

Dialogue on *Experiments in Listening*

Ed McKeon: Much of your writing seems to involve making space for others, listening to them patiently. When you do this, what speaks? And what speaks to you?

Rajni Shah: Listening used to function as a kind of armour for me – it gave me a role in the world in which I didn't need to be articulate or demanding. As someone who was raised female and for most of my youth was growing up as a brown-skinned immigrant in eighties and nineties Britain, I understood very deeply that I did not belong and that I needed to integrate by any means possible. Listening (and to clarify, when I use this word I don't just mean listening with the ears but the act of being attentive) is a way of being valued when you believe that you have nothing to say, nothing to contribute, or you are very unsure of your own voice. In other words, listening is a great tool when you know you will not be heard. And people generally like you if you listen to them!

I begin here because I think it's important to mention that there are many sides to listening. What I describe above is a common experience. And yet, when I eventually found my way to being someone who had some power in the world, and could create environments for others to be in, I felt very strongly that I wanted to create containers where quiet people might feel valued just as they are, valued for their listenings as well as their (often uncertain) voices. Within what had begun as a position of necessity I later found whole worlds of possibility that can't be recognised within a speaking-dominant paradigm.

I always feel incredibly humbled and honoured to be doing this work with others and fierce in my commitment to it. At the same time, whenever I lead a listening session, I am confronted by my own internalised battle with dominant (and ableist) value systems. I am always actively trying to cultivate patience and wellness in my own relationship to the work. Often, there is still a part of me that shouts: "But is everyone okay? No one is speaking! Therefore, something is wrong!"

EMcK: I find your writing and your performances very welcoming. When and where have you been made welcome, and what made this important to you?

RS: Superficially, I have been welcomed into all kinds of spaces over my lifetime and have experienced a lot of privilege. But the reason invitation is so important to me is that those welcomes have often arrived with unspoken conditions attached: you are welcome as long as you behave like this; you are welcome on the understanding that you will respect the

hierarchies that we have already determined; you are welcome to join us and be like us. Even in supposedly experimental or queer spaces, I have always been hyper-aware that I was only welcome on certain conditions – the welcome rarely felt like an invitation to be as strange to the room as I needed and to be seen and heard, to be acknowledged, as I am.

What I am always trying to do with listening invitations is to allow people to be how they are, for there to be enough time and space for each person to arrive in the way they need to and for there to be an invitation for all of us to be in relationship with our own assumptions around difference. The key word here is “trying.” It is important to acknowledge my own limited understanding of the world, which inevitably informs the work. And I am aware that sometimes my invitations to listen are met with resistance, stuckness, rejection, or even anger. For people who struggle with quietness, the rooms I invite them into can feel oppressive – and differently so, depending on what kind of bodymind they inhabit as well as their previous relationships with being heard or being silenced.

Coming back to your question, I do want to identify some times when I have felt welcomed. There are a couple that come to mind immediately, and I smile as I realise that both of them took place within environments that were led by Deaf and disabled people. During the pandemic I attended an [online talk with Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Elliott Fukui](#), and during the introduction Leah Lakshmi said, “We just really want to encourage you to be as disabled as you need to be during this call.” I was very much a guest within what I perceived to be largely a community of people who identify as disabled, and I do not currently identify that way. I was struck by how invited I felt in that moment. It was a real learning moment for me around the importance of disability justice for building better worlds. The relief I felt in my body at being able to be however it is! This feeling is something I yearn for but very rarely experience.

The second was a class that I sadly didn’t end up being able to continue, but I attended the first in a series of ASL classes for beginners that was run by the Quebec Public Interest Research Group at Concordia when I was a postdoctoral researcher there. At the start of the class the teacher explained (via written signs) that, even though we were beginners, we would not speak during the classes but instead would communicate using ASL and other technologies, out of respect for the teacher and in order not to centre speaking. Again, I felt such a sense of relief when we stopped having to communicate using our voices! And I was not expecting this at all. It gave me a profound respect for D/deaf and Hard of Hearing communities and the tiniest awareness of how I might experience the world with different modes of communication.

Maybe both these examples come to mind in response to your question because they relate closely to what I call listening work. The invitation to move away from default or dominant hierarchies of attention and modes of attentiveness. The invitation to be together with others while also listening in and respecting the wisdoms that are present through our own bodies. For some, I imagine that the speed of everyday life can allow some level of tuning in without special circumstances or invitation. But I think it's fair to say that for most of us, we need time, space, and a feeling of safety before we can begin to do the work of tuning into our own needs, let alone acting on them and sharing respectful listening with others from that place.

EMcK: *Experiments in Listening* is also a kind of experiment in writing, insofar as you care openly about the relationship between text and reading. A conventional understanding might place the writer in the place of a speaker and the reader as one who listens. How would you describe this relationship?

RS: I think this description is rather flattening. Firstly, a book is not written by one writer, but is a gathering of words and images and pages that comes together through multiple trajectories and gets made as part of a process. And the writer is one part of this process. A different book would come to exist on a different day! Later, when the book exists in the world, we are all listeners. When I think about my book, the person who wrote those words was made up of other versions of me with particular understandings of particular moments in time and space – I am not that same person today. Now, the book exists as a thing around which different people might gather, each with their own interpretations and life experiences. Each reading, and each time we read, a different listening arises. And, as I describe in the book, I don't believe that speaking creates listening, but rather the opposite. So it is not so much that someone writes a book and then people read it, as that each time a person gives the book their attention, they are allowing it to exist, or even creating it anew.

