vignette One: Documenting COVID-19 through smartphone photos (Kelly Diaz)



Figure 1: A house in the Spruce Hill neighborhood with a variety of homemade and mass-produced signs advocating for racial justice and an end to bigotry. Photo by Kelly Diaz.

Throughout the stressful and lonely period marked by the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I took regular walks throughout my neighborhood in West Philadelphia. As I passed by lawn signs, window art, and other visual displays addressing a variety of social issues and major events, I took photographs of these symbols and messages on my iPhone.² I did not set out to capture these displays as an academic endeavor, but as scholars began to write about expressions of care and the increase in social interactions on digitally mediated platforms (social media, WhatsApp, etc.) (Romania, 2020; Anderson et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020), I realized that my photo collection could add a unique dimension to this body of literature by focusing on analog means of communicating care and identity at a distance.

As I took these photos, I thought about Erving Goffman's work on self-presentation. His text helped me to see the signs as a means of performing identity, gratitude, care, and allyship. This is not to say that the displays are not genuine, but rather that they are calculated and intentional attempts to put forward into the world an image of oneself *through* a visual. Goffman (1959: 21) writes:

The individual may attempt to induce the audience to judge him and the situation in a particular way, and he may seek this judgment as an ultimate end in itself, and yet he may not completely believe that he deserves the valuation of self which he asks for or that the impression or reality which he fosters is valid.

Indeed, I saw many signs that seem to have been made and displayed in order to have an audience “judge” (in a positive sense) the person or the household sharing that message or “performance”. The pandemic coincided with the 2020 U.S. presidential election, which exponentially increased the degree to which people were displaying a national identity and concern. Another significant percentage of the signs expressed “thank you” messages for essential workers who were continuing to leave their homes and risk COVID exposure to keep the community running. While protests against racial injustice and anti-Blackness in the United States grew, many residents in my neighborhood displayed either homemade or commercially manufactured Black Lives Matter signs to demonstrate an intolerance for violence and discrimination against Black Americans. As a queer woman and Latina, I was proud to see the intolerance of racism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination on display amongst many West Philadelphia residents. As a relatively new member of the community, it was comforting and affirming to see my neighbors' values on display through this signage. While I recognized the many problematic ways that people have engaged in virtue signaling, in this case, I *wanted* my neighbors to signal their virtues to me. Since the pandemic kept us from gathering at block parties or local coffee shops, these displays were often the only thing I knew about my neighbors.

Performative allyship has been criticized as a phenomenon wherein people seek attention for their support for justice without doing actual justice work. While I recognize this problem, I can also see merits to the displays of allyship in this context. After all, performing allyship is not in itself a problem, if accompanied by action. To

evaluate intention and action, I thought about the labor and care people took to make homemade signs. I also reflected on how it would be easy to judge someone for simply displaying a commercially made sign, though at times those signs come as a result of a donation to a justice organization. In this case, people displaying them have “put their money where their mouth is” and directly supported the cause. Assigning motivation was, of course, impossible. In these times of social distancing, I was unable to pair the displays of allyship through signage with discussions with the creators about their social justice work. It was also not clear which signs came from allies and which came from people directly impacted.

Equally important to this body of work itself is the process by which I came to integrate it into my academic portfolio. I took all of these photos on my iPhone as I walked my young puppy, Tillie. While I was on these walks, I felt guilty about spending so much time away from my computer, taking breaks that I did not think I had earned from the narrow scope of what I considered to be my “research”. My mindset changed, however, when I read Tanya Behrisch’s “Slow” philosophy. In reference to the hours she spent cooking and caring for herself and her loved ones, she explains:

Rather than viewing those hours in neoliberal time as ‘lost hours’ I want to shift to a Slow appreciation of ‘gained hours’. [...] Care work requires Slowing down, taking time to notice what should be done, for whom, when, and how. The Slow movement invites me to explore this relational process through research, writing, and embodied practice of cooking for others (Behrisch, 2020: 3).

