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Author/s:

Vachon, W;Woodland, S

Title:

Finding resonance: Applied audio drama, inquiry and fictionalising the real

Date:

2021-10-02

Citation:

Vachon, W. & Woodland, S. (2021). Finding resonance: Applied audio drama, inquiry and fictionalising the real. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 26 (4), pp.638-655. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2021.1891038>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/267615>



## **Finding Resonance: Applied Audio Drama, Inquiry and Fictionalizing the Real**

Journal:	<i>Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance</i>
Manuscript ID	CRDE-2020-0052.R2
Manuscript Type:	Open Issue Paper
Keywords:	audio drama, applied theatre, qualitative inquiry, podcasting, arts-based research

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## Finding Resonance: Applied audio drama, inquiry and fictionalising the real

Author 1; Author 2

### Abstract

This article examines the tensions and possibilities of audio drama in applied theatre and qualitative inquiry. Drawing on our experiences of making participatory audio drama, we argue that *applied audio drama* provides rich ground for generating new knowledge and approaches to applied theatre research and practice as informed by the cultural turn towards listening, sound, and sonic agency. Situating the conversation within fiction rather than documentary or self-revelatory podcasting, we discuss how applied audio drama is uniquely placed to explore ideas of truth and resonance at the interface between art, research, education and social justice.

Keywords: audio drama, applied theatre, qualitative inquiry, podcasting, arts-based research.

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This article examines the tensions and possibilities of audio drama in applied theatre and qualitative inquiry. Drawing on our experiences of making participatory audio drama, we argue that *applied audio drama* provides rich ground for generating new knowledge and approaches to applied theatre research and practice as informed by the cultural turn towards listening, sound, and sonic agency. Situating the conversation within fiction rather than documentary or self-revelatory podcasting, we discuss how applied audio drama is uniquely placed to explore ideas of truth and resonance at the interface between art, research, education and social justice.

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### Introduction

The rise of digital culture over the past two decades has seen the democratisation and consequent proliferation of sound and audio-based modes of creative production and a concurrent turn towards sound and listening in art, performance and media. Since the new millennium, podcasting has exploded, with the number of producers and listeners increasing steadily.

Podcasting formats range from single narrators talking into a handheld recording device posted on their WordPress site, through conversational interview style broadcasts, heavily researched documentaries with sophisticated sound design and high production values, to complex multi-season audio dramas produced by entertainment giants such as Spotify and the BBC. According to Podcast Insights, in January 2021, there were over 1.75 million podcasts and more than 43 million episodes (this data contained on the Podcast Insights website). Within this sonic-scape,

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3 audio drama has experienced a revival with artists resurrecting the form from its origins in radio  
4 drama, producing complex, high-concept serial stories for dedicated niche audiences (hear for  
5 example, the *Audio Drama Production Podcast*, hosted on Blog Talk Radio). Audio drama has  
6 developed new mainstream audiences, with commercial productions such as *Forest 404* (Atack  
7 2020) and *Blackout* (Conroy 2019) employing well-known actors and creating immersive  
8 fictional worlds through soundscape and story. With the closure of theatres around the world due  
9 to COVID-19, many companies are also turning to audio as a way to continue making theatre  
10 and connect with audiences. This cultural turn has been accompanied by a critical and theoretical  
11 movement towards understanding the politics of sound and listening, which interrogates the  
12 coercive power of sound and the potential for sonic agency (LaBelle 2018) through reorienting  
13 notions of ‘empowerment’ and ‘voice’ towards the act of listening as a social responsibility and  
14 political imperative (Bassel 2009).

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31 The authors’ applied theatre practices and research sit within this context. The popularity  
32 and accessibility of storytelling through podcasts via affordable home studio equipment makes  
33 audio drama a viable and compelling vehicle for community-engaged participatory arts practice.  
34 This approach has enjoyed some popularity in the documentary or interview form, for example,  
35 *Ear Hustle* (Poor, Earlonne, and Thomas n.d.), produced by current and past inmates at San  
36 Quentin Prison broadcasting their everyday stories and experiences to a public audience through  
37 PRX. Expository podcasts are increasingly being produced independently by communities and  
38 groups as a method for activism and raising awareness of social justice issues. Examples include  
39 *Curtain* (McQuire and Hodgson n.d.), which highlights the structural racism in Australia’s  
40 criminal justice system; and *The Messenger*, produced from a series of WhatsApp messages sent  
41 from inside the infamous Manus Island refugee detention centre (Green et al. n.d.).  
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In this paper, however, we explore the potential of working in fiction and fictionalised accounts of history or personal experience. We argue that in fictionalisation, in art, in creative approaches to inquiry, we have the opportunity to take what was, what is, and imagine what might be. Author 2 has produced audio drama and sound-based projects with men and women in prison in Australia and New Zealand, and Author 1 has created audio dramas with social-service ‘recipients’ and ‘providers’ in Canada. We both have common interests in how the work interfaces between art, research, education, and social justice. The poetics and politics of sound and listening provide powerful theoretical threads to weave into the conversation about applied theatre as research (ATAR) (O’Connor and Anderson 2015). We argue that applied audio drama, related to but distinct from ATAR provides rich ground for generating new knowledge and approaches to applied theatre research and practice informed by the sonic turn. We introduce the term ‘applied audio drama,’ recognising the many ways this emerging form currently exists and may yet develop. Within applied audio drama, we have been part of projects that are collectively devised; research-based; draw upon transcripts, historical artifacts, and personal reflections; involve topics of social concern; created with, and performed by, community members directly impacted by the themes explored in the story; performed by trained actors; and that raise difficult questions for funders, censors, community members, theatre practitioners, academics, and ourselves. Drawing from these experiences of practice, we theorise the form and consider what applied audio drama might be, what it might do, and then conclude with some of the opportunities and tensions we have encountered. We write to provide a starting point from which this emergent form’s theory and practice might develop.

## Towards Applied Audio Drama

While documentary or revelatory podcasts have become increasingly popular in community engaged and activist practices (see McHugh 2017), audio dramas (or fiction podcasts) remain predominantly in the hands of writers and producers creating work—often in genres such as horror and sci-fi (see Locke 2016)—for distant listeners, rather than working in collaborations with (or from within) specific communities or groups. In addition, while most audio dramas involve some form of research, we have found few examples which explicitly position themselves as research-based audio drama. What, then, might constitute *applied* audio drama? And what approaches might be instructive in understanding and creating applied audio dramas? The following are examples we consider as prototypes in conceptualising applied audio drama.

