

# **Listening for Listening In Art and Inquiry**

**by**

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## Abstract

Reflecting on my ways of being in the world as an artist, researcher, student, and mentor, I am drawn by the recurring theme of *listening*—not only in the sense of auditory perception, but also a wider attunement to the world, involving all my intermingling senses. Arts-based research practices of living inquiry, performative inquiry, embodied inquiry invite me to explore the multiple ways I enact listening in different contexts of my life, such as when reading, dancing, writing, transcribing and facilitating art engagement. Through poetry, theory, life-writing and meditations on my embodied experiences, I observe how different metaphors, intentions or practices can guide and enable different kinds of listening experiences.

In particular, I propose that listening transcends an act of reception, constituting a creative and dialogical encounter. Listening calls us to release expectations, preconceptions and control in order to enliven our desire for curiosity, discover new possibilities, and bring forth our own unique voice.

**Keywords:** listening; performative inquiry; embodied inquiry; poetic inquiry; arts-based research; qualitative research; arts education

For the footsteps I hear just ahead...

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to Dr. Mark Winston who has always been there to listen to who I am becoming, and hears who I could be

to my family, friends, teachers and anyone else who has ever told me *don't stop writing*

And thank you, to you, who is listening to me now:

here, this

hear this...

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## Tanda 1: Leaning into Listening

[...]

*Dear student stopping by with a citation question  
we've covered twice in class, thank you  
for pulling me back from the antigravity.  
Who can sustain in that vast floating, so full  
of stars but endless? Dear public radio  
segue music, hook and hold me. Dear hashtag,  
dear late night sketch, dear photo of a friend's  
new pitbull pup, truss me right to this earth.  
Dear caterwauling fire truck in my rearview.  
Dear tailless calico peering in my window.  
Dear child needing milk or Goldfish  
or to know how eardrums work, let me sit  
on the kitchen floor with you. Let's notice how  
we're both right here. Dear automatic car lock,  
As I'm walking away, I'll press the button.  
Honk once to remind me I haven't disappeared.*

*(Catherine Pierce, "Tether Me")*

## Becoming

Originally, when I embarked on graduate studies in arts education, I aspired to become a teacher. I sought models, techniques and theories that could inspire a love of the arts in my students—including the many students from non-arts disciplines I was working with as a Teaching Assistant for an undergraduate literature course, as well as the students I anticipated if I pursued a career in public education. However, over the course of my studies I have been drawn in many directions and worn many hats—I have been a teacher, facilitator, mentor, and increasingly have taken on roles in research, dialogue, and public engagement. Navigating these multiple work contexts, as well as the plural and ever-shifting cultures, relationships, and contexts of my personal life, there were times I felt my identity fragmenting. Did I have a real professional or artistic practice I could develop or inquire from? Who was I becoming?

I took some guidance from Parker Palmer's words in *Courage to Teach*, where he discusses how our pedagogical questions often focus on *what* to teach, *how* to teach it, and *why* to teach, whereas Palmer urges us to also consider "*who* is the self that teaches?" (2007, p. 4, my italics). Learning pedagogical techniques, Palmer argues, doesn't suffice; rather it is self-knowledge that allows teachers to connect to students, understand the subject matter, and find their authentic teaching voice instead of trying to fit the "method du jour" (2007, p. 3, 12). His words resonated across my professional contexts—I can question what career to pursue, or how and why to do so, but a deeper and more enduring question is *who* is this self that moves through the world? I began to see my graduate thesis as a reflexive self-inquiry into the evolving facets of my being, or as Palmer describes "the moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am" (2007, p. 14).

when you move into a new house,  
it isn't your home yet  
scents of another family's dinner  
linger in the air  
their dust in the corners  
their dents in the walls

over time, you make a home  
forge new impressions on the carpets  
fill the cupboards with familiar tastes

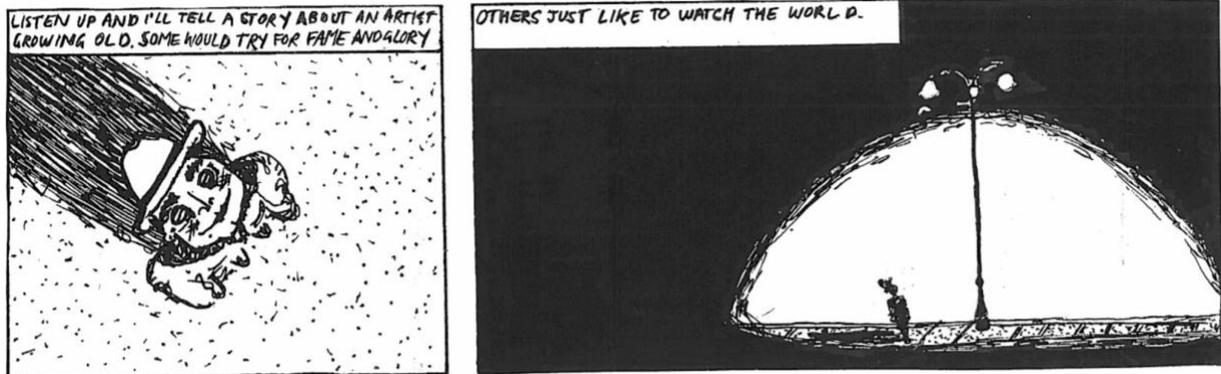
apply the invisible wallpaper  
of your fingerprints

I stand at the threshold  
of the house of my becoming  
becoming adult  
becoming teacher  
(still becoming student)  
becoming artist  
becoming researcher  
becoming human in an all-too-human world

This inquiry is a house within a house:  
creating a piece of writing,  
creating a vocational direction,  
creating a self

this inquiry is a snapshot  
of thought and life  
from a continuous becoming

When I began to reflect on my ways of being as an artist, researcher, teacher, and person in the world, I noted a recurring theme of *listening*—not only in the sense of auditory perception, but also a wider attunement to the world, involving all my intermingling senses. As a child I was often quiet and shy, yet curious and attentive, and over the years I have been attracted to professional and artistic practices that engage me in deep listening, such as mentoring, research, and dancing. Years ago, when a classmate drew a comic illustrating the chorus of Daniel Johnston’s song “The Story of an Artist,” the last two frames in particular resonated so strongly with me that I have since kept a copy of them pinned near my desk both at home and work:



**Figure 1: Story of an Artist**

Excerpt from comic strip by Rylan Schinkel, *Story of an artist (Don't be scared!)*, 2012. Reproduced with permission.

Listen up and I'll tell a story  
 About an artist growing old  
 Some would try for fame and glory  
 Others just like to watch the world (Johnston, 1982)

There is within me this solitary figure—not lonesome, but standing apart from my busy interactions, mesmerized by the beauty in the banal, the details in the rush, the lights and shadows, the words people say, their subtle gestures. It is she who is drawn to wander, write, dance, research, and even teach from a space of listening.

Nonetheless, I initially hesitated to embrace the figure of the listener as a metaphor for my engagement with the world, having internalized the conception of listening as an act of passive reception. In her own treatise on listening, *Listening, Thinking, Being* (2014), Lisbeth Lipari discusses how twentieth-century Western society has predominantly viewed communication as the transmission of information, where we “presume speaking to be the active construction of meaning and listening its passive reception,” rendering listening an “obligatory but irrelevant” activity that is secondary to speech—if at all acknowledged (p. 9). “The silence of listening,” Lipari writes, “is, like its visible counterpart of the shadow, an invisible presence. Listening is the absence of speech, a gap, a lacuna, a fissure” (2014, p. 2). Our discourses on arts and education similarly reinforce images of silently listening students and spectators, set in opposition to the active, speaking role of the teacher or actor (Lipari, 2014; Rancière, 2009; Waks,

2015). For instance, even though John Dewey asserts that sensory perception is central to meaning-making and learning, in his critique of didactic pedagogy he rhetorically reaffirms the inertia of listening, stating that “the attitude of listening means, comparatively speaking, passivity, absorption [...] if everything is on a ‘listening’ basis, you can have uniformity of material and method” (Dewey, 1915, p. 32-34). This stereotypical binary implicitly dissociates the listening student or spectator “from both the capacity to know and the power to act,” (Rancière, 2009, p. 8-9), while disregarding the creativity of the listening act, and the ways in which teachers and artists must also listen.

Our disregard for listening threatens the valuable listening spaces in our professional and artistic practices as well as our everyday life. We hear this in Johnston’s song for instance, where the artist’s community questions his legitimacy and productivity due to his habit of wandering and watching the world:

Everyone, and friends and family  
Saying, “Hey! Get a job!  
“Why do you only do that only?  
Why are you so odd?

[...]

The artist walks alone  
Someone says behind his back,  
“He’s got his gall to call himself that!  
He doesn’t even know where he’s at!” (Johnston, 1982)

In my own life, I fall quiet precisely when I am at my most present, engaged, and inspired—until the wild bloom of thoughts and emotions within me solidifies into an utterance I feel can truly contribute to the world. However, in both personal and professional contexts, I often fidget on the edges of my silence, anxious to ‘find something to say,’ in fear that my silence will be interpreted as ignorance, distraction, boredom, distrust, or haughtiness. Similarly, although art has always been the central source of joy, solace, expression, and inquiry in my life, I question if I have “the gall” to call myself an artist if I am not seeking “fame and glory” by sharing my utterances with the world at large. In my social dance practice in particular, where I take the role of the ‘follow,’ it has taken nearly a decade for me to acknowledge myself as a *dancer*, for I had presumed my role to be passive—listening and ‘following’ the creativity of my dance partner and the musicians. Not to mention how loud my inner critic would disparage the

hours I once “wasted” when my part-time or contract work would free me from the constraints of a nine-to-five workday, allowing me to meander through the hours like the artist in Johnston’s song:

The artist walks among the flowers  
Appreciating the sun  
He does this all his waking hours  
But is it really so wrong? (Johnston, 1982)

Dipping my feet in the ocean on a Tuesday afternoon, as the world spun fast around me, I would ask the waves, where *am* I? And they would reply with the only word they knew: *here, here, here*. Perhaps, it really isn’t so wrong waded in the water, away from it all; perhaps this, too, is a valuable offering: gazing into the rays of light, enamoured with the world...

Instead of rushing to fill silences, engage listeners in speech, and eliminate the position of the spectator, various theories on listening in communication, arts, and pedagogy invite us to reconsider the multiple meanings, possibilities, and value of listening beyond a paradigm of passive reception. For instance, the philosopher Jacques Rancière asks us to question the assumed oppositions between “viewing/knowing, appearance/reality, activity/passivity” that discredit the role of students and spectators and create a hierarchical structure of knowledge, power, and agency in educational and artistic contexts (2009, p. 12). His theories of intellectual emancipation and the emancipated spectator (Rancière, 1991, 2009) instead attribute an active role onto the listener who reaches for new knowledge and experiences, then analyzes, compares, and creates new understandings or interpretations out of the intellectual or artistic content they hear.

In *Listening to Teach*, Leonard Waks (2015) also acknowledges the active and creative possibilities of listening in pedagogy, as he outlines eight forms of listening, each with distinct goals, approaches, and related skill sets. “Informative listening” aimed at obtaining and understanding information, is just one form of listening, which, as Dewey critiqued, is overemphasized in didactic models of pedagogy, to the detriment of students’ sense of creativity, agency, and justice (Waks, 2015, p. 8; Dewey, 1915). Meanwhile, teachers’ listening can become “tightly circumscribed to critical listening in the narrowest sense—listening for the right (or wrong) answer” (Waks, 2015, p. 8).

However, other models of pedagogy encourage teachers to listen in order to “observe and hypothesize about, and to interpret, learner’s interests and capabilities, to build relationships with them and care about them, to appreciate and value them, and to form creative practical ideas [...] about lessons and activities,” while also engaging students in “active intellectual and practical engagement involving all types of listening” (Waks, 2015, p. 8-9).

Indeed, when we listen closely to listening, we find it is not a single experience, but a range of complex, multi-sensory processes that are central to human connection, meaning-making, creation, and even ethical action. Arguably, we listen with our whole bodies, not only with our ears, engaging and intertwining all our senses and modes of knowing (Snowber, 2016; Lipari, 2014; McRae, 2015). For instance, we can both hear and touch sound waves pulsing through us (Lipari, 2014), enabling individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing to play and appreciate music. For many people, synesthetic connections in their brain produce “visual-evoked auditory responses,” allowing them to experience sound from visual cues such as colors or flashing lights (Saenz & Koch, 2008; Fassnidge et al., 2017). Our modes of sensory perception are so intertwined that it is nearly impossible to determine through which sense we are obtaining information about the world. For example, since pheromones convey our emotions through scent alongside (or even contradicting!) our speech or body language, online interactions, such as in distance education courses, may pose limitations to our ability to listen to one another, regardless of the quality of our audio reception (Berg & Seeber, 2016). To define listening as a purely auditory process can therefore create false assumptions about who can listen, how we listen, and under which conditions we can best listen.

Listening through all our senses connects us to both the external world we inhabit and our inner consciousness. Anne McCrary Sullivan describes how “we experience life in all its grittiness and pleasure through the sensory mechanisms of the body. We see hear, smell, taste, touch, and thereby know and feel and understand” (2009, p. 113). Further, drawing from neuroscience, she argues that our intuition is a “biologically real, a cognitive process that arises from being finely attuned to the signals that our physiology delivers from subconscious perception” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 112). Similarly, Celeste Snowber’s work on embodied inquiry explores how listening “to and through the body” awakens us to our inner wisdom, spiritual insights, passions, and

inspirations (2016, p. 56). Listening engages our mind, heart, and soul (Snowber, 2016) in the complex processes of attention, reception, recognition, meaning-making, memory, association, empathy, resonance, and imagination that constitute listening. As Michael Rost describes, the perceptual act of hearing can be distinguished from listening by its “degree of intention,” including both an acknowledgement of the source and a willingness to be influenced by it (2011, p. 12). Applying this definition to our broader conception of listening through our multiple senses, the act of listening requires being mindful of our embodied sensations and how they influence us physically, cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually.

Although listening encompasses so many forms of engagement, to use the particular term listening calls forth unique values, goals, and relationships to oneself and the world which are often overlooked in our society that privileges metaphors and practices of seeing (Lipari, 2014; McRae, 2015). Visual metaphors are particularly dominant in our discourse around understanding and inquiry: we observe the world, bring things to light, see the point, make mental pictures, discover insights, gain a new perspective (Lipari, 2014; McRae, 2015). However, metaphors of sight can suggest a sense of contemplating an object or thing from an external or distanced position, and thus may be less appropriate to express inner, embodied experiences (Lloyd, 2017; McRae, 2015). For instance, in her inquiry into the experience of deep presence in salsa dancing, Rebecca Lloyd describes the need to engage in a “participatory approach [...] stepping inside the phenomenon from a first-person, feeling-oriented stance” (2017, p. 60-61). In her case, she borrows the phrase “feeling our seeing” from philosopher Michel Henry to describe both the phenomenological inquiry into the “felt sense” of hers and others’ dancing experience, and the practice of intentionally exploring the impact of how she uses her gaze when dancing (Lloyd, 2017, p. 67). Celeste Snowber suggests a further lean towards listening, when she proposes that feelings of “guidance, deeper understanding, epiphanies” might be better described as “inhear” than “insight” as they seem to come from within, from “a kind of inner hearing” (2016, p. 60).

In *Performative Listening*, McRae summarizes the work of various scholars who describe how “a shift in sensory metaphors, from visual to aural” can have “material and conceptual implications” for our research process and goals, and our role as researchers (2015, p. 17). Listening can resist the dominant “object-centred and product-based”

approach to research, where research subjects may become objectified or simplified, and success is measured through tangible, visible outcomes (McRae, 2015, p. 17). Instead, listening suggests an “experiential orientation” that values the process, relationships, and embodied experience of research and learning (McRae, 2015, p. 18). To illustrate a listening approach to research, McRae recounts his first experience improvising with a three-piece band, where the bass player told him “if you have something to say...say it. And if you don’t...then don’t say anything” (2015, p. 15). The bass player’s advise invites McRae to “hear music as a conversation” where he is both a speaker and a listener, “and to participate in that conversation accordingly” (2015, p. 15). Translating this approach to the realm of qualitative research, McRae proposes that, “research as an act of listening works to hear conversations, to hear the sounds and stories of others, and to listen for the way ideas emerge over time” (2015, p. 20). McRae’s many such experiences playing the trumpet and listening to the music and autobiography of Miles Davis, leads him to conceptualize “performative listening” as an experiential, embodied, and critical research method that can modify or compliment qualitative research methods (2015).

McRae’s exploration of listening in research and music, like Waks’ description of modes of listening in pedagogy, emphasizes that although listening may be an essential and inevitable aspect of the human experience, it is ultimately a performative act “that can be performed in a variety of different ways with a variety of different consequences” (McRae, 2015, p. 32). Conceptualising listening as a multi-sensory performance or practice invites us to pause, listen deeply to our listening, and question its possibilities. For instance, in Meg Zuccaro’s inquiry into listening as a contemplative and spiritual practice, she poses a number of questions about her listening experiences, such as:

Is it possible to say what listening is? How are the elements of listening known? How does it feel to listen? How does it feel like to be listened to? How do we listen in our daily lives? Might listening be a verb? How does the body sense listening? What is the language of listening? What does listening look like? How does one describe an experience of listening? How does one share and gift listening? Can one learn to listen? How is it that one comes to know the mystery of listening? What does it mean to dwell with listening presence? (2004, p. 17)

How we listen, and how we think of ourselves as listeners in different contexts shapes our experiences (McRae, 2015). Listening can thus be conceived as being much more than a process of sensory perception, attention, or understanding information; listening can become an ethical stance and practice whose implications are far-reaching precisely because listening is the fundamental way we come to know of the world and interact with it (Lipari, 2014; McRae, 2015). Even when listening is forgotten or dismissed, it is “never a neutral act” (McRae, 2015, p. 16), and certainly not irrelevant (Lipari, 2014). Reflecting on our performance as listeners opens us to consider how we can create “connections, relationships, and knowledge” in ways that are not only ethical, but also “pleasurable, productive, and full of possibilities” (McRae, 2015, p. 2). Listening to our acts of listening, we may notice the different ways we can engage with our self and the world, and the effects these have on our life.