I let her words sink in and thought about the value of the care work that I was doing personally and how the time I spent walking my puppy could be reframed as “gained hours” that helped me to understand how my scholarly pursuits are intrinsically linked to my lived experiences and the world around me. I am proud that my photo-essay – and my contributions to this article – grew out of my care work for Tillie, my passion for digital photography, and my academic interest in social justice messaging. Academic work does not need to follow one format or formula, and there is no correct path from concept to publication when it comes to providing meaningful analysis of how individuals and society navigated COVID-19.



Figure 2: Kelly’s cavachon puppy “Tillie” standing next to “Black Lives Matter” written on the sidewalk in chalk. Photo by Kelly Diaz.

Vignette Two: Listening to an audio diary archive (Adetobi Moses)

Documenting the pandemic was both an individual effort – as the previous vignette demonstrated – and a collective one. In response to calls made by many public institutions such as universities and public libraries, innovative digital archives that artfully centered the individual and human toll of Covid-19 developed alongside the crisis. I am studying one of these collections: an audio archive of pandemic diaries called “Corona Diaries”, an open access platform that allows participants to record an audio diary entry related to the pandemic based on a daily prompt.³ As of this writing, the audio collection consists of hundreds of audio submissions from around the world.

In line with Jackson’s (2013) notion of thin description and the work of postcritique scholars (Anker and Felski, 2017), the ethos of my project is one of *immersive* description as a form of critique. My goal is to create an asynchronous dialogue with the diaries so that the voices of the participants and my voice, as the researcher, can coexist and emerge with analysis together. I share my thoughts and experiences as I listen to the voice diaries so that the emerging conclusions of this research endeavor will feel both descriptive of the content of the audio diaries *and* reflective of my

listening experience as the researcher. Below I share notes about my experiences of listening to two audio diary entries.

One diarist begins her recording not with a name, location, or an occupation, but with the lyrics from a John Prine song, “Angel from Montgomery”. The lyrics set the tone for how I engage with the diarist and her thoughts on the pandemic and lockdown.

How the hell can a person go to work in the morning, come home in the evening, and have nothing to say? [Pause for three seconds] This line from the John Prine song is really resonating with me today because our whole day is in a house. And there seems to be *so* much to say when we’re just stuck in our homes and going through the motions of our life. My life is extremely, uh, [chuckles] circumscribed by my daughter and her homeschooling, our interaction, and my attempt to keep her life as normal as possible while moving forward in her education and both of our wellbeing [sic].

This means getting outside, cooking, trying to stay off of devices, which is absolutely impossible. I find myself enjoying phone calls now because I’m so tired of looking into a camera. 90% of what I have to do is online now, which is so ironic because my work is about being visual, being outside, being intellectual, being in my head. And the thing that always sucks the energy out of this work is being on a computer. And yet ... ([Corona Diaries 13431](#))

The song at the beginning takes me by surprise, and I make a mental note to search for the rest of the song after she reveals the singer. I continue to listen attentively even as I wonder what the faint rustling sounds in the background of the recording could be. Are the sounds the movement of looseleaf paper, books, or other miscellaneous household objects?

When the Diarist stops singing and begins speaking, I hear the tiredness in her voice, but it is hard to gauge whether the fatigue is coming from the act of reflection, her experience with the pandemic generally, or whatever activity continues to add faint rustling sounds to the background of the recording. She speaks slowly, I notice, as if weighing her words precisely before she utters them. As she recounts her daily

activities with her daughter, suddenly the sound of a small child makes it into the recording as if to punctuate the diarist's words. At different intervals, the child's faint voice can be heard in the rest of the recording – though the diarist appears not to interact with him or her. As the diarist continues speaking, I again begin to wonder about her possible fatigue. Could it have to do with the added responsibility of caring for a child during the pandemic, or as the diarist describes later, could the tiredness be a result of having to be in front of a camera constantly for work? The abrupt ending of the recording leaves me wanting more as I am left with more questions than answers.