One project describing itself as a ‘verbatim audiotheatre piece’ is *Hi, I’m Mattie (HIM)* (Adams 2016). *Hi, I’m Mattie* is based on text communications from Grindr (a gay male dating app.) and verbatim interview transcripts of Matthew Cavan, ‘One of the first public faces associated with HIV from Northern Ireland in the 21st century’ (Adams 2016, para 2). In the script development process, Cavan was interviewed about his experiences with online dating as a HIV positive gay male drag queen. These interviews were transcribed and used to develop the script. In the audiotheatre piece, Cavan himself plays the interviewer who interviews an actor playing the character Mattie, whose lines are verbatim from Cavan’s interview transcript.

We have found examples of community-engaged audio dramas that resonate as applied audio drama. *Chance: An Inspired Youth Project* (described on the Audio Drama Directory website Audio-Drama.com) presents an example of what might be considered devised audio drama. *Chance* was an early venture of *Inspired Youth*, a UK based social enterprise that uses digital media towards ‘positive impact in communities with a particular focus on engaging and

empowering marginalised people’ (as described on the Inspired Youth website). *Chance* drops the listener into the midst of a moment, young people meeting up, going to a party, and sorting through the consequences of the events and decisions made. Each episode focuses on the perspective a different character. Another research-based audio drama example, which presents itself as a ‘docu-drama podcast’ is *Positive in Prison: HIV stories from a Dublin Jail* ‘based on oral histories and archival research’ (according to details found on the website Exploring the History of Prisoner Health). *Positive in Prison* is the only audio drama we have found (apart from our own) that identifies a formal research protocol including an institutional ethics review process (Weston 2019).

When discussing applied audio drama, it is instructive to look at the long and ongoing history of ‘entertainment-education’ towards social change through radio (de Fossard 2005; Singhal et al. 2004). These audio dramas are created with a specific agenda, often related to behaviour change by ‘bring[ing] exciting, entertaining dramas into the homes and lives of millions of listeners – dramas that engage listeners’ emotions while informing them of new ideas and modeling for them new behaviors that can improve their lives and their communities’ (de Fossard 2005, 24.) These serialised radio dramas are frequently produced for audiences within the so-called Global South, funded by the Global North, and serve social, educational, developmental, and political purposes (de Fossard 2005; Okon, Ochonogor, Cookey 2015; Singhal et al. 2004). This radio drama genre often relates to individual health choices such as sexuality, nutrition, and sanitation (de Fossard, 2005), with stories presenting the consequences of ‘bad’ choices. One of many examples is *One Thing at a Time*, a weekly 15-minute-long serial set in a fictional Nigerian town, funded by the British Department for International Development. The drama seeks to ‘attain behavior change, and develop socially desirable

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3 attitudes, values, and culture, which project individual national pride and positive nation image'  
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5 (Okon, et al. 2015, 89).  
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8 The abovementioned audio productions signal towards elements that help frame applied  
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10 audio drama. Drawing from these examples, we suggest that applied audio drama—like applied  
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12 theatre—is engaged with process as much as product; the resulting production is not limited to  
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14 specific structures, lengths, or forms; aesthetics are entwined with ethics and politics; and the  
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16 work often contains socio-cultural agendas and provocations. We now turn to how applied audio  
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18 drama might function in the inquiry process, extending on key concepts within arts-based  
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20 research (ABR) and applied theatre as research (ATAR).  
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### 23 24 **Truth, Fiction, and Resonance in Applied Audio Drama** 25

