

1. Learning the shape of racist rooms

Rajni Shah

I had said I was going to give a talk called “listening for home.” Here is what I had written in the blurb:

Rajni Shah will share some of their thinking around (and experiences of) listening, racism, safety, and song. The performance will include a chance to engage with Rajni’s new book and accompanying zines. It will be reflective, slow, and kind. If you often feel marginalised or silenced by more mainstream structures of dialogue and interaction, you are especially welcome.

I still think it sounds pretty good. I mean, I think I would attend a talk with this blurb. Mostly because I do feel “marginalised or silenced by more mainstream structures of dialogue and interaction.” This is one of the reasons I started to focus on listening as a topic of study. Because I had always been too shy to raise my hand during Q&A sessions or any other kind of public conversation. And then one day I finally dared to raise my hand during the Q&A after a panel discussion at a large arts institution in London. But when they called on me, the words that came out of my mouth were apparently in such a different language to the one that was expected that everyone just pretended like I had never spoken. I was embarrassed and ashamed. And perhaps more significantly, I was reaffirmed in my theory that it was not a good idea for me to speak in public.

What is strange about this experience is that I am actually very good at speaking in public. Years later, I can tell you that I am articulate, intelligent, and that I am blessed with an easeful and magical relationship with language. Not only this, but even if we’re going for easy wins, I will tell you now that I attended a private Church of England girls’ school in the South of England and an Oxbridge university, so I have had plenty of opportunity to learn the tongue of what would be considered good and articulate English by the kinds of people who moderate talks in London’s art institutions. And yet, when I tried to articulate

something, to be part of a conversation about art at said major art institution – and I really was trying in this moment to speak and be heard – I failed.

As I reflected on what had happened, I wondered: what was it about my body, my words, the tone and volume of my comment, that made it unintelligible to the other people in the room?

Now I ask: what was it about the shape of listening in that room that meant certain voices could not be heard?

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So I had said I was going to give this talk called “listening for home.” But when it came to writing the talk, a feeling of **exhaustion** and disinterest came over me. Mostly, I felt kind of bored by the idea of giving a talk about listening and racism.

Now, what you need to know is that I care immensely about the intersections between listening, anti-racist, and anti-colonial practices. I believe very strongly that the way attention is distributed is political, at every scale. And I love exploring this with other people. It feels like urgent work to me.

And yet, here I was, feeling like the topic was dragging me down.

After I spent some time with this feeling, I realised it was because I have given several talks before on this very topic. And every time I do it, I am more blunt, more clear about the fact that it matters what kind of body you bring. More clear about the fact that I am inviting audience members to reckon with their own listening, their own bodies, their own habits, the very assumptions they are making when they think they understand something or someone. Each time, I talk about some listening gathering that I have organised in which **White-body supremacy** was present and the extent to which this made it impossible to do the work of listening. I am clear when I describe them that these were painful experiences. And each time, at least one White person will approach me afterwards to tell me: “I loved it. It was so relaxing.”

I think this is where the feeling of boredom came from. It was a deep weariness with naming racism and trying to create healing and this being taken by some people as a short cut to feeling good.

This time, instead of going into it, I told the audience about the weariness. And then I began the talk by simply saying: “This room is an experience of racism.”

This room. The one we are in.

This room. Breath in a body of skin.

This room. Alongside all the other rooms.

Shaped by the systems that it is trying to undo.

This is where we begin.

Listening for home.