

Introduction

Life as a Listener

We all become migrant people by virtue of being listeners or readers. For truly regarded, all reading or listening—like all writing—is a kind of travelling.

Fraser 2018: 29

Listening is travel
Listening is exposure
Listening is proximity
Listening is collapse
Listening is disciplined
Listening is commemoration

This label is faded. It is written in pencil. You can just about make out the first name, just about. The other label is bold. No. 158. Two holes are punched into the top, on the left and on the right. A string holds them together. This label was to hang around a head. The faded label was secured to a suitcase. They belonged to Robert. He is gone now. But on April 6, 2022, his voice came out of a university lecture room's loudspeaker as part of an inaugural lecture. I was giving that lecture and was tracing back my interest in listening to 2009, when I worked on an oral history film commissioned by the Cheltenham Hebrew Congregation. Together with my then colleague Joanne Garde-Hansen, we were listening to elderly members of the community talk about their arrival in Cheltenham, where I lived, and where a 185-year-old synagogue is still home to a dwindling Orthodox community. Robert had not wanted to appear on camera, he thought he wasn't handsome enough, and so we used digital storytelling for him to tell his story as we did not need to film him, instead, we needed to take photographs of some of the objects he had from 1938 and to record his voice. He had the labels with which he had been identified when his mother put him on the Kindertransport train out of Vienna, via the Hook of Holland, to Harwich, where he was lodged in a holiday camp until a foster family came to house him.

He was one of the last to be picked because, as he says, “I wasn’t blonde, and I didn’t have curly hair.” Robert’s voice is deep and resonant. It was thirteen years since we had recorded his story. This clip, his voice, his humor was there in the room. It was felt. It was an act of sonic co-presence, bringing him into a listening relationship with the audience who were seated there in April 2022. This voice filled the room. It was a “sonic phenomena” (Western 2020: 304, see also James 2019), rolling around the lecture room’s walls, into the ears of the audience, vibrating, landing. It was more than a “grain” (Barthes 1977), it had texture and weight. It was a sonic thing beyond meaning or signification and outside of that economy of meaning; it was affective (Ahmed 2004; Steward 2007) and it was also located, was placed somewhere. That is, while it was present, it was also tethered to a place in time and in history. It belonged somewhere(s). Where to? It was accented, the r’s of “Kindertransport” trilled, the Austrian German acting out the bassline of the vocal beat. Robert never talked in his native language. Ever. It was there, beneath the English words, haunting the listening of him. Robert’s voice was something of “value” (Couldry 2010 in Chouliaraki and Georgiou 2022: 110); it was claiming its place, bearing witness, and succeeding in being heard. Robert was still there. For those who didn’t know him, he might never have gone.

This anecdote serves to set out how this book is about listening across bodies, and across time. It is about listening to voices and images, and to people talking about music. It is about listening to the past as it appears in the present. It is about the interplay between telling and listening and the narratives that emerge from those encounters. It is about listening in, and out of, spatial and temporal place. It is about listening as an organizing imperative, as a political act: part of a circuit of “speaking and acting together” which constitutes the “political realm” (LaBelle 2018: 9 citing Arendt 1998). It is about trans-listening, listening across disciplines, bodies, times.

Deborah Moglen (2008) has the lovely idea of “trans-aging,” which is about time and experience. Her work is a psychoanalytic exploration of aging and the self; an attempt to think outside of the expected narrative trajectory, and it is something that comes up in the listening projects that I talk about in Chapter 3, where age and reflection confuse linearity. She argues for two models of thinking about aging, the vertical and the horizontal. The vertical model is driven by repression, whereas the horizontal is constituted by dissociation. This in turn takes two forms, the incorporative or the introjective function. The incorporative model is defensive, maintaining “ghostly specters of youth as consuming objects

of loss and desire” (2008: 297). The introjective model, by contrast, “initiates a dynamic and creative process in which multiple self-states of past and present are available for recognition and enactment” (2008: 297). This embraces the “endlessly overlapping states of being and stages of life” (2008: 306). It starts to see the potential for a non-linear model of aging, which is disarticulated from a rigid chronology and characterized instead by relations, moments, experience, and memory. This model allows for an “overlapping,” and, I think, an immediacy which I explore later in the book. It goes some way to articulating the experience of listening to Robert’s voice as it filled the room and went into the ears of those present there on April 6, 2022; it coursed through live bodies, through senses (Barthes 1985a). I was taken back to the moment I first heard Robert and his voice prefigured a temporal collapse.