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27 In our dual roles as theatre practitioners and researchers, we are intrigued by fiction's effects in  
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29 the inquiry process. We use arts-based practices in our research because they 'allow for multiple  
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31 meanings to emerge instead of an authoritative truth claim posed by the researcher. Arts-based  
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33 researchers are after truths not *the* truth' (Leavy 2018, 581, italics in original). For Cole and  
34  
35 Knowles (2008), truth has to do with 'holistic quality' (69), which includes consistency within  
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37 the art, coherence, an integration between purpose and method, and 'authenticity' (69). For  
38  
39 Foster (2016), one of the key aspects of critical arts-based research (ABR) is its 'refusing  
40  
41 assumptions of truth' (113); it does this by simultaneously conveying and undermining truth.  
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43 Performance-based research creates ways to consider truth beyond the empirically validated  
44  
45 accuracy of what is being said and to consider what is being accomplished by the saying. What  
46  
47 are the truths in the dramatised fiction, and what truths are conveyed in the performance?  
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49 Specific examples of how applied audio drama does this are discussed in the section on  
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51 *Transitioning Home* below.  
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3 Leavy (2018) suggests considering trustworthiness alongside truthfulness and posits that  
4 the two can best be understood ‘in conjunction with the concept of *resonance*’, asking, ‘Does the  
5 work resonate? Does it ring true? Does it feel authentic’ (580, italics in original). When  
6 discussing audio drama, resonance seems particularly appropriate to draw upon. Bresler (2018),  
7 writing about ‘aesthetic-based research as pedagogy,’ believes ‘resonance mobilises perception  
8 and engagement, enabling a bridging between the inner and the outer’ (659). For Cole and  
9 Knowles (2008), resonance goes beyond truth; it connects ‘in a holistic way, with the hearts,  
10 souls, and minds of the audience,’ resulting in ‘transformative potential’ (71). Resonance is a  
11 way to consider applied audio drama that recognises the totality of research participants’—or  
12 collaborators<sup>1</sup>—and audience members’ experiences, rather than a singular (or predominant)  
13 focus on the intellectual, aesthetic, or emotional.  
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28 Simultaneously, we recognise that resonance carries assumptions and norms based on  
29 specific socio-cultural contexts. Assessments of aesthetics, beauty, art, and truth are not universal  
30 (despite what Kant argued). Born, Lewis, and Straw (2017) contend that all aesthetics are social  
31 and that the central tenets of aesthetics (individual beliefs about quality and beauty) also require  
32 a critique of those very notions. ‘Social aesthetics’ recognises that aesthetics develop and are  
33 imbued with the contextualising factors that make-up all aspects of culture: ‘The many ways in  
34 which our interactions with art participate in or service an array of political orientations and  
35 social cultural processes’ (Born et al. 2017, 3). Aesthetics, they suggest, are not objective,  
36 neutral, or disinterested - they have a purpose. What resonates for the listener of a particular  
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52 <sup>1</sup> We use the terms ‘collaborators’ to encompass people who were involved in various stages of projects, from  
53 providing verbatim interviews, through to co-writing and co-creating audio dramas and/or being involved in post-  
54 production. The term also replaces ‘research participants’ as we are describing a collaborative research process. We  
55 acknowledge that these terms (and the power relations within them) could be unpacked further, but it is beyond the  
56 scope of this paper.  
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3 applied audio drama may reflect less an objective measurement of truth and more a refraction of  
4 an individual's beliefs. Attending to the resonances of socio-cultural elements surrounding the  
5 listener deepens and complicates discussions of art, resonance, or truth. These considerations are  
6 particularly relevant when one is making claims coming out of inquiry processes.  
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12 Rather than definitively answering questions or determining truth performe, dramatised  
13 stories make space for dialogue and opportunities to collaboratively discover truths through  
14 fiction.  
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20 All *dramatised* stories – that is all stories clothed in *fiction* – are conversation  
21 starters; a call to remember, to think. In the case of applied theatre the use of  
22 stories, operating as steps in an unfolding narrative helps us to become more  
23 aware of issues, concerns, histories, so that we may take responsibility,  
24 consider action and provoke change. (Prendergast and Saxton 2015, 280, italics  
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31 in original)  
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34 Dramatisation within inquiry provides new ways to consider what is performed *through* lived  
35 experience and resists the valorisation of personal testimony so prevalent in contemporary  
36 culture. Prendergast and Saxon (2015) identify several ethical and aesthetic reasons to  
37 fictionalise in applied theatre, including that it allows audiences to enter a metaphoric world  
38 contained through the contract of theatre, which provides safety for actor and audience, and we  
39 suggest, in the case of applied audio drama, safety for research collaborators. Through  
40 fictionalisation, we hope to resist the 'seduction of the real' which, as Prendergast and Saxton  
41 (2015) write, risks becoming 'voyeuristic and exploitative.' When we stay in the presentation of  
42 biography, of 'the real,' people can become stuck, or restrictively cast into limiting roles and  
43 stories of pain and tragedy. Working in child and youth care, Author 1 regularly sees 'youth'  
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3 paraded in front of funders, politicians, students, conference attendees, and service providers for  
4 gratification, education, and validation. The young people revealing their stories in a communal  
5 consumption of lived experience receive gift cards for increasingly harrowing disclosures.  
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10 Author 2 (Author 2 2016) has identified how women in prison experience a kind of fatigue  
11 around having to tell and re-tell their personal stories to a parade of bureaucrats and authorities  
12 as they move through the system.  
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17 By ‘clothing’ personal stories and lived experiences in fiction, we have found that  
18 collaborators are encouraged to exercise creative control from a position of expert knowledge  
19 and that the resulting sense of authenticity produces resonance for them and other listeners alike.  
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21 The audio drama form presents new and engaging opportunities for this process to occur  
22 collaboratively, and to be extended through the craft of what Soltani (2018, 192) defines as  
23 ‘audio-dramaturgy,’ which he sees as unique from other forms of dramaturgy, including radio  
24 drama.  
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34 Audio-dramaturgy then, is the praxis that turns a fiction into a dramatic  
35 presentation in sonic form, to be experienced as the “here and now” of a world  
36 by a listener: the practices and processes that construct and configure the sound  
37 structure, the technologies involved in its creation, aesthetic paradigms,  
38 hypotheses about the audience’s response, and so on.  
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46 In ABR — inquiry, dialogue, aesthetics, participation, and indeed truth do not end with  
47 disseminating research findings. In creating and broadcasting fictive sonic ‘worlds’ in  
48 community engaged collaborations, applied audio drama presents opportunities for groups to  
49 recognise and extend the assemblage of qualities that constitute truth and beauty through, and  
50 beyond, the inquiry process. This also includes attending to the ethics, aesthetics and politics of  
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3 participation, representation and reception that are unique to this particular form, and which we  
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5 will discuss in more detail below.  
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8 We now turn to case studies from our work to consider more closely the possibilities of  
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10 applied audio drama as a method of inquiry. The next section centres the notion of audio-  
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12 dramaturgy in practice, in exploring how Author 2's audio drama projects have functioned in a  
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14 participatory sense, touching on their potential to elicit resonance, meaning and engagement for  
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16 collaborators and audiences. We then deepen the discussion around its potential within the  
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18 inquiry process in terms of sonic agency and the politics of listening, particularly in relation to  
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20 the voicing of gender and race in Author 1's work.  
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### 23 24 **Sonic Engagement, Collaboration and Intimacy in Prison Audio Drama**

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26 Since 2012, Author 2 has been experimenting with audio in her applied theatre practice in  
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28 prisons. *Daughters of the Floating Brothel*, was an audio drama created with a group at Brisbane  
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30 Women's Correctional Centre (BWCC), Australia, in 2015. The Floating Brothel was the  
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32 nickname given to the Lady Juliana, the first all-female convict ship to sail to Australia from  
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34 England in 1790. The story served as a marker in time from which to dramatically investigate the  
35  
36 history of female incarceration in this settler colonial context. The audio drama took place across  
37  
38 five sites and historical moments: The *Lady Juliana* and her passage to Australia; the early  
39  
40 convict settlement at Port Jackson New South Wales (both in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century); Barambah  
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42 Aboriginal Mission northwest of Brisbane; historical Boggo Road Gaol in Brisbane (both at the  
43  
44 turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century); and the contemporary site of BWCC. The work was then presented in a  
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46 series of live listening events in three women's correctional centres and also to the public in  
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48 Griffith University's Theatre 1.29. Author 2 has described this in detail elsewhere (Author 2  
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50 2020).  
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*Behind Walls that Talk* is a podcast episode (still in production at the time of writing) that Author 2 commenced making in 2019 to document the theatre production *Nga Patu Korero: Walls that Talk*, produced by Rand Hazou from Massey University with a group of men inside Auckland Prison, New Zealand (deleted for blind peer review). *Nga Patu Korero: Walls that Talk* was itself a documentary theatre performance drawing on real stories gathered from interviews with men from the Te Piriti Unit, a separate therapeutic unit within the prison for those convicted of child sex offences. Hazou interviewed several men from the unit about their experiences of life in prison, and with the help of playwright Stuart Hoar, used extracts from the transcripts to create a verbatim script. The play script was ‘fictionalised’ through editing sections of the text and creating composite characters who were played by men other than the actual informants. The play was performed in June 2019 to an audience of peers from Te Piriti and invited guests. Author 2 produced the podcast episode using recordings made during rehearsals and the final performance and edited these with interviews with Rand Hazou and other creative team members. The live performance itself forms the central spine of the podcast episode, and as such, represents a hybrid form of applied audio drama, combining documentary and drama, but focused primarily on drawing the listener into the fictionalised world of the play.