Gabriella, a graduate student, shares what it is like to live through isolation with a turbulent sleeping schedule. As her audio entry progresses, she invites me, the listener, to experience what it is like to wake up early, on a pandemic morning, from her vantage point:

Good morning or good night, it depends. My name is Natalia. I'm in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It's 4:00 AM here. I'm at the end of my insomnia, not yet waking up. I live here. I was studying a fellowship at Harvard when everything closed. When the work closed I was very sad during some weeks, but in general now I'm in a good mood. Even so, I can't sleep. I wake up around 2:30, 3:00 AM every night, every day. And, I think [...] I think a lot.

I read about science too. And after reading about science, I go back to think and then I make plans, I change my plans. I also read other people's plans. Uh, when I'm exhausted, like along this time, I just stay silent and jump into the sound of this ... this sounds [sic]. This is the best part of the day, I guess. This is my morning song, or late-night song. Whatever you choose.

[pause 00:01:30]

[bird noises] ([Corona Diaries 13631](#))

The bird sounds in this audio diary are immediately audible once the recording starts. As Gabriella describes her morning and tells me what time of the day it is (4am), I

imagine what it would feel like to be awake and alert at that time. Gabriella admits that she has not fully finished waking up herself, and I note that in her voice a second later. Her voice is laced with a drowsiness that weighs her words down as she speaks.

All the while, the sounds of the birds continue, prompting me to wonder if her bedroom window is fully or only partially open so that the microphone can pick up the birds' sounds. The chirping sounds close to Gabriella, as if the birds have congregated right outside her window or line the surrounding trees near her apartment. I say 'birds' because the sounds do not seem to be coming from just one bird – though it is impossible to tell for sure.

As Gabriella's voice grows faint, and the sounds of the birds completely take over the recording, I fully immerse myself in one pandemic morning of Gabriella's life. Near the end of the audio diary, I also begin to wonder about the different soundtracks of the pandemic that exist. How many people, like Gabriella, discovered or curated new aural experiences during the pandemic – whether via music, nature, or silence? How many people, like Gabriella, were able to endure the pandemic a little more skillfully because of these new experiences?

Though my listening experience is particular to me, readers may use my reactions to approximate some of the intangible *affect* and *effects* of the voices. More specifically, the emotional power (*affect*) of the voices has the *effects* of moving me as a researcher-listener. Opening up myself to the power of the voices and letting myself be moved by them, rather than trying to remain detached or disinterested, seems to have established a special kind of emotional connection and affective understanding, an accomplishment which I felt was the direct result of my efforts to explore the meanings of a postcritical sensibility.

Vignette Three: Listening to podcasts of lockdown diaries (Jing Wang)

As Vignettes One and Two show, both vision and sound are crucial components of what we call postcritical sensibilities. Vignette Three continues to embrace multimodal storytelling and an ethos of listening. More specifically, I explore the power of affective listening as a form of postcritique that resists geopolitical suspicion amidst the surging

Sinophobia during the pandemic. Similar to Felski’s emphasis on “recognition and identification, enchantment and absorption” (2015: 180), affective listening attunes us to hear beyond paranoid suspicion and political depression in everyday life. Listening to podcasts during Shanghai’s lockdown in 2022 enables me to hear hopeful laughter – in this case, joyful, tearful, and defiant laughter by many Chinese women podcasters – against both the devastating consequences of lockdowns and the growing geopolitical tensions between China and United States during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the spring of 2022, two years after the Wuhan lockdown of 2020, the megacity of Shanghai with a population over 26 million came under lockdown. Once acclaimed as one of China’s best-managed cities during the COVID-19 pandemic, Shanghai shocked the world with its tough lockdown policies. Logistic flows were cut; food prices skyrocketed. Many migrant workers were kicked out of their rented apartments and became homeless. People with chronic conditions such as cancer and diabetes were unable to receive their life-sustaining treatments. Lists of people who died during the lockdown – rather than from the virus itself – started circulating on social media but were quickly censored.



