

### ***3. We are capable of so much more***

**Rajni Shah**

The title of my PhD was “Experiments in Listening: we are capable of so much more.” The second part – “we are capable of so much more” – had been the title of a blog post I had written some years previously, before I began the PhD.

During my viva examination, the title was the first thing we discussed. One of the examiners began by saying: let’s talk about this. Clearly, he was a little perturbed that “we are capable of so much more” gave the research soft edges, melting it dangerously close to the field of “self-help.” In response, I talked confidently and passionately about the title. I had no recollection of what I had said until I remembered that there was a recording of the viva. I listen to it and hear myself:

It’s about that idea that as human beings we are capable of so much more, but that doesn’t mean that we declare more or make more or we’re more productive, necessarily. It’s about values for me. It’s about “what’s the more?” I want this PhD to be brave. I want it to be practice as research. As much as possible, I want all the aspects of it to be doing the work. And so the title also needs to do that work, which is to maybe challenge something, maybe open up something, but also to be ... kind of beautiful. And kind of demanding in the way that it asks something. It doesn’t give everything to the reader, which for me means it also leaves room for the reader to bring their interpretation. The reading is part of the work. The attentive state is part of the work. The reception is part of the work.

Sometimes, you hear a phrase like “we are capable of so much more,” and something happens. It lands awkwardly, like a dangerous thing.

Where does that awkwardness come from?

Is it directed at someone?

Does it keep you at a distance from certain kinds of people/writing/places?

Does it keep you tethered?

What kind of writing were you expecting here, and if not this kind, then who told you to expect something different? Does your unease tell you something about your own body and the histories that have shaped it? What does it tell you about your own relationship to kindness or compassion? Safety? Fear? Unrootedness? Softness? Oh, and: Academia? Education? Rigour? Precision? Coloniality? Notice how these words shift meaning when placed in different contexts – how they too, like you, shimmer awkwardly.

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A few years after the viva, I published a book and a series of zines called *Experiments in Listening*, based on the PhD. When the book came out, I marked the moment with an online launch event. For some reason, I felt a strong pull towards reading out loud the blog post that had inspired the original title, even though “we are capable of so much more” no longer featured in the title of the book, and the blog post was a very slight piece of writing that was by then almost ten years old. I couldn’t really explain why, but this was what I chose to share as an introduction to the listening work that the book was attempting.

Perhaps the blog post describes a listening stance. Perhaps it is evidence that **the smallest gesture can be transformative**. But really, though I remain sure about the instinct to share the blog post, I gladly still don’t have the words to explain why.\*

Wednesday, 11 July 2012

blog post on [autumnbling.blogspot.com](http://autumnbling.blogspot.com)

There will be no more weather for a while.

I’m on the bus, on my way to the tube and then to the airport, where I’ll fly tonight to Hong Kong.

Once I get on the tube, there'll be no more outside weather, just a series of fabricated environments.

One of the last things I see before this encapsulation begins is an old lady sitting at the bus stop in the rain. I am looking out of the bus window, on the lower deck, looking right at her, and I smile. She seems surprised, but she smiles back and gently raises her hand into a tentative wave. I beam and wave back. She beams. Just for a moment, as the bus pulls away, I think – I love human beings.

Sometimes, I love human beings.

And I know she's feeling the same thing.

\* **Footnote:** On the morning of 27<sup>th</sup> April 2023, I read [an article in the New York Times about the writer Christina Sharpe](#), and something falls into place for me. I realise that what is unspoken in this story is the fact that I am Brown and the woman who waves and then smiles at me is Black. She is an older Black lady. I have never figured out how to tell this part of the story without invoking race and therefore racism. In many ways, the colour of our skin does not matter to this story. And yet, also, the specific details matter. That this happened in London, in the UK, in 2012. That she was visibly older and I younger. That our skin colours betrayed some of our story but not all of it. That we were both tentative, and then bold, in our smiles, and then our wave.