The decision to make audio drama in both cases stemmed from a desire to amplify the performers’ voices beyond the prison walls to a wider audience and to produce a creative research artefact that could be accessed by collaborators and the post-production team later.<sup>2</sup> Audio drama was seen as a way to circumvent the ephemerality of live performance, and the restrictions on touring productions from inside prison, or bringing in audiences from outside in

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<sup>2</sup> These projects were completed with approval from Human Research Ethics Committees at Griffith University Australia, and Massey University New Zealand and were conducted in accordance with the national ethical guidelines in each country.

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2  
3 the two correctional jurisdictions of Brisbane and Auckland. Both projects invited collaborators  
4 to fictionalise the real, either through reinterpreting history or refiguring personal story. This  
5 approach aimed to create a sense of safety while still promoting the kinds of engagement (for  
6 collaborators) and authenticity (for listeners) that might come from performers' actual life  
7 experiences being brought to bear on the drama.  
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11 As examples of applied audio drama, the two projects worked quite differently in terms  
12 of the participatory ethos. In *Daughters*, Author 2 set out to create the audio drama  
13 collaboratively with the women. The group were heavily involved in the audio-dramaturgy,  
14 creating narration, fictional characters, scenes, and monologues that were based on historical  
15 documentation, early paintings, images and stories, and the women's contemporary experiences.  
16 They made soundscapes and sound effects to support the story, and were involved to some extent  
17 in structuring the narrative. In the Auckland Prison project, the men had creative control over the  
18 theatre work, *Nga Patu Korero*, but only really engaged with the podcast episode (*Behind Walls*  
19 *that Talk*) through early conversations. In the first workshops Author 2 presented the men with a  
20 couple of choices in terms of what kind of audio work could be made that would be based on  
21 their live theatre process: either a creative immersive audio work that somehow reflected the  
22 themes and aesthetic of the live performance; or a documentary podcast episode that followed  
23 the project in a more expository way. They opted for the latter and agreed to be recorded through  
24 parts of the devising and rehearsal process. Five months following the live performance, Rand  
25 and Author 2 took a draft of the episode to the few that still remained in the unit for their  
26 feedback, which will be incorporated in the final cut, but this was their only engagement with the  
27 creative process of making the audio work. In both *Daughters* and *Behind Walls that Talk*, the  
28 artistic team had final say over the editing and post production, where a large part of the work  
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3 took place. While this is not ideal participatory practice, it came about due to the logistical  
4 challenges of working in correctional sites where there were invariably time constraints,  
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6 difficulty accessing collaborators for extended periods, and significant challenges to taking into  
7  
8 the prison the necessary equipment for editing and post-production. The process of editing the  
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10 work away from the groups gave Author 2 an uneasy sense of detached omnipotence as an artist-  
11  
12 researcher, focusing primarily on the potential listening audience, the flow of the narrative, and  
13  
14 the production values of the piece over other considerations. It is certainly a goal and will be a  
15  
16 long-term project to overcome these challenges to full participation. However, both examples  
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18 generated some interesting outcomes in terms of applied audio drama as a method of inquiry.  
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24 In the case of *Daughters*, the audio drama enabled the group to interrogate aesthetically  
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26 the intersectionality between women's personal experiences of incarceration and the colonial  
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28 legacy of incarceration that continues in Australia since being established as a penal colony.  
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30 Women incarcerated in a contemporary prison were uniquely placed to lend authenticity to the  
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32 fictional world that was created, and at the same time distanced by the historical context. They  
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34 were strongly committed to educating their audience about Australia's penal history, particularly  
35  
36 the First Nations women who relished learning about, and teaching others, the facts surrounding  
37  
38 the Stolen Generations – the thousands of Australian First Nations peoples who were forcibly  
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40 removed from their homelands and their families under the government's policies of protection  
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42 and segregation up until the 1970s. The women sounded fictionalised historical carceral spaces  
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44 into being, using found objects in the contemporary prison classroom in the performative  
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46 moment to evoke historical spaces such as the convict ship, the Victorian prison and the  
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48 Aboriginal Mission. These were juxtaposed through the drama against the recorded soundscapes  
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50 of the contemporary prison. This facilitated what Rice (2016) describes as 'acoustical agency' –  
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3 an opportunity to resist the prison's coercive soundscapes with individuals' own creative sonic  
4 practices. Rice describes shouting between cells, listening in on conversations, and playing loud  
5 music as examples of how people might achieve this kind of agency in prison. Looking more  
6 broadly at the invisible, disruptive, affective qualities of sound and its potential in political  
7 resistance, Labelle (2018) describes this as 'sonic agency.' In *Daughters*, the group was making  
8 its own soundscapes that might facilitate this in a directed way towards an aesthetic outcome.  
9 They repurposed found objects around the classroom to create Foley effects: screwing up a  
10 plastic bag to emulate a crackling fire in a Gadigal<sup>3</sup> camp on the shores of Port Jackson, turning  
11 tables over and stomping on them to approximate officers walking on the deck of a convict ship,  
12 rotating a magazine rack to make the sound of a windmill in an early Aboriginal mission:  
13 overlaying the oppressive soundscapes of early carceral spaces onto the contemporary space  
14 through an at-times liberatory process of playful creativity.