Listening, Belonging, and Memory

We listen in corporeal, familial, institutional, and ideological environments whose textures ebb and flow, whose modes and nuisances we negotiate. I listen for a child to come home at 3 a.m., to the emails popping into the inbox, to the ever-present I-Phone, I try to block out the sounds of my country’s politicians vying for my attention, I listen out for oppositional support. There is a large literature on sound and our place within it, some of which I note in the next chapter, but the rationale for my work emerges, like most, from a view that there is a gap in the field of knowledge on the approach I take, and from an assessment of it as being core to much of the contemporary conceptual and practical work that I have conducted and am in the process of working on. There is no book that deals with “Listening” as a core methodology for use across media and popular music studies and its connections with belonging and memory, for using listening as a step into storytelling research. Les Back’s brilliant book *The Art of Listening* (2007) did much to establish it as key to a sociological methodology, however, to use it as a legitimate way in to approaching creative music practices, oral history projects, and storytelling projects is to understand its importance and potential for listening as a cross-disciplinary methodology when conceived of as a process that happens within broader matrices of belonging and memory. Conceptually, the book is about listening as a trans-temporal and multi-sensorial mode, and these modes are worked out through examples of research projects that illustrate different circuits of listening.

The book is written from a cultural studies approach where popular culture and popular music act as valid locations from which to build the core arguments around listening as a multi-sensorial and temporal mode. I am not a philosophy scholar, nor am I a sound studies one. I work in the overlaps between popular music and media, oftentimes too “music” for media and too “media” for

music. The research I have done drives this book, and so it might be argued that it is grounded in those voices and stories. This approach is founded on an understanding that the music, stories, narratives, and online media that serve as examples in the book are all doing some kind of work, that they are meaningful in and for themselves, that in becoming audible they might alter discourses of exclusion or of ignorance.

I think that I want the book to be able to work on two levels. First, I want to make it clear that listening is not the same as reception, and that understanding its many dimensions and roles reveals its increasing importance within online communication and community work. This means I am reliant on Barthes' idea from *The Responsibility of Forms*, where he writes about how listening "speaks" (1985a: 259). He fuses the auditory with the enunciative, foregrounding the interaction between the two, that space of exchange here. This is a space that I look at in this book, paying attention to how we might open up such spaces within the context of applied media and music research. Second, I want to use "Listening" in order to travel across disciplines, and so I use a variety of cross-disciplinary avenues into thinking about being a listener, life as a listener, listening to, listening for, in chapters that encompass reflections on time, space, memory, and listening to accounts of projects in community media and music, on oral histories and storytelling.

Listening and Belonging

Being listened to, being rendered audible, is key to belonging. Given that listening happens in and between bodies, real, virtual, and imagined (fleshly, digital, and national/diasporic), I touch on the relationships between the two and note how the act of listening can be a weapon of exclusion as well as a tool for inclusion. In 2004, Sara Ahmed clarified her position on the idea of comfort, which she said was "about the fit between body and object" (Ahmed 2004: 148). She was reflecting on how heteronormative society is like an uncomfortable chair for the queer subject, who can never "fit." Similar in practical terms to the design of cars, whose driving seats are engineered for male drivers, Ahmed's work spotlights the heteronormative (and patriarchal) architecture of social and material life through and upon which those who are "different" need to travel and negotiate. Rather than a chair, let's think about a mold, or a piece of foam, which has form but can also be changed through use. Similar I guess, in spirit to Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, wherein gender becomes through repetition, belonging is molded through many series of encounters, refusals, and acceptances, and I explore this in Chapter 4 in relation to citizenship and the dynamics of inclusion secreted into specific processes of listening. Rather than bell hooks' idea of belonging as being about "a" place and community (2009), the book thinks about belonging in relation to time and memory.

