Chapter 3: Listening to Affects: Working with affective evocations of sound/silence as a mode of doing decoloniality

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Introduction: Listening for the murmurs of resistance

It is the first discussion group session with my PhD colleagues in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. I sit across from them, taking up a small corner just around the edges of the rectangular table. New faces and old faces turn towards each other smiling and exchanging pleasantries. Many of us have played in this field before, having completed our master's degree from this very institution, knowing already of the unspoken rules one needs to be conversant in to navigate through its ranks. We begin introducing ourselves first and foremost by way of our research—countries, colleges, experiences, and other such identifiers come after ***(refer to i – Conversations in the Margins)****; we lead with research—which is of the utmost importance. Each project sounds exciting, engaging and with immense potential for outcomes—a living breathing organism of promise. Slowly, as we reach my corner of the table, I take a breath steadying myself, I do not have a fully-formed research question, I have an open-ended inquiry—an exploration—I*

Conversations in the Margins

(i) Dear Reader, I want to begin by introducing our conversations in the margins, as we move through this text, I will keep calling your attention to the margins and the footnotes where we will find reveries, segue ways, provocations and more which I present as building blocks of research often ignored. The Margins is where I present my provocations, and the footnotes is where I do my critical thinking – rough notes – or where the process is depicted. The centre of the writing is where you will find the stories, the argument, but it is in the excess you will see the detours, the winding road I took to arrive here. Let us talk about the attempt to bring neutrality in research, in arts and humanities and social sciences, where there has been much debate on the possibility of neutrality. Neutral, impartial or non-involved observer position has been a standard shared by several qualitative traditions (Skovulund *et.al.* 2023). The authors write, 'Can and should research be based on ideals of neutrality and impartiality or should researchers instead embrace the personal interests and subjective reasons that drive them to study a specific field?' (Skovulund et.al. 2023: 363). In our introductory seminar, we introduce ourselves with our research first rather than our 'selves'. The questions we are seeking to unravel, our hypothesis, all come before our experiences, our colleges, our countries, our beings, etcetera. Glimpses of our lived experiences cast aside—the

positions we take, the lived entry points into our research enquiry—the great big belly of where our research stems from is shelved for the time-being. In academia and our academic lives, it seems almost as though our research positions our lived experience within the environment, rather than our ***living*** that positions how we will lead the next four years of academia and academic life, even when the experience tells us otherwise. As a decolonial scholar, I know that research is never neutral—historically it has been used to oppress and manage narratives of indigenous and marginalised communities, even the word holds a dirty connotation associating with exploitative behaviours (Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021).

In acknowledging the layered power-structures—systemic, individual and community-based—it is essential to build a true-sense of ethics of care.

like to call it, its post-humanist research I think, or is it more so post-qualitative? It is definitely decolonial and perhaps I will use some critical feminist theoretical frameworks. I feel better acknowledging the boxes within which this "open enquiry" fits in (ironic, I know) precisely so in academic terms, yet it feels insufficient if not restrictive as though I am placing bindings upon myself (refer to ***ii – Conversations in the Margins on next page****). There is no hypothesis, and my methodology is through the act of creating, living, building, observing, engaging, rather than analysing, I embed myself in the lived embodied experience of the research. Examining the effect of sound, silence, and stillness within learning spaces—how do we listen? The project itself is on the act/action*[1] *of decolonisation, but I am practice first, art first. This introduction is met with intimidating silence, I could have spoken in an alien language, incoherent, but nonetheless, I am surrounded by a supportive group of peers who rally together as they nod their approval not quite understanding what I have said. Someone says, 'I have been fascinated by the introduction that was given to us at the induction about the Arts Creativity Research Group, you all do some really cool stuff, I imagine it's like playing all the time.' I smile and agree. Most of the time the work does feel like play. Nevertheless, I can't shake the feeling that this well-*

1 The meaning of act/action is based on the definition of decoloniality as given by Catherine E. Walsh that is a way of thinking/doing/knowing/being; an ongoing process of reconfiguring the practice of decoloniality, that attempts to breakthrough the hierarchical structures of race, gender, class and heteropatriarchy; the way this impacts life, knowledge, spirituality, and thought processes (2018: 17). The act/ion, thus, in this context is both the process by which one approaches/thinks about knowledge and learning—what that means individually, communally and as a society? What does the actual act of producing said "knowledge" look like?

meaning remark somehow undermines the importance of the research[2] *and its critical heft, raising questions about the work that is being done, that should be considered as "work" despite its inherent "playfulness".*

Conversations in the Margins

(ii) Thinking about the restraint of a call for open enquiry reminds me of an experience of conducting a creative writing workshop with primary school students in Nepal. When given a free lease to be as creative in their storytelling and writing—when I had told them to not worry about whether their story began at the beginning, middle or end, they were frozen in writer paralysis—unable to think outside the box now that the parameters of control often found in academic writing were removed. Many students instead chose to re-write familiar stories and follow known structures for the safety of results and feedback.