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31 The process of making audio drama generated meaning and resonance not only for the  
32 women collaborators but for those working with them and witnessing or hearing their work as it  
33 unfolded; and for audiences who participated in the listening events (see Author 2 2020 for  
34 deeper exploration of this). In this sense, the group was embarking on aesthetically engaged  
35 inquiry, where the embodied process of working at the intersection of the contemporary and the  
36 historical through sound and drama lent the experience aesthetic potency. In focus groups, both  
37 prison and public audience members later reflected that listening to real incarcerated women,  
38 performing fictional stories of incarceration inside a prison, created a strong sense of emotional  
39 connection. Listeners also expressed that the absence of visual performative elements enabled  
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55 <sup>3</sup> The Gadigal (also spelled Cadigal and Caddiegal) are a group of First Australians whose traditional lands are  
56 located in Sydney, New South Wales including Port Jackson.  
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3 them to connect imaginatively on a deeper level, echoing the notion of audio drama being a  
4  
5 ‘theatre of the mind’ (Verma 2012).  
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7  
8 Despite it having not yet reached a wider audience, *Behind Walls that Talk* has already  
9  
10 been instructive as an example of applied audio drama. The playscript and live staged  
11  
12 performance was devised around Te Whare Tapa Whā (The House of Four Sides) – a widely  
13  
14 used model of Māori health developed by Sir Mason Durie (1994). The theatre participants  
15  
16 engaged with this as part of their therapy in the prison unit, and presented it early on as a  
17  
18 thematic starting point for the creative process. The staged performance consisted of eight  
19  
20 scenes: arriving in prison; adapting to life; four scenes each focusing on one of the four walls  
21  
22 that make up the house (physical wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing, and  
23  
24 family/relationships); a scene about what interviewees would like to ‘build’ for their future; and  
25  
26 a final scene about what they would like to leave behind upon release. It was performed by a  
27  
28 small cast of five incarcerated men from the unit, who represented the five composite characters  
29  
30 developed from the original source interviews. The podcast episode follows the same structure,  
31  
32 interspersed with interviews including Rand Hazou, Pedro Ilgenfritz (a mask practitioner who  
33  
34 had been involved in the project), and Professor Meihana Durie, son of Sir Mason and the head  
35  
36 of Massey University’s School of Māori Art, Knowledge and Education (Te Pūtahi-ā-Toi). These  
37  
38 interviews were included to support the fictionalised drama through providing important  
39  
40 background and exposition into the creative process and Te Whare Tapa Whā.  
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47 Returning to the Te Piriti Unit for feedback on the draft podcast episode, there were five  
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49 men present: two who had been in the theatre production, and three who had participated in the  
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51 original interviews and had been in the audience. We set up playback using multiple sets of  
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53 headphones connected to an amplifier, so that the group would hear the work with more intimacy  
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3 and fewer distractions than if it were played through speakers. The group reflected afterwards,  
4 not only offering their suggestions for changes or additions to the work, but also on the effect of  
5 listening in this way to something that they had experienced as live theatre. One collaborator  
6 whom we will call 'Mark' reflected that when he had watched the live performance, he had been  
7 more focused on how things were staged and the humour contained in seeing his peers perform.  
8 He also noted that he was watching out for 'his parts' in the story. Listening to the audio, Mark  
9 said he was more involved, taking in all of the different stories and considering how they related  
10 to him. He described it as 'being on the outside looking in' and said it 'made me feel I am not the  
11 only one, I'm not alone not to be so hard on myself...made me feel more connected.' Another  
12 collaborator, 'David', suggested that listening was a more 'expansive' experience, relating it to  
13 his early experiences of the radio drama *Bad Jelly the Witch* and the power of imagination. For a  
14 couple of the collaborators, the listening process reinforced some of their understanding of Te  
15 Whare Tapa Whā, as they listened to Meihana Durie's commentary and connected it to their own  
16 embodiment of these ideas through the performance. This points to another area of strong  
17 potential for applied audio drama, where collaborators are able to listen back in an experience of  
18 intimacy and connectedness to reflect on the deeper meanings and resonances contained in the  
19 work.

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There remains much to explore around both projects in terms of applied audio drama;  
however, it is clear that working in audio presents opportunities for imaginative intimacy, sonic  
agency, and resonance that may not be achievable through other artforms. Turning towards the  
politics of listening and sonic agency more broadly, both projects have been challenged by the  
demands of correctional authorities in each site. Management at BWCC initially approved  
broadcast elements of the *Daughters* project, but Queensland Corrective Services refused

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3 permission at the executive level to broadcast the piece on community radio and internet podcast.  
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5 It appeared that there had been some kind of error or miscommunication that led to this  
6  
7 occurring, and even after we lodged an appeal, they upheld the decision, stating that the content  
8  
9 of the piece did not ‘meet community expectations’ for Queensland Corrective Services, and  
10  
11 could potentially be ‘confrontational for listeners.’ *Behind Walls that Talk* is currently sitting  
12  
13 with the Department of Corrections New Zealand awaiting approval for public broadcast. We  
14  
15 have been told that we may be required to alter the performers’ voices to protect their anonymity  
16  
17 and consequently the safety of their victims. Such restrictions create tensions in relation to  
18  
19 ownership, where the privacy demands of Corrections, or even human research ethics, can be at  
20  
21 odds with the performers’ desires to be known and recognised for their work – which many have  
22  
23 said gives them a sense of pride and allows them to be seen as something other than a ‘criminal.’  
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### 29 **Unsheltering Transphobia and Racism Through Applied Audio Drama**

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31 Through the previous examples of prison-based practice, we have begun to explore how sonic  
32  
33 engagement and a participatory audio-dramaturgy might operate within the arts-based inquiry  
34  
35 process. We now expand on ideas of acoustic or sonic agency within applied audio drama,  
36  
37 exploring how the work might contribute to a politics of listening, in this case specifically in  
38  
39 relation to gender and race.  
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42  
43 *Transitioning Home* (2018) is<sup>4</sup> a six-part applied audio drama that was created by queer,  
44  
45 trans<sup>5</sup>, Indigenous, Black, and people of colour (QTIBPOC) young people who had experienced  
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47 homelessness. It was made in conjunction with artist-researchers, child and youth care  
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53 <sup>4</sup> We write about *Transitioning Home* in the present tense as it remains available for people to listen to  
54  
55 (<http://transitioninghomepodcast.podbean.com/>), and to highlight that ongoing availability is one of the potential  
56  
57 benefits of applied audio drama, compared to, for example, applied theatre.

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59 <sup>5</sup> By trans, we refer to transgender, transsexual, gender queer, and all those who identify as something other than the  
60  
gender they were assigned at birth.