Listening and Memory

Memory studies is a well-established and flourishing area of academic research, and my job here is to think about how it is related to listening. I am meeting memory studies through digital storytelling, and so my entry point is story. I acknowledge work on memory as an iterative process (Barad 2010; Hristova, Ferrandiz, and Vollmeyer 2020; Kuhn 2007, 2010), particularly in relation to image (Campt 2017; Kuhn 2007, 2010) as well as noting the role of popular music and memory as a trigger to tell stories (Istvandy 2019; Van Dijck 2014). Throughout this, I am holding on to “story,” that is the desire for narrative, and the truths they might enunciate might be different to “historical” or “factual” truth (Spence 1982, in Hirsch and Spitzer 2009: 160), but is key to “listening across age(s),” as the vehicle through which memory is relayed to the self and encountered by others in listening encounters. Some of these encounters might be termed “witnessing events” and the idea of the witness comes out of memory studies in relation to the Holocaust. In particular, Felman and Laub’s (1992) work which centers on psychoanalysis and the Holocaust is instrumental to this and there are two strands of their thinking that are useful: the idea that witnessing is a moment of subjectivity collapse, and that witnessing might be a productive act. They argue that in witnessing trauma “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (1992: 57) and this proximity, the collapse into the other is an act of exposure. The idea that listening might be a productive process is outlined here, where they write how “The listener [. . .] is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*” (1992: 57), a place, a moment where “things flash up” (Stewart 2007: 68), and lines meet. Listening can thus be transformative, modulating relationships between the listener and the listened to. Listening brings us closer.

Listening and Proximity

To listen to something or someone is to be close to it or them. Listening is about proximity, and in many works on sound and listening, which are outlined in Chapter 1, it has been considered the opposite of the visual experience, which effects distance. Even at its most utilitarian, when it is about access and information, it is also about getting closer to that which is being listened to. I will examine this throughout the book by considering the politics of proximity in relation to enablement and containment. I say “proximity” to mean that listening as a methodology is about being enfolded into difference, which may also involve other narratives (Macarthur 2016: 7). This sense of being “enfolded into” is an important one, which has been considered in relation to the nascent individualized listening technologies of the late twentieth century. In his assessment of the emotional and cognitive affordances of the Walkman, Bull (2004) argues that such media technologies offer a sense of proximity, or a “we-ness” and “being with”

(2004: 186). They also manufacture distance from the “real” environment by inserting a selected one (work on headphones). Depending on what is being listened to, an album, a playlist, an audio book, the radio, mobile technologies offer a temporary community with other voices, sounds, and stories. My work centers on those stories, rather than the technological mediums through which they are relayed, although I do consider the method of representation that Twitter feeds have in relation to listening in Chapter 3.

Close listening can also be uncomfortable or undesired, messy, and political (Oliver 2015). Music might be curtailed, voices silenced, “noisy” protests made illegal. Sound and music can be and have been used as a weapon, as torture (Cusick 2017; De Nora 2000). Although I do not consider that in this book, I do think about listening when there is a discomfort, a distaste, or even a bodily refusal to be in the same space, to be trapped in proximity, which I consider briefly in Chapter 4 in relation to sounds of Otherness that are dampened down, muted, and refused and ask why that might be.

Connected Listening

“Connected listening” is listening that happens within a matrix of real, virtual, collective, national, and diasporic bodies, which themselves are in constant flux. The listener listens from their body, and this exists within a web of identities, histories, and memories. A theory of connected listening weaves together ideas from sound studies (Kheshti 2014; Voegelin 2014; Thompson 2017; LaBelle 2018), cultural geography (Western 2020), feminist cultural theories of storytelling (Fernandes 2017), and affect (Ahmed 2004; Stewart 2007; Berlant 2011) to understand the role of listening as imbricated within complex and fluid fields of affective belongings that intersect across space and time. More specifically, the body is a thing that exists temporally and spatially; it is located. To think about how we might listen and how listening bodies might without thinking about where they might be found is to ignore the contexts within which that listening is done.

