Sharing the problem of listening

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The Backward Circle began in 2015 as a problem with a tutor. Now, several years later, I understand the problem I had then was likely a manifestation of autism. At the time of writing, I'm waiting to be assessed for an Autism Spectrum Disorder; the assessment may or may not confirm autism but the screening process alone has caused a tectonic perspective shift on my practice, and its specific focus on performed language. While it is no exaggeration to say the tutor I had a problem with was the most charismatic academic in the entire art school, I can now acknowledge the fraught whirlwind of our first meeting—the basis of *The Backward Circle*—had as much to do with my propensity to be glamoured by strong communication styles as it did with their intention to set the tone for our dynamic.

The combination of the tutor's talking and body language captured my attention during our first meeting. Captured is the word for it. The net was not the tutor themselves but my lines of internal enquiry; monitoring and decoding resonances between spoken and gestural meanings, and how they required particular reactions from me. I could hear what was being said but I can't say that I was listening because I know I wasn't reflecting on the object of our discussion—my artwork. Leaning forward toward me, which means earnestness mixed with attention, the tutor smiled and nodded while making a suggestion and so I found myself likewise, animatedly agreeing with who knows what. The tutor flicked their hair and leaned back to begin an anecdotal aside; I repositioned my own body accordingly, acting out the change of register in my own thinking, showing I was keeping pace.

After thirty minutes of intense monitoring, I was exhausted and upset. I went home miserable and frustrated that I had been unable to keep a guard of my own meaning and say what I wanted to in the face of another person. Frustration boiled over: this was the tutor's doing. The bastard had tried to beguile me and put me in my place! Well, I wasn't having it; the next tutorial would be back-to-back. I needed to figure things out about my artwork, not waste time appraising the tutor's manner! Charismatic they were but they were also welcoming of dissent. The tutor readily agreed—no pushback, only curiosity and support. I hoped that once I was relieved from monitoring, I'd be able to listen and say what I thought.

bell hooks discusses the relation of listening to voice in her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom.* 'To hear each other (the sound of

different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition,' she writes (1994, p.41). She underscores the singular importance of students finding their own voice in the classroom as part of this. 'I don't mean only in terms of how she names her personal experience,' hooks writes, 'but how she interrogates both the experiences of others, and how she responds to knowledge presented' (1994, p.149). It is this participation in the matters of the classroom that constitutes voice in hooks' teaching practice, and it is through speaking with one's voice that others might hear you and recognise you. This seems par for the course in Fine Art education where interrogating the experiences of others is the basis of its main teaching method: the group critique. But it's possible to attend 'crits' all year long and still not find your voice, instead only learn to affect a way of talking. hooks' work in critical pedagogy reminds us that we must alter existing pedagogical structures that are based on the authority of the teacher's voice in order to promote listening.

The back-to-back tutorial was not all that unorthodox, really. Art education has a legacy of week-long crits and locked room experiments but it did bring balance to mine and the tutor's dynamic. My frustration evaporated and I ceased blaming the tutor because I found some space to have a voice in. I mistook personal relief for disciplinary breakthrough, though. I stopped short of interrogating my own issues with communication and instead I accepted the idea that my intervention with the tutor had been a comment on the pedagogical form itself—the tutorial. I eagerly read up on Institutional Critique as art practice and in the studio, I was busy with other more important things like writing experimental monologues.

Any student artist working through the implications of subjective narrative writing will come up against two obstacles during opportunities to present work in progress to a group. First is the sympathetic faces of others who can't separate their aesthetic experience of the writing from the fact of the writer, and so collapse both the functions of the narrator and author into a single act of telling something to anyone who'll listen. This is a mire for a student experimenting with form across disciplines, and leads to all sorts of digressions that position lyric constructions as nothing but a veil for therapy. The second obstacle is the discomforted deployment of critical distance in order to swerve difficult or emotional content. It often looks like an insistence on materiality—the paperclip as opposed to the use of staple, the effect of the paper's weight—and this can contain a barbed disdain for the centring of tricky life experiences in the making of an artwork—'it's all me, me, me,' I once heard it put.