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3 practitioners, and trained actors. The initiating group consisted of two emerging and two  
4  
5 experienced artists (including Author 1), with a diversity of gender experiences, racial identities,  
6  
7 sexual orientations, and artistic practices represented. These multiple identities, skills, and social  
8  
9 locations were essential to the project, both as a source of material to create the script and as a  
10  
11 direct challenge to traditional notions of theatre making, research, and service user/service  
12  
13 provider hierarchies<sup>6</sup>. There was also a conscious attempt to disrupt the ‘outsider’ artist or  
14  
15 researcher entering into community to create theatre or ‘do’ research. A process that can be  
16  
17 fraught and, at times, result in projects that are experienced as exploitative or harmful to  
18  
19 community members (Smith 2012; Graham et al. 2019).  
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24 The six-episodes of *Transitioning Home* form a cohesive narrative arc following stories  
25  
26 of multiple QTIBPOC folks as they navigate accessing and living in the homeless shelter system,  
27  
28 as well as what led to them needing shelter. While the stories link, with at least one character  
29  
30 from the previous episode in the next episode, individual installments can stand alone as a short  
31  
32 audio drama. Each episode explores a different theme that came from the group development  
33  
34 process. Topics include transphobia, rape, systemic racism, and suicidal ideation, among others.  
35  
36 These framings of experience through the lens of conflict and trauma, so common in theatrical  
37  
38 representations, risks limiting the understanding of the shelter system and those who access it: A  
39  
40 reduction to victims and perpetrators. Collaborators talked about frequently experiencing their  
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42 social service involvement in these ways. Such as trans-feminine people being seen a threat to  
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44 cis-gender women in the shelter system and thus being denied entry, despite trans women being  
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52 <sup>6</sup> Space prohibits a complete discussion of how this manifested in practice; however, two concrete examples of this  
53 included the choice not to credit a ‘writer’ in recognition that the text was developed collectively, and the decision  
54 that everyone was paid the same hourly rate, regardless of role. Such attempts to shift power were not always  
55 successful, and at times raised subsequent ethical questions and logistical challenges (such as implications for  
56 professional actors who are union members).  
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3 at far greater risk of abuse than perpetrators of harm (Human Rights Campaign Foundation  
4 2018). Or conversely, being denied service because they were ‘at risk’ of violence and staff  
5 could not ensure their safety, a gross abdication of responsibility given the disproportionate  
6 number of LGBTQ+ people who experience homelessness (Abramovich 2016). Given these  
7 realities and representations in media, an important aspect for the group was presenting  
8 alternatives to what is, and considering what might be. As such, the piece drew on speculative  
9 imaginings of how a QTIBPOC friendly shelter might function, with the stories of adversity used  
10 as counterpoints to a utopic futurity. This ‘cruising utopia’ (Muñoz 2009) is one example of how  
11 applied audio drama can resist the limitations of trauma tropes through sonic agency and fiction.  
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24 Audio enables different forms of engagement and provocation for audience members  
25 from those created through visually centered platforms such as stage or video. *Transitioning*  
26 *Home* analyses gender and race through a lens of power manifested via racism and transphobia.  
27 This analysis is achieved, in part, by excluding visual cues for the audience. Applied audio  
28 drama creates space to consider how we listen, opens up notions of voice (metaphorical and  
29 literal), and provokes the audience to confront our own biases such as how we hear gender and  
30 race.  
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40 Consciously and non-consciously, listeners seek out vocal cues to socially locate who  
41 they are hearing. In her research on opera vocal pedagogy, Eidsheim (2014) demonstrates how  
42 ‘listeners project intention and identity onto vocal timbres—and that the projected meanings and  
43 identities are derived from received value systems and contexts’ (para. 2). Extending the  
44 concepts of truth, resonance, and the politics of listening introduced above, applied audio drama  
45 incorporates sonic considerations of vocal timbre, social aesthetics, and fiction(s) within  
46 research. Truths are revealed as much in the listener, if they are willing to hear, as by the artist-  
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3 researchers – truths such as how we hear race, gender, class, age, health, and sexuality, among  
4 others. Eidsheim (2014) calls these ‘the timbral micropolitics of difference to which the voice is  
5 subjected’ (para. 4). Working with a medium that centres the voice, applied audio drama  
6 functions within timbral micropolitics, producing opportunities to embrace the dissonance that  
7 listeners may experience.  
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11 Casting decisions were made with the co-creators of *Transitioning Home* that all trans  
12 characters would be portrayed by trans actors, and all characters who were Black, Indigenous, or  
13 people of colour would be played by actors of the same race, ethnicity, or lineage. Provocatively,  
14 the group also decided that white characters could be played by actors of colour. While trans  
15 characters were portrayed by trans actors, sometimes characters were played across trans  
16 identity. Specifically, actors who identified as trans-masculine played trans-feminine characters.  
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19  
20 The politics of listening and sonic agency provokes one to consider what happens when  
21 listening to voice in the absence of visual cues. In thinking about *Transitioning Home* notions of  
22 gender, listening for gender, and listening *to* gender, were disrupted. For example, hearing  
23 gender is complicated for the audience when listening to trans actors and trans characters without  
24 the biases of sight. Testosterone deepens the voice, while estrogen does not change the voice.  
25  
26 Thus, trans-masculine actors who have transitioned away from their assigned female gender at  
27 birth, such as the character Remy, an outreach worker who supports street involved youth; and  
28 trans-feminine actors, who have transitioned away from their assigned male gender at birth, such  
29 as Aidan a street-involved young person in the series, may both be heard as masculine. Many  
30 audience members will assume that the two characters are both cis-gender males (cis-gender  
31 meaning they currently identify with the gender assigned at birth). This sonically replicates some  
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3 of the prejudices that trans people face in navigating social services, placing the audience into the  
4 position of having to confront, and perhaps adjust, their own perceptions of gender.  
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8 Sonic agency, including the ability to create sounds, limit sounds, and influence the  
9 sounds one engages with, may exist yet not be heard. In the narrow case of listening to gender,  
10 the expression of agency may in fact reify restrictive, binary, or oppressive notions of gender;  
11 while simultaneously disrupting restrictive, binary, or oppressive notions of gender by the very  
12 act of forcing people to hear beyond what they understand as male/female, masculine/feminine,  
13 either/or. This is partly what *Transitioning Home* explores with the character Aidan. The actor  
14 playing Aidan identifies as trans-feminine herself and, like other cast members, had experienced  
15 difficulty accessing services due to how people heard her voice over the phone. Several cast  
16 members talked about phoning shelters to secure a bed and being told that they did not sound  
17 ‘female’ or ‘male’, and were thus denied services because the shelter serves a particular sex. This  
18 of course is not unique to the shelter system, as most service providers (and indeed most people)  
19 listen for, and to, gender. Embedded within this is the assumption that we can *know* sound; once  
20 we make this assumption ‘then *whatever we believe is projected onto the sound*’ (Eidsheim  
21 2014, para. 20, italics in original) and we accept sound as truth. We hear based on what we  
22 ‘know’, revealing who we are.  
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42 Schlichter (2015) writes of voice as an assemblage, as suggested by Deleuze and  
43 Guattari’s construction of the term. In this assemblage the “‘voice” merges material and  
44 ideational aspects, such as somatic and corporeal, technological, environmental, linguistic, and  
45 textual elements’ (Para. 11). In the example presented above, Aidan’s voice becomes an  
46 ideational trigger which manifests in material consequences. The audience is then returned to  
47 their own socio-cultural-ideological-micropolitical listening of the conversation between Remy  
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3 and Aidan. Who and what does the listening audience hear? And how do listeners grapple with  
4 the consequences of how Aidan is heard (or not)? It is worth considering when listening might  
5 reify gender, and when it may serve as a step towards sonic gender agency if we are forced, as  
6 listeners, to change how we see what we hear.  
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12 Similar topics regarding race, class, and other sonic-social markers are raised in  
13 *Transitioning Home*. Unlike transgender identity, none of the actors playing across race  
14 identified across race (no Black actors saw themselves as white, for example). The choice to cast  
15 across race, specifically Black actors performing as white, was a political as well as an aesthetic  
16 move, speaking to the lack of roles for people of colour, the roles people of colour are cast in  
17 ('bad/gangster/drug dealer,' first to die, and what Spike Lee called the 'super-duper magical  
18 negro' (Seitz 2010)), and the group's perception of over representation of white people in mass  
19 media and podcasting. Author 2 (Author 2 2020) elsewhere discusses how the *Daughters* project  
20 afforded First Nations women cast members to playfully engage with 'whitefacing' by voicing  
21 white male police officers arresting a woman for vagrancy. The *Transitioning Home* team also  
22 cast people of Jamaican descent as Jamaican characters, even though some of the actors had  
23 never lived in Jamaica. As such the project did receive valid criticism from listeners regarding  
24 the 'authenticity' of accents.  
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42 Author 1 (a white man born and raised in Canada) does not hear inauthenticity in the  
43 Jamaican accent, yet experiences dissonance listening to white-voice performances by Black  
44 actors. Schlichter (2015) takes up the idea of authenticity in vocal training as a way to critique  
45 the politics of 'voice' as some sort of universal, privileged, unquestionable, truth revealer – a  
46 tendency many of us slip into. Author 1 perceives (hears) class, education, and theatre training  
47 (or not) across multiple scenes of *Transitioning Home* and wonders if this gives the whole  
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3 project a heightened ‘authenticity’ when the actors reveal their ‘true’ selves while playing  
4  
5 against their own social location.  
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8 This biased, problematic, phonocentrism becomes an opportunity to consider for creators  
9  
10 of applied audio drama. Artist-researchers working in this method might consider whether or not  
11  
12 it is possible to hear outside our social locations despite our listening politics. Does our ear  
13  
14 reveal our biased, socially-constructed, authentic selves, despite our desired (aspirational)  
15  
16 politics? In the scenes just discussed, listening is tied to social-aesthetics, sonic agency, and  
17  
18 timbral micropolitics. Applied audio drama is uniquely situated to raise questions regarding  
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20 when we are sonically tethered to our assumptions and biases and how acoustic creations might  
21  
22 foster agency – sonic and otherwise.  
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## 27 **Conclusion: Tensions and opportunities in applied audio drama**