Figure 3: Caption: A bird-eye view of Shanghai on April 18, 2022. Captions in smaller fonts read: “New local confirmed cases of the day 3084; Cumulative local confirmed cases 27613; New local asymptomatic cases added that day 17332; Cumulative cases of local asymptomatic 370320.” Screen capture from the video “The Sound of April,” originally filmed, edited and produced by Cary, archived in *China Digital Times*, accessed in Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBdOXwdBn5s>.

The city's soundscape was filled with desperate cries from ordinary citizens. In a viral six-minute video titled [‘The Sound of April’](#), the grey, monochrome urban landscape serves as a stark contrast to soundwaves from all walks of life. As a bird's-eye view of the ghostly city slowly moves along, you start hearing voices filling the empty space: exhausted doctors, trapped truck drivers, elderly citizens helping neighbors, desperate mothers begging for medicine for sick children, crying neighborhood committee officials, hungry young migrant workers, an angry crowd demanding food ... The sound collage, on its initial release on social media around April 20, 2022 by an anonymous internet user, was widely shared but then quickly censored.



Figure 4: Caption: A robotic dog carrying a loudspeaker was walking in residential compounds to promote scientific pandemic prevention. The yellow line on the screen reads, “Netizens: Feeling full of technology.” On the bottom right, the two lines read, “March 29, Shanghai, Marching with Civility.” Screen capture from a Tiktok video reposted to Sohu.com, accessed via https://www.sohu.com/a/673734687_100114195.

In the same period, the soundscape in Shanghai was also marked by electronic loudspeakers carried by robotic dogs and drones. On March 29, 2022, a robotic dog, carrying an electronic loudspeaker on its back that broadcast a pre-recorded message, walked along an empty, sunny street inside a residential compound in Shanghai. The loudspeaker's female voice kept reminding residents to wear masks, wash their hands, and avoid social gatherings. An even more dramatic scene with drones took place on the evening of 5 April 2022. A drone with ominously alternating red and white lights appeared in the dark sky, circling above a residential compound in Shanghai. It carried a loudspeaker warning residents to "strictly obey the government's anti-pandemic regulations, control the soul's yearning for freedom," and "do not to open your windows to sing." Both scenes were captured in short videos and have been widely watched, commented on, and shared by netizens on social media platforms. I was one of those who watched those videos and listened to those sounds with anger, incredulity, and a deep sense of cynicism.

These voices kept haunting me throughout the Shanghai lockdown. I lived and worked in Shanghai from 2019 to 2020 during the first wave of nationwide lockdowns early in the COVID-19 pandemic. When Shanghai came under lockdown in the spring of 2022, I was living almost 7,000 miles away in Philadelphia. However, my friends, former colleagues, and some family members were in Shanghai. Through WeChat and Facetime, I knew how much they had suffered on a daily basis. When people were struggling to buy food and basic supplies in Shanghai, I also developed a hoarding habit of filling my fridge with food. I started losing sleep when hearing the news of dogs and cats being killed or elders unable to get adequate medication. I started wondering – Is there a way out? Where to hear hope, a kind of hopefulness that "is not the opposite of critique but its lifeblood" (Castiglia, 2017b: 217)?

Before long, I realized those eerie, almost apocalyptic noises did not constitute the whole soundscape of the Shanghai lockdown. In March and April 2022, at the height of the Shanghai lockdown, I listened to lockdown sound diaries through podcasting on the popular app Small Universe (Xiaoyuzhou). Officially launched in March 2020 during the Wuhan lockdown, the Small Universe app has been growing rapidly in its numbers of podcasts and listeners. Between March 27 and April 16, 2022, I listened to 49 podcast episodes on topics related to the Shanghai lockdown.

