

Carried from Home on the Thread of a Tune: Listening for Misunderstanding

Transcript

Sound Design

Text

<p>Opening: A recording of a passage from Virginia Woolf's <i>To The Lighthouse</i> spoken by a female voice: "...the voices came to her very strangely, as if they were voices at a service in a cathedral, for she did not listen to the words. The sudden bursts of laughter and then one voice. ...The words... sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves....</p> <p>"Dirty Wallpaper" fades in, twinkly music playing along a guitar strumming.</p>	<p>SK: What we draw from our individual, but collectively obsessive, experience with sound and sound design helps us <i>start framing listening as an inventive and collaborative practice</i>. So, with some crucial help from Lisbeth Lipari (2014) we are asking questions that are too big – questions like: What delineates the act of listening? What is the relationship between listening and sociality? And maybe most powerfully because of its simplicity, who or what do we actually listen to when we decide to listen? After all, what is an act of listening that is not</p>
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<p>Music fades out, fade into a conversation between two voices, JC and Student 1, JC laughs in the background throughout</p>	<p>hooked into a community of people practicing an elegant process they can understand?</p> <p>AC: Because here's what we know, or at least what we accept:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listening collects—listening works as a shared gathering in all kinds of ways and in all kinds of spaces. It participates in what shows up as space. Rather obviously, we are gathered at concerts, at political rallies, in classrooms, on hikes, at church, in workshops, at conferences. Listening brings together, delineates. 2. Listening can be so, so fraught, especially because it gathers. One reason for this is that the practice of listening and the goal of understanding are deeply connected via the 'technique' of active listening. Active listening's goal is comprehending – to achieve shared meaning between parties, human or otherwise. But it is, for us, misunderstanding that better serves as a kind of goal for any shared gathering; misunderstanding requires that we have what Lisbeth Lipari calls the 'courage' to endure what will seem like endless repetitions and uncertainties. Misunderstanding requires that we endure others. <p>JC: So, what we hope to do is invite you into our collective effort to listen—not reflect on, not at all— but to listen to the ways we are gathered by our own communities, our own practices, our own concerns. Instead of a shared understanding, listening may finally serve as an inventive process that requires a fairly drastic “loss of control, loss of ideas and concepts” (Lipari 2014). One way Lipari shows listening otherwise is through the religious practice of Quakers. Quakers gather for worship by listening— expectant listening, which has nothing to do with interpretation or understanding and everything to do with gathering. Listening expectantly but without ready or prior understanding is what Quakers call a “gathered meeting.” Lipari speaks of this kind of listening, this practice, as <i>a listening otherwise</i> where we might refuse to control or master and instead to hold our listening lightly. “Actually,” she finally says, “it is not to hold, not to grasp. No grasping, no holding. Being. (Lipari, 103)”</p> <p>Student: Just from the beginning, it was like, getting that assignment of like, hey, can you just sit there (JC: Laughs) and listen for five minutes? And it's just like, I mean, I guess? I don't know what this is supposed to really do...</p> <p>JC: Right</p>
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<p>Same music fades back in</p> <p><i>To the Lighthouse</i> excerpt continues in female voice: “She did not know what they meant, but, like music, the words seemed to be spoken by her own voice, outside herself. She knew without looking around that everyone at the table was listening to the voice.”</p>	<p>Student 1: but like, I’m bearing with you on this. (JC: Laughs) Um, and then just trying to do that. I’m not, first of all, I’m not a good person, as far as like, um, schedules or habits go. So just trying to keep to something like that? Already a difficult thing. But doing it like, at first it was like oh, this is, nothing is happening. I’m just, I’m sitting in a dark room, (JC: is more quietly chuckling, almost as a whisper) nothing’s going on, but like, as you’re doing that and as your sitting there and your listening and just kind of like, letting everything fall away a little bit and just try, I tried not to over think it. Like I tried to just be like, let me not think about what I’m doing here, which sometimes helped but for the most part like, I had to kind of, my mind would focus on things, ya know? I would like, I’d sit there, and id be like, what is <i>that</i> noise I’m hearing over there?</p> <p>SK: So, for us, and we’re not alone, listening is deeply related to an ethical being with others. When I listen, I open myself to and witness the experience and suffering of the speaker. And when I practice such witnessing, I become responsible to the speaker. In listening, we can’t help but receive the otherness of the other. For example, In <i>Sonic Intimacy</i>, Dominic Pettman explains that the ambiguity and ambivalence of the human voice makes the voice difficult to hold, and we don’t “trust things we can’t seize with our eyes and hands” (5). Since we can never hold the other’s voice, there is “always a part of the other that will escape our will-to-possess” (5). Pettman’s example helps illustrate the materiality of the voice at the same time that it reveals there is not necessarily any materiality to grasp—to understand. The act of listening, then, is in tension with the will to understand. And it may be this tension, this crucial will-to-understand and this voice that will escape understanding, that</p>
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<p>The sound of a fairly vibrant classroom of students slowly rises in volume before it tops out just as JC begins talking.</p>	<p>opens yet another space for listening to emerge as a legitimate rhetorical position.</p>
<p>The sound of the classroom fades under the rising sound of a church service singing “Blessed Redeemer” in the style of Sothern (white) gospel.</p>	<p>JC: Listen...you’re teaching your first class of the semester or quarter. Here are the sounds you encounter when you arrive in the classroom... it certainly gathers. It’s the kind of sound <i>your</i> class makes, and the sound of the class you <i>belong to</i>. How might you understand it? How might you (productively?) misunderstand it?</p>
<p>Fade to silence</p>	<p>JC: And how might you already be ordering the meaning of this kind of gathering— that is, understanding what matters here? How does such an understanding collect and gather (or even repulse) your own response? How does this sound mean before you have the chance to listen, to <i>listen otherwise</i>?</p>
<p>Cut to two student voices</p>	<p>AC: Again, for Lipari, listening otherwise is dangerous because it (rather ethically) resists certainty, closure, and categorization. That is, it’s a practice sustained by the expectation of a different, of an unexpected “quality of relationship” (p.101).</p> <p>Student 2: When you listen to a creek, you’re not listening for anything. You’re not listening for where you jump into it, or like, so listening to a conversation, usually you’re listing with the idea that you’re supposed to respond a particular way and you’re constructing your response as you’re listening to someone talk usually, but listening to a creek, I’m not constructing my response to it, I’m just listening and responding.</p> <p>Student 3: So, I reflected upon my experience when I was living in a city. I believe it is not only that we see the beauty of nature in front of our eyes, but also we are trying to feel that we are in a different environment, and trying to feel the different sounds, like the crispy sounds you hear when you are treading on the falling leaves, the wind shifting through the leaves, the rustling sounds, the chirping of the birds and the murmur of people and even the sounds of the crickets.</p>