In this chapter I explore the practice of decoloniality as a process of questioning and exploring what thinking/being/doing/theorising through the decolonial lens can look like? I do this as I move through the Institution[3] as an academic, researcher, and teacher. I use a new-materialist lens that is founded on Barad's (2007) idea that everything is matter, which by extension, allows us to think of knowledge and meaning-making as also matter, matter that is malleable, giving birth to new and always emerging materialities of the world and in the world. This is the entry-point, from which I engage with the sounds of white patriarchy and colonial rhetoric stemming out of the Institution and knowledge making spaces, the instances of silence and stillness that spill out like fleshy sonic vibrations shaping academia and our learning spaces, what are the readings of systemic power inequities that we can listen for in our attempt to reimagine just education futures. What resistances can emerge working with these points of sonic tension to build

2 A problem with arts-based research is that it is interdisciplinary in nature, and while in academia we go hoarse shouting for more interdisciplinary work as Hull (1999) puts it the interdisciplinarian is the first to be hired and fired. He writes about the extreme standards across disciplines that we hold the interdisciplinarian to – the highest form of assessment across all disciplines that find their way into his work, and all the while addressing the different interests and values of scholars in these disciplines – it's a labour that is often ten-times harder than that of a single disciplinarian – almost as though we are making a case for inter-disciplines to fail. Alternatively, research in siloes is what has kept academic output in its ivory tower – perhaps adopting a diffractive model i.e. reading one discipline through the lens or praxis of another in a truly enmeshed and entangled nature is worth the labour to see what new materialities emerge – whether they meet the highest standards yet or not.

3 The Institution is representative of academia and the bodies of knowledge making.

new meanings and new materialities that practice decoloniality and move us towards doing pluralistic knowledge? What arises in the slippages and fissures (Dernikos *et al*. 2020) of an unequal knowledge-building terrain, showing up as sonic points of tension on the body[4], dear reader, I listen through the filter of affective theory – wherein sound leaves marks on the bodies. Think about the shushing of excitement at the start of a new class, the quiet thumbs up during reading hour, the Pavlovian clap that teachers use to quieten a room of Key satge-2 students in the UK. I am calling us to pay attention to the movement of sound and silence impinging on fleshy bodies, held in the space of a racially, socio-politically, and intellectually diverse environment of the academy. What gets revealed to us when we make an attempt towards holding space for plural forms to exist - of knowing, learning, relating, and entangling with one another and with many worlds (refer to **iii – Conversations in the Margins**).

Conversations in the Margins

(iii) The idea of many worlds and the pluriverse was introduced by decolonial scholars such as Mignolo (2007) and Dussel (2012), giving the impression that many worlds exist simultaneously. Thinking along these lines, I cannot help but visualise it as layers of knots placed upon each other as knotted overlays, richer, nuanced and taut. Perhaps, if we allow ourselves to engage with this tension as teachers, researcher and students, the living bodies that take up space in the Institution, it will give us a glimpse into what makes true plurality possible—not to resolve difference, but to witness and hold space for it.

Problematising academic living and the Institution:

The academy is often primed to speak in restrictive formats, reaching for an arbitrary check-box set-up of diversity, inclusiveness and equity, rather than the multi-layered, nuanced alternative of plurality that becomes part of the systemic framework of an institution, building certain inherent issues in academia and the production of research (Biasco *et al*. 2001). This has perhaps been most starkly evident with the recent rolling back of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and measures in the academic institutions of the United States of America which found themselves without funding and resources to continue significant research. If DEI measures are truly nuanced, part of the working process of our systems of knowledge, a

4 The body of learners, researchers, knowledge-makers, institution heads, etc.

working practice framework within the institution rather than a framing worn on top as adornment, it would not be as easy to dismantle them. We are left considering who gets to choose who comes in or is left out. Who decides and how, who are these stakeholders?

One of the aims of this piece of writing is to interject and impinge upon the idea of the "academic" in writing and research, and the building of "formal knowledge", to once again centre the lives and the processes of living within education systems and knowledge-building. Thus, to make a case for the fleshy bodies that take up space, and for the nuances of the lived experiences that are the building blocks of "significant research".[5] For someone reading this chapter, you would have seen there are boxes referred to as Conversations within the Margins. These "Conversations" already explained as spaces where I speak about the ideas, reveries, half-formed thoughts and provocations that have arisen as I was writing this piece. These are not complete or polished or peer-reviewed writings, they are glimpses of lived experiences, of conversations with peers, friends and mentors, conversations between you the reader (or my imagination of you) and myself the writer, yet I argue that they hold the same significance as the scholarly works cited, because they lead the direction of this inquiry. The "Conversations" guide this exploration, and in doing so, hold academic weight despite their half-formed, informal nature. This is what shows up as the belly of my research—as my supervisor is fond of saying—meaning that this is where the soft flesh as well as the vulnerability of what drives this research project lies,[6] it frames my positionality, it guides my enquiry and while it is often discarded because it does not fit the extractive norms

5 Reader, I am thinking of DEI in a widened context, we must also consider the processes within other knowledge forms that help build meanings and readings of the world, their ability to exist and take as much space as the Eurocentric knowledge tradition has, not as alternatives, but rather as co-existing in their own right. This allows one to think of the praxis format by which DEI measures can and should be reimagined, as permeating all aspects of research, teaching, learning and knowledge-building, rather than acting as an odd-and ill-fitted skeletal structure placed upon an academic institution.