## An Inquiry into Listening

In this inquiry, I take up McRae (2015)'s invitation to reflect on the practices and possibilities of my own listening as an artist, student, researcher, and person in the world. I lean into spaces and experiences of listening in my life, including reading, dancing, writing, transcribing, engaging in arts-based inquiry, and facilitating art engagement in order to ask, *who is the self that listens?* I consider my embodied, emotional, and spiritual experience as a listener, as well as the metaphors, intentions, or practices that guide and enable different kinds of listening. I find that I feel my most fulfilled, enlivened, connected, and creative when I am consciously engaged in acts of deep listening, and I also notice habits and approaches that inhibit genuine listening. When I am truly listening, I release expectations, preconceptions, and control, and encounter sparks of deep wisdom, meaningful connections, and a desire for life.

A vast number of disciplines have touched on listening as both a literal act and conceptual idea including the natural sciences, communications, aesthetics, education, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Listening has been defined in a number of ways over the decades, depending on the theoretical lens applied, and evolving understanding of the biological, neurological, psychological, cultural, and technological processes involved in listening (Rost, 2011). However, this inquiry does not aim to provide a survey on theories of listening in the arts, research, and pedagogy, or prescribe a method of listening; rather, it is a meditation on particular instances of listening in my own life. Over the course of my inquiry, I attend to ideas on listening from a wide variety of sources, including theory, poetry, life-writing, personal conversations, and my own embodied experience.

As I explore small corners of this vast terrain, certain framings, definitions, ideas, and images particularly resonate with me, surprise me, pique my curiosity, and form patterns and associations between each other—the way various instruments can tie together to form the *clave* rhythm (Spanish for “key”) that distinguishes Latin music. One of my favourite moments as a salsa dancer is when I walk down a street, approaching the door of the dance hall, and start to feel the *clave* both ringing in the air around me, and awakening deep within me. *Clave* compels me to move in new ways, while surfacing movements that seem to have always been central to my being. Similarly, certain

metaphors and ideas about listening transformed how I listen, while others articulated familiar aspects of my lived experiences. My personal reflections and theoretical inspirations play their instruments together on the pages of this thesis, allowing me to discover the movements and resonances of my listening self while I invite my readers to find their own dance within its rhythms...

In this introductory Tanda 1, *Leaning in/to Listening*, I share how a symphony of arts-based research methods and practices facilitated my inquiry into listening and informed my theoretical understanding and appreciation of listening as an ongoing and essential practice in art and research. Particularly inspiring were living inquiry (Meyer, 2006, 2008, 2010), which invited me to listen to listening in my lived experience; performative inquiry (Fels, 2012, 2015), which drew my attention to “stop moments” of awakening and insight in the listening acts I perform in my daily life and my artistic practices; and embodied inquiry (Snowber, 2012, 2016), which guided me in listening to what my body knew about listening, especially in my dance practice. Further, I reflect on research frameworks and approaches to writing that helped me craft my inquiry into listening, including the use of poetry (Prendergast 2009), and the practice of métissage (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009; Irwin, 2004).

Tanda 2, *The Eros of Aesthetic Listening*, traces back to my undergraduate literary studies, to explore how Hélène Cixous’ evocative metaphor of reading as “making love to a text” (1991, p. 24) can reframe our approach to listening to art and the world around us. Drawing on theories from writers and philosophers such as Anne Carson, Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous and Jacques Daignault, I argue that the metaphors and images of love, pleasure and desire that emerge time and again in descriptions of aesthetic experiences transcend the idea of mere enjoyment. Rather, the energy of eros can elevate listening to art into an encounter that is creative, dialogical, and transformative. When readers listen creatively, considering new interpretations instead of applying previously formed schemes, a text may multiply infinitely before us, activating the tantalizing reach that turns listening into an experience of desire.

Central to the experience of eros in aesthetic listening is the blurred distinction between creator and listener. Thus, after exploring what it means to listen creatively as a reader, in Tanda 3, *Creative Listening*, I uncover the important role listening plays in my artistic practices of writing, living inquiry and dance. Creating through listening (or, for

short, “creative listening”) involves deep attunement to the world around us through all our sensory modalities in order to responding with our own unique creative expression. A daily practice of listening allows me weave together disparate sensations and experiences in my writing and inquiry. Meanwhile, genuinely listening to the multiple stimuli around me when I dance—the music, the floor, my partner, and my own moving body—allows me to connect with my agency and authentic movement as a dancer, expanding my possibilities of expression.

Tanda 4, *Ephemeral Listening*, shifts our attention to transcribing—a listening-intensive task that is essential to many qualitative research studies, although it is often disregarded as an onerous but otherwise straightforward and mechanical task that precedes real research. However, unpacking the layers of representation and interpretation that are involved in transcribing challenges our hubristic belief that it is possible to neatly and objectively capture knowledge. Through a literature review on portrayals of transcribing and transcribers, alongside a poetic inquiry into my own experiences transcribing, I delve into the emotional, intellectual, and even transformative potential of this listening practice. I propose that if we recognise the selective and creative nature of transcribing, alongside the inevitable gaps and losses of this process, we may be called to better reflect on our choices and experiences as transcribers, and value the ephemeral insights the transcriber witnesses as being central to research endeavors.

Building on the theme of listening as a creative act in arts and research, Tanda 5: *A Community that Listens* reflects on the profound impact of listening to one another’s creative expression in a nurturing manner. Responding to Lynda Barry’s (2008) questions about what makes us stop creating art as we enter adulthood, I trace mine and other artist’s creative histories to highlight the pivotal role experiences of listening have on our relationship with artmaking, and our confidence in our voice in public spheres. I advocate for the creation of communities that listen—where we not only cherish other’s voices but also listen for and to the silences, seeing the artists in those who cannot see it in themselves, and reminding them—with care and with a challenge—the importance of offering their unique voice to the world.

In the concluding Tanda 6, as the title implies, *I Listen On*. After years of developing this inquiry into listening, I bring my queries back to my present work context

in public engagement, with a final meditation on advocating for team-based analysis to foster a culture of listening with my colleagues. I listen for the ever-emerging questions of listening that propel me forward, carrying the insights I have gained through this inquiry into new contexts, while opening new opportunities to reflect on the way I perform listening, and listening performs me.

## Listening for Occasions of Art-based Research

Describing the practice of poetic inquiry, Anne McCrary Sullivan notes that common characteristics of poetry can also be recognized as *occasions* for poetry— aspects of research data or life experiences that are “more welcome of poetic rendering” (2009, p. 111). For instance, sensory images, voice, emotion, ambiguity, associative logic, tensions, and contradictions are all valuable elements that a poet can play with when writing—but they are also qualities that the poet can listen for in their life and research, which alert them to phenomena that may require the air of poetry to truly come alive on the page (Sullivan, 2009). Similarly, as I began to ponder about listening while I explored the growing body of arts-based research through my graduate studies, I began to recognize shared characteristics between my experience of listening and the essential qualities of many arts-based research practices, identifying my thesis as an occasion to voice the former through the latter.

Listening is embodied, yet ephemeral and intangible; listening brings together fragmentary sensory stimulus through association, interpretation and intuition; listening is embedded throughout our lived experience, while serving as a common metaphor in theoretical discourses; listening can be enacted in multiple ways, becoming a performance with ethical consequences. Exploring the nature of my listening experiences called for approaches to inquiry that draw attention to embodiment and performativity in lived experience, and forms of representation that allow for intuitive associations, metaphoric thinking, and the invocation of sensory experiences on the page. Listening presented an *occasion* for arts-based research, and the development of my thesis paper began to (both intentionally and spontaneously) incorporate elements and principles reflected in the theorization of various arts-based research practices—including living inquiry (Meyer, 2006, 2008, 2010), performative inquiry (Fels, 2012, 2015), embodied inquiry (Snowber, 2012, 2016), poetic inquiry (Prendergast 2009), and métissage (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009; Irwin, 2004).

Although such a mixed-methods approach may suggest methodological confusion or excess, for me it speaks more to the shared epistemological and/or ontological orientations of arts-based research practices. Patricia Leavy (2018, 2015), Conrad & Beck (2015) and other scholars assert that arts-based research is a unique

research paradigm, not just a set of methodologies within qualitative research. Unlike other research paradigms, arts-based research centers on the belief that “the arts can create and convey meaning” (Leavy, 2018, p. 5), especially meaning that emerges from *aesthetic*<sup>1</sup> or “sensory-perceptual-emotional” knowing—a fundamental way of knowing that evolved in humans before “linguistic-cognitive knowing” (Conrad & Beck, 2015, p. 10). In other words, arts-based research draws on various artistic disciplines to make sense of “sensory, emotional, perceptual, kinesthetic, embodied and imaginal” knowing (Leavy, 2018, p. 5) and share these complex dimensions of experience with others (Conrad & Beck, 2015). As Conrad & Beck (2015, p. 5) argue, Denzin & Lincoln’s metaphor of the “bricoleur” (2018, p. 11) can be extended from the qualitative researcher to the arts-based researcher, “as she/he responds to the emergent opportunities for research-creation.” Just as our aesthetic knowledge brings together our senses, perceptions, and emotions, in my experience arts-based research lends itself to the organic confluence of various approaches that already exist within this paradigm—as well as the generation of new possibilities.

My choice to acknowledge the multiple arts-based research practices that influenced my work also enacts the value that Conrad & Beck (2015) posit as being central to arts-based research: *relationality*. Poetic writing (the most apparent arts practice in my thesis) allows me to share my aesthetic experience of listening with others in a way that makes space for multiple interpretations and invites my reader to explore their own understandings and experiences of listening—enacting the “relationality or dialogical engagement” that arts-based research values (Conrad & Beck, 2015, p. 12). Although I have been writing poetry since I was a child, my graduate studies in Arts Education allowed me to join a community of artist-scholars whose own research-creations, theoretical writings, and personal mentorship has allowed me to understand *why* I felt called to write, *how* I could fuse my art and my research, and how I could listen and learn through my other senses and arts practices, such as dance. While I continually

<sup>1</sup> In their articulation of the ontology and epistemology of arts-based research, Conrad & Beck (2015, p. 8) clarify that “the sense of aesthetics we refer to here is not the modern sense of aesthetics related to taste or judgment of fine arts based on notions of beauty (Kant 2007), but what might be more aligned with the classical Greek sense of aesthetics (Aristotle 1998) – the origin of the Greek word *aisthanesthai* meaning to sense, perceive, or feel (Online Etymology Dictionary 2014). This is an understanding of aesthetics as a sensory, perceptual, and emotional knowing (Whitfield 2005).

gather new articulations of arts-based research, I present here the particular concepts, qualities and characteristics from arts-based practices that sung to me over the years I wrote this thesis.

First, I wish to acknowledge the powerful way arts-based research practices helped me validate my lived experience as a site for transformative inquiry into my listening practices. Juggling multiple part-time jobs alongside my graduate studies, and lacking a paid/professional artistic practice, I often questioned whether I had a legitimate foundation for conducting research. However, Karen Meyer's practice of *living inquiry* (2006, 2008, 2010) inspired me to turn my inquiring gaze towards my lived experiences in education, research, and art even if they followed unconventional pathways or didn't measure up to my perceived standards of legitimacy. I am reassured by Meyer's assertion that "we are never world-less. As worldly beings, we participate with/in existing day-to-day practices of a culture in a fairly transparent way and with, or possibly without, a felt correctness" (2010, p. 85). She further clarifies that living inquiry is not "a philosophy of life, a methodology to be followed, or an analytical tool," but rather a practice of living with awareness to the "newness, truth, and beauty in daily life" (2006, p. 165). Just as the theory that humans are fundamentally creative and aesthetic beings (Conrad & Beck, 2015; Dissanayake, 1992) assured me that I had an inherent calling to practice art, Meyer's *living inquiry* reminds me that I have an inherent capacity to engage in inquiry as a person in the world.

I also felt an affinity to Meyer's approach as she features writing as a starting point for inquiry into complex themes. Meyer invites her students to choose specific contexts in their life through which to observe the existential themes of place, language, time, self/other (2006, 2008, 2010). Students then craft short "fieldnotes" through writing or other artistic mediums to share their "attentive experiences" and open dialogue about the structure, content, movement and significance of daily life (Meyer, 2006, 2008, 2010). Echoing this practice, my interest in the theme of listening emerged through a practice of journaling about memories and observations from my daily life as I pondered Palmer's question of *who is the self that teaches* (2007, p. 4)—or in my case, who is the self who engages in all my roles as a teaching assistant, research assistant, student mentor, etc. My writing surfaced questions, tensions, and moments of grace and insight. The act of creation brought my fragmented life together on a page, where I could begin

to recognize through-lines of my values, ways of being, and aspirations, feeling the “wholeness” which Palmer argues “does not mean perfection,” but rather “becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am” (2007, p. 14). Engaging in a writing inquiry from my lived experience thus brought meaning to both my experiences of listening and my life as a whole.

Living inquiry not only invites us to listen to our lived experience as a source of insight, empowering our voice, but also to participate ethically and mindfully in our daily interactions (Meyer, 2008), thus enacting the relational value of arts-based research (Conrad & Beck, 2015). For instance, discussing our societal disconnection from nature, Meyer notes that our relationship with the natural world “hinges on whether we see ourselves as ‘integrally continuous’ with the natural world or ‘contingently thrown into it’ [...] as strangers needing to fend for ourselves at any cost, unaccountable to the consequences” (2010, p. 86). Reading this, I realized that I could choose to see myself as a “contingent” part-time, contract worker, a “stranger” carrying out tasks to earn a pay check, or I could see my various roles as part of a continuous practice, a multi-faceted engagement with the world that carries real impact and responsibility. Living inquiry further helps us live with authenticity by becoming aware of the ways in which our actions are conditioned by the world (Meyer, 2008). Observing my daily experiences, I notice how institutional or social structures can augment my sense of contingency and restrict the possibilities of my listening. For instance, as a teaching assistant in distance-education courses—or even as a social dancer often dancing with strangers—my interactions with others can be short, fleeting, and depersonalized. It is easy for me to disregard the import of my words, or ways of listening. However, practicing living inquiry anchors me to the present, making me aware of my freedom to act and listen with authenticity and care.

Performative inquiry offers another pathway to “still the momentum that carries us relentlessly from one moment to the next” (Fels, 2015, p. 118) and enact ethical ways of being in the world and with others. Lynn Fels reminds us of the weight of every interaction with our students, regardless of its duration or context, stating that:

We engage with our students through moments, one moment unfolding into the next, in our presence and in our absence. Each moment marks us, marks the students we encounter. Hence a single moment of encounter is embodied within us for a lifetime, with all its consequences, known, as-yet-

unknown, anticipated, intended, unexpected, unforeseen. To attend in the present to each moment is to engage in the unfolding of each child's future, and our own. (2015, p. 118)

Performative inquiry asks us to listen deeply to the present moment for what philosopher David Appelbaum called a *stop*: sometimes fleeting moments that nonetheless linger with us, interrupting, disrupting, surprising and awakening us (Fels, 2012, 2015). Stop moments reveal “how we perform and are performed by our environment, our roles, our contexts, our relationships with others and the ‘scripts’ that we create,” opening an opportunity to consider different ways of responding or engaging in the world, and their corresponding repercussions and consequences (Fels, 2012, p. 51). Like McRae’s work on performative listening (2015), Fels’ performative inquiry once again calls me to attend to the way I “perform” my listening in various contexts of my life. I allow my writing and research to be led by stop moments from my experiences of listening that “provoke new questioning, call forth reflection, and inspire” (Fels, 2012, p. 53-4). Asking “What if? What happens? What matters? So what? Who cares?” (Fels, 2012, p. 54), this reflective practice contributes to my ongoing inquiry, while helping me engage in “meaningful responsible action” as a listener (Fels 2015, p. 114).

Fels’ emphasis on viewing our art practices as “action sites of inquiry” (2012, 2015) further inspired me to explore my experiences of listening within the full spectrum of my engagement with the arts—including reading, dancing, and singing—even if my primary mode of expression was writing. This approach expanded my understanding of what it meant to be an arts-based researcher, and ultimately sparked a remarkable shift in my sense of identity. Although the arts have always been a core passion in my life, they tended to inhabit the margins of my sense of identity and research. Engaging in a focused inquiry into a core aspect of my identity (listening) within the frame of my artistic practices helped me re-center these practices in my life, legitimize my sense of being an artist, and appreciate how my artistry can lead my engagement with the world.

For instance, although I have been dancing salsa and swing since I was fifteen, my dancing has always been absent from my studies, research, and teaching, and I struggled to view myself as a *dancer*. I prefer to dance in the role of the ‘follower’ in these partnered dances, listening and responding to the ‘lead’ of my dance partner—a role that I often perceived as being passive—and I never engaged in the other activities that constituted my definition of being a dancer, such as choreography, dance

competitions, or performances. However, when I began listening for stop moments as I danced salsa and swing, and when I recently started learning the tango, I was amazed by the rich insights that emerged from my interactions, responses, moments of resistance or experiences of transcendence.

Social dancing is fundamentally a relational practice, where we engage in reciprocal listening and dialogue with the music, our dance partner, our own body, and the space around us. Attending to the figures, emotions, and resonances I experience in as I dance, I become aware of the embodied lessons on relationships, listening, dialogue, creation, intimacy, presence, and timing that are embedded in my practice. Once again, performative inquiry creates a reciprocal exchange between theory and practice: attending to my listening while I danced grounded me in the present, drawing my awareness to the quality of my connection to my partner and the music. Meanwhile, the insights I gained while dancing, and metaphors emerging from the dynamics of dance began informing all aspects of my life—from my inquiry into listening, to my broader research and teaching, to my personal life.

Indeed, over time I came to realize just how central my dance practice is to my sense of identity. After one joyous night dancing swing, I wrote:

When I am lost in the world, I return to dance. When I am lost to myself, I return to dance. I return and think *this is everything*. Right here, in the space between his sweat-soaked shirt and my sweat-soaked brow; in the celebration between the drums and the banjos, the clarinets, bass, piano, and my bones, muscles, feet, and hips. *This is everything*. Here is where all my aspirations coalesce and come alive, embodied in me. This is my true self, lost to the music but found in it as well. I return to dance, not once but regularly, to re-enact that space, and carry it forth in my body, heart, and soul.