<p>Quietly playing Copland's "Appalachian Spring," which features a refrain of the shaker hymn, "Simple Gifts." The song is overlaid and sometimes interrupted with digital static and "fuzz" (referred to as "Copland" from here on out)</p> <p>"Copland" fades out</p>	<p>Student 2: Like, when you're responding to something and there's like personal stakes for you, like the creek isn't going to do anything if you listen to it incorrectly or if you misunderstand it, which is why I think were not worried about understanding it as much, because there's no stakes lost if you don't understand it correctly, whereas if you're listening to someone who's trying to tell you like, they have been struggling with something that endangered their life, that you haven't been doing everything you possibly can to help resolve or help like, rectify in the world, like, there are big things at stake if you misunderstand that for yourself and the person you are listening to. And so I think the stakes are different because your response isn't being weighted by someone else, and isn't being judged by you in the same way that's happening when you're listing to like a creek. Your response isn't a reflection of you, you don't see your response as a reflection of you in the same way that you see your response to conversation as a reflection of you, and your roll in the world, and who you are, like if you're good or bad like deep down, so bug moral difference I think in how you listen.</p> <p>AC: Similarly, (well, sort of similarly) Lyotard helps us hold lightly what we hear as we play what he dubs the Pagan Game. Unlike the Moses Game where an addresser and addressee are clearly delineated in a dialectic relationship where the addressee is always obligated to the addressor, the pagan game affirms an addressee or a listener who lacks a clear addresser—a "receiver without a sender" (Arroyo, p. 82). A listener without a speaker, without an understandable origin or source.</p> <p>JC: The goal in the Moses Game is to listen to your addresser so that you can best understand, best know precisely what the address and, indeed, the very present addresser means to communicate. The pagan game differs—the addressee listens without any requirement of an addressor. To some degree, such an exclusion makes it difficult to play the pagan game with a classroom where I'm learning to listen to the vibrancy or the stagnation or something else that's collecting a first-day-of-class without already knowing what these sounds explain. It's so easy in this example of the classroom or even the church service to <i>listen actively</i>, to re-inscribe or predict this others' utterance.</p> <p>Student 4: And, and the same thing goes for like, a car sound, I don't know, it's also like, if you're like, oh that's a car, you're not listening to it anymore. I guess that that's kind of where I approach things, that you stop listing once you understand or once you think you understand.</p>
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“Copeland” fades
back in