To observe, experience, and analyze these lockdown sound diaries, I listened to podcasts, read listeners' comments, joined in commenting sections, and took listening notes. This approach is akin to what Jing Wang, an anthropologist of sound studies at Zhejiang University, calls "affective listening":

Affective listening suggests exactly such a relation: feeling into the energy of one's sonic surrounding, to be affected by intensities, forces, and flows of sounds. In Chinese medicine, the ear is connected to all parts of the body. The ear is the body. Affective listening is a sonic way of being with/in a sonorous poetic space infused with its creators' intelligence and sensations (Wang, 2016: 124–25).

Affective listening allows me to immerse myself in the scenes, stories, emotions, and atmospheres created through podcasts and the digital mediation of everyday life settings. It compels listeners to experience the "intensities, forces, and flows of sounds" (Wang, 2016: 124–25). I laughed at podcasters' jokes, cried when hearing a sad story, felt angry when people talked about their sense of helplessness, and, from time to time, even talked back to the voices. This approach enables me to move constantly between a text-based and an audio-based analysis of digitally produced content to better grasp its impact on the listening public. As such, affective listening is akin to what Wessler (2020) advocates as an ethical commitment for media and communication scholars to more actively cultivate compassion, care, and practices of democratic listening.

While many topics emerged from podcast listening, here I focus on one important theme: women's voices and experiences. Among the 151 podcast hosts and speakers, at least 11 people shared their detailed experiences as neighborhood group-buying coordinators. Significantly, they were all women. This affirms a pattern of women's ubiquitous role as civic organizers, laborers, and caretakers throughout the pandemic (Yang, 2022). In the lockdown sound diaries, the female speakers are of diverse backgrounds: migrant workers, white-collar workers, community workers, entrepreneurs, college students, medical staff and doctors, daughters, and mothers.

In the episode *Young Lin's Diary* (YBJX), the host Young Lin talked about her experiences and feelings of living alone: "The recent days have really been chaotic.

Under the lockdown policies, almost all citizens have been quarantined in their own homes. Due to the severity of the COVID situation in some districts, people have been living under lockdown for over 20 days. Some started quarantining at home after the Shanghai government announced unified control and lockdowns.” She went on to share her emotional swings, her daily routine, and how she participated in group buying. Young Lin’s soft and calm voice betrayed a sense of anxiety and worry. One listener comforted her in the comment section, “Although the pandemic is merciless, the warmth in the human world has never disappeared. Young Lin, please eat well and live well!” There were other similar comments from listeners who also expressed that they had lived alone by themselves. Young Lin’s story moved them and made them realize they were not alone. This mutual support, particularly among female podcasters and listeners, was therapeutic.

Besides sharing personal experiences, female podcasters show how mutual aid and humor could be incredibly healing. *Ms. M’s Lounge* (MJKT), a podcast born during the 2022 Shanghai lockdown, features three women living under the same roof. With a round of handclapping and cheers, the host, Ms. M, opened the first episode (April 6, 2022) by introducing herself as a former media worker and current small business owner; the other hosts, Fei and Airu, were her roommates. Their laughter transported listeners to a college student dorm room. They cheerfully exchanged what it felt like to live as a woman-only mini-collective, with everyone taking responsibility to buy and cook food.

In the second episode, Ms. M invited Jiao and Fei to share their experiences as group-buying coordinators (April 9, 2022). The three women discussed whether “women hold up over half the sky” and “why most of the coordinators are women.” Jiao observed that in many groups the most active buyers and coordinators were women, while men tended to do more physical or technical labor. Ms. M added: “I’m not intentionally bringing up the topic of feminism ... But I also know quite a few gay friends who are coordinators. In a critical moment like this, we need to rely on our sisters.” While Ms. M was speaking, the other two speakers shouted in the background: “Sisters, stand up!” Many of the 35 listeners who left comments expressed their appreciation of these discussions. One listener, LLJC, wrote: “Men do not participate enough in family life while women basically take care of all chores and have to buy

living necessities and food items” (April 12, 2022). By critiquing the gendered division of labor and extending a sense of sisterhood to the LGBTQ community in Shanghai, Ms. M and her friends made their listeners feel heard as well.