6 I continually speak of research inquiry as an exploration or a journey and in the tradition of post-qualitative research it is so, not to prove or disprove a hypothesis but rather to inquire after research questions (St. Pierre 2019). In the decolonial tradition this resists the neoliberal need for research to produce a finished product or result (Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021) and instead foreground a process or a way of knowing and then paying attention to the emergences that come up along the way.

of Western academic citation practices (Calderón 2022), I ask here—is it any less important? Is our disregard of these stories and anecdotes and unpolished ideations as "fluff" or the stuff for the notebooks and margins, not simply another form of silencing? The impulse to clean up the "fluff", the very *process* of germination,[7] by its nature interjects the depiction of a valuable process; the process of "showing the work" as we were often told to do in our math classes. Even detours and ideas that have been discarded before completion leave their imprint behind, building a weblike network of impressions and paths marking our journey on the way to building knowledge? Each of these Conversations in the Margins are those tracings that have built the "meat" of this text, even if they are not themselves fully-formed or tidied appetisingly, and I find it counter-intuitive to discard them as insignificant.

In an earlier conversation with my PhD advisor, I expressed my anxiety around fitting in within the ivory tower of the Institution, I was starting out as a researcher and worrying about the part of myself I would have to discard to fit within the norms and values of the Institution. Would I have to violently cut off parts of myself and leave them at the door and plead my allegiance to the Cartesian logic of binaries and absolutes applauded within the Institution? Would I need to separate my many selves and many worlds when out in the field, or when writing papers, adopt a make-believe neutrality as I indulge in a split between the mind, the body, the social, the intellectual, the many worlds I inhabit? I said to her—

> I am practice first, I am poetry first, I am lived experiences first, art is my research, building from life and thinking through life and living is what I centre in my research. This is the critical lens through which I view and understand the world, and I feel as though this is not understood much less accepted as of value in academia. I don't ever seem to have enough words to explain how rich and important art, poetry, the everyday, the mundane, and the trivial can be as data in research enquiry, more so human enquiry, I feel silenced. Feel the silence on my body – diminished by it. Marking it as other. I am always left feeling that I need to choose one over the other.

7 Of an idea.

I was attempting to describe to her, the possibility and the existence of a creative practice that held a critical lens within it in academia and research. The creation of a by-product that was art, but it held within a process by which it came to knowledge-building, what I liked to think of as research in motion. The "artwork" itself is fraught with nodes of tension, interrogation, theory and epistemics, which perhaps are done differently to *traditional* qualitative or quantitative research, but are no less intensive for the critical rigour that they bring to my enquiry. While, as my peers sounded the Eurocentric rhetoric, declaring that my research processes feel like play (after all building poems from responses gathered in a sound-walk or a trip through a museum display as a form of engendering deeper engagement via deep listening) does feel like fun, the critical intensity within that process and method was examining and building new onto-epistemological configurations of knowing which allow us to examine the politico-ethical cuts we make to our ways of meaning-making in the world.

Simon O'Sullivan calls this the 'ethico-aesthetics' which is best understood as a kind of paradigm that moves beyond the scientific parameters and is related to a practice of 'self-creation' (2017: 210), speaking to the ways in which we can produce ourselves differently onto-epistemologically. The spaces and pockets where this process occurs is what Finley (2014: 531) refers to as the liminal space[8] of the arts, which is primed 'for the discovery of "what is not yet" in an improved world'. I do not know if I would be as optimistic to claim an improved world as Finley does, as it runs the risk of looking for a certain wholeness or a universalism that turns away from the simple fact that differences always exist and there is not one "improved world", but multiple that leads us to acknowledging that birth and destruction always exist side-by-side (refer to **iv – Conversations in the Margins**). I would, however, agree that the liminal space here holds room for the pluralities of the world/reality to show up authentically, as a

8 Many academics, scholars, artists and creative practitioners have grown weary of the "liminal space" of becoming, as post-humanists would say, since it implies an ongoing state of limbo where we are always becoming, about to take form, but not yet formed. I think the liminal space here layered atop the tension nodes where neocolonialist and neoliberal rhetoric permeates through the academy, creating an affective tension in the fleshy bodies of students, teachers, researchers, etcetera. The liminal space is where change can happen through tension and engaging with this tension.

necessary reflection of how knowledge occurs, exists, is born and reformed in an infinite recursive process of assembling and re-assembling. It is in reflecting this in our Institution and academic living that we honour a polyphony of life and nature making our knowledge environments agile and resilient to the complex and nuanced changes of an ever-evolving world.