Student 5: (Laughs) Well, I think the shift had to do with research, with me getting into the research, and this last quarter we had been reading about research methods and one of the things you try to do when you are interviewing ore when you’re doing grounded research, is you’re not an interpreter to begin with, you are a recorder, and you’re the stenographer of whatever is happening and you’re trying to keep yourself out of it as long as you possibly can, and then you let yourself in, and then you can do analysis, and I feel like I had always been jumping in to being in the situation and being an interpreter instead of just recording and being a stenographer of the world. (**JC:** almost inaudibly inside of a pause makes a “Hum” type of response, sounding a bit emotionally moved) And I think that was part of why I wanted to change my practice, because I think I felt that recording sounds and listening to things just as they are, is more truthful to what sound is.

JC: Sara Arroyo expresses it this way: In the pagan game, our *only* obligation is to “remain a listener, but not with the expectation of total submission [this is not Buddhism] or of the promise of someday becoming a speaker/master” (83). She tells us that Vitanza, following Lyotard, has placed the speaker-writer (encoder) in a situation of non-authority; for the speaker (of the communication triangle) can only be a speaker now by virtue of having been, more so, a listener, decoder, reader.

SK: We will already *understand* the sound of our first-day-of-class, of our church service, of our coffeepot, our hike, our family, and our friends because understanding precedes compassion, or a feeling with the other. Lipari’s listening otherwise rejects such a formulation, asking us to give up our predominately molding and ordering activity that we call listening, and reminds us again and again (because such work will always be a practice and never a habit), that, in the words of Kenneth Burke, “every way of seeing [and listening] is also, concurrently, a way of not seeing [and listening].” And, so, the requirement to first understand what comes to matter is a selective ethics (a selective hearing!) that habituates what is already said—already sounded.

Student 3: We discussed about giving voice to an entity that is not man-human, like the trees, or the birds can have a voice, but you know like things that don’t normally have a voice, um, we will listen to these entities and it would totally change our minds and perhaps listening in a different perspective.

Student 1: Yeah, no that’s, and yeah it definitely it like this understanding of sound, we have, I mean for the most part, it seems like

<p>“Copeland” fades back in <i>To the Lighthouse</i> excerpt continues in female voice: “...as if this were, at last, the natural thing to say, this were their own voice speaking.”</p>	<p>the more you study it, I think it comes up. Um, but like we have a sense of sound... before sound, no that’s not like right, [big sigh] yeah, this understanding of sound, it goes to this idea that we hear so much that we kind of start to forget that we are listening.</p> <p>AC: Vitanza, again listens through Lyotard, teaching there is no anarchy here. Instead, “the [Pagan] game is all about listening and generating the rules of possibility” each time. Listening, then, can push past the instrumental act of communication—certainly past our tired yet still touted communication triangle—and toward inventive interactions because even when we speak and there is no one to listen, <i>we</i> still listen.</p>
<p>“Copeland” Fades out</p> <p>the repeating and braided voices of a “poetry workshop” read in a “poetry voice” slowly repeat just a little louder as it fades in to this space: “Tell me about your piece,” “What was your intent with this poem?” “How does this poem make you feel?” “What parts of this poem stick out to</p>	<p>In something like a poetry workshop, it’s often the case that while a poet is reading, my own listening seeks after what I can predict, or the ways I can predictably respond to the other in such a way to gain what I already expect to hear. My listening, that is, transforms the actual strange space of a poetry workshop into knowledge of what is to come next. So, I speak the questions to which I’ve already learned to listen: Where is this poem going? What’s being said here? How, (and often when) is this poem going to end? What should I say when we’re finished?</p> <p>AC: These questions swirling in my head as my colleagues read their new, unfinished poems aloud for the sake of the workshop are my own acts of re-inscription. In predicting their work, I am making it into something else, something safe and something known. That is, I am</p>