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29 Applied audio drama is an emergent form, and more creating, listening, and theorising is  
30  
31 necessary to understand its benefits, limitations, and opportunities. Below we identify some of  
32  
33 the opportunities and tensions, based upon our own experiences, and consider the efficacy of  
34  
35 applied audio drama as an example of arts-based research (ABR) or applied theatre as research  
36  
37 (ATAR). Within this, we wonder if there is something *extra* that applied audio drama brings to  
38  
39 the process of community engaged arts-led inquiry.  
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### 44 **Opportunities**

#### 45 *Applied audio drama as an engaging and accessible approach*

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47 By using an approach that engages collaborators through technology, making soundscapes and  
48  
49 learning new skills such as recording and production, people we have worked with find applied  
50  
51 audio drama interesting, exciting and accessible. In addition to being fun, applied audio drama  
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53 allows for creations with reasonably high production values, at a fraction of what it might cost in  
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3 video or staged productions. Applied audio drama can also engage with mobile populations who  
4 may not be able to commit to a lengthy devising and performance process. Working with actors  
5 who are itinerant, incarcerated, in precarious situations, and have significant health challenges, or  
6 when doing productions emanating from temporary living situations such as shelters, prisons,  
7 groups homes, and hospitals all make for significant challenges and an unpredictability as to who  
8 will show up on the day of the performance. Further, applied audio drama is particularly well-  
9 suited for people who find the idea of live performance terrifying. Applied audio drama can to  
10 circumvent many of these challenges. Although, as discussed above, this can compromise full  
11 participation and institutional restrictions may present additional challenges.  
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### 23 *Reaching wider audiences*

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25 Applied audio drama allows projects to reach wider audiences (and for longer) than an  
26 ephemeral theatrical performance event. In the case of prison-based work, this is conditional.  
27  
28 Author 2 and Author 1 have (separately) done many community-based, devised, and other  
29 applied theatre productions over the years. Most audience sizes have tended to be in the dozens,  
30 and the number of shows limited. With podcasts it is not hard to move into the hundreds if not  
31 thousands of listeners, with the potential for indefinite growth given that it can exist online for  
32 many years. Many devised theatre productions speak to a particular audience demographic, one  
33 that may or may not be substantial in the region the show is produced (for example, street-  
34 involved Indigenous trans youth). With podcasting, there are no geographic limits, thus people  
35 from anywhere in the world can listen (subject to language and access to the Internet).  
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### 49 *Longevity*

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51 The audio work serves as an artefact of performance that collaborators are proud to have  
52 contributed to, and that they can listen back to and share with others more widely than a live  
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3 performance. Since it can stay present online for years, people can access well beyond the  
4 reasonable expectations of a traditional theatre run. Author 2 has noted several instances where  
5  
6 collaborators have shared finished works with friends and family members long after projects  
7  
8 have been completed, further amplifying the sense of pride in their achievement and extending  
9  
10 the potential for knowledge production and impact beyond the project itself.  
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#### 14 *Resisting coercive soundscapes*