Conversations in the Margins

(iv) Reader, I invite you think of the plurality of lived experience as a layered universe made up of multiple universes of varying sizes existing atop one another, and through one another. In what is almost a prismatic reality, wherein perceptions and entry points diffract into new ways of being/knowing/thinking/learning. There is no *one* improved world as it begs the question improved according to whom? Rather a world that is not yet, is a world rife with potential and possibilities, wherein process itself is product—it makes room for theory to exist in motion.

Affects potential to build new materialities:

It would help to bring attention to the language I have been using to describe the tension emerging within and outside the Institution as the entanglement of neoliberal, white patriarchal, and colonial forces tighten and evolve their restrain. When I explained that 'art is my research', I used words such as 'silenced', 'choose (between)' and 'feelings', the tautness of this tension emerges as an affective and visceral response in my body and I wonder reader, does it show up in yours too? When you think back to moments in your academic life where your lived experiences and the day-to-day had to be left at the door, examined with an objective lens of scrutiny, for fear of the bias that stems from the nuance of human experience slipping into the research field. We are so intent on keeping bias, nuances, and the personal away from our positionality, yet it is impossible to do so since research is never neutral (Thambhinathan and Kinsella 2021). I say this as I read affective lived experience as a social force, that holds in it the potential for doing decoloniality. The affective is often described as "'charges' (Stewart 2007), 'flows' (Manning 2016), 'forces' (Coleman and Ringrose 2013; Seigworth and Gregg 2010), 'intensities' (Deleuze 1994; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Massumi 1987), and 'vibrations' (Henriques 2010)'" (Dernikos, *et.al.* 2020: 8). These words imply a sense of movement, resisting and disrupting the status quo leading to our different ways of knowing and understanding. The affective is no longer limited to a narrow emotion-based definition,

rather it is treated as a process that as understood here, highlights spaces of tension and difference. In these spaces new materialities are born, out of the tension that arises within and engages with what is outside of us; thus, I treat tension here as the difference and differencing of lived experiences (Clandinnin and Connelly 2000) clashing together.

Engaging with these clashes can take us beyond the norm of a Eurocentric 'universality' (Akena 2012: 600). These nodes of tension that we bump into in deeply diverse academic spaces, need not be silenced, nor should they be solved and unknotted to reach a form universalism, held in a space of stillness it helps to notice what is emerging from these discomforting spaces.

Barad (2010) gives us the concept of new materialism which as briefly mentioned before, accepts matter as everything, the building blocks of our ways of meaning-making that can be assembled and re-assembled differently. When we look at the idea of plural knowledge systems, and plural ways of knowing it is with the acknowledgement that many worlds exist (Gatt 2023; Terry 2024) and this layered existence continues in simultaneous cycles of birth-death-rebirth. The points of tension become spaces of opportunities for building these different formats of knowing and knowledge, creating new materialities. With that in mind, I move to discuss the entanglement of the affective in education, playing with this lens through the modes of sound, silence and stillness in learning spaces and the potential for presencing multiple worlds, cultures and knowledge systems. In my research, I do this specifically through workshops with researchers and practitioners working in higher education. The workshops focus on our listening processes and practices to understand our agentic roles in what stories we allow in, those we disallow and why—what forms of worlding have led to these agentic choices. What is heard and what remains unheard—how do we, and why do we make those agentic cuts and decisions? Examining the underlying structures of coloniality, neo-liberalism and white patriarchy that are inherent in our academic spaces—and exploring ways in which we can engage with their tension to move towards a pluralised 'hopeful futurity' (Demos 2020: 2).

Rattling Affects: Examining affects potential through sound/ silence:

[Dear Reader, I ask you to read this section out loud, revelling in the sound of these words and the keen intimacy of another's memory]

> *I remember the rat-ta-tat-rat-ta-tat clinking of cans that trailed the cart of the kabbadi-wallah (recycling man) as he wheeled his gems / shiny curiosities in his mobile treasury / we hear him a block away as he makes his rounds, marking his steps closer and closer to us, around the blocks of flats that make our suburbia – A, B, C, D – hear the clinking of cans a mile away inching closer / impatient we run towards him, a hoard of children our shoes hitting the pavement pitter-patter, pitter-patter / pulled to the music of the cart / he lets us examine one by one the discarded pieces of lives – historied trinkets / rat-ta-tat-rat-ta-tat I hear in the recesses of my mind each time I sit down to write, unpacking my own assimilation myth, searching deep within for the long discarded historied trinkets of my life / knowingly-unknowingly buying into the dream 'only to realize that assimilation just can't happen' (Villanueva 2001: 267).*

I am concerned with contextualising my own positionality before moving forward, since it heavily influences my entry-point into this piece of writing. I am a researcher of colour from the Global South, my education has been culturally diverse in that I went to a British boarding school in India and completed my higher education in India, Italy and the United Kingdom. This education varied across socio-cultural class systems too—from private boarding schools to government universities and eventually, *the* academic institution of the University of Cambridge **(refer to v Conversations in the Margins)**. As a researcher, I began from practice as an artist, writer and spoken word poet, moving into academia, with the arts always being the critical methodology and lens with which I enter the space of academic research.