This experience recalls an inspiring phrase from an interview with community-engaged artist Karen Jamieson (2015) that I helped transcribe in one of my research assistantships.<sup>2</sup> Describing how her work includes teaching, choreographing, and

<sup>2</sup> From 2013-2018, I worked as a Research Assistant in the ASC! Project, a SSHRC-funded national research initiative exploring teaching and learning, evaluation, and partnerships in the field of art for social change. Under this role, I transcribed a series of interviews Dr. Patti Fraser conducted with artists in British Columbia whose practice includes facilitating participatory art-making processes with community members in various settings. My experience as a transcriber was one of my sites of living inquiry, while the reflections of many of the artists inspired my thoughts on listening, art, pedagogy, and inquiry. Videos of all the interviews are accessible at *Artists Speak*

facilitating, Jamieson noted that her dance practice is the unifying identity from which she leads her work: "I'm always investigating, inquiring, working with, exploring, discovering dance," she stated, "fundamentally, I'm a dancer, that's what I am" (2015). What would it mean, I wondered, to not only embrace that I was an artist, but indeed to lead my life and work from this identity? Instead of asking, "who is the self that teaches?" (Palmer, 2007, p. 4), what if I asked *who is the self that creates?*

In moments of uncertainty in my work as an advisor, teacher, and researcher, I envision myself approaching my work primarily as an artist, and suddenly I feel a burst of confidence, creativity, and joy in what I do. The fragmentation of my professional life finds unity. As artist-educator Vicki Kelly states, "each art form has unique pedagogical ways of acting upon our senses and sensibilities" (2015, p. 47), so to develop an art practice is to develop a unique way of being in the world. Jamieson emphasizes the importance of engaging in dance as a daily practice, including solitary dancing, and having her students "share what they themselves practice, as opposed to what they've read about" (2015). As I progressed in my research, my art practices moved from being a personal, leisure activity that I engaged in when I found the time, to being a core commitment to a performative practice of embodied listening through which I may explore personal and professional questions and enact the creativity, connection, and presence I wish to bring to all my interactions with the world.

As both dancing and listening are deeply embodied experiences, my research process and insights were deeply influenced by Celeste Snowber's scholarship on embodied inquiry (2012, 2016), which explores how developing an attentive connection to our bodies can inform our personal and professional lives. Like Meyer's living inquiry, and Fels' performative inquiry, Snowber's embodied inquiry is a "life practice" or "way of being in the world" (2016, p. xv). Arguing that "all of the knowledge of how to listen to your body is already within you," Snowber doesn't offer a singular plan or method for engaging in embodied inquiry, but rather an invitation to see our bodies as a "place of inquiry [...] learning, understanding and perceiving (2016, p. xiii). As I explored my experience as a listener, I paid particular attention to my embodied experience, including

(<http://artists-speak.ca/>). The particular interviews I discuss in this thesis are cited in the References under the interviewee's last name.

the many senses that are involved in listening, and the way my body feels when I am engaged in different kinds of listening.

A dancer herself, Snowber's work draws connections between physicality, poetics, creativity and spirituality, and encourages us to incorporate improvisational and expressive movement, such as dance, into our research process (2012, 2016). Challenging our common assumption that paying attention, listening, and learning requires us to sit still, Snowber suggests we "dance the questions" (2012, p. 54), blending movement with writing to awaken our emotions, imaginations, intuition, and sensuous knowledge (2012, 2016). Snowber's scholarship resonated with my experience of finding rich insights about listening within my social dance practice. Further, her writing on the value of expressive, improvisational movement and finding our "body signature," or unique way of moving in the world (2012, p. 53) influenced the way I perceive and engage in my dance practice, as I explore in greater depth in *Tanda 3: Creative Listening*.

If the playfulness, risk taking, and creativity of improvisational movement can help us access our emotions, imagination, and unexpected insights (Snowber, 2012), poetry is a form of dancing on the page that opens new possibilities for both the writer and the reader. In her introductory overview of the use of poetry in qualitative research, Monica Prendergast (2009) proposes that poetic inquiry tends to fall into one of three categories: literature-based poems that are "written from or in response to works of literature/theory in a discipline or field," researcher-voiced poems emerging from field notes, journal entries, or autobiographical/autoethnographical writing, and participant-voiced poems written from interview transcripts or solicited from research participants (p. xxii). In this thesis, my poetry falls within the first two categories: literature-based poems and researcher-voiced poems that help me gather, understand, and represent my experiences and ideas on listening. Over the course of my inquiry, I constantly engaged in freewriting, often in poetic forms, allowing my associations to bring together memories, theoretical influences, personal hesitations and resistances, and sensory perceptions.

While not all of my poems related to listening ended up in my thesis, the process of writing allowed me to stumble upon unexpected ideas and insights that transformed my understanding. For example, I conceived and developed each chapter of this thesis

in response to a metaphor or lived experience of listening that emerged in my personal poetry. In the free space of poetry, and the privacy of my personal journal, I did not have to worry about fitting my emergent ideas into pre-existing structures, outlines, or expectations. When I identified a potential starting point for inquiry, I continued to free-write poetry and prose around emerging themes. What's more I began to *think* poetically regardless of the form of my writing, drawing theoretical connections through patterns, contradictions, metaphors, allusions and associations. My poetic thinking and writing allowed me to tease and untangle elusive experiences and concepts and express them to others without flattening their complexity.

The performative, embodied, and poetic influences on my work make their final expression in the overall structure of this work—which is split into *tandas* instead of chapters—a metaphor from my mother tongue and dancing experience that carries a particular invitation for the reader. In a tango social dance, or *milonga*, the music is played in *tandas*: sets of three to five songs of a similar style and tempo that are typically danced with the same partner. The *tandas* are broken up by *cortinas* (literally meaning “curtains”), short clips of non-tango music during which the dancers clear the floor. During the *cortina*, dancers may thank their partner and return to their seat, or they may find a new partner by making eye contact across the empty room, exchanging a nod, or *cabeceo*, and engaging in the next *tanda* of music.

In this inquiry into listening, I have adopted the *tanda* as a conceptual metaphor and organizational framework for my thesis. Each chapter, which I call a *tanda* here, is composed of a series of written compositions that explore the theme of listening within a specific context (listening to art, listening in creative practices, listening to the body, transcribing, and listening to my students). The epigraphs between *tandas* serve as the *cortinas* that offer a pause of breath, and an opportunity to clear the dance floor of our minds so we can better see the invitation offered by the next set of reflections.

These written *tandas* enact a form of the research practice of *métissage*, as articulated by Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009). *Métissage* has been introduced as a collaborative practice of writing and research that brings scholars in dialogue across differences in race, class, gender, geography, and language (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009), however the practice can also offer a space to integrate the “*métissage* existence” of individuals who hold multiple interrelated identities, such as

artist-researcher-teachers like myself (Irwin, 2004, p. 29). Weaving various pieces of writing in *tandas* allows me to honour the different ways my voice emerges when I speak from the multiple contexts of my life and work. Over the years, I have written essays, poetry, poetic prose, stories, and journal entries on computers, journals, napkins, backs of envelopes or other scraps of paper. Folding all these voices into my thesis allows me to explore a topic through the multiple lenses of my intellect, feeling, and practice (Irwin, 2004, p. 29), while exploring how my writing and identity are influenced by the various temporal and physical locations I inhabit during the ongoing process of inquiry (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). Stylistically, this practice of writing and research invites me to remain authentic to my voice in its multiplicity, embracing my whole self, instead of being falsely homogenized into a singularity. In terms of process, writing in *tandas* also accommodates the non-linear process of living inquiry, allowing me to insert new insights and modify elements in each *tanda* in response to emergent experiences and knowledge.

Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) conceptualize *métissage* through the metaphor of braiding, however I evoke the metaphor of *tandas* from my own artistic and listening practice of dance, in the hopes of offering a glimpse into my embodied understanding of *métissage*. For instance, in a milonga, playing several songs consecutively is particularly important as tango can be danced to very diverse styles of music—including the steady 4/4 time of “tango” music, the flowing 3/4 time of the “vals,” the playfully fast 2/4 time of “milonga” music, and contemporary or fusion music. Each musical style has its own emotional resonance and invites different kinds of footwork and dancing frames between the dancing couple. Playing several songs from the same style consecutively in *tandas* allows dancers to enjoy the full variety of tango music, while offering them time and space to strengthen their connection with their partner as they sink into the music. Similarly, writing in *tandas* allows me to honour the contiguity of the a/r/tographer’s life and work where my “roles or acts of inquiry” as a teacher, researcher, and artist “shift to be close—adjacent, but not touching” (Irwin, 2004, p. 31). Each *tanda* is able to explore a theme or idea with focus and depth, following the notion that there is a “time and space for each [identity] to be emphasized” (Irwin, 2004, p. 31), while their juxtaposition suggests relationships, points of affinity and dissonance (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). However, the *tandas* also withhold neat resolutions and transitions, allowing readers to

insert their own meanings and understandings in the interstitial spaces created where the rough edges of my life meet.

An adept tango DJ is attentive to the flow of the songs within each *tanda*, as well as between the multiple *tandas*, creating a journey for the dancers. As suggested by Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009), when combining and editing pieces of writing, I consider the flow between texts, their contribution to the work as a whole, and how they may come together cohesively “without losing their individual and different textures and voices” (p. 13). The written *tandas* that comprise this thesis thus have an internal cohesion that allows them to be read as standalone pieces, while speaking to an overarching inquiry.

We look across the room, I offer you my *cabeceo*, inviting you to dance with my reflections on listening in art, research, pedagogy, and life...

## I Find Myself Listening

I find myself listening  
into the first steps of consciousness  
as morning sounds  
situate my waking body:

the texture  
of cars against the road  
letting me read  
sky's countenance  
with my eyes still closed:  
dusty-summer-rough  
or river-stone-slick

faint kitchen clinking  
soft steps  
hum emerges  
holding my heart in its hearth

I find myself listening  
as I wander the world,  
transfixed by its myriad gestures:  
choreography of objects and beings,  
voices, movements, and energies,  
play of light, mingling sounds,  
suggestions of scents  
captured in photographs, poems,  
memories that linger...

I find myself listening  
on the dance floor  
where emotion vibrates souls in unison  
on the beat-two-three-four-  
and we try, and we try, and we try  
to express how deeply we have heard  
the ecstatic tensions  
of together-apartness  
beyond-within-ourselves  
by finding new lines  
arcs  
force  
tremble  
surrender.

People in my community call on me to listen.  
What they call a job,  
or research—collecting, transcribing,  
analyzing, synthesizing data—  
I experience as different shades of listening:

listening to the waves  
of emotion and cognition  
that ricochet between the lines,  
between us.

The words in the reports I write  
are leaves on a tree,  
rods on a wind chime  
through which we hear  
the world's whispered answers.

If find myself listening,  
headphones on,  
teaching on a Tuesday night  
—yes, teaching:  
a web-conference tutorial in my  
immaterial, distance-education classroom,  
held together by tenuous fibres of listening  
stretching across cities and countries.

I strive to interpret the symbols and murmurs  
that emerge from the faceless silence,  
and communicate care, elicit enthusiasm,  
take us on a journey through voice  
hoping they, too, are listening.

I find myself listening  
in a small room:  
purple plant, box of tissues,  
students filing in  
hour by hour.

I receive their “file” beforehand:  
the letters and numbers on their transcript  
marking their “academic difficulty”  
notes from intake interviews,  
a bar graph of learning strategy psychometrics  
comparing them to the “average” student  
(my own one below par)

but the body knows more ways to listen:  
put the pen down,  
turn towards,  
tune the mood with a smile,  
float across the water of shame  
with the buoyancy of shared laughter  
or a steady, encouraging silence,  
open a window for air with a story,  
ask with the heart:

where are you?

what matters to you?

what is your song?

Melting mind into body,  
I listen.

Taking the world in  
deeper,  
reflecting like a mirror,  
I listen.

Disappearing into listening,  
I find myself,  
listening.

## Tanda 2: The Eros of Aesthetic Listening

*When I was a teenager I once stood before an artwork at the Reykjavík Art Museum; my feet hurt and the work seemed ugly, dead, and boring. So I turned away. My mother, who was along, was surprised at me. This piece was so remarkable; it had a powerful but delicate motion. So I looked again—and no longer saw the work itself, only its motion. The lapse between the two viewings, the interim, created some kind of absurd angle; I experienced indescribable beauty, and laughed.*

*That's one reason why I've found it both an exhilarating challenge and an unbearable responsibility to write about art, to see if maybe words can get some viewer to look again at an artwork, entertain more viewpoints, circle around the work a bit longer.*

(Oddný Eir, "On the Way Down: Fluttering Wings and Three-Dimensional Afterthoughts")

## A Teacher's Quest(ion)

During the six years when I had the joy of working as a teaching assistant for undergraduate literature courses, the highlight for me was always the “Creative Project” assignment, inviting students to use any art form to explore a theme, character, or storyline from the literary texts we read together. Every semester I was amazed by the unique and thoughtful projects I received, ranging from poetry to dance, visual, and culinary arts—Homer’s *The Odyssey* as a salad was delicious. However, the vast majority of my students were not coming from an arts or humanities background. Majoring in the sciences, social sciences, business, or education, they were usually taking this course to fulfill their mandatory “breadth” credits—two courses outside of their major aimed at rounding out their education. I found many of them hesitated to voice their thoughts on the literature we read, and there was particular trepidation around this “creative” project. Inevitably, the emails would trickle in...

*“I’m not an artistic person, could I do a stick-figure drawing of The Odyssey...?”*

There was so much I wanted to reply to messages such as this one...first, that we are all artistic people, even if we’ve forgotten it after years of putting down the crayons in favour of the five-paragraph essay. And that yes, they could work with simple-shaped comics, but not without an appreciation for how this form can be richly artistic, as we can see in the work of artists like Allie Brosh or Don Hertzfeldt. What’s more, I wanted to convey that this project was not just a drawing...but then, what was it?

Stones of resistance can be built into walls, or into paths of inquiry. After my own undergraduate years studying literature with my equally passionate peers, working with non-arts students made me pause and question the purpose of required courses in the humanities. If most of my students did not dream of becoming humanities scholars or artists, how could I encourage them to see the creative project as more than a fluffy gimmick, and to value the course as a whole as more than just a credit on their transcript? If we take heed of Elliot Eisner’s notion that “the aim of educational process inside schools is not to finish something, but to start something” (2002, p. 90), what could I hope or imagine my courses started for my students, especially those who will go on to work in politics, healthcare, business, education, and other sectors?

Emerging-student in the arts,  
I experience education  
as a series of gifts received

Gifts from the heart  
linger the longest

Emerging-teacher,  
I wonder:  
What do I have to offer?  
What gift can I give?

on a page  
a poem flowers

pausing on the words  
our gentle breath is spring  
nudging petals open

heartafterheartafterheart

## The Eros of Aesthetic Listening

When I questioned what I could share with my students from my own love of studying literature, I immediately remembered the day my class spent two hours meditating on a six-line poem: “Touch” by Octavio Paz:

My hands  
open the curtains of your being  
clothe you in a further nudity  
uncover the bodies of your body  
My hands  
invent another body for your body (1987b, p. 115)

With our professor’s guidance, we noted our impressions, traced the repetitions and oppositions of the text, asked questions, unfurled interpretations. Time passed by effortlessly, and there was almost an air of magic as the poem came alive before me. Reading through my old notes, it struck me that the spirit of discovery within Paz’s poem of desire reflected my own pleasurable experience of studying the poem, and further how both of these encounters echoed Hélène Cixous’ description of the act of reading in her essay *Coming to Writing*:

The flesh is writing, and writing is never read: it always remains to be read, studied, sought, invented.

Reading: writing the ten thousand pages of every page, bringing them to light. Grow and multiply and the page will multiply. But that means reading: making love to the text. It’s the same spiritual exercise. (1991, p. 24)

Although Roland Barthes warns that “no ‘thesis’ on the pleasure of the text is possible: barely an inspection (an introspection) that falls short” (1975, p. 34), I nonetheless felt called to inquire: what is the nature of the kind of aesthetic engagement Cixous speaks of? How can we invite students into this “spiritual exercise”? What kind of listening is embodied here? After all, one can hardly add “making love to the text” to the course objectives...

Cixous’ essay challenged me to question the way I normally framed the act of reading in my classes. Often I reminded my students, “make sure you finish the readings before next class” ...whereas Cixous describes being “struck with astonishment mingled with scorn and disgust” by the opening line of a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé: *The flesh is sad, alas, and I have read all the books* (qt. in Cixous, 1991, p. 24). Cixous argues

that such a statement is a lie, because a book can never be “read” in the past tense. Extending Mallarmé’s juxtaposition of flesh and books, she declares that calling a book “finished” is like calling a body finished, a “decaying carcass” (1991, p. 24). Perhaps it is no wonder that, alongside instructions to “finish” readings in a week, it is so common to refer to literary analysis as “dissecting a text”! Reflecting on the beauty of studying pieces of literature such as Paz’s poetry, I find myself identifying with Cixous’ description of reading as *making love to a text* and wondering how this metaphor can reframe our approach to listening to art and the world around us.

Cixous’ essay joins a long tradition of philosophers who have explored (and contested) the role of erotic desire in aesthetic experience and knowledge. In the Western tradition, this line of inquiry can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. Plato’s *Symposium*, for instance, describes a long philosophic ascent whereby one’s sexual desire for a beautiful individual sparks a desire to understand the nature of beauty itself—as manifested not only in the human body, but also in the soul, in culture, in knowledge and understanding (Nehamas, 2007). Ultimately, one is drawn to understand the very essence of beauty, its “Form,” and to live “a life governed by the love of all the beauty in the world, which is for [Plato] the life of philosophy itself” (Nehamas, 2007, p. 2-7). Erotic desire animates and permeates Plato’s entire path of philosophical inquiry; as Alexander Nehamas recounts,

the philosopher wants from the Form just what ordinary men who know no better want of beautiful boys: intercourse (*sunousia*)—without a second thought, Plato applies to the highest point of this philosophic ascent the very same word he uses for its lowest. [...] The most abstract and intellectual beauty provokes the urge to possess it no less than the most sensual inspires the passion to come to know it better. (2007, p. 7)

In contrast, Nehamas outlines how for Immanuel Kant, contemplation of true beauty in nature or art should produce satisfaction *detached* from personal interest—“a pleasure bereft of desire” (2007, p. 3). Similarly, for Arthur Schopenhauer, the beauty of art offers “the peace, always sought but always escaping us on the former path of desires” (qt. in Nehamas, 2007, p. 5). Whereas Plato sees the unquenchable longing of desire as a source of hope and motivation for inquiry, for Schopenhauer desire is a state of suffering that distracts from aesthetic appreciation and serious contemplation (Nehamas, 2007).