Amid a pervasive sense of ‘political depression’ during the lockdowns, making fun out of bitterness is not just about humor – it is a survival strategy. In the podcast *Nothing to Talk* (WSKT), three women managed to physically get together for a recording on March 31, 2022, one day before the Shanghai district of Puxi came under official lockdown. In their sound diary, I heard bags zipping, items being exchanged, cars passing by, birds chirping, and food being chewed as they talked and laughed together. The three women left their apartments to record their conversation in the open air in a small park along a riverbank.

Listening to their laughter in the riverside park, I recall what feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2018) says in her *Feministkilljoys* blog: “[S]urvival for some requires crafting a life from shattering experiences, the kind of experiences that might leave you fragile, close to the edge, ‘at the shoreline’”. The ambient sound constantly reminds me of the temporal and spatial contingencies under which these women lived along the edge of anxiety, fear, anger, and joy. “We just want to make fun out of bitterness.” They laugh: “Can’t we? Aren’t we allowed to be happy?” (WSKT, April 1, 2022). In contrast to the loudspeaker voices circling in the sky and through the residential compounds, these women’s laughter was a defiant gesture to create their own voices and hope – however small or fleeting – in a time of uttermost uncertainty.

Discussion and conclusion

In the past fifteen years or so, literary and cultural scholars have articulated strong but constructive criticisms of the hermeneutics of suspicion underlying the conventional practices of literary and cultural critique. The new visions, alternative epistemologies, and styles of research and scholarship these scholars delineate represent a set of strong postcritical sensibilities which resonate across the humanities and the social sciences. Rejecting an epistemology of suspicion, these postcritical sensibilities contain an ethos of openness, emotional attachment, hopefulness, and vulnerability for producing new forms of critical scholarship.

At the center of the alternatives to the practices of suspicion proposed by postcritical scholars is an affective orientation to critique and attention to “empathy and sympathy, recognition and identification, enchantment and absorption, shock and the sublime” (Felski, 2015: 180). Emotional attachment, rather than suspicious detachment, is celebrated as a new ethos of critical inquiry. It is contrasted to “a regrettable arrogance of intellect” in suspicious critique (Felski, 2015: 15). Yet, despite the centrality of emotion and affect in postcritical thinking, exactly how an affective stance might inform research still remains to be demonstrated. A new generation of scholars in the social sciences, who may or may not be cognizant of recent postcritical thinking, has however produced work with a clearly affective stance (Behrisch, 2021; Nassar, 2021; Wingerden, 2022). They are also explicitly critical of the arrogance of intellect by rejecting the norms of “mastery” and detachment in academic research. Like postcritical thinkers, they value openness and hopefulness in writing and research. They have gone further, however, to center an ethics of vulnerability as part of the knowledge production process. In all these works, we see a new critical ethos of openness, hopefulness, and vulnerability, which we have called postcritical sensibilities.

These postcritical sensibilities inform our own research on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Doing research about the pandemic while we still live in it, we did not – indeed could not – distance ourselves from our objects of study. The postcritical vision of scholarship as emotional engagement and receptive listening inspired our efforts to understand the pandemic. In Vignette One, the researcher documented neighborhood experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic through smartphone photographs. While the photographs showcased signs in public spaces, they did so from the perspective of the researcher and are imbued with personal feelings. The researcher witnessed, and was moved by, the political leanings of the residents in her neighborhood and the perseverance of ordinary people in difficult times. She felt that the signs put up by neighbors invited her attention, even her judgement, but the signs were also like notes of welcome to her as a newcomer to the neighborhood. She also reflected on what was unseen, such as the labor and care residents took to make their homemade signs. In this way, Vignette One conveys a message of hope during turbulent times. The author acknowledged her vulnerability – she felt guilty about spending so much time away

from her computer, but she also reported how she overcame the guilt by gaining a new understanding of the meaning of care work during the pandemic.