Conversations in the Margins

(v) Reader, I am describing the University of Cambridge as ***the*** academic institution because of the inherent coloniality and its reverberating impact on knowledge—what is considered as such and what is not and the power dynamics that such contextualisation lends to "knowledge"—which is at the heart of the institution. One example of this is the power structures within the IELTS examination (Part of University of Cambridge Press and Assessment) that most international students from South Asia and South-East Asia must undertake to move on to higher education in universities outside their home countries; this exam is mandatory and expires every two years, and irrespective of their fluency in the language, the student must undertake the exam to prove their ability. Due to the expiring nature of these results, I have taken this exam three times, despite English being the primary language of instruction for the entirety of my educational career. To undertake a project of decoloniality within this institution, given the contextualisation of my position as stated above, creates its own circles of tension allowing for varying degrees of agency. Each of these tension knots and my engagement with them through time (at different times, with different levels of experience, and reputation), have resulted in different new materialities. The university, thus, itself becomes a diffractive apparatus which in turn, leads to multiple ways of thinking/being/doing/theorising knowledge and ways of knowing.

Allowing myself to embed my lived experience within my research, rather than maintain any form of separateness starts to feel novel and yet, it is not new. Linda Tuhiwai Smith talked about how Imperialism continues to have its lasting impact on people who have experienced its violence, writing that it, 'still destroys and is reforming itself constantly' and going on to explain that 'Indigenous peoples as an international group have had to challenge, understand, and have a shared language to talk about it [the experience]' (2012: 19). It begins with allowing ourselves to be able to talk about what was lost and perhaps is continually lost, to be able to choose our own language in doing so and not having it delegitimised.

In a recent reading group meeting, I asked my fellow colleagues and my PhD advisor as we closely read the book *Life, Re-Scaled: The Biological Imagination in Twenty-First Century Literature and Performance*. There was much discussion around this excerpt,

> "[this book]by investigating engagement with life sciences and biopolitical questions in recent European and North American fiction, poetry, graphic novels, and performances…They ask how artistic work integrates new knowledge about neurons, microbes or fungi, how it echoes new perspectives brought by epidemiology, ecosystem

> modelling, or Earth System science, and how it contributes to critical thought concerned with those fields" (Campos and Patoine 2022: 3).

One of my colleagues voiced the freedom they felt in reading that art itself is a form of critical inquiry, that it was a process of research, doing research. Another spoke of the necessity to understand art as a mode of questioning and as a form of knowing and knowledge-building. How revolutionary it was to hear this for the first time, to be given permission for the first time. Yet another spoke on how encouraging it was to have art engage with scientific narrative, not simply to explain it, but to diffract through it. Hearing these remarks, I question whether we feel this sense of permissiveness or validation because of the language that is being used to make this statement, since the statement itself is not new and certainly not revolutionary. This language is codified. It is in the guise of "scientific" language and hence, perhaps holds a perceived veracity. Indigenous scholars, scholars of colour, artists, poets and others have expressed similar sentiments time and again and yet these narratives do not stick, nor do they hold the same sense of veracity to them—they are forgotten in the collective archive of the memory, disregarded, or silenced. Calling out this hypocrisy, Barbara Christian, an African-American literary scholar who in the late 1980s wrote about the potentially, yet unrecognised varied nature of "theory" as done by people of colour (which I reminded the group),

> For people of colour have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, and our very humanity (1987: 52)?

The sense of validity and to what extent it is felt from one excerpt to the other was distinctly different, the first excerpt codified in the language of the academic institution, in the language of "science", in the "official" tone,

held an inherent perceived assuredness and veracity when compared to the other. It made me consider the ways in which silences emerge in academic spaces and ways in which the processes of silencing are reiterated and stabilised—where/how do plural cultures emerge in these spaces that are rife with inherent and unspoken rules of coloniality and neo-liberalism? Going back to the anecdote of the *kabbadiwallah*—having given up the historied trinkets that make up our uniquely diverse lived experiences in the false hope of an assimilation myth (Villanueva 2001: 267), how do we begin to listen for these silences? How do we begin to sound our multiple selves and our many worlds into being, to do the work of decoloniality in practice?