In his 1975 essay *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes notes that, while desire has enjoyed some “epistemic dignity” in philosophical debate, concepts of pleasure and bliss are often derided or ignored. Just as our bodies can be seen from either an anatomical or erotic perspective, Barthes argues that the *corpus* of writing can be seen from either the perspective of “grammarians, critics, commentators, philologists,” or as an experience of *plaisir* (pleasure) or *jouissance* (translated as ‘bliss,’ but also connoting ‘orgasm’ in the French) (Barthes, 1975, p. 16; Howard, 1975). Barthes affirms pleasure and bliss as a site for profound aesthetic engagement, however he notes that in philosophy pleasure is associated with either an elitist or immoral hedonism, and dissociated from reason, knowledge, truth, or rigour: “Pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion [...] Pleasure is continually disappointed, reduced, deflated, in favour of strong, noble values: Truth, Death, Progress, Struggle, Joy, etc.” (Barthes, 1975, p. 57).

Thus, as students and educators, we may be afraid of talking about enjoyment in class or approaching our studies from a sensual or emotive perspective—particularly in the arts and humanities, disciplines that are constantly defending themselves from accusations of frivolity. We brandish theoretical discourse and critical analysis as shields from subjectivity and levity, instead of considering the possibility that theory and analysis may also be practices of pleasure, that pleasure may be a site of knowing, and that “knowledge itself [could be] delicious” (Barthes, 1975, p. 23).

Alongside Barthes, an emerging body of pedagogical theory invites us to consider concepts of love, pleasure, and eros beyond a sexual context, and celebrate their place in the processes of living, learning, and creating. For instance, bell hooks (1994, 2003, 2010) notes that love and eros in pedagogy tend to be viewed as disruptive, distracting, or abusive, yet she argues that since these energies are inevitably present in our embodied experiences, they can also be used constructively as a source of passion for teaching and learning, a foundation for caring and inspiring pedagogical relationships, and a force for self-actualization. Similarly, Celeste Snowber’s work on embodied inquiry calls us to return to our sensory and sensual ways of knowing, writing that:

Eros cannot be confined to the bedroom. Eros infuses life into all our interactions. It is a partnership between ourselves and creation, between

one person and another, between colleagues, students, friends, lovers, and ultimately our own creativity. Eros is the life force, which breathes and enlivens us to the life that wants to be lived in us. (2016, p. 31)

As I explore in this essay, the metaphors and images of love, pleasure, and desire that emerge time and again in aesthetic experiences transcend the immediate idea of enjoyment. Rather, the energy of eros can elevate listening to art from a frivolous entertainment or consumption of a commodity into an aesthetic encounter that is creative, dialogical, and transformative.

The notion of eros expresses a state of seeking and reaching. In its original Greek, eros denotes *want, lack, or desire of what is missing*, hence the classic paradox within images of desire, where intimacy is paired with distance, absence, or loss (Carson, 2015). After all, as Barthes states, the erotic in the body is “*where the garment gapes [...] the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance*” (1975, p. 9-10). We see this in both the poem by Paz and the passage from Cixous that inspired my inquiry into the eros of listening to art. Paz’s poem does not describe the beauty of the beloved any more than Cixous tells us whether the page being read is interesting or well written. Instead, they draw our attention to their form of engagement: how a lover touches their beloved, and how one can read a book. In both instances, their reach is deliciously frustrated. Thus in Paz’s poem, the lover’s hands are never said to *disrobe* the beloved, but rather “*clothe*” them (1987b, p. 115), and in Cixous’ quote, the page is “*never read*” (1991, p. 24).

In Anne Carson’s treatise on eros, analyzing expressions of the concept from classical philosophy and literature, she argues that although eros is “*properly a noun, [it] acts everywhere like a verb*” (2015, p. 63). “*Desire moves,*” reaching across the distance between oneself and what one desires (Carson, 2015, p. 17). Paz and Cixous focus on and prolong this movement, the energy of their short passages carried by the flurry of present and future-tense verbs: *touch, open, uncover, invent; to be read, studied, sought, invented; reading, writing, bringing them to light, making love*. Love and aesthetic listening become a spiritual exercise where we’re caught mid-stride.

Carson notes that scenes of desire routinely include “*three structural components—lover, beloved, and that which comes between them*” (2015, p. 16). Whether this third, obstructive factor is fabricated or inevitable—distance, decorum,

death, rivalry, flirtation, or active resistance—it activates eros by maintaining “the space across which desire reaches” (Carson, 2015, p. 25). Indeed, we see the lover and reader in Paz and Cixous’ work actively maintaining the distance between them and the object of their desire by metaphorically creating an obstruction. In “Touch,” the lover “clothe[s]” the beloved in a “further nudity,” and even goes on to “invent another body for [their] body” entirely (1987b, p. 115). Meanwhile, reading is “making love” when it becomes a creative act, where the reader writes “ten thousand pages of every page” (Cixous, 1991, p. 24). While the reader brings these new pages “to light,” the original text remains in the dark: unread, elusive, desired (Cixous, 1991, p. 24).

Although not always framed in terms of eros, reception as an act of creation is a central premise in various aesthetic theories, where the audience is seen as an active creator of meaning, or even a co-creator of the artwork itself. For instance, John Dewey argues that true perception is “an act of reconstructive doing,” which consists of “a series of responsive acts that accumulate toward object fulfillment,” as opposed to mere “recognition” where we fall back “upon some previously formed scheme” (2005, p. 54). Similarly, from the perspective of reader-response critics, the reader produces meaning in a text based on the interpretations, feelings, associations, and memories that arise as we read the printed page (Tyson, 2006).

Drawing from both these lines of thought, Maxine Greene states that meaning does not “reside in the subject matter, in the canvas on the wall, or in our own subjectivities” but rather “*happens* in and by means of an encounter with [a work of art]” (1995, p. 139). As one’s response to an artwork continually changes, producing new interpretations or new readings, the “ten thousand pages of every page” that Cixous describes (1991, p. 24) become truly innumerable. If we engage creatively as listeners, remaining open to new readings instead of applying previously formed interpretations, a work of art may multiply infinitely before us, activating the tantalizing reach that turns listening into an experience of desire.

Barthes, one of the influential voices in the school of reader-response criticism, posits that the reader’s unique, creative engagement with the text is what makes reading an experience of desire (1975, 1989). Pleasure, for Barthes, is not only to be found in the content or structure of a narrative—the titillation of pornographic writing or the “striptease” of narrative suspense—for, sooner or later, these desires are satisfied

(1975, p. 10). Instead, he describes pleasure in a three-part structure similar to Carson's own model of desire: the unresolved gap or seam between two edges, the cuts and losses produced in our interaction with the text (1975, p. 6-7). Barthes outlines numerous examples of such a gap, such as the way a "text of bliss [...] unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (1975, p. 14). In this example, the difference between the reader's experience and the text's ideas opens up a conceptual gap where both discomfort and the energy of eros may reside.

Alternately, Barthes suggests that our engagement with a text may carry us away from it physically and mentally, creating gaps in our reading that sustain the pleasure of the text between different re-readings. As we read, we may find ourselves looking up from a text, lost in "a flow of ideas, stimuli, associations," creating a "text that we write in our head *when we look up*" (1989, p. 29). Eventually, "smitten," we return to the text (Barthes, 1989, p. 29), and these interruptions—along with our anticipation that "impels us to skim or skip certain passages (anticipated as 'boring') in order to get more quickly to [...] whatever furthers the solution of the riddle, the revelation of fate" —create a unique and pleasurable rhythm between "what is read and what is not read," which Barthes calls *tnesis* (Greek for *cutting*) (1975, p. 11). Neither the author nor the reader can predict *tnesis*, as "from one reading to the next, we never skip the same passages" (Barthes, 1975, p. 11). Every time we pick up a book, we experience renewed pleasure as we become aware of previously unread passages, experience different unsettling disjunctures, create a different rhythm of *tnesis*, and become inspired with new ideas.

What's more, the creativity of a reading "seeped in Desire" (Barthes, 1989, p. 35) may culminate in concrete creation, for instance, in writing. Cixous' description of "making love to the text," after all, is drawn from her essay "Coming to Write" (1991, p. 24). Opening with "In the beginning, I adored," Cixous' biblical allusion places desire before the word (1991, p. 1). She describes being gripped with a burning, consuming desire for something inexpressible, beyond us: "signs. Flashes of being [...] Beauty [...] with all the mysteries inscribed and preserved on it" (1991, p. 1). However, feeling that she lacked the right to write as a Jewish woman born in Algeria "between two holocausts [...] in the very bosom of racism" (1991, p. 17), with no roots or language to call her own, she turned first to reading—voraciously: "I began to read very early: I didn't eat, I read. I

always 'knew' without knowing it, that I nourished myself with texts" (1991, p. 20). Cixous is the perfect example of the "lovers of writing" that Barthes describes, who are "scattered, clandestine, crushed by a thousand—even internal—constraints," and oppressed into "a society of consumption and not of production, a society of reading, seeing, and hearing, and not a society of writing, looking, and listening" (1989, p. 41). Nonetheless, the limitations of Cixous' finances and her municipal library impel her to take up a creative form of reading that allows each book to become "endless. Everlasting. Eternal" (1991, p. 23). With the help of "memory and forgetting," she finds that she can "Begin [each text] again. From another perspective, from another and yet another" (1991, p. 23). Thus she "writes" the "ten thousand pages" of every page in her books (1991, p. 24), until she is finally liberated to write her own work—to engage in what Barthes calls the ultimate pleasure of reading: "veritable production: no longer of interior images, of projections, of hallucinations, but literally of *work*" (1989, p. 41).

Cixous' evocative trajectory as a writer reminds me that to engage passionately and creatively as a listener in the arts is not just an experience of "light, trivial" personal pleasure (Barthes, 1989, p. 9), but in fact a political act, an affirmation of my equal human right to expression and to being, a victory of life against death. Broaching this theme from the perspective of theatre, French philosopher Jacques Rancière discusses the pedagogical and ultimately political implications of conceiving spectatorship as an active and creative endeavor. For Rancière (2009), emancipation of the spectator means to blur the boundaries between creation and reception and acknowledge that the spectator plays an equally participatory role in a performance as the writers, directors, or performers do, each in their own way. The spectator "selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her" (Rancière, 2009, p. 13). This perspective is possible if we assume:

the distance inherent in the performance itself, in so far as it subsists, as a spectacle, an autonomous thing, between the idea of the artist and the sensation of comprehension of the spectator [...] It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission. (Rancière, 2009, p. 14-15)

Once again, the triangle of desire: for both the spectator and the artist, the artwork is a "third thing" that they cannot own; the artist can only reach desirously towards it with the

intention of their “idea,” while the spectator reaches towards it with their attempts of “comprehension” (Rancière, 2009, p. 14). An emancipated spectator, whose engagement with art is fuelled by the energy of eros, knows she can “translate what she perceives in her own way,” making meaning from the offering that is equal to the interpretation of any other spectator, or even of the creators themselves (Rancière, 2009, p. 17). Further, Rancière proposes that this sense of agency and equality translates beyond our aesthetic engagement with art: the emancipated spectator realizes that they are also an equal actor in their own story, and in the world at large (2009, p. 17).

Reading with desire emancipates Cixous as a reader, creator, and person in her own right. When she first “discovered ‘culture,’” Cixous describes how she felt diminished and excluded; its “splendor, its menace, its *discourse*” emphasized the very “foreignness” that she felt forbade her to write—for self-expression would only be a “further divergence” (1991, p. 11-15). “I was no one,” she states, “And no one [...] doesn’t write” (1991, p. 26). Facing death in the world around her, and the death of her own humanity based on her gender and race, Cixous writes that she “armed love, with soul and words, to keep death from winning” (1991, p. 2). Although, at first, she felt she was reading “without any right, without permission, without their knowledge” (p. 12), in her desire to extend the pleasure of reading, she finds herself creating the way Rancière describes the emancipated spectator does. Writing seems impossible to her because it is the “realm of the Truth [...] clear, distinct, and one,” while she feels “blurry, several, simultaneous, impure,” however, this multi-faceted perspective is precisely what allows her to approach books “from another perspective, from another and yet another” (1991, p. 29, 23). Love fuels her reading, keeping her books alive through the multiplying reach of creative listening, and ultimately writing affirms her being, and keeps her alive as well:

Writing: a way of leaving no space for death, of pushing back forgetfulness, of never letting oneself be surprised by the abyss. Of never becoming resigned, consoled; never turning over in bed to face the wall and drift asleep again as if nothing had happened; as if nothing could happen. (1991, p. 3).

The emancipated listener, whose desire writes itself in thoughts, feelings, meaning, and artistic creation, creates a world for themselves where they may be alive, awake, and hopeful.

## Our Beloved Also Listens

Applying Carson's model of desire to the experience of aesthetic listening, there are three elements: the reader, the reader's experience, and the text itself—and so, before I conclude, I want to draw attention to the last, equally essential, factor. I turn to one more triangulated experience of creative aesthetic listening, this time from curriculum theorist and philosopher Jacques Daignault and his essay on the “acousmatic modality” of writing. Inspired by Barthes, Daignault works from the premise that a text “is not the printed thing [...] but each of the readings of the printed page and even the sum of all these readings which always contain a part added by the reader” (2005, p. 6).

Some writing, he proposes, is particularly good at eliciting the reader's subjective response by offering freedom of interpretation and association, keeping alive a degree of mystery, instead of “impos[ing] constraints on the reader to compose with the content of the printed text” (2005, p. 7). Daignault calls this kind of writing “a text that listens” (2005, p. 6) or an “acousmatic” text, drawing from the ancient Greek term *akousmatikoi* for the students of Pythagoras who listened to his lectures from behind a veil or screen. We therefore call sounds ‘acousmatic’ when they are heard without seeing the source, just as Daignault and others describe how the reader is never directly in contact with the text, separated by the veil of their individual readings.

I find it telling that Daignault frames the text as an active subject instead of a passive object: the text listens to us, just as we listen to it, engaging in a reciprocal, dialogic exchange. Similarly, Cixous describes how she could feel “loved by a text” (1991, p. 13), while Barthes writes that the text that produces pleasure or bliss “must prove to me *that it desires me*” (1975, p. 6). In fact, Barthes takes this metaphor even further, stating that: “there is not a subject or an object. The text supersedes grammatical attitudes: it is the undifferentiated eye [in German mystic Angelus Silesius' phrase] “The eye by which I see God is the same eye by which he sees me” (qt. in Barthes, 1975, p. 16).

This presence behind the veil—seeing us, listening to us, desiring us, loving us—is the sensuous “flesh” that Cixous finds within the pages of a book that is “never read,” instead of the inert “carcass” of the “finished” one (1991, p. 24). When a piece of art remains ‘other’ to us, existing independently of our perception and experience of it, we

lose the arrogance of assuming we can grasp, define, possess, dissect, or consume it. We are electrified to pursue art's endless mystery, to touch it in the infinite way Paz describes in his poem: discovering the bodies within their bodies. Desire is alive with ambition, frustration, and humility.

The eros of aesthetic listening therefore relies upon awareness of our power to create meaning in our interaction with art, as well as awareness that there exists, beyond us, the artwork itself. We must not lose sight of the other edge; we must not allow our "writing" to entirely erase the original text. As Daignault warns:

the danger for the reader is to project himself only listening to himself, that is, not to weave any links between the text and himself or that this 'self' that he listens to is a surface subject which he doesn't see is totally made up. (2005, p. 6)

For Daignault, "a text that listens" not only invokes creative engagement in the reader, but further "attempts to push the reading process towards the discovery of this fabrication, of oneself in the region of one's own symbols, of one's own textuality" (2005, p. 6).

All the authors we have explored so far echo this point: that by recognizing how we weave a veil of meaning between the text and ourselves, we may take notice of how we construct meaning in our lives, and that we can re-interpret and re-write our lives as many ways as we can read a text (Greene, 1995; Barthes, 1975; Daignault, 2005; Rancière, 2009; Cixous, 1991).

Aesthetic listening, like desire, both unites us with and individuates us from the *subject* of our attention—and in the tension of this paradox, we open ourselves to transformation. Carson argues that: "the experience of eros as lack alerts a person to the boundaries of himself, of other people, of things in general," creating an "acute awareness of self" (2015, p. 30). In romantic desire, the lover may feel painfully incomplete, lacking their 'other half,' or else they may feel a "heightened sense of [their] own personality ('I am more myself than ever before! the lover feels)" (Carson, 2015, p. 39). In either case, the pain and pleasure of eros rests on our imagination's capacity to see double: the actual self in the present, and the imagined self in the possible future, united with our idealized beloved; "to know both, keeping the difference visible, is the subterfuge called eros," Carson states (2015, p. 69).

Similarly, reaching for the aesthetic subject that lies just beyond our comprehension (or even beyond our full perception), we activate our imaginations (Greene, 1995). We may uncover different interpretations, meanings, and connections within the text—some of which may be delightfully contradictory, like life itself. We may encounter concepts that are unfamiliar or that pique our curiosity—and follow these lines of inquiry impelled by the desire to know, as Plato describes. We may usher in new poems, essays, stories, or other art forms that have been waiting on the tips of our tongues and fingers to be brought to form. We may appreciate different ways of life, values, cultures—pleasing and inspiring, or unsettling and disruptive (Barthes, 1975). Holding side by side an image of the actual and the possible, we may reject these visions more vehemently, or else “pursue this glimpse of a self [we] never knew before” (Carson, 2015, p. 37). Aesthetic listening, alive with the creative, imaginative force of eros, allows us to hear all these promises unfurling before us, and create new life within our life.

## A Manifesto of Eros in Aesthetic Listening

### 1. Let the body read.

Reading is no less an embodied art than dancing. A written text is an annotation of thought-turned-breath. Let it move and breath again: read it aloud, faster, slower. Write the words out with your own hand. Let your body encounter the forms and textures of language:

alliteration alive on our tongue  
rhythm and rhyme rippling in our chest  
sinuous sentences drawing languid  
caresses  
down  
our  
spines,

syllables circling  
until they  
until they  
until they come  
—to a close—  
with the staccato of punctuation!