<p>you?” “Does this poem <i>feel</i> finished to you?”</p> <p>Workshop Comments fade</p> <p>“Copeland” fades in</p> <p>“Copeland” Fades</p> <p>A Childs voice comes in, humming the shaker hymn, “Simple Gifts”</p>	<p>understanding so that I may have a kind of compassion. And the more familiar questions that we speak in such a workshop—questions that have been spoken seemingly by the workshop itself—the more they gather together my own position among this territory, this milieu.</p> <p>AC: Yet again, to listen otherwise is not to habitually privilege understanding, but to allow listeners to resonate with each other in a way that brings the discussion beyond the intention of the speaker and the restrictions of “understanding.”</p> <p>AC: So how might we learn to practice something like a poetry workshop when predictive utterances are disallowed? When listening otherwise is the game?</p> <p>SK: For us, that means our own production work reverberates with connections to that which is well beyond our own seemingly isolated intentions. If we can practice a listening otherwise or play the pagan game, then we are gathered into new and surprising interactions.</p> <p>Misunderstanding becomes a continual response rather than a final say. The practice of listening otherwise, that is, compassion that precedes understanding, necessities vulnerability. A rhetorical vulnerability is continually working from misunderstanding. So instead of shared understanding, listening interacts with and changes whatever it comes into contact with, showing up as a collaborative act, and an ethical response.</p> <p>SK: Deleuze and Guattari’s first scene for the refrain, of which there are three, introduces a child alone in the dark who, without thinking, sings to themselves—a kind of “Tra-la-la” that maps out a milieu, that imposes a bit of form onto the chaotic or at least unknown. The tra-la-la, the refrain, introduces or maybe restores a center to some moment of possible chaos. And this is Deleuze and Guattari, so don’t hear me saying that the world, or in their language, the earth, is somehow stabilized. It’s all and always chaos. But like a philosopher, (our word, not theirs), a child hums a tune for stability and, so, hums in an effort to listen, to pick out if not a safe boundary, then a milieu or a familiarity. And this refrain is always a</p>
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<p>The child's humming fades away</p> <p><i>To the Lighthouse</i> excerpt continues in female voice: "...She knew, without looking round, that everyone at the table was listening to the voice...as if this were, at last, the natural thing to say, this were their own voice speaking.</p> <p>"Copeland" fades in</p>	<p>wildly tentative point emanating from possibility—it doesn't hold; it temporarily comforts.</p> <p>JC: When Deleuze and Guattari pick up the notion of the 'refrain' in an effort to think through music as a means of doing general philosophy, they, as surprising as this is for thinkers like D&G, stabilize, even comfort, their nomadic, weary, and often splintered readers.</p> <p>SK: It all gets a little muddled at first because the refrain is so closely linked to notions of territory but we can extract it from its context in the same way we extract a baseline, a guitar riff, or a lyric from a song and carry it with us—repeating it (listening to it) as we and it move out of the territory.</p> <p>JC: In a definition that is still too large, Deleuze and Guattari finally say, "We call a refrain any aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory and develops into territorial motifs..." (323).</p> <p>SK: The refrain won't remain tethered to a territory, won't only gather a milieu or carve out space. The tra-la-la travels; the refrain is moveable! And this allows the listener to reterritorialize, even to invent. We can repeat or "rehear" comforting little refrains along our lines of flight. In this way, Deleuze and Guattari say the refrain renders invisible cosmic forces visible. It carries us "from home on the thread of a tune."</p>
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<p>“Copeland” Fades out</p>	<p>Student 1: This would be extremely useful in terms of “let’s not just assume we understand everything going on with these voices and let’s assume like there’s room, there’s room in that voice for things we can’t understand yet, or we don’t understand yet.” In my mind, I’m really thinking, like, in my mind I’m focusing on like somebody, like an MLK type figure getting up on stage and speaking. (JC: Okay, underneath the student who doesn’t really stop talking). And it’s so easy to like focus on the context of what their saying, but it’s also like there’s so much to the quality of the voice itself and the sound that’s happening, or when like chanting starts, the quality of all of the voices coming together and like hearing that in particular.</p> <p>Student 5: So, if, like I don’t know how to really describe what I mean, but something like if there’s trees in the wind and their creaking and their leaves are rustling and their arms are going “deedle dee” um, (laughs), um. once I’m like, oh it’s the wind and it’s the trees, maybe I don’t hear the intricacies of like maybe there’s like, movement of bugs in the bark. Or maybe there’s the bark itself that’s moving in a certain way, maybe roots are moving in a certain way that I just am not listening for anymore because it’s like, that’s all trees and wind. That’s all it is. You’re not listening I guess for the distinct sounds within everything that builds everything up anymore once you’re like “Aha! Wind, trees.”</p> <p>SK: Deleuze and Guattari say, the refrain, then, can be deterritorialized even as it allows for reterritorialized activity. Or, it begins to diagram the chaotic—the earth—which can be the start of a new diagram of events. Or, even more simply, the refrain serves as a practical kind of theorizing that allows us to hear what else might be possible as the refrain engages and comments on all that it encounters.</p>
<p>“Dirty Wallpaper” fades in, again: twinkly music playing along a guitar strumming.</p>	<p>AC: Lipari writes that “all too often, we ignorantly punctuate our experiences with a spatialized temporality, which, like a period at the end of a sentence, signals finality and completion and fails to account for the expanding oscillations of assonance and dissonance... which are better expressed by the musical temporality of a comma, or a breath” (174).</p> <p>Such ignorance allows us to, then, punctuate the act of listening—to somehow give listening a beginning and an end.</p> <p>It’s a holistic and transformative practice that faintly echoes Krista Ratcliffe’s work to frame listening as “a [rhetorical] trope for interpretive</p>