Deep listening methodology as a process of presencing

[Dear Reader, this section is to be read aloud]

When I begin to perform a poem standing in front of the classroom/I picture my body spreading itself outward / like wings drawn out / bringing you – the 'other, – the 'audience'—the 'separate' into the fold of an internal world / an invitation, perhaps, or an act of vulnerability, or is it rather the experiencing of a collectivity – co-theorising, collaborating, co-storytelling? (Niccolini et al. 2018: 337)/ I call them research poems, and through/with/in them, I question myself, often wondering, how internal is this world I built/build/will build? Marked up by externalities, it opens out its circles of influence, impact and impingement/ we are changed in and of ourselves by others and other selves. As I stand in front of the room, poised to let my sound carry, my voice, my words, my poems, then again in an instant I am the face on your screen, a series of ones and zeroes, come together as a moving picture, delivering – raw insides turned out – I am simply a voice, travelling through wireless headphones, a story – punctuated by pauses and inflections, a moving cadence, silence, short breaths, your breaths, my poem, our poem. Our bodies moved.

The movement of sound in the act of listening and the affective impingements that we experience as we listen to the sounds around us and the listening field provide interesting layers that, when engaged with, mark the spaces where decoloniality can be practised as more than theory. Affective encounters with sound make space for thinking in assemblages, building layers in motion, where some affect theorists include "'feelings'

(Cvetkovich 2012; Ngai 2005), 'emotions' (Ahmed 2010; Cvetkovich 2012; Zembylas 2014) when defining what affect is, many characterise affect more as 'an immanent social force' (Massumi 1987; Stewart, Zembylas 2014)" (Dernikos *et al.* 2020: 5) that is always in motion leaving a changed state behind. The body then becomes an interactive and intra-active dynamic field (Barad 2007). It is constantly being affected or re-modelled by events, ideas, experiences, etcetera, occurring outside and inside, in a state of continual configuration and re-configuration by human and more-than-human elements. Sound, by its nature, is ephemeral, and where it collides with the body, sometimes it simply passes through and other times it leaves its mark, as McLuhan puts it, we have no earlids, sound always surrounds us even in our times of rest (Carlyle and Lane 2013). It can be felt, and yet it remains obscure (Crawley 2016), and it is because of this that it opens itself to the possibilities of new ways of knowing/being in the world, new materialities within our onto-epistemology.

To do this, I turned to a methodology of Deep Listening to imagine a pedagogy of deep affective listening founded on the work of Pauline Oliveros (2022), wherein we listen in layers, and as we listen, we move along the length and breadth of these layers of sound/soundlessness moving in space. These movements are prismatic, bouncing between layers in our process of meaning-making and making-meaning. All the while I, as the researcher, am observing where we collectively[9] make our cuts of agency in shutting out certain sounds, certain meanings pertaining to these sounds, certain politics around these sounds and how they are encountered and how these might trap us, if at all, into systems of coloniality and neoliberalism preventing experiences of plurality and variedness that surround us. I also turn to the work of Salome Voegelin, who places the body as an enmeshed frame of research, wherein the body thinking, doing, performing "words as a muscular engagement with the world whose actuality in turn is felt on the body, as fleshly and material form: as human and more-than-human matter that comes to matter from their in-between and in conversations" (2023: xi). The points where the body is impinged upon, particularly by sound, are where the gaps and spaces for making a difference and engaging with the world in different ways can be practiced. Deep Listening brings

9 Participants in the group workshops.

attention to the consciousness of this act of listening, the space within which we notice, as Oliveros writes, "Listening affects what is sounding" (2022: 9); this immediately places us as part of the listening field and an important element within it. The body acts as an apparatus of listening and simultaneously silencing, in this process of sifting we reimagine our engagement with soundlessness and silencing and question what is being silenced, with the inherent politics of what is heard and unheard.

The act/process of Deep Listening during the research workshops is a collaborative one, a collective listening that leads to embodied and emergent affective responses, paying attention to these sounds as we (participants) listen to the listening field with a deeper receptiveness that is tied to fleshy body—we start to dismantle why certain sounds and stories are accepted and why other are rejected or considered disruptive. At the end of the session, participants build on their responses and the collective responses about the process of listening from site—the physical body and the listening field—to the experience of depth and the width of listening. What emerged, and what was the experience of navigating such a collective and layered listening field when contextualised as an emergent site of knowledge? This allows plurality to emerge, interlacing with what is already known. Oliveros writes about the process of deep listening as one where experience comes first, before everything else; in doing so, we emphasise both the details and scope of sound (2022), and I extend this to think also about the scope of the act of listening. The listening act with which a workshop session begins focuses on multiple layers of listening (as shown in the audio example below), and then it is through the performance of a research poem that I, as the researcher guiding the workshop, encourage participants to explore their process of listening and the social-political agentic soundings we place upon this process. Here I take the example of a workshop conducted at the NYC Face-To-Face Arts Roundtable Conference in April, 2023. The questions or prompts that I provided explore the nature of sound tracks/flows, their pulls and our focus on certain sounds as meaningful, meaningless and noise. The poem performed had music and a beat to it, at times the listener felt a pull to the music, which took them away from the words, and then we questioned—what affects emerged when this happens? Anxiety, ease, restlessness, alarm? And if so, where do they come from, why

and what do they mean? Can they open us up to new ways of knowing and engaging with difference?

