

Conclusion

Final Resonances

As I write these closing remarks, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken over the world. The first months, when lockdown policies were enforced, people began to notice changes in their everyday soundscapes. Some of the sounds they were accustomed to hearing, such as those coming from planes or honking cars, suddenly disappeared. New sounds surfaced instead: the singing of birds, the crushing of leaves, our own steps. Things appeared to be different. Sounds are part of our everyday life, and in their absence, our sense of normalcy was called into question.

The first difference I noticed in my usual soundscape came through the mundane experience of watching a *fútbol* game. When the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) allowed tournaments to resume, it decided that no members of the public would be present in the stadiums. The first game after lockdown was on Saturday, May 16, 2020, between Borussia Dortmund and FC Schalke 04 for the German Bundesliga. During the televised game, instead of listening to the usual roar of fans, the spectator was left to hear lone sounds: coaches yelling instructions and players cursing and shrieking in pain when they were fouled. It was disorienting but also boring. Without the usual and expected sounds, the experience changed completely because the whistles, chants, and murmurs produced by the fans are intrinsic to the experience of watching a game. The attention shifted from the plays to individualized sounds. After the first few games, some clubs decided to artificially add to the broadcast recorded ambient

sounds, such as celebrations and booing, that one would expect on the soccer field—with varying degrees of intensity, depending on the development of the match. With the added sounds, the games felt “normal” again, and, in fact, the attention went back to the plays. And yet there is something eerie in experiencing a game with a standardized, false ambient sound.

It was evident that without the expected soundscape the games would be experienced differently, and this accentuates how listening affects our apprehension of the world, without our even knowing it, by helping us to direct our attention. Listening to sounds has this capacity, and when the practice of listening becomes regular, genres of listening emerge, helping to anchor different social interactions. The pandemic has shown us in a direct way that listening structures social relations—in some cases, more than language does. Whether through the mastery of a particular listening genre, like the one described in this book, or by just following the systematic and habituating trail of diverse sounds, the act of listening serves as a cohesive force basting together a diversity of social situations. Absent this basting, the uncanny emerges because we forget the extraordinary structuring capacity that listening generates.

In Buenos Aires, lockdown was incredibly strict for about four months after the first cases of the virus were detected in Argentina.¹ The government implemented *Aislamiento Social Preventivo y Obligatorio* (Preventive and Compulsory Social Isolation or ASPO in its Spanish acronym), and *porteños* needed a permit to go anywhere except to buy food. If caught roaming without a permit, the transgressor would be fined and also risk the embarrassment of being called a *boludo* (asshole) by passersby, as early videos showed.² The lockdown was effective in keeping the number of infections very low, compared to neighboring countries. And during this time, dozens of articles appeared in newspapers, magazines, and academic journals analyzing and explaining the problems generated by social isolation, many of them focused particularly on the psyche. Written in the heat of the social and individual symptoms of the pandemic, some augured the end of an era—a paradigm shift—projecting either pessimistic or optimistic versions of the society to come. The former involved evaluation of the authoritarian trends that the containment of the pandemic would generate (see, for example, Orozco 2020; Salvatto 2020) or discussed how the sanitary distances that were imposed between bodies influenced affects and the psyche (Canet-Juric et al. 2020; Chire-Saire and Mahmood 2020; Verztman and Romão-Dias 2020).

According to different sources (Antón 2020; Frittaoni 2020), the search for online psychotherapy in the whole country has increased at least

20 percent during the pandemic. This number does not include regular analysts who have continued their sessions using this “debated” new format.³ Loneliness appears as the main problem of the confinement, presented as *más mortal que el virus* (deadlier than the virus). But another perspective comes from my friend Marcelo, who lives alone in Buenos Aires and who joked that he doesn’t feel isolated because lockdown has made him listen to himself: “At all times I find myself listening to my inner dialogue. So, I don’t feel that lonely because it feels as if I have company [laughter].” I asked if he could expand on this process, and he replied, in a serious tone, “It’s like reviewing different moments of my life and understanding in a better way why I behave in a certain way.” After a pause, he continued, “I think I finally hear what my analyst has been hearing all these years.”

In this book, I describe a particular form of listening that emerges through dialogical encounters between speakers. I explain that what *porteños* are listening to is “that which is not said” but which is implied as they resonate with the speaker’s statement. This is an embodied form of listening expressed by the reported speech formula *When you say x, I hear y* (*What you really mean is . . .*). Marcelo has been to psychoanalysis off and on for the past ten years, so he has been exposed to psychoanalytic listening for a long period of time and therefore is capable of finding this resonance in a dialogic relationship within his inner speech. In other words, he has habituated his listening practice to pay attention not only to external sounds but also to internal dialogue, a practice that he says has been nurtured by the pandemic. I asked how that differs from thinking and having an inner dialogue with oneself—a common practice among many people. He answered, “Every time we think or read, we listen to ourselves, so in that way it is similar. But I go beyond the meaning of the words and try to experience rather than reasoning—that’s the difference.” With the lack of “live” interlocutors, one has to ask whether experiences such as Marcelo’s (or Adriana’s, in chapter 3), in which listening habits within a psychoanalytic framework promote internal resonances, are common among *porteños* in lockdown. In a *culture of listeners*, such as the one that exists in Buenos Aires, the lines between the expert listener, the analyst, and the common listener became blurred. There is no passive reception of professional knowledge but a constant reproduction of it (Briggs and Hallin 2016; Carr 2010a).