Listening happens within and between things and people, across bodies, memories, and imaginations. It has, as LaBelle writes, “relational affordances” (2018: 26). It travels, and in turn, enables travel. If so, we might ask where we are before we set off on our listening. In his 1993 book, *Weltfremdheit (Alienation)*, German philosopher Sloterdijk asks, “Where are we when we listen to music?” (“Wo sind wir, wenn wir Musik hören?”) (2016: 294). Now, this “where” might be in a spatial or a temporal “place” and his question is, I think, interested not only in the ontology of the listening subject but in the relational impact that listening has on it. I am not just thinking about listening to music, as I said earlier, but to voices. And so, my response to his question, “where are we . . .?” is that we are exposed and that this can be a positive place to be. We are open to invited and unintended sounds and stories. I am interested in the experience of listening encounters, between people, to music and to images, to the dynamics of listening between people and things. Sloterdijk’s question, which focuses on one side of that dynamic, the listener, uses “wo” (where), which can be understood to encompass a chronological or

locational “where.” But let’s replace that with “when,” which upsets the security of the listening subject, forcing it to be reconsidered in relation to the encounter within which they are engaged. Listening is, therefore, an act of exposure that has the potential to both soothe and disrupt, involve and alienate. The shift to thinking about listening as an applied research tool requires us to think about the “conditions of connection” (Stewart 2007: 31). These are the landscapes, netscapes, rooms, and roads where we listen and are listened to and where some voices go unheard or are erased or distorted.

Listening and Story

The applied research discussed in the book stresses the importance of listening to individual narratives. This, in turn, has prompted me to ask questions over story and its performance within the narration of the self; across digital storytelling and other projects asking for life-course narratives. I don’t think, like Stead or Kassabian, that there is anything problematic with using narrative (Macarthur 2016: 175), on the contrary, continuing to use this “narrative paradigm” (Macarthur 2016: 175) meant that participants “knew the score”; they understood what “story” meant to them. A lot of the book will be showing how it is the stubbornness of story and its desire to impart order, to emplot (Ricoeur 1984), to frame experience and emotion that is being listened to across a number of different research “listening spots.” Story is integral to the pursuit and presentation of memory. Kuhn argues that “one central plank remains however: the notion that memory and memories are discursive” (2007: 283). They are iterative, and the past is only available through this process, whereby it is “iteratively reworked and enfolded through iterative practices” (Barad 2010: 260).

A number of these stories that are discussed in Chapter 3 were rehearsed, scripted, and repeated in ways that have meant that I use the phrase “performative historiography” to capture how the repeated narrations of the past self incrementally become an accepted version of that same self, broadcast to others. I remain convinced of the pull of narrative, “canonical linguistic frameworks that organize event memories into comprehensible and causal sequence of events in the world” (Fivush 2008: 51). This organizational process can be accompanied by a similar process of the “ensemble and sequencing of images” (Kuhn 2007: 286) for both individual and collective subjectivities has been a feature of

the empirical digital story projects I have worked on, and they are too, a feature of the online archives I explore in Chapter 3. They are all connected by narrative, and these narratives lie at the micro, individual level. I have tried to spotlight narratives that get subsumed under larger stories, to give people the mike.

Not Listening

In 1980, the British cultural theorist Stuart Hall introduced an idea about encounters with media messages. His famous “encoding, decoding” (1973) article illustrates the vectors of power that lie at every point along the trajectories of (then twentieth-century) media messaging. Depending on cultural capital, status, education, age, and political affiliation, viewers might decode messages that producers had encoded into them in one of three ways: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. This model allowed for an understanding that “reception” might be colored by a number of different variables, as well as relying on a substantive difference between the then “producer” and the “audience.” The model worked by understanding the ways in which television and mass media were encountered; I watch the evening news and disagree with its coverage of an event due to my politics; my family agrees with it— and so on. Put listening in the model. That doesn’t change much on an initial attempt, you can listen and agree, listen, and partly agree, listen, and disagree. But how about listening and ignoring? How about switching off? Some of what the book covers in Chapter 4 is about specific institutionalized forms of “not listening” to those who have exceeded the boundaries of ordinariness by being too noisy.