Instructions to guide the performance:
https://soundcloud.com/user-13841562/instructions-for-collaborative-listening-exercise?si=51fc1d0a860d4247b98df159cbc81f6f&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

Transcript:
I will begin by performing a poem I wrote called *The Wild Girl*; before we begin, there are certain things that I invite you to pay attention to, if I may, in fact, call you into a collaborative exercise in listening. Today we will try to listen differently, going deeper, or we will listen in layers. As much as I want you to listen to my reading, focus on the words, the music, the beat, etcetera. I want you to also listen to yourselves, to the spaces within that may or may not directly connect/link with what I am saying. Let me clarify myself; we will be focusing on three layers of listening, to begin with, that go beyond listening to the words of the poem; the first is the physical—any sensation that arises in the body, tension during the performance, for instance, pay close attention to how the beat of your heart changes. Pay attention to your breathing as it rises and falls with the words and the song of the poem. Maybe you start to tap your fingers or your foot, or maybe you begin to sway a little; you could get restless fidgety, and we must pay attention to each of these impulses. The second layer we will focus on is the mental field, that is, the thoughts that emerge as you listen. Maybe there's a word, a phrase, a section that sticks to the body (**refer to vi – Conversations in the Margins**), maybe it's the sound in this room or outside or in the recesses of the memory hold onto that. Lastly, pay close attention to your personal, if there is something in the listening process and in this exchange that unearths the epiphanies and half-formed thoughts from your own lived experiences, what you bring to the listening process, memories from the collective, which might not be universal but where called out and upon today, here, within **this** listening field—we will think about why and what called upon them?

Conversations in the Margins
(vi) Affect has the ability to perpetuate and hold in place systems and parameters, specifically hold in place particular 'racialized bodies' within systems of oppression (Ahmed 2010). It is only by paying attention to the listening process, to what/how/why is emerging within us that we can move to pluralised ways of knowing/being/doing difference and its impact on our onto-epistemological self-creation, our theory-building in motion.

At the NYC Face-to-Face roundtable conference, I followed these instructions with the poem *Wild Girl*. This poem speaks to the urge to engage with our unlearned forms of knowing/thinking/being/doing—where do they take us? In listening to this poem **(refer to vii – Conversations in the Margins)**, which acts as a prompt, participants are encouraged to question the listening process, thinking about the idea of learning/un-learning meaning-making processes through sound and silence—that is, what sounds we filter out or push down.

Conversations in the Margins
(vii) Dear Reader, the turn to poetry for making seen the unseen arises from the impulse that has been written about by Neilsen – 'lyric enquiry' (2008): inquiry that both recognizes and welcomes the lyric impulse, the singing of the self' that Lorde has also spoken about at length in her essay *Poetry is not a Luxury*, 'such inquiry honours expressive and aesthetic writing and processes which are, at once, creatively and wholly themselves and sufficient, free from the conventional demands of having to make a case or prove a point' (2017: 18). It is a form of inquiry that is process-driven in doing the work of a revelation or unearthing. It makes it no less significant in resonance that it comes from the realm of the storied imagination.

Link to the poem here:
https://soundcloud.com/user-13841562/wild-girl-wild-girl-a-call-to-listen?si=9bb8b3ff3d34423381b6fb7c36509f69&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

Some of the questions which came up in the session after participants had listened to the poem were—what does listening mean to you? What are your earliest memories of listening? What does silence sound like to you? How do you listen to the space within which you are situated? Where is the cut that allows you the listener and the teacher/researcher to tune into certain sounds, soundings, storying and subsequently out of these sounds/soundings? To add to these, I borrowed provocations from Oliveros' *Quantum Listener* (2022: 3): "When do you stop hearing the sound? When

does sound simply exist?". These echoes reverberate through the layers of the listening field—sound, silence, stillness, the affective and its moving force that leads to new materialities—new ways of knowing, new ways of being, new ways of theorising.

Listening for meaning and power

In the collaborative act of deep listening, this collective listening, led to shared responses around the process of listening. One of the participants of the workshop spoke on how she was pulled in different points in the performance by the beat of the drum (the musical track within which the poem was nestled) steadying the rhythm of her body, it pulled her away from the words till she realised that she was missing out on what was being said—it felt like a distraction to her from capturing/understanding the meaning behind the poem. The affective resonance to this distraction caused a sense of panic in this participant, as though she would not be able to perform or engage in the session if she missed even a small portion of the content or of the product being shared. The focus was on the content, not the process, what it was doing, or how it allowed her to show up in the session. The fact that we are pulled by the beat of the drum, rather than the words of the poem is doing something, and this was missed because of the sheer panic it off-set in participants. She said, '*I felt that I was getting distracted from listening to the poem, following the words, and the meaning, because of the beat of the music. I felt an urgency to keep up with everyone.*'

As a researcher, I thought her response was particularly interesting, specifically when considering the behavioural process of listening, its performance, and how that makes us feel secure within an academic space. The urgency to keep up, the urgency to follow the meaning behind the words of the poem, which can be argued is one part of the poem, but not the only part; the music, the rise and the fall and the way the words are overlaid upon it, have been done so with intention and yet in our listening process we are trying our best to silence the music and its ontology. We are trying to tune it all out.