The pandemic seems to have fostered the doxic idea that psychoanalysis and psychotherapy are “everywhere” in Argentina. Rafael, an established analyst, told me that “the pandemic created and accentuated many mental

disorders; but in comparison with Spain, where the psychological help rose 200 percent in the past months, here [in Argentina] we don't see that number because we have been taking care of our mental health for a long time. We are a culture of listeners, and we have continued to do so with new means [online platforms]."⁴ Centro DITEM, where multifamily sessions are conducted, has a similar outlook; in a long letter posted on their Facebook page on May 5, 2020, the center explained that they would remain open through virtual sessions, and in-person visits would be available only for crises. Corroborating Rafael's stance, they stated, "The average attendance for our virtual groups is 65 people per day. This number is higher than those who attend in person. The explanation for this is simple: there was a notable increase in the number of family members participating in our meetings. The same happens with the classes that are given weekly [at the center] for the professionals doing specialization internships."⁵

Centro DITEM began conducting online MFSP sessions through the Google Meet platform during the summer months of 2020 and has continued to do so. Many patients and analysts commented via a Facebook thread on the importance of mental health services during lockdown. These ideas echoed the plea to the government by mental health providers to be considered "essential workers." An article titled "COVID-19: Los psicólogos piden ser declarados personal esencial de salud" (COVID-19: Psychologists ask to be declared essential health workers), published on June 25, 2020, in the newspaper *La Nación*, quotes Jorge A. Biglieri, dean of psychology at UBA, as complaining that the government was focused only on stopping the spread of the virus without taking into account "a conception of health in bio-psycho-social terms." Biglieri warns that "this biological reductionism produces a dangerous underestimation of the psychological and social effects of the Preventive and Compulsory Social Isolation (ASPO)" (Polack 2020).

The cultural milieu in Buenos Aires continued disseminating psychoanalytic ideas in spite of the pandemic. On August 16, 2020, psychoanalyst, actor, and theater producer Pablo Zunino, who for eight consecutive years produced and directed the successful play *El Dr. Lacan*, released an online representation of his new play, *Herr Professor Freud*. Inspired by Freud's daughter, who died during the 1918–19 influenza outbreak, Zunino tried to imagine Freud living through a different pandemic. In the play, Freud (played by Zunino) is represented as a modern figure who tries to make sense of new technologies (e.g., Zoom) and new epistemes. The streamlining of dramaturgy became an important way to keep people entertained

while at the same time keeping actors, producers, and directors employed. On July 18, Gabriel Rolón began streaming *Entrevista abierta* (Open interview), a “play” that he has been performing off and on for the past six years in different theaters around Argentina and neighboring countries. In these presentations, Rolón opens with a monologue about Freud, Lacan, and “philosophical” questions about love, fear, rancor, and the like. After the monologue the public asks questions, and Rolón answers them in the order received. In the streaming version, his wife, Cynthia Wila—a writer and actress—helped compile the online questions and find the common thread. (Access to the streaming cost five hundred pesos, the equivalent of six US dollars.) Although they belong to different domains, it is hard not to draw comparisons between Rolón’s *Entrevista abierta* and the MFSPT, where the resonances of the participants’ comments and questions trigger particular interventions and where a common theme is expected to emerge from the resonances. Another similarity is Rolón’s emphasis that participants should “*escucharnos los unos a los otros*” (listen to one another) to mobilize affective entanglements.⁶ The mediatization and circulation of psychoanalytic discourses have continued to flourish during the pandemic. The mediatized nature of communication has expanded the propinquity and frequency of psychoanalytic encounters and discourses. And listening continues to be invoked as the most important tool to help navigate lockdown.

Rolón thinks that Argentina is unique in the way its people are prompted to listen to one another. In a June 2020 interview with Alejandro Fantino, Rolón (2020) told the story of being at a party in Spain and seeing a woman sitting by herself. Rolón approached the woman and asked if she was OK. The woman was perplexed and responded that she was surrounded by friends but that no one at the party, except Rolón—a stranger—had asked if she was OK. Then she said, “No, I’m not OK. How did you notice?” Rolón answered, “I just saw you.” Rolón then tells Fantino, “Because corporal language is also there to be listened to. And she said, ‘Well, here nobody asked,’ and I told her, ‘If you lived in my country, we would have asked you ten times.’” He continued:

GR: Because we Argentines are more attentive to this. Our history has forced us to be attentive to this, Ale. Because when your grandfather came here, you know who he had next to him? A stranger, a stranger who at best spoke in Turkish, spoke in Arabic.