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16  
17 Sonic agency provides a way of understanding how people have choice, and not, regarding what  
18 they hear; and how people make sounds as a way to re-establish a sense of agency in spaces,  
19  
20 refiguring or replacing what may be oppressive or coercive soundscapes with their own sonic  
21  
22 creations. Audio-based participatory approaches to research have the potential to facilitate sonic  
23  
24 agency while also creating an escape from multiple forms of incarceration – sonic and physical.  
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26  
27 Creating audio dramas from one's own lived experiences, and listening to podcasts (or other  
28  
29 auditory stimuli) in sonic privacy, potentially holds resonance as a form of agency and  
30  
31 resistance. Several people have reported to Author 1 that they were unaware of shelters and  
32  
33 shared *Transitioning Home* with isolated trans youth as a form of education and support.  
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#### 37 *Imaginative intimacy, sonic agency and resonance in the 'theatre of the mind'*

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40 Audio drama provides distinctive experiences for collaborators and audiences that may not be  
41  
42 achievable through other artforms, providing fertile ground for expanding applied audio drama  
43  
44 as a mode of inquiry. While most theatre involves listening, we believe placing hearing at the  
45  
46 forefront of the five senses does something unique. The absence of visual performative elements  
47  
48 creates conditions whereby the existing preconceptions and power dynamics of socio-cultural  
49  
50 elements such as race, gender, and ethnicity can be disrupted in generative ways through sonic-  
51  
52 based performance. It also enables listeners to connect imaginatively, perhaps more  
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3 imaginatively and on a deeper level, than other forms of performance, where visuals may take  
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5 over. There is a vast body of literature (for example in sound studies and psychology) on how we  
6  
7 hear, and what happens when we hear. Applied audio drama practitioners will benefit from  
8  
9 engaging with this literature in considering, creating, and critiquing work. Similarly, exploring  
10  
11 these ideas through audio-dramaturgy engages collaborators through unique modes of  
12  
13 storytelling and creative practice, opening up new avenues for generating aesthetic engagement  
14  
15 and meaning as makers.  
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18  
19 *Creating spaces to consider how we listen, and opening up notions of 'voice'*

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21 Fictionalisation emanating from the inquiry process, as with all forms of arts-based research,  
22  
23 moves towards a different way of considering how to tell the data tale. Performing data through  
24  
25 speaking directly into the ear of the listener shifts how people engage with empirical materials.  
26  
27 This is not new to applied theatre practitioners, but it may be new to other researchers.  
28  
29

### 30 31 **Tensions**

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33 *Challenges to authorship, ownership and representation*

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35 In our respective projects, we have both experienced tensions and power dynamics that can occur  
36  
37 within creative teams, and the agency that may or may not exist in knowledge production and  
38  
39 meaning making through the applied audio drama form. For Author 2 particularly, projects so far  
40  
41 have presented challenges to sonic agency, voice and ownership through limitations in being able  
42  
43 to engage groups fully in editing and post-production, and the restrictions to vocal representation  
44  
45 and broadcast imposed by corrections authorities.  
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48  
49 *Politics of listening*

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51 Following Bassel (2009) and others who explore listening as a political imperative, the question  
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53 remains as to who listens. Furthermore, how do we motivate people to listen to these marginal  
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3 stories in a marginal medium? Are we making work for an echo chamber? Our projects  
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5 emanated from institutionalised spaces (shelters and prisons) that are situated within oppressive  
6  
7 neoliberal structures of state ‘care’ and carcerality. While the works may have disrupted some of  
8  
9 the existing power dynamics and coercive soundscapes for collaborators and audiences, how can  
10  
11 we encourage proponents or operatives of these structures to listen? Moreover, as audio drama  
12  
13 gains traction in the mainstream, produced by wealthy media corporations, do the DIY  
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15 production values of a participatory approach alienate audiences? How can artist-researchers  
16  
17 work within these constraints to produce a more ‘authentic’ experience for the listener?  
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### 20 21 *Engaging in dialogue with audiences*

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23 Applied theatre performances at their best create dialogic spaces between performers and  
24  
25 audience, but audio drama is often a one-way transaction. How do we develop this into a dialogic  
26  
27 space? It may be worth considering how we can extend dialogue through interactive app-based  
28  
29 technology, and build on Author 2’s experiments with immersive and interactive sound  
30  
31 installations in public spaces. Listeners’ responses could then be folded into an iterative process  
32  
33 of inquiry that extends beyond initial reactions, surveys or focus groups. Author 1 has brought  
34  
35 *Transitioning Home* into college classrooms as a way to explore the topics raised, through  
36  
37 interactive scenario-based learning. In a course on arts-informed inquiry, students listened to  
38  
39 audio dramas before creating their own micro-dramas based on their undergraduate thesis  
40  
41 research. For Author 2, there were some tensions between how the women experienced the  
42  
43 process of making *Daughters* as being largely enjoyable, and how audiences experienced the  
44  
45 final work as being somewhat dark and lacking in joyful moments (see Author 2, 2020). *For*  
46  
47 *Behind Walls that Talk*, there was a stronger imperative to articulate the process through the  
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49 product, that is, the process of clothing real stories in fiction and the critical and aesthetic  
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3 engagement that this facilitated for collaborators. This latter approach has the potential to engage  
4 audiences more in the ‘whole story’ of a work, rather than just the end product.  
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10 In this article, we have cast our net deliberately wide in the hope that it might provide some  
11 touchpoints for deeper exploration of the methodology. Applied audio drama extends the  
12 possibilities of applied theatre, inquiry, ABR, ATAR, and audio drama. As the tensions and  
13 opportunities above show, there is still much to learn about this emerging method with a host of  
14 possibilities for creative projects across peoples, places, and times. We each continue to work on  
15 projects and develop our approaches: Author 2 on acoustic ecology and soundscape with  
16 incarcerated women (Author 2 et al. 2019), and Author 1 on research-based narrative  
17 fictionalisations with child and youth care practitioners who have experiences of living in  
18 residential placements. We also seek out others who do this work (see for example Author 2 and  
19 Author 1, forthcoming). We look forward to hearing how this approach might progress in the  
20 coming years and being part of the community of artist-researchers that contributes to its growth.  
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### 38 **Authors’ Notes**

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40 [Removed for anonymity purposes.]  
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