'Many professors who are critical of the inclusion of confessional narrative in the classroom…lack the skill needed to facilitate dialogue,' bell hooks points out (1994, p.151), not naming any names. All classrooms contain people who like the sound of their own voice or who are unable to establish links between their anecdotes and the

matter at hand, so for dialogue to be facilitated it must be orchestrated by some means. For myself, at the time a student with a desire to minimise faces and who was suddenly fluent in Institutional Critique after just two tutorials, my orchestration to facilitate dialogue in the upcoming group crit was to turn everyone away from each other.

Between The Covers aired for the first time last year in October on BBC2. The broadcast came days before the introduction of the disastrous three tier restriction system that preceded the second UK national lockdown. The tier system disproportionately sent the north of England into disarray with confusion over boundary lines, travel and commerce. Opportunistic weekend drinkers caught the train or in some cases walked down the road, to pubs in lower-tiered areas while the rule conscious among us—myself included—settled down for an 'irreverent, entertaining, mischievous' Friday night in with professional northerner and radio presenter Sarah Cox. In the depths of pandemic chaos, the new celebrity talk show where 'books spark the banter' would 'bring the nation together through sharing the enjoyment of reading,' the blurb on iPlayer claimed (BBC 2020/21, para.1).

Bringing people together at a national scale during the pandemic was easy enough to imagine. It looked like people sitting on their sofas Tweeting with a free hand but I had no idea what 'sharing the enjoyment of reading' meant. It sounded suspicious. There was a smiling displacement in the wording. The sole purpose of a book club— the collective reading of a particular book—had been removed. With the book missing all that was left was the experience of considering one. I later discovered this wasn't the only substitution in the programme's design. Six months after the first series and some negative press in The Telegraph—overstuffed; little time discussion —the BBC announced a second series, slightly revamped but still focused on banter. Commissioner Emma Cahusac claimed the show was a continuation of 'BBC Arts' commitment to book programmes' (BBC 2021, para.7)—not literature, or fiction, or even just books but, book programmes.

I realise that after the dull funny thud of the phrase 'book programmes' lifts, this all may seem fairly innocuous. The BBC, after all, is a broadcaster and makes programmes not books. However, the commitment, such that there is one, falls shy of reaching the supposed object—literature, fiction, books—by virtue of naming the method of its presentation. The commitment lands bias on programmes and to me that constitutes a trick. BBC Arts is committed to the production of the BBC. But wait! 'The guests' passionate and engaging banter makes us all want to try books we wouldn't have otherwise picked up,' Amanda Ross, CEO of the programme's subsidiary production company, Cactus TV, offered in an attempt to refocus on the

object of discussion (BBC 2021, para.8). It's 'the ultimate fantasy book group,' she continued, and with that the books were gone again.

The reference to fantasy football—a rankings game where points are accrued in an imaginary league based on players' real-world performances—is a revealing analogy. The more banter the guest has, the more valuable the book that they had read one time. On what other grounds could the nation base its judgement? They hadn't even read the same book so there were no comparisons. Ten minutes into the first episode, I turned the television off: I was very happy that the celebrity guests had all privately and separately read some books in the near or distant past, which they either liked or didn't like and facing each other in a circle on telly, found this agreeable.

I decided I would join the nation on Twitter after all:

> *In response to awkward af anti-intellectual, apologetic and utterly shite new book club programme on UK telly, I'll host a reading group for feminist utopian sci-fi novel,* Woman On The Edge Of Time *by Margaret Piercy for people who haven't read it and are interested. Every Weds 6pm - 8pm from 21st October for 8 weeks. 10 people max on Zoom. Free chapter pdfs/ audio book available/ hard copies for skint people. Email why you fancy it and what format you want. Cheers!*