The provocation I presented to all listeners was around when, where and why is it that we condition ourselves into believing that we missed out on the

meaning-making act by allowing the song of the poem to take centre stage in this case, which ignores the other aspects of the listening field which can also bring us emergent knowings. Perhaps in the stillness[10]—what can emerge is a flow towards a different/differenced/alternative meaning. The participant eventually admitted '*I stopped forcing myself to draw my attention back to the words and let it flow with the poem and the song, and when I was pulled back to the words it was by something that struck a chord deeply within me*.' These words evoke a sense of uncovering/unearthing/revealing—a resonance-building capacity that is inherent in poetic enquiry—an undoing of how 'matter emerges in the invisible in-between, which as a sphere of sound, even if inaudible or unheard, confirms how matter mattering is indivisible, in that it is connecting rather than a theoretical apart' (Voegelin 2023: 44). I would briefly like to come to the idea of hauntologies in education grounded in a "spectral event":

> The event is not what we desire but what is being desired in what we desire, some deeper disturbance of our desire. When we desire this or that, we have the uneasy feeling that something else is getting itself desired in that desire, like a *desire beyond desire*. In this sense, we can never say what we desire. We do not know what we desire. Still, this is not some fault or limitation … It is the very structure of the event, of temporality, of the openness of the future, of the ghost of the future (Caputo 2016: 116).

The spectral event in this workshop tapped into ghosts of the past and future, from the experiences of past meaning-making/behaving as were developed whilst our young years spent in school/the Institution/the academy to the present when how, what, when, where and why we listen and allow certain stories, words, sounds into our periphery more actively over others is simply a regurgitation of past inclinations—done unconsciously.

Dernikos provides an example of this from a primary school classroom in New York City, where she observed: '[the] slippages among sound, silence, noise, voice, and ir/rationality [that allowed her] to map out the ways white

10 Where words slip through the consciousness of attention, that is attention placed and misplaced.

supremacist forces subtly moved with/in' (2020: 134). In these spaces of silence, students were encouraged to approach a text in codified formats, wherein the text is holding space for a very concrete form of materialities/knowing the text that does not change, nor engages with change and with the potentialities and possibilities of what could be. Excited exclamations of young readers as they engaged with stories were shushed and dampened, they were encouraged instead to put their quiet thumbs up in appreciation. While peers (having learnt the behaviours of the institution) would readily shush an excited child engaging exuberantly with a reading text, they would ignore the blaring sounds of car horns outside of a New York classroom. Something similar occurred in the workshop, where participants struggled with the layers of listening processes and understanding why certain layers were so easily and naturally tuned out. It is significant for these questions to be asked for this work to be done with researchers, especially since it allows us to acknowledge and engage with the 'relational becoming' inherent in research,

> 'knowledge does not determine what is shown or what is seen, "this" or "that" and it is not about human agency and ability to show or to see. Instead, it is how we emerge with each other, between what is shown and what is seen. How we become visible. And it entails a responsibility to this process' (Voegelin 2023: 44).

Listening to not only the poem, but also what it enlivened within and without the listener was an act of activating varied environments, the awareness of noises and voices that are sounded through our socio-cultural lenses, both innate and learned, that allow us to make the cuts of what is relevant and what is not. As much as listening can act as an agent of silencing, it can also do the contrary—hold a space that presences alternative narratives, stories, sounds and experiences.

Conclusion: Listening deeply

Engaging with the act of listening by engaging with sounds, silence and stillness as a multi-tentacled force (Haraway 2007), highlight points of

tension moving through learning spaces and in academia. For researchers/knowledge-makers, it is important to pay attention to these pulsating points as it allows them to access what 'was once lost' due to the assimilation myth (Villanueva 2001: 268). To build plurality that takes away from binaries towards a multiple, polyphonous world as Law suggests, 'if much of reality is ephemeral and elusive, then we cannot expect single answers. If the world is complex and messy, then at least some of the time we are going to have to give up simplicities' (2004: 2). Giving up these simplicities in research and when we attempt thinking/being/doing/theorising as decoloniality, we must centre what emerges when paying attention to the affect. To the tension nodes where we make the agential cuts of our attention addressing the politics of such attention—the scope and politics of sound/listening, the entanglements of these cuts within the larger power relational structures of education and how plural/multi- worlds can be presenced. This is a 'claiming' wherein 'the voice of a "witness" is accorded space and protection, the sound/listening space, the listening field herein acts as that sacred protective space (Smith 2012: 144). The act of 'claiming' embraces the 'tension' and enlivens it as a way of seeing/being/knowing/doing ourselves differently and opening a space for possibilities 'to perform a communal dialogic function' (Finley 2014: 531).

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