<p>“Dirty Wallpaper” fades out</p>	<p>invention.” Like Lipari, Ratcliffe wants a rhetorical listening that functions as "a stance of openness" (17). It’s a rather lovely rhetorical practice of, put crudely, getting over yourself so that the other, human or otherwise, need not be (once again) wholly subsumed.</p> <p>SK: When we can, to offer a pedagogical example, listen to voices of capital like Jeff Bezos, Donald Trump, Taylor Swift, Kanye West, Elon Musk, and to the other end of the same spectrum: like weary telemarketers, humming child laborers, the wheezing welcome of a Walmart greeter? Or even more intensely, the squeal of factory farm pigs, the opening bell of Wall Street, the boot-up of a Mac computer, the incessant refrain of the ice cream truck? We might listen to such gathering sounds with an ear for misunderstanding. Or at least with an ear for the soundscapes that have yet surfaced a subjectiving refrain. (Pettman, 102).</p> <p>JC: Listening otherwise played as a pagan game at least gives me a chance to listen for the refrains still playing my subjectivity—to listen to the tra-la-la I sing as I listen to you.</p> <p>SK: To push maybe too far, the pagan game frees the listener—the addressee—from both the master philosopher and from the weight of the known address. But it also frees the listener from knowledge of a hailing and gathering entity like students in a classroom, the preacher at church, the nostalgia of a campfire, or the radio playing in, or maybe <i>as</i>, the background for the dishes. Of course, the source of the sound in all these situations is discernible. But like a listening otherwise, the authorial footing in the act of listening in the pagan game remains vacated. And so, the addressee speaks as a listener, which means they speak as a participant of meaning—of understanding—rather than as a source or master.</p> <p>Student 5: And that’s—that’s the important thing, once you think you understand you stop listening, and that’s why like so often if someone’s talking to us about something and were like oh I get what you’re saying, you stop listening, you stop really listening to them, you stop listening to what they’re saying, and they might be saying other things that you have never thought about or saying things in way that you’ve never thought of.</p> <p>Student 2: When you asked me to go up there and like, sit and listen intentionally, and I started noticing birds, or like the creek moving, or like we had a lot of like runners because everyone was home running all back and forth across like the sidewalk we have out there. I had never like stopped to listen to them before so then when I would go out there at other times that I wasn’t journaling, I would just get kind of annoyed because</p>
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<p>“Dirty Wallpaper” fades in again</p> <p>The song, “Dirty Wallpaper,” builds in terms of volume and instrumentation as a baseline is introduced. It then slowly fades away to end the piece.</p> <p>There’s a way in which this ending doesn’t have a ‘cap,’ or final “takeaway.” It may even feel a little unfinished. The music fades away after the last reflection is offered by a student, who, like us, is still working out what it can mean to “listen otherwise.”</p>	<p>then I couldn’t like, you know, turn off my ears right away, because all I could hear was all these noises that were completely distracting my space all of a sudden, it wasn’t the same space, because once you notice you just can’t un-notice. Um. And by the end I think I really got to an area, and I wrote about how meditative it felt by the end because I stopped seeing it as like a disruption of the space but it was just what was actually creating the space in the first place, it kind of was like a connectivity that didn’t exist for me before. Um. So it wasn’t this weird interruption but it kind of just became an ecosystem of sorts, so I think that for me practice wise kind of got me used to like being part of what was happening and not just seeing it as like me over here, the space over here, disruptive noises over here, but this weird, like simultaneous creation of everything together.</p>
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