The open call was popular. Within one week ten people were ready to join. I scratched around the internet for the audiobook version, one of the group members forwarded a pdf copy, and links to cheap paperbacks started to be shared in an email thread. We were a mix of artists, musicians, writers, librarians, students and our reasons for joining varied. For some it was their first time reading science fiction, one or two were doing broader feminist research, and for others the book group was some more pandemic socialising, so much of which had been on Zoom for the last eight months. Our first meeting was a taster session. I thought this was a good exit strategy for people who didn't want to be in the group or who didn't like the sound of the book. We gave general self-introductions and listened to Chapter One. The audiobook sounded from my laptop's speakers, looped over into its microphone, through Zoom, and down across the Internet before playing out toward the participants from their respective devices. This schematic description of our connectivity is as insufficient and naive as any other imprecise account of a moving encounter. An ad hoc audiobook hosting, a two-hour pirate radio story! All of us were free to do as pleased, cameras off, listening to the same voice tell us about another place entirely. I was, I was moved.

Woman On The Edge Of Time is the story of an institutionalised woman, Connie, who is either delusional or is in fact visiting a utopian future community via telepathic time travel. Written and first published at the height of the Women's Liberation Movement in 70s America, Marge Piercy's novel is frequently grouped together with other monumental science fiction novels of that period for its speculative exploration of gender in society. Misogyny, systemic racism and disdain for the poor intersect violently and tragically at points in Connie's narrative, spiralling a grief and a depression that drills through her every encounter. It's paused, if not won-out, by the restorative erotics of friendship both within the institution's walls and the future world she regularly visits despite incarceration.

The provisional nature of the broadcast during our first meeting chimed with the endeavour to hold a space open for group discussion. There were some resonances with the book's theme of distanced friendship. It was magical and hopeful in that way political organising is supposed to be. I respect and like all the book group members and while I'm well aware I instigated the whole thing, I struggled to participate after this first meeting. Each Wednesday I felt a creeping reluctance to do anything. I identified oppressive demands of my time and energy in everything from the wording of an email to the fact of making dinner. In the final hour before the group's Zoom call, I'd either shout at or to my partner, and cry about it, cry about crying about it. I hate being in groups. I don't mean this in an off-hand way. I mean it in a frustrated, exasperated and ultimately very boring way. At thirty-five, I'm sick to the back teeth of feeling as I do about being in groups. They overwhelm me with the work of monitoring how things are said and meant, and working out how I'm supposed to speak and appear to several different people at the same time. I'm better one on one, I increasingly find myself saying while accounting for my limited number of friends.

The truly devastating thing is that everyone in the book group will have had their equal share of obstacles and yet we shared many useful, funny and important moments. Only a few of us could make it one week so we drew scenes and outfits from the book as we imagined them. It was very funny. I got to know some people better. Myself and another member of the group will join a queer fiction writing workshop together later this year. A typewritten poem by Marge Piercy was found in a box file by an artist who was curating an exhibition of her project, *The Mobile Feminist Library*, for MOSTYN in summer 2021, while another artist found an open letter signed by Piercy in 2013 lamenting developments in gender studies since the 60s and 70s, and intimating that feminist organising would be right to exclude trans people. I was glad for that clarification on Piercy's hollow feminism, as were the artists working on the archive exhibition. The group was a good group and there was no basis for my woeful behaviour in the people themselves. We were eleven tiles on the computer screen with simulated eye contact, delayed microphone capacities and

while we weren't in the same place, we were all facing each other, simultaneously: that was my problem.

The Backward Circle is one way to talk about it but *The Outward-Facing Circle* at least gives you the idea of faces and where they're directed so I'll refer to it like that from now on. I designed *The Outward-Facing Circle* to facilitate a dialogue of my writing during my group presentation. This was my 'orchestration' as bell hooks would say. We'd sit in the usual democratic circle but with one tweak—our chairs would be turned away from each other. It wasn't a book club; it wasn't a therapy group. By stripping out the visual aspects of communication as I'd done in the back-to-back tutorial, I hoped we'd find ourselves alone, listening to voices. Without the influence of other people's facial expressions, gestural agreements and implicit permissions to speak, or of how people inclined toward or turned from a speaker, what their hands were doing, where their gazes fell, I wondered if we might each find our own ground from which to speak, as I had done under these conditions —if it was possible to come together like this, unmonitored.

