A few years ago (in early March 2017, to be exact), my relationship to sound — and reading — began to change. I woke up one day to a constant high-pitched ringtone that I initially mistook for a distant alarm, but I soon realized there was nothing actually “making” the sound I was hearing. This kind of experience of phantom sound is commonly known as tinnitus (from the Latin verb tinnere “to ring”), usually defined in technical terms as a sensation of noise without an external stimulus. The initial ringtone sound eventually went away, but tinnitus has been my odd companion ever since, coming and going erratically depending on physical and environmental conditions (seasonal, architectural, acoustic). Sometimes tinnitus feels like the roaring of waves or hum of machinery; sometimes it’s a screechy wheel or chirping crickets. Whatever form it takes, tinnitus can be especially intrusive in externally quiet environments (bedroom, office, library) — making it difficult for me to concentrate and read.
When tinnitus first emerged in life, my first impulse was to do a bunch of research and read a lot about it (yes, I’m an academic). Truth be told, much of this entailed scouring online forums and discovering it’s not an unusual thing for people to experience at some point or another — and I was surprised to discover from some Deaf friends via social media and in-person conversations that it’s not unusual for them to experience tinnitus as well (this fact nicely challenges preconceived notions that “deafness” simply means complete silence).¹ As the bothersome tinnitus persisted and I consulted different physicians and specialists, I learned how health professionals approach this phenomenon: as a somatic condition, an embodied experience, or even a “phantom disability.”² In addition to seeking medical care (if a “cause” can be discerned: nerve damage? illness? allergies? stress?), people who experience tinnitus can also aim to manage their surroundings to adapt to the condition or engage in cognitive behavioral therapy — that is, find strategies to change how they think about and react to the unsettling reality of phantom sounds.³

My own main strategy for coping with distracting “extra sound” is — ironically enough — to fill my personal space with more sound. The little sound machine that I

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keep on my bedside table, along with whatever happens to be my leisure reading at the moment, produces just the right amount of white noise (something like the hum of a fan) to mask the “internal” sounds that I hear. I also take this device with me from home into the office or wherever I might be working, as I can never quite predict when I might need the gadget to help me concentrate.

My experiments sonically altering my environment have taught me that reading aurally (i.e., listening to audiobooks and podcasts) can be an important form of self-care. When I listen to audiobooks — usually when I’m winding down at night, or if I’m passing the time in transit — I can feel a welcome relief in “escaping” into a narrative and thus distracting myself from the annoyance of tinnitus. I can take pleasure in relaxing and being surrounded by another’s voice. Over time, I’ve realized that reading aurally hones my skills in “close listening” too — I attend more carefully to the crafted quality of texts and appreciate how the people voicing texts aloud are performing for an audience.4

Perhaps what I’m describing is not so much the practical benefits of sonic “distraction” but rather the beguiling intimacies of aural reading, or “being read to,” or something that might be called “reading-listening.” In her beautiful, thoughtful contribution, Alexandra reflects on her experience reading texts aloud for readers who are blind or visually impaired, and she describes forgetting herself (putting aside her ego) as she focused on mediating the textual voices of others.5 As a hearing and sighted reader increasingly choosing to listen to texts, how might I reflect on what forgetting myself means as a reader-listener?

5 See page 86 of this volume.
Over the years I’ve tried using screen-readers and similar technologies that convert digital text into synthesized speech, but I just haven’t been able to train myself to adapt to such modes. I know various people — blind and sighted — who prefer or require such technologies to read texts effectively, and some can read very quickly in doing so; access needs vary from person to person and should be respected. For my part — and I can only speak for myself — I appreciate the “human touch” I can access by reading a voiced text aurally.