Ways of Listening: Interfaces and Interactions

Listening at the door, through telephone wires, through headphones, across oceans, to old vinyl, to zoom lag; ways of listening are formed and impacted by technologies as much as subject position (Barthes 1985b; De Nora 2000; Born 2010; Bull 2004; Nancy 2007). Emerging from the applied research work that is covered in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 is an understanding that “practices of listening are also shaped by technologies and their interfaces and affordances” (Rice: 102 in Novak and Sakakeeny 2015). Listening is not only a fulcrum between listener and listened to; it is a process that collapses (and enforces) difference, allows for proximity, and happens within broader political, chronological, and temporal flows. It also operates on a dynamic axis of ever-mutating digital communication practices that enable listening across time, and across bodies. There is a wealth of research on headphone practices and the making of the personal sonic environment (De Nora 2000; LaBelle 2010; Bull 2018; Hush 2019; Roquet 2021), where the interface between the self and surrounding physical space is moderated through soundtrack choice. My interest lies at the interface of the listening self with others enabled by, troubled by, and afforded by applied research listening practices and recording technologies.

Before I go any further, I want to think about my own “interface” with listening, since that has been the impetus for the book. I acknowledge the burgeoning impact that autoethnography is having within feminist media and popular music studies (Ettorre 2016; Grist and Jennings 2020; Cohen, Grenier, and Jennings 2022). I do not specifically work from an autoethnographical perspective, that is, I

am not critically examining my own responses to and experiences of listening throughout the book, but I guess I am borrowing from its spirit, what Ettore calls the “feminist ‘I.’” My body has been present in the research that is written up here. And it is not an invisible one, it is not transparent. It has entered into encounters and seen its impact; its accent, title, age, nationality, and gender have consistently marked it out. It has seen these borders negotiated in these listening exchanges. But I have chosen listening because of two life experiences. First, like many, lockdown made me think about my listening in a different way, and I wanted to put it at the top of how I worked with people in research projects. Second, I suffered a breakdown in 2019 and over the course of three years, was listened to. It came at a price, a hefty one, but it made me realize how important that space was: how the act of listening is an act of kindness. And I used that experience to think more about listening as an act of defiance.

Map of the Book

Listening ripples across time and ruptures the surface of things. Bodies lived and bodies politic can be disturbed by the act; taken back, brought close to Others. Reassuring, reminding, and disturbing, listening is the connecting mode, and Chapter 1, “Connecting Lineages,” brings together established and emerging voices from across new and not so new philosophies of listening that revolve around the idea that listening is caught up with resonance and refusal. I use ideas from sound studies and memory studies, from cultural geography, sound art, and popular music opening up a conceptual space to build a theory of listening in relation to belonging and memory, touching base with key work on listening (Barthes 1985b; Erlmann 2014; Kassabian 2013; Kheshti 2014; LaBelle 2018; Nancy 2007; Szendy 2008, 2017; Voegelin 2014; James 2019, 2021), listening and Otherness (Denning 2015; Radano and Olaniyan 2016), and listening to images (Campt 2017).

Chapter 2, “Applying Connected Listening,” discusses how to listen with an ear to memory and belonging. This methodology can be used across interdisciplinary research projects, including, but not limited to, digital storytelling, popular music ethnography, online listening, and media analysis. It can be a messy method, given that it involves bodies and entanglement, upset and discomfort. I introduce the term “Grounded Feminist Listening” as a negotiated way into this type of research listening. This approach relies on listening as a “feminist care” mode, particularly in terms of “giving attention” to (Robinson 2011; Sevenhuijsen 2003; Brannelly and Barnes 2022; LaBelle 2018), which in turn, can produce discomfort through unforeseen affective connectivities (Stewart 2007; Kheshti 2014; Schulte 2016), and double witnessing (Dreher 2009; Fernandes 2017; Hirsch and Spitzer 2009). This is when narrators and listeners witness unfolding stories triggered by artifacts and images in parallel. And because the research involves listening to images, I use Campt’s (2017) work on the resonant image to

understand what this means in practice. This includes using “Qualitative Online Listening,” a simple modulation of traditional media discourse analysis, which I use to tackle the resonant image and its affinities, or “intensities” (Stewart 2007) across applied research, with participants and with online narratives of the @AuschwitzMuseum account.