The poetic devices we memorized by rote in grade school describe the way a text glances, approaches, spins us—moving our mind, heart, and soul in ways we feel and respond to instinctively, before language, before theory, before thought.

Listening to a text does not take us into our mind in pursuit of a universal truth; rather, it returns us to “our body of bliss,” unique in its sufferings and pleasures, situated in the material and temporal world (Barthes, 1975, p. 62).

Do not deny the body’s reading, even if it is tension with your cognitive analysis. Barthes states that “the pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do”

(Barthes, 1975, p. 17). As Maxine Greene states, knowing “about” a piece of art, “even in the most formal academic manner is entirely different from constituting a fictive world imaginatively and entering it perceptually, affectively, cognitively” (1995, p. 125). Read with your whole self: mind, body, heart, and soul. The eros of aesthetic listening honours and opens all of these windows of meaning.

## 2. Linger.

The eros of aesthetic listening resonates across time and space. Slowing down, “spending reflective time” (Greene, 1995, p. 125), we may go beyond perceiving the world, the art piece, or one another in the singularity and naiveté of the initial encounter. Visiting and revisiting, we become intimate with the multiple layers, possibilities, and perspectives of phenomena beyond the physical, literal, or readily available: the bodies within a body, the “ten thousand pages of every page” (Cixous, 1991, p. 24).

Remember how you lingered with your lover at your doorstep the night of your first date. And how, for days to come, you replayed your first kiss over and over again. Who approached first? How did they hold us? How did the rain feel upon our brow? Poring over every detail is not tedium when we’re in love. We return to listen for the thoughts, feelings, and observations that escaped us in the initial encounter, when elation suspended time.

Read slowly before parting ways with the text, and then let yourself re-read it closely. Your encounter with a text is unique; come to know it intimately. Ask “aesthetic questions” such as “why do I feel spoken to by this work; excluded by that one? In what sense does this song actually embody Mahler’s grief?” (Greene, p. 137).

## 3. Sing your love song.

Sit and write the “ten thousand pages of every page” (Cixous, 1991, p. 24). This is not an essay, but a love letter to your beloved, celebrating the tantalizing veil that both reveals and hides their form.

Joining creation with reception, the vague resonances, impressions, stirrings, glints of light we sensed as we first read now materialize into concrete ideas and insights, about both the text and ourselves. We practice the “the art of translating” our aesthetic experience for our community, and just as we “counter-translate” the experiences of others (Rancière, 2009, p. 11). No one can experience the desire of our inquiry, but they can listen to its song.

Yet we know we are gifting language to the inexpressible just as the text’s author did. We read what we wrote like we may look read a postcard stained by saltwater, knowing that we can never really touch and be touched by the ocean, by the book, until we submerge ourselves again...

## Tanda 3: Creative Listening

*Love made a gesture, two years ago, a fluttering of eyelids and the text rises forth; there is this gesture, the text surges from it.*

(Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing*)

## Constellating

Across the clamour of a busy street, a row of trees catches my eye in an act of silently violent and stunningly beautiful disrobing. Their leaves are transitioning seamlessly from the bright green of their crowns, through shades of yellow and orange, to the deep red leaves huddled around the lower branches. Shaken loose by a determined November wind, the red leaves are now fluttering to the ground in a steady shower. I stop mid-stride, transfixed by this choreography of transformation, loss, and grace that resonates with my heart, and I write:

On Abbott Street, the trees,  
danced their skirts to shreds today:  
ballerinas  
on bare branch pointe  
surrender into performance  
of this overture to loss

When I listen, I am called to create, tracing the world's gestures with pen and paper, camera, brushes, or following my passions into research. Is it an impulse to capture, grasp, understand? Or perhaps, like the trees in autumn, creating in the face of listening means to stage a site of loss. I write to re-member scenes that captivate me, assembling and stitching together the pieces of a living moment. I write to create a space where the leaves are still falling from the trees on Abbott Street, just as the magic of their descent keeps falling from my hands. I speak so I may keep finding myself at a loss for words, I inquire so I may keep failing to understand, I ground moments in metaphors so I may continue listening into their flight. I create to experience the grace of falling, loss, and destruction, and the hope of re-birth.

One of my favourite descriptions of the writing process is a quote from the poet Anne Carson where she suggests that the aim of poetry is not to create a static representation, but rather to share the feeling of "action" or "movement" that we experience when we are inspired (2004, p. 203). Carson disagrees with those who interpret the ancient idea of *mimesis* to mean a "snapshot of an event [...] a perfect record," arguing instead that:

[...] a poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page, and the reader, when he engages it, has to enter into that action. His mind repeats that action and travels again through the action, but it is a

movement of yourself through a thought, through an activity of thinking, so by the time you get to the end you're different than you were at the beginning and you feel that difference. (2004, p. 203)

I love reading Carson's essays and poetry precisely because I feel myself caught in the agile motion of her thought process: leaping between diverse images, metaphors, and allusions she draws from art, history, philosophy, and her personal life. In fact, Carson's writing process literally embodies her mind's movement, working "at three different desks, with a different project on each, let's say, one is academic, one writerly, and one art" that she moves between "erratically, sometimes to all three desks within an hour," allowing them to "cross-pollinate one another" (Carson, 2004, p. 205). The creative work, in Carson's approach to writing, emerges out of relationships of listening between the artist and their various points of inspiration. It is like a constellation—formed not by the individual stars in the sky, but rather out of the motion of our eyes as we trace invisible lines between them to construct images, mythologies, or oracles for the future.

Imagining creation as an "action of the mind" or through the metaphor of constellating changes the way I seek inspiration and engage in my artistic and research practices. From this perspective, the muse I listen to is not a private voice that I await in isolation, who whispers never-before-seen ideas softly into my ear; rather she is all around me, waiting for *me* to awaken and listen for her with my body, mind, heart, and soul. As Celeste Snowber describes:

The etymology of the word muse is to "literally stand with one's nose in the air," or to "sniff about." [...] One may not go walking around the neighborhood with the nose literally in the air, but one can make available the full self to be in a state of openness and alertness for when the muse will come. [...] Perhaps the muse is one's relationship to one's body. (2016, p. 58-9)

Fundamentally relational in nature, creative listening requires a commitment to embodied presence and curiosity. I walk more, hands outstretched and open-hearted, following the eros of my inquiring body and mind into detours and flights of fancy, knowing that insights emerge out of unexpected synchronicities, the leaves that fall before us on a given day...

Creating through listening involves a daily practice of awareness, which must be met with an equal dedication to reflection and expression. Anne Carson describes how

the artist's voice emerges from a practice of forming ideas and expressions with the serendipitous elements we encounter in daily life:

The things you think of to link are not in your control. It's just who you are, bumping into the world. But how you link them is what shows the nature of your mind. Individuality resides in the way links are made. (Carson, 2004, p. 207)

Speaking of the unlikely connections she makes in her own writing, she further explains:

I put them together by accident. And that's fine, I'm happy to do things by accident. But what's interesting to me is once the accident has happened, once I happen to have Simonides and Paul Celan on my desk together, what do I do with the link? What I do with it depends on all the thoughts I've had in my life up to that point and who I am at that point. It could be Simonides and celery, it doesn't matter; it only matters insofar as I'm going to make a work of art out of it. It seems totally arbitrary on the one hand and on the other, totally particular about who I am as a thinker. (Carson, 2004, p. 207)

Carson's open-minded exploration, coupled with her determined intention to create ("*I'm going to make a work of art out of it*"), brings forth not only her brilliant work, but also her sense of self as a thinker. She reminds me of the value of articulating the observations and associations I make, no matter how odd or fleeting they seem to be, as well as to continually balance and intertwine living, listening, and writing.

Carson's reflections on her artistic process also offer an important commentary on the value of not compartmentalizing our life, allowing our various projects, interests, and inquiries to bleed into one another. As Carson describes, her writing is woven together by the entirety of her life experiences and the unique perspective with which she listens to the world in a given moment: "all the thoughts in my life up to that point and who I am at that point" (2004, p. 207). Freed from the restrictions of a single project, my journals chronicle everything from heartbreak, to the beauty of the ocean waves, to theoretical reflections—often drawing original understandings and metaphors from the parallels that emerge between these disparate experiences. Every day as I sit to write, yesterday's ideas are renewed as they meet today's circumstances. My daily conversations, readings, aesthetic experiences, sorrows, and joys are all in dialogue with each other and with my writing. I must surrender fully to the messy, non-linear process of writing and re-writing, compiling, arranging, and re-considering my thoughts. When I allow myself to listen to the world through an ear of inquiry, I may find that the

startling beauty of falling leaves on an autumn day can speak to both my aching heart and my scholarly inquiry into listening.

We can practice creative listening as we engage with the world, as we think and imagine, as well as during the practice of our craft. After all, John Dewey argues that the artist “embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works,” allowing him to refine his artwork until he is satisfied with the effect it creates (2005, p. 50). While I often was more conscious of the act of listening in the opening stages of inspiration, and then in the final stages of editing, Jacques Daignault’s (2005) writing recommendations inspired me to explore how creative listening can manifest itself *during* the act of creation itself. As mentioned in Tanda 1, Daignault (2005) coins the term “acousmatic text” to describe texts that listen to both the writer (sparking new insights as they write) and the audience (eliciting creative interpretations). His suggestions for an “acousmatic modality of writing” that creates such a listening text centers on maintaining an open stance towards the nascent work, and towards our embodied and affective experience as writers (2005, p.8-9).

For example, Daignault advises that the writer of an acousmatic text should “welcome all the words,” and all the characters, ideas, and intertextual references that emerge, without erasing or judging the “apparent incoherence or unrealness” of their writing (2005, p. 8-9). Further, the writer should “recognize or admit the path of the body in writing and experience/feel well all tensions. Welcome all the emotions,” and ultimately “welcome the unknown” (Daignault, 2005, p. 8). Only in the final editing process do we refine and “order the words and paragraphs obtained”—however even in this stage Daignault asks us to release a sense of control, playing with the words and “keep[ing] alive the idea of mystery” (2005, p. 8-9). Ultimately, it is the frayed edges of the unpolished work that allows the writer to “make a place for the other” in the text and “write with the goal to be an ear” (Daignault, 2005, p. 9). This is the culmination of the cycle of creative listening: the artist listens to world, they hear their voice in the unique way they constellate disparate elements and ideas, and they listen to the plurality of options in the process of creation. Subsequently the audience listens to the art piece, and may hear inside it their own voice, their own constellations waiting to be expressed...

## Kitchen Dancing

Social dancing is where I most intensely experience the nuances and power of uniting perception and expression in an aesthetic experience (Dewey, 2005) through a practice of creative listening. When I dance salsa, swing, or other social dances, my partner and I are both *creative perceivers*, listening to the music and to each other's movements, and responding with our dance. We are also *listening creators*, remaining attentive to our emotions and expressions to elevate our dance. And since dance is an embodied art form, we arguably become the *listening art* itself. Just as Daignault's "acousmatic text" (2005) listens to the writer and the reader, drawing forth new ideas and connections, our dancing bodies inspire emotion and movement for whoever might watch us—even if our audience is not moving physically, their mirror neurons will activate in unison, especially if they themselves are dancers (Hyman, 2012).

For me, one of the most unique and life-giving aspects of social dancing is the possibility to experience such a heightened sense of connection with the music and my dance partner that I become more than myself. Michael Kimmel discusses this experience in his analysis of the skills that allow improvisational tango dancers to maintain unison as they improvise on the dance floor (2009). Tango dancers, he explains, often experience:

...the seemingly elusive yet most gratifying skill of feeling like a super-individual unit: a condition of embodiment that has variously been described as *intercorporeality* (Merleau-Ponty 1945), *consubjectivity* (Csordas 1993), and a 'dyadic states of awareness' (Troninck 1998). (Kimmel, 2009, p. 77)

Salsa dancer Rebecca Lloyd similarly describes feeling "a meeting of souls where no separation, let alone outside, exists" (2017, p. 68). This sense of unity is not only emotional or spiritual; scientists have found that our body schema—the mental representation of our body that allows us to navigate the world safely—is indeed malleable, and can integrate objects and people we interact with, as if they were an extension of our self. For instance, we may respond to stimuli at the end of a tool as much as if it were at the edge of our hand, and the same effect is found after coordinating our motions with another person, such as in dance (Sedivy, 2016; Soliman et al., 2015). When I experience a strong connection with another dancer, we listen

together to our joint movement, accommodating and playing with the space around us, while being inspired to the greater beauty we can create together.

As I consciously immerse myself into this multi-faceted space of reciprocal and creative listening, I recognize the profound impact my approach to listening has on my own movements, my inner experience as a dancer, and the joint performance I am part of. Dance classes are usually more explicitly focused on teaching expression through moves and styling, mentioning listening only in passing instructions such as *listen to the beat* or *listen to your partner*. However, if we acknowledge that listening “can be performed in a variety of different ways with a variety of different consequences” (McRae, 2015, p. 32), we realize that listening to the music and our dance partner is not a singular, straightforward process. Just as an instrument must be tuned to produce notes with a desired effect, we can tune and attune our listening as dancers based on how we conceptualize the dynamic between each other and the music.

Many social dancing classes are structured around pre-set combinations of moves, which can be a more approachable entry point for beginning dancers and allows one to gradually build on technique. However, these choreographies also limit the creativity with which we can listen to the music, our dance partners, and ourselves. In particular, as a ‘follow’ in the social dance world, I had become used to defining my role—and consequently, judging the quality of my dancing—based on my ability to stay on beat and accurately identify and respond to the cues offered by the ‘lead.’

This approach to dancing sharpened a valuable skill of embodied listening—I became highly attuned to my partner, quickly sensing the movement they were creating through the minute shifts in their hands, arms, or the rotation of their chest. However, I had to ignore much of what I heard and felt inspired by in the music, beyond the basic beat—and sometimes even *including* the beat, as I strived to quietly smooth over a partner’s lack of rhythm! I particularly struggled with “styling” classes, where few of the embellishments we learnt felt graceful or sexy in my body. I could execute them in time with the music, but I always felt like they were out of tune with my emotions; it was like having my dancing dubbed in another language.

Learning dance through set choreography can further turn our listening into what Dewey would call “recognition,” instead of true “perception,” where we “fall back, as

upon stereotype, upon some previously formed scheme. Some detail or arrangement of details serves as a cue for bare identification” (2005, p. 54). Listening in a mode of “recognition” in social dancing can give the guise of strong communication between the dancers—but only within the confines of a single class, a single dancing style, and familiar music. When I began social dancing outside of class, I encountered leaders from other dance studios who knew different moves or danced in different styles, and whose cues were unfamiliar. For instance, after years of learning the linear “LA style” of salsa, I found myself being led in Cuban style, which feels entirely different—from the hand position down to the basic steps. Or at times a slow blues song, or the jazz riffs of a mambo, would surprise both my partner and I. These were literal “stop moments” (Fels, 2012, 2015) that halted my routine movements and invited me to consider new ways of listening and responding.

After years of re-tracing borrowed constellations in the sky of my dance practice, when I entered the social dancing scene, there were suddenly new points of light, calling me to create my own constellations, to listen creatively as a dancer. I found that the best studio to learn creative listening was the very first one I had attended as a child: in my kitchen, dancing solo. Many of my dance teachers had recommended practicing alone, but mainly for the purpose of understanding the rhythm and developing muscle-memory for basic steps. My kitchen dancing, however, asks me to listen first and foremost *to* myself and *for* myself. Putting aside my anxieties about the “right” way to move, I return to the roots of dance, surrender to my instincts, and respond freely to the music. When kitchen dancing, I don’t pay attention to my gracefulness, fluidity, or whether I am breaking out of or blending dance styles. I stretch into the corners of my body and experiment with the possibilities of motion. As I cook or clean, I play with obstacles in my path, seeing how my movements transform, expand, or contract as I open the fridge door, or navigate around the countertops and open dishwasher. Slow songs used to terrify me the most on the dance floor—what to do with so much time!? But in my kitchen dancing, I begin to appreciate how slower rhythms offer me a bit more space to play with a sound.

I listen for the various instruments in the music apart from the standard beat, letting different parts of my body take the lead: shoulders in dialogue with the vocals, feet with the drums, hips with the melody. Then the rest of my body follows, falls in,

committing to the direction of my first instincts. One leg lunges while the other trails languidly, arms float, hips orbit out. I let myself be emotional, sexy, vibrant, joyous, nostalgic. I become familiar with my unique voice, gestures, style, and instincts as a dancer, developing a vocabulary of expression that feels authentic instead of forced. I find my true dancer, dwelling in the lively spaces of the in-between: moving in relation to the diverse offerings of a song, the ground beneath my feet, the objects around me, and the feelings within my heart on a given morning.

When I return to social dancing, I bring this awareness of my embodied self and the possibilities of its expression to the larger dancing unit I am a part of. My understanding of my role in the dance partnership changes dramatically; I no longer see myself as being passively led, but rather as an active participant in a three-way conversation. I listen to my partner's cues, but also to the music. What is it saying to me? What do I want to say back? And what do I want to say to and with my partner? In a blues workshop I once attended, the instructors suggested the idea that *leaders create context, and followers respond and interpret*, reframing our partnership in a way that acknowledges that the 'follow' also creates through their listening.

Similarly, in a swing workshop, the instructors spent one session encouraging the follows to 'rebel' and take the leaders' cues in a new direction, slowing it down, or speeding it up. We discussed how this kind of creative re-interpretation contributes to the partner dance, so long as it is done within a relationship of mutual listening instead of ignoring the leader's intentions. Indeed, one of my tango instructors described how, although it is often seen as politically incorrect, he prefers to describe our dancing roles as *masculine* and *feminine* instead of *lead* and *follow*, as the latter so strongly imply a hierarchy of power and agency. We shouldn't assume that the feminine role is passive or submissive, he argues, nor does it describe the gender or sex of the individual who takes that place; rather feminine and masculine are equal and essential counterpoints in the dance partnership, forces of yin and yang.