One of my favorite books about the intimacies of listening-reading is by the professor and memoirist Georgina Kleege. *Sight Unseen* (1999), Kleege’s first-person reflections on her own blindness, is a classic in contemporary disability studies. In a discussion of books on tape (in the days before digital audiobooks or online podcasts), Kleege notes how vocally produced recordings of books “perhaps satisfy an impossible longing . . . you can have storytime any time, wherever you please” and listening to a book on portable headphones means you “can wrap yourself in a cocoon of comforting narrative, which provides continuity to your disjointed day.”\(^6\) Reading aloud not only creates a transformative dwelling space (“cocoon”) but is also what Kleege calls a “theatrical performance” of a voice with an audience: even the “most neutral, unpolished reading adds a third dimension to the encounter between reader and text.”\(^7\)

When I read Alexandra’s reflections, I was struck by the efforts she made to keep her voice as neutral as possible and not to “upstage” the text being vocalized. As a

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listener-reader, I don’t mind the humanity of the vocal mediator coming through; in fact, I often feel more engaged with a text when I’m invited to think self-consciously about “listening through” the recorded sonic voice to the textual written voice being conveyed. The experience of aurally reading a vocally mediated text reminds me of the somewhat asynchronous “real time” experience of watching a live interpreter (speaking or signing) embody the voice or narration of another person. I can’t not pay attention to what the mediator is doing just as I attend to the voice being conveyed. For me, reading aurally is not so much a two-way relationship between a text and audience as much as it is a dynamic choreography of text, vocal reader, and aural reader.

The constellation of issues I consider here — reading, community, intimacy, and access — are shaped by my professional background in the academic field of disability studies and also by my commitments to disability activism. Mia Mingus, a disability justice organizer who identifies as queer and physically disabled, has given the name “access intimacy” to “that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs,” and it “can happen with complete strangers, disabled or not, or sometimes it can be built over years.” The time, care, and labor that professional and volunteer voice readers perform in addressing the access needs of strangers or audiences they have never even met suggests access intimacy on a broad scale — and this all of serves as a reminder that access intimacy need not entail physical proximity.

The recent nonprofessional audiobook of *Resistance and Hope: Essays by Disabled People* (2018) edited by Alice Wong on behalf of the Disability Visibility Project is an especially vivid example of access intimacy by and for a diverse disability community. This collection — available as an ebook, PDF, and audiobook — features essays by disabled writers, artists, and activists, with the audiobook format physically recording and combining disabled voices. The book’s mode of production aptly pursues disability justice: all royalties from purchases of the book will support HEARD (Helping to Advance the Rights of Deaf Communities), an organization that seeks to correct and prevent wrongful convictions of individuals who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing. This effort to uphold the rights of disabled people — including the rights of incarcerated d/Deaf people to have full access to sign language interpreters or appropriate means of communication — cultivates an ethos of access intimacy. One rewarding experience for me as I listen to the *Resistance and Hope* audiobook is hearing the physical voices of disabled activists such as Alice Wong whom I have never met in person but nonetheless feel I “know” through Twitter and social media.

Regardless of whether (or whither) it goes, tinnitus — or rather, my wavering and wobbly experience of it — is perpetually shifting how I read (and think) about sound, orality, and aurality. The fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe*, an English housewife’s dictated spiritual autobiography (and a work to which I repeatedly return in my teaching and research), makes a curious distinction between the idea of “bodily” [physical] voices and “gostly”

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[spiritual] voices; such a demarcation evokes the writings of mystic Richard Rolle, whose books were read aloud to Kempe by her scribe. There’s an extensive history of scholarship on Margery Kempe that seeks to “diagnose” her experience of hearing voices and “gostly” sounds (epilepsy? psychosis? hallucinations?). What fascinates me about this text is not any prospect of “diagnosis,” nor even Kempe’s parsing of “objective” and “subjective” sound (eerily like

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tinnitus?), but the idea that Kempe had internalized her discursive frameworks for sound aurally.

The Book of Margery Kempe is mediated through, and by, recursive modalities of reading experience. Throughout the Book’s production, Kempe dictated her own reflections and had her own newly mediated words read back to her: a familiar yet alien version of her own voice embodied by another person. In reflecting on my experience of tinnitus and historical reading experience, might I be moving toward some medieval expression of access intimacy?

I am now comfortable saying that tinnitus is something I live with, whether or not it’s present with me at all times. It might go away in the future, or it may morph into something else — but I’m always-already prepared for its re-arrival.
As I re-read *The Book of Margery Kempe* with complexities of sound in mind, I have come to appreciate the dynamic recursivity of oral and aural dimensions of reading across time and space. How we read (i.e., the physical mechanics and technologies of reading) operates in a “feedback loop” with how we read (how we absorb and interpret texts). I value tremendously the intimacies of reading and thinking with others.