Having said this, I did write it with careful attention to invitation. I wanted a reader to feel like they are welcome, and that I appreciate them finding their way to the book and spending time with it. I wanted readers to feel held in the experience of reading as much as possible. I made a series of accompanying zines, which allow for a different texture and shape of approach to the same ideas too, and this was always important to me – to explicitly invite multiple possible forms of engagement.

EMcK: For this special issue of the *Journal of Sonic Studies*, we're interested in the overlaps and interplay between creative practice and social science as they address

issues of voice and listening. How does theory inform your practice and practice shape your understanding? Perhaps more concisely, how might scholars and practitioners in social science learn from your work and experience?

RS: I think it's important to recognise that disciplinary boundaries exist via very specific historical trajectories and are part of the colonial project. So I'm not too keen to engage with those terms in my answer to the question. And in many ways, the book is an attempt to lay down that rather unhelpful binary between what gets called "practice" and what gets called "theory." Having said that, I hear you asking about how a book that is in some ways so explicitly about theatre and the theatrical can feel relevant to people who do not identify with those words or worlds, and this I am happy to address!

When I started writing the book, I had just decided to end my career as an artist working in theatre and live art.* It felt really important to me at the time that I move away from those worlds and open up to what might be next in my life. So when the opportunity to do a PhD in Theatre Studies came up, I was initially a bit hesitant. I had some big questions around what a practice-based PhD would look like if I wasn't "practising" in the ways I had been.

When I spent time with this, I realised that I wanted to find out what would be left if I took away all of the stuff that people think about as "theatre": the stage, the lighting, the acting. What I found was that there was a certain quality of attentiveness which was the thing I still treasured about performance and wanted to spend more time with. This listening felt significant and even political to me in ways I could not yet articulate or even really identify.

What most interests me about theatre is this feeling of being in audience, this quality of listening that is unproductive and makes such different demands from the listening I experience outside the theatre. In a way, it is arbitrary that the book is about theatre. I began there because that is what I know and the medium that I have worked with. It is the lens that allows me to write about and think through what it means to be human and to reflect on what is missing in our voice-dominant and hyper-presentational society. But the book is, above all, about practices of listening and being-alongside. It asks who we might be if listening was valued as much as speaking.

* I later realised that what I was abandoning was not performance-making or "being an artist" but the uphill struggle of trying to make a career within an industry that upheld patriarchal, capitalist, colonialist values. Abandoning the idea of "career" (i.e., a damaging fiction of linear

progression) was one of the best things I have ever done, and it eventually left me feeling more like an artist than ever before.

EMcK: Theatre – like politics – is often conceived as a site of voice. Likewise, politics is played out as a site of representation, a notion echoed in the etymology of “theatre” as “a place of viewing.” How would you conceive their relation?

RS: When I was a teenager, I was selected to attend a European Youth Parliament at a local school. After a general introduction, we were assigned into groups, and each group was given a topic to discuss. My group was working on the topic of hunger and poverty. All I remember from this session is that a tall blonde boy spoke very articulately from a right-wing position and argued us all into silence. Later, though many of us from within the group spent time working on counter-arguments, he convinced the whole assembly of parliament that poverty was self-inflicted and that a profit-driven social structure was the answer we were looking for. I disagreed with all my heart, but I didn't have any of the tools to argue with him. This experience could have led me to train as a lawyer, as one of my friends did, or to focus in some other way on developing my voice so that I would have these tools later in life. Instead, I carried forward a feeling of incredulity that this is the system within which human politics takes place.

Part of what was happening, of course, was that the blonde boy was speaking into our listening. And our listening had been trained to assign value to certain bodies and modes of speaking above others. Perhaps even more significantly, the whole set-up of that parliament was centred around speaking as the only mode that was of value. And while it is certainly true that politics and theatre are both described and understood as sites of voice, this is not the only thing that is happening in either.

What I am trying to do with my book, and in the listening gatherings that I host, is to not only write about or dream about different ways of being, but to enact a social structure within which we can undo some of that training. Where we listen for long enough that our own biases become apparent to us. Where we are uncomfortable, ineloquent, and inarticulate together. Having lived on unceded Indigenous lands in two different places over recent years, I also understand that the particular alliance between politics and speaking that I currently live inside is a recent one, and there are many cultures that hold the relationships between listening and speaking completely differently to the one that I have been taught.

EMcK: Performance – like writing (and broadcasting) – is often understood as a relation of one to the many, speaker and listeners. How important is what takes place between audience members/listeners, and how can this manifest itself?

RS: In my book, I propose that we are all audience members, all listeners, and that collectively we create listening between us. I won't go into the whole philosophy of it here, or I would be recreating the whole book! But an important part of what I am experimenting with in this book is the idea that there is a kind of listening that is closely allied with compassion and is a way of being beside another person. The theory in the book is that this is the kind of listening that becomes possible when we come together as audience. So we need the "performance" or the point of focus in order to gather together, but the work that happens when we gather is not only or primarily what happens "onstage."