As social dancing is a listening practice where I am just one half of a whole, I also rely on my partner's creative listening to maximize the aesthetic possibilities of our individual and joint expression. Both partners need to be present not only physically, but also mentally and emotionally. Using an example of visual arts, Dewey argues that in an "emphatic-aesthetic experience,"

[...] vital intimacy of connection cannot be had if only the hand and eye are engaged. When they do not, both of them, act as organs of the whole being, there is but a mechanical sequence of sense and movement, as in walking that is automatic. Hand and eye, when the experience is aesthetic, are but instruments through which the entire live creature, moved and active throughout, operates. Hence the expression is emotional and guided by purpose. (2005, p. 51-2)

Listening as a form of perception instead of recognition, in Dewey's definition, requires our full emotional engagement, and an intense "yielding of the self" which is not possible if we "withdraw; sometimes from fear, if only of expending unduly our store of energy; sometimes from preoccupation with other matters, as in the case of recognition" (2005, p. 55). I notice this call to surrender the self immediately when I'm dancing—the moment my mind wanders elsewhere, or if I'm too tired, I stop listening to the music and my partner, and I begin to trip, move in the wrong direction, or get entangled as we dance out of sync. The relationship between my embodied experience and my sense of presence is reciprocal; to regain connection and listen once more to my partner and our dance, I first have to listen to myself, checking in with my hands, shoulders, feet, hips, heart, and mind.

The emotion and presence that allows for creative listening in a dance partnership cannot be staged through stylized motions; our true listening state invariably reveals itself through our embodied reactions when we are caught off-guard. In Lloyd's inquiry into the experience of presence amongst salsa dancers, one world champion she interviews notes that the degree of connection is revealed in her partners' gaze: "you can have the most beautiful actual movement, but if your eyes are dead, it doesn't match up" (2017, p. 67). Experimenting on the dance floor, Lloyd finds that when she makes eye contact:

[...] there is an energy communicated back to me. Sometimes it is met with aversion or a startle, but on more than one occasion, it opens up a feeling of connection where a true intermingling happens and where our invisible selves merge. (2017, p. 68)

Just as I can sense my degree of presence and listening by the fluidity of my motions and responses, I can discern my partner's mode of listening by how (or if) they interact with my creative expression. Leaders who acknowledge our equal creative agency in the partnership actively open spaces in the choreography of our dance for me to freely express myself, by packing less figures in a bar of music, slowing down, or even pausing

in an open stance. What's more, they respond to both my experimentation and mistakes with grace, generosity, and enthusiasm.

When both my dance partner and I are listening creatively and choosing our movements spontaneously, authentically, and in dialogue with the offerings of the present moment instead of following routine, our dancing comes alive. We become innovative and playful, and the intimacy between us as dancers deepens: we make eye contact, smile, and laugh together. It can be the same song, the same bodies, the same space week to week, however if we truly listen we find the ways in which that sameness is ever changing, just as we are. Listening we are drawn to create in a practice of presence, love, and renewal.

## Inquiry as Awake Surrender

Over the years that I have pursued my inquiry into listening, I often felt guilty and inadequate when I struggled to fit within into strict timelines. My adventures of listening led me to wander into the colloquial “rabbit holes” of reading, and further into new lines of work, new love, and new perspectives on my life. There were periods of feeling lost that eventually led to the emergence of my voice. However, as I came to recognize and embrace the how my artistic and intellectual creativity emerges from a practice of listening, I started to understand and nurture the conditions through which my work can flourish and be shared with the world.

Creating and inquiring through a practice of listening invites us into a different experience of time and challenges common understandings of direction and productivity. Indeed, in one of the wild and insightful pages of *What it Is*, Lynda Barry’s graphic novel on creativity, lies a provocation: “following a wandering mind means having to get lost / can you stand being lost?” (2008, p. 49). The challenge and the joy of creative listening lies in its unpredictability: I can neither direct where life will take me, nor anticipate what I will create. To live in inquiry requires a practice of *awake surrender*, much like in improvised social dancing.

At the first tango milonga I attended, I remember being terrified when one of the more experienced leaders asked me to dance. I became almost *too* alert; I tried to predict what might come next so that I could prepare an appropriate response—and instead ended up launching into motion before I was led into it. He whispered to me: *remember not to move until you feel the leader shift your weight*. As I turned my focus towards where my weight was balanced, everything else fell away, and I found myself responding to moves I had never even learnt or imagined. He shifted my weight and I would fall into it, languorously extending into whatever spaces were open, letting myself pause completely, and listening for the next shift in weight.

Similarly, as I engage in a practice of living inquiry, such as this inquiry into listening, I write and create in the spaces that open up for me, but I take care to not force myself forward. As Celeste Snowber reminds us: “if we are listening, we’re in congruence with life’s plan” (2016, p. 56). I begin to listen for the moments when my writing is stuck as an invitation to let go and wait for the world to shift my weight into the

next movement. Instead of pushing myself to write another line, I recourse to activities that engage me in deep listening, such as walking, reading, conversing with others, dancing, or practicing photography. I try to let go of the anxiety to plan each step purposely, and try not to immediately judge these listening activities as a detour, luxury, or waste. Rather, I awaken my curiosity and listen to where my body and heart want to take my mind, while taking care to make time for free-writing—whether it is in my journal, a scrap of paper, or more focused scholarly writing—to capture passing thoughts, *welcoming all the words* (Daignault, 2005, p. 8).

Unfortunately, unstructured creative time and practices of creative listening can seem antithetical to what are often perceived as conventional academic practices. Yet the absence of unstructured creative time is detrimental not only to our scholarly creativity, but our very wellbeing. Academic faculty experience high levels of occupational stress (Berg and Seeber, 2016) which is mirrored in the mental health crisis amongst graduate students (Evans et al., 2018).<sup>3</sup> Various factors contribute to this academic stress, including a pervasive sense of lacking time; anxieties about being unproductive or degree completion timelines, despite a tendency to work long hours; hesitancy to admit struggles for fear of undermining one’s professional reputation; and an underlying culture where “to talk about the body and emotion goes against the grain of an institution that privileges the mind and reason” (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 2; Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario, n.d.).

Indeed, over the course of my listening inquiry my creative need for time and diverse listening experiences often jarred with my perceptions of what constituted research and my expectations of when I “should” complete my work, despite the pressure of working multiple jobs. The more stress I experienced, the more my tempestuous listening heart tried to reclaim the time and freedom it needed; the more anxious and guilt-ridden I became, the less my creativity flourished even in the time I stole back. I would simply fall into listless activities of procrastination without enjoyment or deep listening. It was a vicious cycle, reflected in a painful poem I scrawled in my journal one afternoon:

<sup>3</sup> Evans et al.’s 2018 study of students in 26 countries found that “graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population” (p. 282).

## 9-5 x 5

my caged poet stalks  
the halls of my weekdays:  
face pressed  
against the window, too tight  
to speak, jaw cracking  
so when she loots  
the production line, she discards  
this food she cannot eat,  
lets it go stale in corners,  
twists her fork of inquiry  
into my feet so that, bleeding,  
I cannot walk apace with others

in the red confusion  
she breaks the window pane:  
now she hangs  
on the perilous edge  
of this façade  
gasps life, shouts air—  
if she leaps, will we  
shatter or fly?

As I explored my experiences of listening, time and creativity, I began to value of activities that foster deep listening as fundamental to my artistic and scholarly practices. I was particularly inspired by the “slow” scholarship movement, which reminds us that scholarship is a meandering process. Core intellectual and creative activities, (such as reflection, dialogue, and open-ended inquiry) require ample time (Berg & Seeber, 2016). Indeed, deep thought, creativity, and problem solving flourish in experiences of “timeless time” or “flow,” where we are so engrossed in the present moment that we transcend our sense of self and time, instead of when we punitively monitor every passing hour (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Mainemelis, 2001, 2002). Timeless time is precisely what I experience when I am deeply engaged as a listener, such as by conversing, reading, transcribing, observing the world, taking photographs or dancing. These activities reconnect me to my body and the present moment, awakening the open stance and degree of emotional engagement that are also the features of Dewey’s notion of “perception” instead of “recognition” (2005), or what I am calling *creative listening*. For this inquiry, engaging in listening activities was crucial for my research, however I noted that listening activities could also serve as “rite[s] of passage” that can facilitate experiences of flow in my broader creative and scholarly life by focusing my attention, increasing emotional arousal, decreasing anxiety, and creating a “playful

atmosphere” (Mainemelis, 2001, p. 555). I feel most creative when I am immersed in these listening activities, and the effect lingers, transferring to the writing I undertake right after an experience of listening.

As I surrender to my listenings, however fast or slow, straight or winding their call is, I find new models for what it means to grow, to learn, to create. I turn my eyes out the window and attend another class of listening inquiry...

### **Winter’s Master Class**

I witness:  
sky shredding itself  
into multiple infinite perfections,  
covering land’s cacophony  
in uniform held breath  
where pathways become traceable,  
and bodies leave not shadows  
but angels.

Flakes—confidently  
aimless in their feather of time—  
let themselves be carried  
into new spaces  
by inquiry and desire:

sometumbledownfuriously

while other      pockets

    pause

                    back

                    rise

                    even

wander open  
saying soft, saying look

                    look!

                    look

saying love:  
Here. This.  
Hear this.

Do crying seagulls  
recognize this choreography  
as ocean rearranged?

I sit, take notes  
from crystalline masters of listening.

## Tanda 4: Listening as Ephemeral Knowing

*Listen to me as one listens to the rain,  
not attentive, not distracted,  
light footsteps, thin drizzle,  
water that is air, air that is time,  
the day is still leaving,  
the night has yet to arrive,  
figurations of mist  
at the turn of the corner,  
figurations of time  
at the bend in this pause,  
listen to me as one listens to the rain,  
without listening, hear what I say  
with eyes open inward, asleep  
with all five senses awake,  
it's raining, light footsteps, a murmur of syllables,  
air and water, words with no weight:  
what we were and are,  
the days and years, this moment  
weightless time and heavy sorrow [...]*

(Octavio Paz, "As one listens to the rain")

## **/tran(t)'skrīb/**

: to represent (speech sounds) by means of phonetic symbols

—Merrriam-Webster Dictionary

There is a remarkable silence around the process and purpose of transcribing—a common listening-intensive task within the field of qualitative research. Despite Elinor Ochs' early call to consider the theoretical nature of transcribing (1979), over the last four decades subsequent scans of the literature have continued to note the way research reports, published literature, research training, and methodology textbooks rarely mention transcribing, or at best gloss over it (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Tilley, 2003a; Bird, 2005; Davidson, 2009). Mapping the ontological “landscape” of transcription, Bird (2005) states: “how researchers perceive of transcription affects their treatment of it within their research methodology” (p. 227). The overwhelming norm of silence around transcription indicates and further perpetuates the positivistic assumption that transcription is an onerous but otherwise straightforward process, a mechanical task that is merely a preliminary step to research (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999).

Consequently, discussion of best practices for transcription is often limited to technical questions, such as how to make transcription more accurate, time efficient, or less strenuous. Conventions for notation may be proposed with the purpose of increasing consistency, without questioning the impact of the representation of a recording, or the very process of transcribing can have on the analysis and findings (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Davidson, 2009). For instance, my own undergraduate research methodology textbook dedicates only two short paragraphs to transcription: offering a dictionary definition for a transcript: “a written record of the events that were recorded” before noting that, although it is a “time-consuming” task, outsourcing the work is a “costly alternative” (Gay et al., 2012, p. 387-388). Presumably, “costly alternative” implies the financial cost instead of any intrinsic value in the experience of transcribing.

The gap in theoretical discourse around transcribing, alongside its ubiquity in qualitative research, arguably also speaks to an underlying *epistemological* orientation: conceiving communication as the transmission of information, and understanding as having information (Lipari, 2014). For instance, Lipari (2014) notes how, in the English language, we claim to *grasp* the meaning, *capture* an idea, or *catch* someone's drift,

while “the origin of the synonym ‘comprehend’ is to seize or lay hold of, to hang on to. And similarly, the word ‘apprehend’ carries this sense” (Lipari, 2014, p. 139).

The invention of audio and video recording devices heralded an era where we could begin to “capture more” of the world around us (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 130), and since then, these have become the method of choice for data collection in qualitative research (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Hammersley, 2010). Instead of depending on handwritten notes or memory, audio and visual recordings offer us a more stable and objective “registering record” of an event, “freezing fleeting social events in a permanently accessible state of matter” (Ayaß, 2015, p. 507-508). Transcription aims to further contain the recorded event by annotating speech, sounds, and gestures into a common symbol system and offering a more “permanent, retrievable, examinable” data set (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, p. 80). What’s more, we often use mathematical symbols, arrange transcripts in tables, and annotate time down to fractions of a second—conventions which “draw on the aura of objectivity” and claim an “authoritative status not unlike that of statistical presentations” (Ayaß, 2015, p. 520-521). These practices reveal a series of interlocking assumptions:

- a) that the knowledge from lived experience can be captured in an audio-visual recording of speech;
- b) that this oral and embodied knowledge can be neatly translated into text; and perhaps even,
- c) that if our perception of the audio-visual recording is delimited by stable textual symbols, our interpretations of the event will converge neatly, allowing multiple readers to agree upon more “objective” findings.

And yet...

*The idea of understanding is linked to capture and containment, to a break in an ongoing flow of movement. As if understanding were a great tiger that we must take into custody and keep enclosed and tightly controlled. (Lipari, 2014, p. 139)*

The tiger of Knowledge and Understanding  
is pacing the cage of its recording.  
We need a safe passage to access it  
to study it  
to measure its claws and imagine their marks.

Send in the transcriber  
with the shackles of language  
and the syringe of sight!

Listening, my dear,  
is a dangerous profession.

The transcriber steps out of the cage.  
The tiger is sleeping.  
The transcriber's arms bear scratch marks.  
Her pant leg is torn.

She may have witnessed the triumph of capture  
but ask her, too,  
what she has witnessed of freedom.

**00:00:05.5**

Q: What would be one characteristic of understanding through listening, as you've experienced it as a transcriber?

A: The first thing that comes to mind is that learning through listening, or understanding through listening is really

an experience of loss

which I think makes us uncomfortable or anxious [...]

(Self-interview, 2018)

In recent decades, a growing body of critical literature on transcription has begun to challenge our hubristic belief in capturing information through listening by foregrounding the inherent gaps in transcription. Transcribing involves a number of decisions, including choices about what events are significant enough to transcribe, the layout and notational style, and which details of the recording to capture in the transcript—amongst non-verbal vocalizations, gestures, facial expressions, slips-of-tongue, false starts, overlapping speech, pronunciations, tone, silences, background sounds, or information about the setting (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Davidson, 2009; Hammersley, 2010). Instead of assuming that a transcript is a complete, exact, and neutral record of an auditory event, new perspectives on transcribing suggest that transcripts are always partial constructions or representations (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Davidson, 2009; Hammersley, 2010) of, as Brandenburg & Davidson emphasise, “an experience that has passed forever” (2011, p. 708).

Nonetheless, many scholars argue that the inevitable gaps in a transcript are, in fact, *essential* to its usefulness in qualitative research. Without some omissions, the vast quantity of details that we can capture through audio and video recordings would crowd the page and render the transcript almost illegible (Ochs, 1979; Cook, 1990; Ayaß, 2015) especially when the aim is to study a phenomenon through language, instead of analysing the discourse itself, as is the goal in fields such as Conversational Analysis or linguistics which tend to employ more detailed notational styles. Lapadat & Lindsay (1999) trace a shift in the literature of transcribing from early efforts to formulate uniform notational conventions towards an acceptance of the multiplicity of transcribing approaches, encouraging transcribers to consciously determine their approach based on the research goals. From this perspective, transcribing no longer strives to capture intact units of information, but rather becomes a *complex act of moderating loss* so we can better listen to the wisdom we seek.

While some edits or omissions in a transcript are deliberate, many are products of either human error or the transcriber’s interpretative listening, based on their assumptions and (mis)understandings about the speaker’s language capacities, the cultural norms and practices of discourse, or the subject matter itself (Ochs, 1979; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Hammersley, 2010). Indeed, Hammersley (2010) observes that in our everyday interactions, hearing serves meaning-making for “we are not

concerned with the particular words used, or with pauses, for their own sake, but rather with understanding what is being said, what its implications are, what response needs to be made, and so on” (p. 560). In contrast, when we attempt to transcribe a speaker’s exact words, it is meaning-making that supports our hearing because “we will recognize words much more easily when they seem to be part of a meaningful statement than when they are part of an apparently meaningless one” (Hammersley, 2010, p. 558).

Interpretation therefore doesn’t just add extraneous details to our transcripts but is rather essential to our ability to listen in transcribing: we utilize whatever meaning we can interpret from the data presented to help us identify the words used and select which non-verbal details are significant enough to mark down (Hammersley, 2010). Of course, different listeners will have different interpretations depending on their relation to the material. For instance, Brandenburg describes an instance of receiving a transcript from an external transcriber and finding the words “strange” and not reflective of her own memory of the event, prompting her to re-transcribe the data to add more context and affective dimensions from their first-hand understanding of the experience (Brandenburg & Davidson, 2011).

Transcribing joins a sequence of selective, interpretive, and political acts of listening in the research process. We begin by listening to the initial call to attend to a particular topic and further tune this listening as we narrow the scope of our research to particular contexts or subjects. We then construct a representation of reality through the listening of data collection: choosing what to include in the video frame, the tape recording, the field notes, etc. Eventually, we may engage in the interpretive, situated act of transcribing (Green et al., 1997; Brandenburg & Davidson, 2011), once again (re)presenting the data in ways that will subsequently constrain our analysis and influence our findings (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999).

How we listen as researchers—as well as how the eventual audience listens to our research findings—depends on our evolving epistemologies, ontologies, memories, and relations to history, language, and the world around us. Acknowledging the responsibilities of transcription as a form of listening that constitutes *research* inspires calls for increased reflection and transparency around the transcription process so that the inherent choices and limitations can be intentional, ethically-informed and aligned with the research goals and theoretical orientations, and explicit to the reader (Ochs,

1979; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Bird, 2005). A conscious transcription listens to the way it listens, so that it may encourage a more contextual understanding of what was heard.