AF: This is great, that is to say, do you believe that the history of Argentinian migration forced us to be more attentive to the person next to us?

GR: Of course!

Rolón is reproducing folk theories about why psychoanalysis is so prevalent in Buenos Aires, which include the belief that because Argentines “come from ships” and “don’t have a motherland,” they have developed a collective trauma that needs resolution, which psychoanalysis can help provide. Rolón adds another reason why his country has a culture of listeners: the first migrants to what is now Argentina lacked linguistic competency. Therefore, attention to what the other was saying became an intrinsic trait of Argentines, who can listen to the body even before it speaks, as Rolón himself demonstrated when he saw the Spanish woman sitting by herself.

The pandemic has thus reinforced discourses about Argentine exceptionality in regard to being rightful consumers of mental health services. As psychologist Iafi Shpirer told Maya Siminovich in an interview for *Fuente Latina*, “People have to fight to maintain this unnatural sense of communicating online, of talking on the phone, of listening.” Yet Shpirer believes talking and listening will be easy for Argentines because they like to share “personal stories” and do not hesitate to “talk about themselves” (Siminovich 2020). The commonsensical idea that Argentines like to share intimate aspects of their lives in conjunction with going to analysis on a regular basis is portrayed in a comic strip by graphic humorist Esteban Podetti (figure C.1). The strip, published on his Facebook page, depicts a woman lying on the analytic couch and expressing concern about the new terms and conditions allowing WhatsApp to share information with Facebook. The woman then explains that she alone possesses information about herself and, referring to the conspiracy theories and fake news that circulate on social media, says that she does not understand why “The New Order” wants her data. She is interrupted by the analyst, who verbally abuses her, calls her stupid, explains that she is a nobody and that Facebook wants to steal information only from important people, and then sends her home. In the final vignette, the analyst hands Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg an envelope and tells him, “Here is the data of Mrs. Paola, even her erotic dreams, Mark! All the dirt. Very good distracting maneuver on the part of *Guasap* [phonetic Spanish pronunciation of WhatsApp]! Nobody suspects where you get the info!”⁷

The idea that social media giants can get information about their customers through their psychoanalytic encounters is something that, as my good friend Daniel said, “can only happen in Argentina.” But Daniel is not the only *porteño* who thinks that people in Buenos Aires have a tendency to “overshare” personal information, whether with their analysts, friends,



FIGURE C.1 La Embarazada Mala, by Esteban Podetti (2021). Courtesy of Esteban Podetti.

or even strangers. In the article “Why Argentinians May Be Finding Social Distancing Harder than the Rest of Us,” published on April 23, 2020, in the national British newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*, reporter Clare Wiley explains that a longitudinal study of forty-two countries conducted in 2017 revealed Argentina as the country where people require the least amount of personal space to feel comfortable: two and a half feet away from strangers, much less than any other country.⁸ Wiley quotes tango dancer Alejandro Gée, who explains that the embrace of physical contact by Argentines is a deeply ingrained part of the culture that also expresses itself in emotional openness: “You go to the market and there’s someone you don’t know; they start telling you about how they broke up with their boyfriend or girlfriend and they’re crying. That’s completely accepted, it’s normal, nobody freaks out. Someone cries, someone is laughing—then they invite you to dinner and you don’t even know them.” I experienced firsthand the sociability Gée describes, where Argentines communicate aspects of their intimate lives with strangers. *Porteños* were interested in what I had to say, and in many cases they went beyond the denotation of my words to listen to “that which is not said” but which was implied in my words, regardless of how close we were. Argentina is a country of listeners, and the dialogic relationships that emerge through the attention placed on words, silences, and resonances are an undisputable fact in how *porteños* communicate.

The pandemic has given a boost and visibility to the importance of mental health to counterattack some of the psychosocial scarring that lockdown practices generate, and the importance of listening to each other reverberates throughout media outlets, casual conversations, and official news. Only time will tell whether psychoanalysis/psychotherapy will continue to have the important presence it currently has; but what is certain is that fundamental discourses based on psychoanalysis—the idea that unconscious practices guide structural aspects of our behavior, that talking about your personal ailments helps ease some of their immediate effects, and that listening to one another is the key to counteracting the psychic hurdles brought on by the pandemic—continue to circulate with a strong force in Buenos Aires today.