While Vignette One features one researcher's reflections on a personal project of emotive encounters with neighborhood signage, Vignette Two presents a case of personal engagement with a collectively sourced archive of audio pandemic diaries. The archive is hosted online and open for public use. By listening to the diaries in the archive and sharing her experiences of listening, the researcher demonstrates not only a concrete way of engaging with the COVID-19 pandemic, but more importantly, shows that the acts of listening to the audio diaries are forms of building human connections as much as a way of learning. As she listens, she keeps asking questions to herself about the lives of the diarists: "I again begin to wonder about her possible fatigue. Could it have to do with the added responsibility of caring for a child during the pandemic, or as the diarist describes later, could the tiredness be a result of having to be in front of a camera constantly for work?" Here the researcher is deeply drawn into the lives of the diarists through her experience of listening. Receptivity, or passivity for that matter, leads to human connection and understanding.

Vignette Three is also about the importance of listening in research. The researcher listened to 49 podcast episodes during the Shanghai lockdown in March and April 2022. While these episodes cover many themes, she highlighted those episodes which featured women's voices and experiences. To her, listening to these podcast diaries was an affective experience. She heard the emotions of fear, anxiety, and pain in the voices of the women, but also their joy, humor, and laughter. As she listened, she shared their joys and pains, laughing or crying with them. In short, she practiced what postcritical scholars counseled – "a greater receptivity to the multifarious and many-shaded moods of texts (Felski, 2015: 12).

In short, in a time of crises, when media and public discourse were flooded with corona-skepticism and conspiracies, and when racism, hate crimes, xenophobia, and the coronavirus were tearing apart communities and ravaging families and individual lives, our research on the pandemic reveals both vulnerabilities and hopefulness. Opening up to the experiences of others, seeing their struggles, being moved by their voices, and documenting all this proves to be an intellectually honest and emotionally sincere research experience. Intellectual honesty means shying away from pretensions

to totalizing claims and the self-conceit of mastery and authority. Emotional sincerity means not hiding one's emotions in the research process – or faking as emotionless. It is our hope that the COVID-19 pandemic, by radically exposing the frailty of life and the ills of social and racial inequality, also radically exposes the limits of self-righteous and suspicious critique. Postcritical sensibilities in the wake of a devastating pandemic counsel receptivity, hopefulness, vulnerability and care in the practice of critique, and social and media analysis more broadly.

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Podcast Entries

- MJKT. 'You Can Only Understand How Wonderful [*Wasai*] It Is to Live Together in a Rented Apartment with Three Women.' 0:41:45, 6 April 2022.

MJKT. “‘Group-Buying Coordinators’ Save Shanghai People, What Have They Gone Through These Days?’ 0:35:39, 9 April 2022.

MJKT. “‘Group-Buying Coordinators’ Save Shanghai People, What Have They Gone Through These Days?’ 0:35:39, 9 April 2022.

WSKT. “‘Before Shanghai was under lockdown, we met for the last time.’” 16 April 2022.

YBJX. “‘The City that Stops during Pandemic, The Love that Grows during Group Buying in Residential Neighborhood.’” 16 April 2022.

Notes

¹ Author names are listed in alphabetical order.

² A gallery of these images is shown on the website of the Center on Digital Culture and Society at the University of Pennsylvania: <https://www.asc.upenn.edu/research/centers/center-digital-culture-and-society/research/covid-storytelling-archiving-and-remembering/signs-times-photo-essay>

³ Corona Diaries began as a joint venture between Harvard University’s Nieman Foundation for Journalism and MIT’s Center for Advanced Virtuality. Together, Uli Köppen, Fran Ponetta, Tanja Pröbstl, James Burke, as well as developer and sound artist Halsey Burgund, created “Corona Diaries”.

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