## The Listener

If we deny loss,  
gifts pass us  
where we no longer wish to listen

If we rail against loss,  
we drown in too much presence,  
create chaos instead of insight

If we honour loss,  
we may be transformed in its gaps,

the listener is in the room,  
bearing witness

## Who is the transcriber?

- 1.
2. [process of transcription not acknowledged in the report]
3. Not actually a word in the dictionary. The un-named liminal space between the verb [to transcribe] and the completed noun [transcript].
4. A fast typer.
5. A fast typer, whose arms now hurt.
6. Not me! (Let's hire someone...)
7. A graduate student.
8. "Primarily women [...] essentially invisible persons, paid to serve as nameless, faceless technicians even though they participate in a transformative auditory experience" (Gregory et al., 1997, p. 294).
9. "the tapes [...] were barely audible. His transcriber would not even try..." (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 131).
10. Someone as accurate and objective as a machine.
11. A machine.
12. Anonymous, reading the interview to a machine that is only able to recognize one voice.
13. Anonymous, checking the machine for errors.
14. "A meaning-generating agent, selecting portions from the flow of the recording and turning them into meaningful units" (Ayaß, 2015, p. 511).
15. Someone as objective as a machine, and also highly attuned to the nuanced ways human emotion and meaning are conveyed in speech.

16. "But how do you record pain, how do you record wreckage? They recorded themselves in her, while she dutifully typed his words" (Martel, 2016, p. 213).
17. "a human being, not simply an extension of the recording equipment" (Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016, p. 93).
18. Someone making crucial decisions that affect the fidelity and readability of the transcript.
19. "where I just deal with the admin staff, I'm just kind of this peripheral, outsourced person" (participant qt. in Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016, p. 101).
20. A researcher, perhaps, even if they're not *the* researcher.
21. Someone engaged in a multi-modal process of interpretation and representation.
22. An artist painting sound and gesture with strokes of the Latin alphabet, numbers, and mathematical symbols available on a qwerty keyboard.
23. Certainly *not* an artist: "the final arbiter of the fidelity of the transcription is not the skill or 'artfulness' of the transcriber, but rather the adequacy of the transcription when compared to a direct listening/viewing of the original data" (Pasathas and Anderson, 1990, p. 77).
24. The last "witness" before "sense-data" becomes "inky, curved lines on paper" (Langer, 1957, p. 15).
  
25. A listener.

How we position transcribing within the research endeavour influences our expectations and assumptions about the transcript, but also our perceptions and interactions with the transcriber. So far, the field of qualitative research has a tradition of predominantly ignoring the transcriber and their experience within reports of the research (Tilley, 2003b), and sometimes even as an intellectual and emotional being within the research team (Etherington, 2007; Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016), particularly when the task of transcribing is outsourced to a third party. In contrast, within the critical body of literature on transcribing, the transcriber begins to emerge from the margins and becomes a key actor in the transcript, the overall research project, and its sociopolitical impact.

Listening and typing, transcribers could be seen to be poised between reception and creation; however, when we redefine the listening dimension of transcription as an interpretative act, we ascribe an active and ethical role to the transcriber throughout the process. Transcribers become mediators for participant's voices, and the choices of representation they make impact the subsequent analysis and potential conclusions of the research as a whole (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999), leading theorists such as Green et al. (1997) and Bird (2005) to argue that transcribing constitutes a *political* act. The transcriber is responsible for crafting a transcript that ethically reflects participant's voices, while facilitating readability and analysis in service of the research project's specific goals. Acknowledging the critical role of the transcriber in the research process underscores the importance for transcribers to reflect on their listening and notational practices (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Bird, 2005), and for researchers to offer hired transcribers guidance on the research context, goals, and theoretical orientations in order to negotiate notational practices that are aligned with these (Brandenburg & Davidson, 2011; Tilley, 2003b).

Additionally, the literature on transcribing highlights the deep understanding that emerges from a practice of slow and repeated listening. For some, the valuable familiarity with research material that is gained through the process of transcribing supports the argument that researchers should conduct their own transcription (Davidson, 2009). However, Tilley (2003b) suggests that working with an external transcriber can become a form of what Lave & Wenger (1991) call "legitimate peripheral participation," or "the particular engagement of a learner who participates in the actual

practice of an expert, but only to a limited degree and with limited responsibility for the ultimate product as a whole” (p. 14). Listening to recordings, transcribing, and discussing both the content and practice of transcription with lead researchers can offer novice researchers the opportunity to learn more about a subject matter and gain experiential understanding of research practices and their ethical considerations (Tilley, 2003b).

Tilley further proposes that research-transcriber discussions can be a reciprocal site of “co-learning” for both the transcriber and researcher (2003b, p. 844, drawing from Lave & Wenger, 1991). For instance, she describes how her transcriber Debbie became a valuable “research confidante” (Tilley, 2003b, p. 838) with whom she could discuss not only the process of transcription, but also the content of otherwise confidential research material, and whose questions and insights helped inform her methodology and analysis. Tilley’s experience illustrates how valuing and practicing listening within a research endeavour—by listening to the way we listen as transcribers and listening to everyone involved in the research process—can deepen our collective capacity and knowledge.

Delving into the lived experiences of transcribers also challenges the assumption that it is possible to remain emotionally distanced when we deeply listen, revealing the affective, embodied, and transformative dimensions of listening. As Kiyimba & O’Reilly (2016) affirm, transcribers experience “normal human reactions” when listening to accounts of other people’s suffering (p. 96). In fact, considering Hammersley’s (2010) argument that identifying exact words depends on deep understanding of context and meaning, it would follow that an empathetic attunement to a speaker’s emotional state is a *prerequisite* for an accurate interpretation and transcription of their story, instead of being a distraction.

First-hand reflections from transcribers additionally highlight how the slow, repeated nature of listening in transcription, as well as the experience of listening to story-based material both serve to heighten the emotional impact of listening. For instance, Etherington (2007)’s transcriber Annie emphasises how “closely” (p. 87) she listened to the recordings she worked with, describing them as “very, very gripping” (p. 89), and comparing them to other powerful narrative formats such as a “film” (p. 88) or a “good book” (p. 89). Similarly, Tilley (2003b)’s transcriber Debbie notes that she is “more interested [...] listening at the same time [...] not just mechanically typing” when working

with recordings of lived experiences than with “technical jargon” (p. 841). Annie goes on to provide a detailed account of her response to the difficult material she listens to: mirroring the speaker’s affective journey, she experiences a “roller-coaster” of emotions ranging from despair to fear to inspiration. The emotions are so strongly felt that they elicit a visceral response—“by the time I finished I was almost standing on my chair clapping, you know?” (Etherington, 2007, p. 90, p. 87), her whole body immersed in the experience that her ears and hands are processing.

The emotional impact of listening implies critical ethical implications for research involving transcription. As Etherington (2007) and Kiyimba and O’Reilly (2016) outline, the unique position that transcribers inhabit within the research process can intensify the negative impacts of listening. On the one hand, close, repeated listening increases transcriber’s risk of experiencing vicarious trauma or burnout when working with distressing material; however, they lack the structured psychological support available to other professionals who listen intensively to traumatic material, such as therapists (Etherington, 2007; Kiyimba & O’Reilly, 2016). Additionally, if external transcribers are hired and kept at a distance from the data collection or conclusion of a research project, they lack the interviewer’s or researcher’s ability to respond directly to the speaker, intervene, or learn the outcomes of a worrisome situation (Etherington, 2007; Kiyimba & O’Reilly, 2016). Confidentiality further impedes transcribers from debriefing their experiences with outside parties (Kiyimba & O’Reilly, 2016).

Transcribers have reported feeling frustrated, helpless, or disempowered (Kiyimba & O’Reilly, 2007), as well as an unsettling sense of intrusion or voyeurism, despite knowing that the participant has consented to sharing the material (Etherington, 2007). These ‘shadow sides’ of transcribing call for researchers to listen to the experiences of their transcribers, not only to inform the research but also out of an ethical duty of care. Etherington (2007) and Kiyimba & O’Reilly (2016) recommend several practices to support our research listeners, such as listing transcribers as potentially vulnerable persons ethics reviews, warning transcribers about potentially distressing material, maintaining open lines of communication, and providing opportunities for debrief. As transcribers have noted, just being on the receiving end of a non-judgmental listening can help them process their own listening experience (Etherington, 2007; Kiyimba & O’Reilly, 2016).

At the same time, research on transcriber's experiences also points to the ethical and transformative openings that become possible through the empathetic listening transcribers practice. Despite transcribing the stories of individuals with vastly different life experiences, transcribers Annie and Debbie are both able to imagine themselves in the position of the speakers in ways that transform their attitudes and behaviours, and positively impact the participants (Etherington, 2007; Tilley, 2003b). For instance, in Tilley (2003b), listening to and transcribing the experiences of incarcerated women expands Debbie's awareness of the inequities within the justice and correctional system, leading her to notice and question the treatment of an inmate she sees at a doctor's office, and shift her previous opposition to offering incarcerated women an education.

Similarly, Etherington (2007)'s transcriber Annie notes that prior to transcribing the accounts of ex-drug users for Etherington's study, her own "background [was] quite sheltered" and she "never really fully understood why people take drugs" (p. 87). However, "listening [...] closely" to the recording allows her to "almost see everything from [the ex-drug user's] point of view" (Etherington, 2007, p. 87). Her attitudes shift over the course of transcribing and she ultimately recommends this deep listening experience as an avenue for increased understanding:

[P]eople who are terribly judgemental about drug users are the very people who really ought to listen to this stuff and find out about how it really happens, and maybe in some cases, it might just change their attitudes a bit and make things a little bit better for everybody. (Etherington, 2007, p. 87)

After opening a space for Annie to debrief the distressing emotions of transcribing, and asking what further support she needs, Etherington (2007) notices that Annie has not developed vicarious trauma and is instead framing the lasting impact of listening to difficult material as a valuable experience.

In both studies, the transcriber's empathetic listening and capacity for identification with the participants further translates into real-world impact. In Debbie's case, one participant in particular reminds her of her own mother or of herself, due to their shared race, class, and religion, closing the perceived gap between the two women: "so familiar and then something went wrong in her life and this is what she is left with" (Tilley, 2003b, p. 848). Debbie goes on to volunteer to visit this participant, who

wanted to build connections with the community prior to her release, and the two build a lasting friendship (Tilley, 2003b).

Meanwhile, Etherington (2007) is inspired to add further layers of listening to her research design, extending the positive effect of Annie's transcribing experience to become a form of reciprocity and affirmation for the participant. With approval from both Annie, the transcriber, and Becky, one of the research participants, Etherington records Annie's responses to the transcript and shares them with Becky, and also records Becky's responses to Annie's debrief. Etherington frames this process as a practice of "witnessing", drawing from narrative therapy where:

'outsider witnesses' and 'reflecting teams' are used in structured and intentional way in groups (for in depth description, see White, 1995, 2000). The value of outsider witnessing is seen as acknowledgement of: the life experiences and stories of the person at the centre; their values, commitments, hopes and dreams; our own responses to what we hear and the aspects of our own experience which gave rise to those responses; and how our lives had been affected/changed by what we had heard (Fox et al., 2003). Those acknowledgments help the person at the centre to re-story their lives in more hopeful and life affirming ways.

Whereas Becky had concluded her original interview stating "Well, I hope that is of some use" (Etherington, 2007, p. 91), listening to the responses of the transcriber/witness affirms its value: Becky remarks that it is "important" to hear that the transcriber didn't judge her (p. 96), and that it was "nice to hear that she found it quite inspirational at the end" (p. 94). Meanwhile, Becky's responses to Annie's comments and the transcript remind Etherington (2007) to refocus her subsequent analysis in ways that do justice to Becky's self-perception, emphasising her resourcefulness and her current life. Etherington's study is steeped in co-listenings that refine the narratives that will ultimately be presented to the listening audience.

Just as Cook (1990) states that there are "as many transcription systems as there are transcribers" (p. 5), the rare accounts of transcriber's experiences that do exist in the literature hint at a treasure of more stories hidden within field of qualitative research. While not all transcription will elicit such profound emotions and transformations as we see in Etherington (2007) and Tilley (2003b), their stories remind us to question who is the transcriber? How are they experiencing their listening? How can listening to their listening become embedded in our research methodologies? And

how might practices of reciprocal listening transform our research findings, our very understandings of what research is, and the world at large?

I can but offer my drop in the bucket...listening as I transcribe about listening when I transcribe...

# Transcribing as Ephemeral Listening

00:00:00:1

arms stretch  
back straightens  
hands poise on the keyboard

hit play on the recording

words wash over me and through me  
wearing headphones, I hear them almost exclusively  
immersing me in the waves of vowels breaking into consonants

I let myself go

become the words

I observe in amazement how my mind processes language and time in the act of transcribing: the vibrations of the words hit my ears, and within me (somewhere!) I briefly memorize them; my mind begins immediately replaying the last sentence, complete with the speaker's tones, inflections, and pauses, like the neon spots that linger in our eyes after the flash of a bright light; my hands type the words out, eyes scanning along to catch errors, and, meanwhile, my ears carry on listening to the tape in real time...

...listen, echo, type, read, listen...

...listen, echo, type, read, listen...

...listen, echo, type, read, listen...

a surreal conveyor belt in my mind,  
speeding up, becoming more fluent, able to move through the tape without pausing as much...

each phrase moving between four corners of my body:  
ears, mind, hands, eyes,  
multiple phrases cycling through at once  
a full immersion,

and yet

curiously      on the surface

floating bubbles of brilliant inspiration

**00:03:12.6**

for five years I worked as a research assistant  
transcribing over 70 hours of interviews

transcribing  
at its essence  
is listening  
trying to write what you're listening to  
listening and then (trying) (to) (write)

[...] at the beginning I [hated it]  
I was slow, and it was painful  
and it was just, you know,  
it was just, you know lots of  
just, you know, lots of jogging back  
jogging back and forth in the audio  
back and forth in the audio trying to capture  
all of the right words.

[and I had] all these questions, like how to  
turn this sound into... *uhh*... text, when it's not always  
neatly laid out into sentences,  
[...] how to interpret  
[ahh] different vocalizations that we make,  
and different pauses, and how to show stress, or where to break run-on  
sentences so it would, because  
otherwise it wouldn't  
make uh sense or  
Sometimes, because we were working with audiovisual  
recordings, often, it was questions of,  
you know, if they made a motion like [hands gesture in a circle] [...]

while I was sorting through the technical questions,  
I became fascinated by the practice of transcribing

somehow while coordinating all these simultaneous acts of language processing  
I was making new insights connections

sometimes I was moved to tears by an interview,  
or had moments of expansive understanding  
almost euphoric  
suddenly aware of the intricate interrelationship  
of ideas drawing together the voice of the speaker  
with the chorus of other voices  
chorus of my mind

It is a mode of thinking, a way of understanding that I have only ever experienced while transcribing. Neither reading finished transcripts nor listening to the tapes and taking notes are quite the same. It was something about

being immersed in the language  
suspended in sound  
my hands "tied up" transcribing  
unable to really express my own thoughts,  
but having them just kind of...

percolate

surface

dancing at a different level of consciousness

New questions emerge

*How do we listen when transcribing?*

*What kind of thinking emerges in this listening space?*

**00:40:41.2**

Listening experiment: what if I  
close my eyes and not type?

*still* I feel the words moving in me  
tendons tensing and  
releasing  
along ingrained patterns  
performing the dance each word would make on the keyboard

*opening the video full screen*  
*makes it easier to listen to what it is they're saying*  
*what it is they're meaning*

their speed  
gestures and expressions  
breath-shaped pauses  
rhythm-colored nuance  
mirrored

their speed  
gestures and expressions  
breath-shaped pauses  
rhythm-colored nuance  
within me

speak  
listen  
know  
from body to body  
body into body  
body with body

listening close, I become attuned  
to the music of their being  
feeling where their thoughts are moving  
so I can dance my fingers in response  
always emerging, a surprise

interviews and conversations  
evoke thinking-as-speaking<sup>4</sup>  
like improvisational dance,  
they might have a choreography in mind, but  
how it is expressed, how it works out in the space  
how it manifests in their body  
all happens in the moment

it's not emotion [...]

and *then* they move  
it's a coming to emotion through movement  
coming to thought through speech

<sup>4</sup> Tilley & Powick, 2004

learning the tango, I was told “don’t move  
anywhere until the lead shifts your  
weight”

as the transcriber  
I am the follow in this dance  
I can’t predict it  
I need to be exactly in the moment  
or just a step behind  
not moving myself into imagined figures

I can’t start to write the word until they’ve actually  
said that word  
I can’t start to make a meaning for them,  
before they’ve made that meaning

I open my fingers to write the next word,  
whatever it’s gonna be [...]  
let the voice emerge  
imperfections are new renderings

listen

**00:46:31.0**

listening in body: she smiles, I smile  
she quickens, fingers scurry  
[she gestures upwards] my shoulder twitches  
a gasp

[not in the recording, that is me—

transcription operates in the liminal:

“the spaces between research and life, talk and text,  
speaking and reading, author and reader, which is the only  
space there is. Linger in the infinite betweenness allows  
for entangled and exciting and anxiety producing  
relations”<sup>5</sup>

speaker’s voice and motions mingle  
with my spontaneous responses,  
passing half-formed thoughts  
thinking as *ooh* and *aah* and *mmm*  
thinking as breath and vibration  
thinking as empathetic resonance

less formulaic,  
more felt, less linguistic,  
more embodied, less conscious  
free from patterns free from paper

key words,  
bright lights that seem to  
flash up

echo

was that mine or theirs?  
rewind and edit  
“clean” the transcript from my fingerprints

a transcript is spun from the liminal  
sound, memory, body to body

I wear their words  
my own thoughts tug on the sleeve<sup>6</sup>

[best practice says to pause and write a memo—  
but when I turn the sprite has disappeared  
what was that thought? was it  
even a word, or just an image, a feeling  
a floating light

the tape continues  
I have to rewind and continue  
rewind and continue to type I  
continue to type I can't write my own thoughts now  
now I can write only this until

the tape ends.

What was it I was thinking?

Where can I find those lost insights again?