The city of Buenos Aires serves as a great case study to understand several aspects of listening because of the permeability of psychoanalytic listening as a genre. Through the close examination of the circulation of this genre of listening, this book presents different properties of listening that can be analyzed beyond the Argentinean context. First, listening is highly

structured: no matter the setting, there is always a pattern in any listening act. Second, listening is not always automatic: many listening practices are learned and take time to master. Third, listening is multimodal: it can be deployed differently, generating an array of outcomes depending on how it is contextualized. Fourth, it is performative: it creates social roles, as when expert listeners, such as the psychoanalysts examined in this book, or anthropologists perform their social positionality by listening within a particular genre of listening. Fifth, listening provides directionality, helping the hearer to focus on particular actions and not on others—as I observed while watching a soccer game during the pandemic—or when “earslips” and mondegreens emerge, helping us to give sense to nonsensical sounds and thus to establish a meaning about indiscernible sounds. Last, listening has a perlocutionary force (as language does). Sounds sometimes linger and will find a referent at a later time after other sounds or words are heard; this aspect is crucial to psychoanalytic listening, since its goal is to disentangle the aural residues that accumulate throughout one’s lifetime.

In this book I maintain that listening is one of the main channels from which psychoanalysis circulates in Buenos Aires. Psychoanalytic listening’s prevalence is due to its exposure through the media, through the household, when family members discuss their own therapy sessions or are themselves analysts, and through going to analysis. This exposure has resulted in a culture of listeners interested in and willing to participate in the well-being of others. I purposely resisted analyzing the *What you really mean is . . .* reported speech as a form of power, as an imposition. Following philosopher Enrique Dussel (1973, 54), who discusses what he calls an “ontological generosity” when intersubjective encounters occur, I understand the *When you say X, I hear Y* dialogical exchange as based, most of the time, on a genuine effort to help subjects listen to themselves. Rather than just meddle in someone else’s business, the lay listener challenges liberal ideas of atomized, self-sufficient individuals who master their own words and make them transparently reference their inner intentions, which can also be distinguished from their social and material being (Carr 2010a; Keane 2001). I understand this dialogical relationship as a way in which the psyche is connected to others, and I view the intervention on the part of the lay listener as a form of symbolic exchange.

The question of why some aspects of Argentina’s sociability rely on psychoanalytic premises still puzzles many people. United States psychologist Martin Seligman, best known for his “positive psychology” approach—a

methodology aimed at creating a science that investigates human qualities such as strength, virtue, and happiness—contends that psychoanalysis is, in fact, a negative methodology.⁹ In a 2021 interview in *La Nación* newspaper, Seligman asked the interviewer—who had not even mentioned the subject—whether Argentina is finally leaving behind its “obsession” with psychoanalysis. The interviewer, in turn, inquired why he asked that question, and Seligman responded: “It would be good to know why Argentina is so psychoanalytic. Somehow, psychoanalytic thinking focuses on itself, paralyzing individuals, while modern cognitive-behavioral psychology deals with skills that help overcome problems in the external world. Perhaps it is that the psychoanalytic gaze aims at deep change. And there is something in the Argentine soul that appeals to a deeply underlying and self-paralyzing vision. I have wondered that about Argentina for almost 30 years now” (Mon 2021).¹⁰

Here Seligman contradicts the idea discussed in this book about the psyche as connected to others and qualifies going “deep” into one’s consciousness as a paralyzing endeavor. There are in this view resonances of a liberal idea by which, in order to overcome problems, sufferers must adhere to an active methodology of optimism that, little by little, will liberate them from negative ideas. The paradigm of self-sufficiency is evident in Seligman’s critique of psychoanalysis. Moreover, he inadvertently replicates common folk theories that depict Argentines as somber, sad, and melancholic, which are reflected in what he sees as the self-absorbed, paralyzing attitude that psychoanalysis fosters. The myth of Argentines as melancholic typically centers on their penchant for tango music, depicted as a gloomy genre, or the longing for a motherland. Others grieve a country that supposedly was, once upon a time, an economic powerhouse before its current decline. Now Seligman adds psychoanalysis as a possible trait to the mournful depiction of Argentines. That this was written in early 2021 underscores how psychoanalysis continues to be a referent in discussions of Argentina. Psychoanalysis is thus still attached to the idea of Argentina and continues to generate speculation about the “true” nature of the Argentine character, a favorite theme that has filled the country’s literary and scholarly world for ages.¹¹

Rather than pursue the ultimate cause that explains *why* psychoanalysis is so prevalent in Argentina, this book asks *how* it circulates and continues to reproduce itself in many different contexts by focusing on Buenos Aires as a culture of listeners. By analyzing listening as a genre, I hope to

open the possibilities of expanding the examination of the different structures that listening generates and how these structures, which can be conceptualized as having boundaries—even if artificially delimited—create and sustain social relations. By studying how listeners resonate with the words of others, this book is a window into the crucial role that listening practices produce in creating identities and signifying the world.