The writing I presented before the group was an unedited two-page monologue written on a manual typewriter. The character-narrator urgently pieced together a narrative of domestic scenes and bodily memories from glanced at images of nakedness, smashed plates, seasons and the uncertain names of city streets—it suggested violence but didn't establish it. The written language affected destabilisation too. It was replete with grammatical mistakes, typographic errors and the smudged impacts of the machine's malfunction were visible around the edges of characters. Letters lay over letters obscuring words. Knowledge of the operator's hand—my hand—could be traced in these marks and this, I was told, blurred the roles of character, typist, author. Wanton line breaks and truncated sentences that owed their aphoristic bent to my shocked finger joints, made for a frenetic reading. The voice of the text was breathless, stammering out a tale that was equally broken and jumpy.

Everyone had to be on their own with that voice during the crit, just like they'd been the night before when reading in preparation. This is the live condition of reading first person fiction: falling into a time and space relation with the narrative voice you encounter, meeting them somewhere in the middle to be told something. Perhaps I was asking my fellow students to speak from that time and place, to help make it communal for me. If ten people all read about a particular field at the same time, aren't they all in that field together? This always struck me as a radical concept but in the context of that specific monologue, that unsettling kitchen of broken crockery and uncertain nakedness, I can see I constructed an unsolicited and one-way intimacy. I apologise for that. Whatever I hoped for, we talked mostly about how strange it felt to

speak to each other that way— separated but together in our manner of being separate. Was this the condition of political solidarity or was it a social atomism? I still wonder, though I suspect my 'orchestration' means it's the latter.

Over the last few years, I've used *The Outward-Facing Circle* as a teaching strategy to practice hearing and listening in the classroom. It's been a useful tool to consider the political and social disorientations Sarah Ahmed describes in her book, *Queer Phenomenology: orientations, objects, others*. It has also benefited group reflections on the communal durations experienced by Stuart Brisley and the various audiences of his extended performance works. Participants rely on the acoustics of whatever teaching space we find ourselves in and on their ability to notice changes in the pitch and tone of a speaker's voice, the cadence of speech patterns, utterances and hesitations. Knowing when to speak is difficult in these conditions but it is levelled as difficult for everyone. The confidence a person might usually have to visually take up space is lost to them, the meek might come forward. To say, 'I can't hear you,' suddenly has the potential to mean both things at once; my hearing is obstructed, and, I don't understand what you mean. Participants of *The Outward-Facing Circle* to date, however, have been hearing and seeing. The absence of visual communication for d/Deaf people or someone with hearing difficulties requires a recalibration of the operation. Similarly, people who already don't see the visual aspects of communication in greater or lesser degrees, may suggest new methods of approach to the auditory perception game.

Pauline Oliveros arrived at a distinction between hearing and listening by collaboratively making and listening to sounds, as a practicing musician and an acoustic researcher. 'To hear,' she wrote in, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice,* 'is the physical means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically' (2005, p. xxiii). If the back-to-back tutorial returned my capacity to listen then *The Outward-Facing Circle* increased the group's need to hear, while providing an acoustic space to expand our perception of sounds in. The more hearing happened, the more there was to give our attention to, perceptive and interpret. For now, the questions of what autistic perception might be and how it makes the interrelations of sound, voice, listening and community legible, differently, are too near at hand for me to satisfactorily or appropriately address. I'm trying to listen to the things I've heard through the instances of practice I've described but the interpretation of acoustic vibrations is subject to time and delays, as Oliveros makes clear. What is heard can sometimes be interpreted in an instant, or several years later, or never! So, while I have some hope of drawing my endless rumination on communication to close, I may also take it to the grave.

References

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