Working with veterans, migrants, rural workers, farmers, and people being helped into employment has made me consider the ethics of listening across different societal layers; how might we listen across class and across gender, and what might a listening with age “look” like? What are the ethics of me, someone who has never been in care, or in prison, or has families who were murdered in the Holocaust, or who have been trafficked or fled war, listening to voices of those who have? What are the ethics of “curating” those voices to gauge the impact of policy implementation? (Butterwick 2012; Dreher 2009; Fernandes 2017). Some of the conclusions of this chapter reveal more problems than answers and these are further explored in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Chapter 3, “Listening Across Age(s),” is about listening to the past as it is “storied” in the present. It introduces the idea of “performative historiography,” which is a process whereby stories about the past become “true” in the repeated telling and how some of these stories and the formats they appear on can go some way toward upsetting dominant narratives. Because it is about listening across age, it also introduces the idea of “rippling,” which thinks about listening as multi-temporal (Barad 2010; Tanner 2021).

The chapter focuses on two case studies. The first uses a digital storytelling project, Veterans’ Voices, where I worked with aging UK veterans over a two-year period to facilitate intergenerational storytelling and listening. I use memory research with war veterans (Islam 2019; Long et al. 2021; Nugin 2021; Welzer 2010) to help make sense of the project and consider how listening across ages actually manifested. The second case study listens to the Twitter account “@AuschwitzMuseum” using work on archives and witnessing (Felman and Laub 1992; Hirsch and Spitzer 2009) and memory and image (Kuhn 2010; Tendeciary 2006). Every day, the account, called ‘Auschwitz Memorial’, posts twelve photographs of people who perished in or survived the olocaust. I argue that this listening is an enfoldment into an affective economy (Ahmed 2004), which provides affective cross-temporal connections (Stewart 2007). On October 27, 2022, Elon Musk bought the platform, which resulted in staff departures and forebodings of platform collapse. If this happens, then that listening will have to move elsewhere and its concomitant affectivities may alter.

Chapter 4, “Listening and Belonging,” explores how modes of listening work to generate ideologically specific ways of belonging and “not-belonging” as a citizen. It discusses this from a UK perspective, using the early twentieth-century radio show, *Listen with Mother* (1950–82) and the recent “The Listening Project” (2012–22) which offered “ordinary people” the chance to have a conversation. I illustrate how this urge to the ordinary (Stewart 2007; Berlant 2011), a way of being, an epithet, that can be both inviting and constraining, is mobilized to shape who is listened to and who is excluded. Moving to recent case studies from recent UK legislation around protest and

noise I pick out instances where there are those who are not listened to and threatened with expulsion from this good “citizenry.” Through discussion over a digital storytelling project with unemployed people, it then asks questions over listening as a way of gauging the impact of routes to good citizenship that are couched within a neo-liberal framework of the good citizen as the working citizen.

Chapter 5, “Listening: Migration, Voice, and Place,” is about listening in order to question certain “western econom[ies] of voice” (Chouliaraki and Georgiou 2022). It uses a two-year pan-European project called Mapping the Music of Migration (MaMuMi) where migrants in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Spain, Norway, and the UK shared a story about a song that was important to them. Its aim was to counteract dominant European-wide discourses of the “migrant” through listening exchanges centered on a song. The chapter argues that listening and its ability to produce proximity (Erlmann 2004: 175) and “affinities” (Stewart 2007) is an affectively powerful mechanism. It can make the silenced subaltern (Spivak 1988), audible and engineer a space for sonic agency (LaBelle 2018) for those whose voices have been collapsed into prevailing and pervasive discourses of Otherness, fear, threat, and vulnerability (Chouliaraki and Georgiou 2022).

Chapter 6 is called “Echoes” and is an attempt to resound some of the key ideas that emerge throughout the book. It adds in some more voices and asks you to listen to them. One of those voices is Robert Landberger’s.