**00:32:54:2**

I let go

I let go, the beautiful thought, beautiful word

I let go

thoughts, once born,  
remain living somewhere in me  
floating in my body  
developing, growing  
coming-into-being

brilliance, ecstasy, living, moving, understanding

a speaker's thoughts are alive for them when they're speaking  
that's why they're hard to capture fully on a page  
*hard to catch their drift*  
we do our best; brackets, italics, and punctuation  
standing in for the human

the transcript is complete. file save upload attach email

but their drift is still moving  
my thoughts when listening are also alive  
a river has flowed into me  
the alive thoughts continue to develop  
emerge disappear re-emerge or drift on

I listen to capture  
in order to listen not capturing

transcribing is a practice of listening through loss  
letting go on the page to open space for listening  
letting go in our minds so our roaming thoughts  
may enter the space of unfolding  
knowing as process  
evolution  
transformation

to live in listening

## Tanda 5: A Community that Listens

*And if someone felt that his life had been an utter failure, and that he himself was only one among millions of wholly unimportant people who could be replaced as easily as broken windowpanes, he would go and pour out his heart to Momo. And, even as he spoke, he would come to realize by some mysterious means that he was absolutely wrong: that there was only one person like himself in the whole world, and that, consequently, he mattered to the world in his own particular way.*

*Such was Momo's talent for listening.*

*—Michael Ende, Momo*

## I Can't—

joyously I follow  
the tumble of girls' laughter  
onto the white sheet  
rolled across the floor  
exploring new ways to paint—  
today with feet and toes

drenched in colourful dreams  
I glance up—pristine white  
moat of tile expands  
between us and the sink

bury myself in laughter

thank goodness for  
timid camp volunteers  
(socks and shoes still on)  
who can rescue us  
so I can rest  
in carefree childhood  
just a minute longer

Artmaking with children, as a children's camp leader and now as an aunt, makes my heart overflow with joy. Where was this joy, I wonder, last weekend when I was in a cabin, attempting to sketch the ponderous mountains surrounding us? *Go, go, you have to sketch*, my husband urged, having packed my pencils and sketchbook unbeknownst to me. Yet minutes later I felt frustrated to the point of tears. *Not even close, not even close...* There is an astonishing gap between my eager creativity as a child and my corralled expressions as an adult—a gap I can often only broach when I am led by (rather than leading!) the children in my life.

In *What it Is* (2008), a vibrant book on the nature of creation and imagination, cartoonist and educator Lynda Barry comments on the way many people become less comfortable making or sharing art as they grow older. She invites us to explore how and why we first became afraid of art-making, asking: "Was there ever a time when you liked to draw? When did you stop? Why did you stop? What scared us?" (2008, p. 73). Reflecting on my own experiences, as well as listening to the accounts of friends, students, artists, and scholars, I notice how the key turning points in our artistic histories

often involve positive or negative experiences of listening. Making art or engaging in performative or creative acts in any sphere (such as public speaking or innovating ideas) always involves a degree of risk and vulnerability as we expose the unique thumbprint of our inner world: our inimitable voices, gestures, and imaginations. Thus, how our offering is received early on—including how the world listens to us, and how we listen to our self—can have lasting effects on our relationship with creative expression, and our confidence sharing our voice with the world in many ways.

For instance, Barry (2008) recounts how her and her peers' relationship to art were shaped in childhood by experiences of public recognition and positive affirmation. While some students were encouraged when their drawings were shared on bulletin boards or their stories won school contests, the selective nature of these opportunities instead curtailed most of the children's future engagement with art:

Out of 30 kids there were about ten that stood out and were good at something. The rest of us started wishing. I wish I could draw. I wish I could write. I wish I could sing. I wish I could act. I wish I could play music. I wish I could be funny. By the 5<sup>th</sup> grade most of us knew it was already too late (Barry, 2008, p. 80)

Barry herself went on to become a lauded writer and cartoonist, however she discusses how in these early years she internalized the dichotomy between “good” and “bad” art and developed a self-critical gaze that haunts her late into her career (2008). As a young Barry increasingly questions “is this good?” or “does this suck?” drawing becomes an experience she “stopped enjoying [...] and instead began to dread” (2008, p. 123). Within a framework of “good” and “bad” art, the latter doesn't deserve to be shared—and perhaps not even exist. For instance, when Barry tries to make her own picture books as a child, she describes how “I would always ruin them somehow. My handwriting looked bad to me [...] Sometimes all I did was erase until the paper tore” (2008, p. 75)—her oppressive form of listening to her own art threatening to silence her and turn creation into destruction.

Similarly, in an interview on community-engaged art, Squamish carver Aaron Nelson Moody (2015) discusses the tendency for art to be “pushed aside from regular people” during the transition from childhood to adulthood in our society. He describes being “shamed away” from singing after being told he was singing “wrong” or “off-key,” to the point that he “completely froze up when it came to singing”—an experience that he

calls “musical abuse” (Moody, 2015). Reading these passages from Barry and Moody, I am struck with a visceral sense of recognition: tears, crumpled paper and eraser shavings, self-loathing, destruction and loss, a sense of wooden limbs and aphony have all made frequent appearances during my attempts to draw, sing, dance, act, or even write. Like Barry’s classmates, I often find it easier to “wish I could” or pre-emptively claim that “I can’t” instead of venturing my creative voice.

Although one could argue that it is not essential for everyone to be an artist, our experiences expressing ourselves through art can be emblematic of our wider interactions with the world. For example, Barry (2008) discusses the strong association she developed as a child between the feedback she received for her artwork and her sense of self-worth, belonging, and hope for the future. When her stories and pictures were praised, she would feel “very hopeful about [her] life” (2008, p. 76), and had the sense that her peers and teachers “liked [her] more” (p. 126), although she found this effect was easily overturned by creating a “bad” drawing that “makes people think you are dirty or stupid or lame” (Barry, 2008, p. 126-7). Her poignant narrative speaks to the profound impact our responses to artwork can have on each other’s sense of self—all the more powerful in childhood when we are searching for our place in the world and hungry for affirmation not only for our artwork, but also our developing identity.

Meanwhile, Moody (2015) connects experiences of art-making with our broader social responsibility. Moody explains that from a Squamish worldview, art is not restricted to the domain of “experts,” and is not seen as “separate from anything else we do” (2015). Rather, art is seen as a way of being in the world that “every human being has a right [...] an obligation to do” (2015). Moody recounts how a youth canoe trip with the Squamish Seagoing Society became a turning point for his artistic and community participation:

Somewhere along the line [...] they stopped the canoe [and my teacher said] ‘don't think that we don't see you when we sing that you sit at the back, don't think that we don't realize that you don't speak up, you know, when we introduce ourselves, and when we go to dance you always seem to be mysteriously absent. [...] the people who are travelling this canoe are carrying our culture [...] you're choosing to be in the canoe or choosing not to be in the canoe.’

And we waited around for a while, we weren't moving in the canoe, and he said ‘well, you're in the canoe, or you're out of the canoe [...] I think you

can make it to shore from here, because we're pretty far out in Howe Sound.' [...] And he said 'if you're in, you're going to stand up in front of your community tomorrow, and you're going to sing, you know, by yourself, and you're going to introduce yourself, you're going to speak up in front of everybody.' (2015)

Within this teaching, singing and dancing is parallel with participating in one's community and the responsibility of carrying culture for future generations. Sharing one's voice is not seen as an individualistic or narcissistic act, but rather a way of participating in and contributing to one's cultural community. Moody notes that although he still felt "very paralyzed" as a singer because of the memories of shame, his desire to remain in the canoe—and metaphorically, in his community—helps him to confront his fear.

When we consider the deeper personal and social impacts of creative and cultural expression, we begin to appreciate the dangers of obstructing or shaming another's voice. Describing how communication "gives birth to worlds" through the creation of "relationships, organizations, governments and laws" (2014, p. 12), Lisbeth Lipari notes that throughout human history *not listening* has been employed as an instrument of systemic oppression. Measures such as "burned books, forced re-education of children, banned or mandatory tongues, or the invisible death rays of shame and ridicule" (Lipari, 2014, p. 106) control voice and listening in order to dehumanize others and inhibit oppressed people from forming relationships and creating new visions for our world. Such practices were fundamental to the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world.<sup>7</sup> Within this historical context, it becomes clear why Moody employs such strong language as "musical abuse" to describe the act of discouraging another's voice, as well as the profound importance of his teacher's call to participate in the community as a cultural carrier (2015).

To listen is to acknowledge another's humanity and respect their inherent right to a voice. To listen is to confirm another's presence, grant validity to their experience, and value their unique contribution. To listen is to affirm another as an equal co-creator and allow their visions, desires, and perspectives to shape our own understandings and the

<sup>7</sup>In their 2015 report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada described Canada's treatment of Aboriginal peoples, in particular the operation of residential schools, as "cultural genocide," defined as "the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group," including "prevent[ing] the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next" (2015, p. 1).

path we tread together. Listening is one of the most precious gifts we can give, and one of our most imperative ethical practices.

## A Community that Listens

As I contemplate the power of listening to one another's creative expressions, and the multiple ways we can perform listening, I find myself inquiring *how can we listen in ways that nurture each other into song—and in doing so—nurture each other's beings into the world?* And what does it mean to foster classrooms and communities that listen in such a life-giving ways? As usual, listening blooms and branches before me, performing itself in new ways in each interaction. As I journey through my paths as an artist, mentor and scholar, I collect stories that sing to me, illuminating new possibilities for my relationships of listening...

Aaron Nelson's Moody's story of being called to sing in his community reminds me of the importance of *listening for each other's voices*—in their presence, and *especially* in their absence. Moody's teacher does not merely reprimand Moody for not participating; he opens by reminding Moody that he is unconditionally seen and heard in his community:

[...] don't think that we don't see you when we sing that you sit at the back, don't think that we don't realize that you don't speak up, you know, when we introduce ourselves, and when we go to dance you always seem to be mysteriously absent. (Moody, 2015)

Hearing this, I think about those of us who have pretended to sing, mouthing the words; those who of us who have stood on the sidelines when others were dancing, trying to make ourselves invisible; those of us who have withheld from drawing or writing out of fear. Did anyone notice our silences? Did anyone care? A community that listens will hear the silence, note the absence, see the artist in those who cannot see it in themselves, and remind them—with care and with a challenge—the importance of offering their unique voice to the world.

Hearing one another's silences and invoking their voices is a key component of bell hook's conception of "critical pedagogy" or "engaged pedagogy" (1994; 2010). hooks discusses how students from less privileged classes, ethnicities, or races often feel forced to "assimilate to the mainstream" in classrooms by changing their habits and speech patterns, or falling silent altogether, in order to silence their vernacular cultures (1994, p. 181-182). She encourages teachers to challenge systems of oppression in the classroom not only by altering curriculum content, but also by questioning and re-

imagining learning activities and norms of conduct (1994). For example, early on in her classes, hooks creates structured spaces “where everyone’s voice can be heard, their presence recognized and valued” by asking all the students to write short paragraphs and read them out loud (1994, p. 186). She describes how the “physical experience” of speaking and listening to one another establishes a precedent of mutual participation, increases student’s commitment to learning, and builds a sense of community in the classroom (1994, 2010).

hooks’ and Moody’s reflections remind me that when I am in the role of the facilitator, mentor, or teacher in a space, I carry the responsibility of listening and encouraging transformative norms of ethical listening. I am warned by hook against *privileging* voice over silence when we encourage others to find and share their unique voice (2010). She writes,

Engaged pedagogy assumes that every student has a valuable contribution to make to the learning process. However, it does not assume that all voices should be heard all the time or that all voices should occupy the same amount of time. [...] In the engaged classroom, students learn the value of speaking and of dialogue, and they also learn to speak when they have something meaningful to contribute. [...] we honour all capabilities, not solely the ability to speak. Students who excel in active listening also contribute much to the formation of community. (2010, p. 21-22)

hooks’ writing evokes a powerful experience I had as an art camp leader years ago, when I learned to listen to the beautiful multiplicity of my students’ voices, including their silences.

### **Brian**

Long white banner paper  
unrolls like a silent sea, ready  
to be splashed and rippled with  
rainbow cords of paint, and Brian  
draws trains.

Yesterday’s black ink news turns  
festive rain, molded  
by sticky fingers into birds  
and lions and dogs, and Brian

draws trains and helicopters.

Picasso's blue period  
rendered cheerful in children's  
monochromatic imaginations  
of their multiverse, and Brian  
draws trains and helicopters and trucks.

No label on a medical form speaks  
to Brian's silence, so when  
Marshall asks *why doesn't he  
talk, why does he keep  
drawing trains?*  
I remind him not to speak about you  
as if you're not here.

In your silence I begin to hear:  
silver raindrop meticulousness  
of your penciled trains: never paint, only  
occasional marker. I learn to decipher  
your requests, your smile a  
subtle crescent: not sad, not shy, just  
like a thought crossed your mind.

I begin to hear  
the gently rising smoke of your trains  
and then, even more translucent,  
as you imitate the crows,  
ask me if I like them. Voice like  
feathered shadows on burnt grass;  
no one else would have heard you  
probably, not even me.

Velvet taps of fingertips on volleyball,  
squeaks of chairs,  
the children play silent ball,  
eliminated from the game by a laugh,  
an escaped exclamation,  
clap of a dropped ball.

Here we enter your world:  
vivid, attentive silence,  
where we all win  
when you win, with ease

When Maxine Greene speaks of "children whose identities are contingent on the existence of humane communities" or "communities of regard" (1995, p. 41, 39), I think of that week of summer camp with Brian and the other children who, all together, came

to create such a community. Greene discusses how labels such as ‘disabled’ or ‘at risk’ so often limit the potential we see in children, and the potential they see in themselves, fixing them “as firmly as flies in amber,” or moving us to seek ways to treat, train, help, and control difference (1995, p. 39-41). Through art, students can express themselves in any of the various literacies they prefer, encouraging a sense of agency, the development of community in sharing our self-expressions, and reminding us to attend to each other in our “difference and connectedness” (Greene, 1995, p. 39). Only by listening deeply, patiently, attentively into Brian’s silence was I able to hear his voice and foster a community amongst his peers that could move beyond questioning and labeling into appreciation and sharing.

Although I shied away from singing or performing in my childhood, writing became the literacy through which I could bring my voice into the world. I learnt to write at a young age under the guidance of my first (and always) teacher—my mother—in the half-ruled Hilroy exercise books we worked in daily. Today, the stack of yellow notebooks doesn’t betray the eraser shavings—and likely even frustrated tears—of my learning, but my transformation as a writer is visible. My writing develops into neat print in a matter of weeks, spaces between words carefully measured with a pinky finger in lieu of the grid paper Mexican schoolchildren learned to write on. The vocabulary and topics become complex: spanning science, cultural studies, geography.

Many of my yellow notebooks house adult sentences: my child hand balancing on the stilettos of my mother’s voice as she dictated the lesson. However, they don’t become what Maxine Greene describes as children “simply accommodating us by imitating our languages, memorizing our terminology” (1995, p. 54). Unlike the pages in my school notebooks, where an adult hand had sometimes written what was deemed ‘too hard’ for me, or where I had merely cut-and-pasted pages of printed stories and colored in the pictures, the sentences my mother dictated were recreated in my own hands, becoming mine.

Through meticulous spelling I came to know words intimately, hand storing synonyms in the crooks of my knuckles. I learned grammar in two languages, allowing me not only to craft sentences, but later to crack them open, to know how the silver fish turn from noun to verb to adjective in my own writing. I was invited into a “signified and signifying” world where I could see myself as a “conscious, reflective,” an active namer

and speaker in both my cultures (Greene, 1995, p. 55, 58). Seeds of literacy eventually bloomed in my own free-writing where, having learnt to name my world, I was able to “construct multiple realities” (Greene, 1995, p. 57) from my own lived experiences and from those I imagine. Because of my mother’s teachings, I never struggled to understand the world, or to express myself; I never felt like any text was ‘too advanced’ for me to crack it open and try. Her gift was more than literacy: it was strength, self-confidence, power and assertiveness; it was freedom, it was voice.

My mother taught me another secret of logos: that its most indispensable purpose is not to name and know the world others build around us, but rather the one within, the “interior landscape [...] the contours of our emotional selves” that art can reveal (Eisner, 2002, p. 11). Amongst the yellow notebooks, there are spaces for writing and drawing feelings, naming the things that made me happy, sad, and frustrated; the things I liked, discovered, or was grateful for. One slip of paper cut out from a yellow notebook is a testament to a particularly significant manifestation of this teaching. After being homeschooled by my mother, my return to public school in the second grade was a difficult transition. My brother and I faced a fair dose of bullying. One day, when I begged to stay home, my mother didn’t force me to attend but instead encouraged me to send a note to my teacher, accompanied by a children’s book about a Chinese immigrant named Jasmine who gets bullied at school:

Dear Mrs. Strong:

Today I was feeling very sad because Monica and Kelly were making fun of me for wearing my brother’s jacket. They were also making fun of Mexico, the country I was born. I told them I was wearing the jacket so we could save and visit Mexico one day. I wish I could find friends in the classroom.

(Journal excerpt, March 4, 1998)

While I can’t say my statement that day spared my brother and I from being bullied again in the future, it did make a strong impression on my class as well as on my sense of voice. By asking me to write that short but poignant letter to my teacher, my mother instilled within me “the craft required to be fully participant in this society, and to do so without losing the consciousness of who [we] are” (Greene, 1995, p. 165). Remaining at

home that day, I had not retreated, but rather crafted and expressed my voice in a way that was perhaps more powerful than my presence, allowing me to be fully heard.

Looking back, I am filled with such tenderness for that girl (still within me today) so young and full of feelings. I am awed and grateful that through my mother's guidance, I received the gift of language as "a way of growing and being and living in the world" (Leggo, 2009b, p. 172), wings catching my every fall.

## Sing

Over the years, I have become increasingly comfortable expressing myself off the page—dancing, performing, drawing, even public speaking--however, there remains a lingering fear of singing. According to Carriage (2018), most people are born with the physical foundations for a singing voice and can learn to manipulate their voice for a desired singing effect. Thus, I could surmise that with sufficient training I could become at least an adequate singer. However, the younger Aaron Nelson Moody and I are far from alone in believing we cannot sing—raising questions about what it means to feel able to sing beyond the basic physical ability. I listen to my silenced singing as a metaphor of the challenges I and others face in expressing ourselves in our communities. Further, I seek to lean into the ways I can live in the *metaphor* of singing: bringing my full self—my stories and experiences, the “vernacular culture” (hooks, 1994) of my mixed cultures and intersecting identities, my fears and passions—into my writing, research, and ways of being in the world.

In her essay “Dispelling the Myth of the Non-Singer,” Louise M. Pascale invites us to reflect on the meaning of singing precisely from the perspective of self-identified “non-singers,” such as Onika, an immigrant woman from Barbados who states, “here in the United States, I’m not a singer. When I’m singing my music in Barbados, I am a singer” (qt. in Pascale, 2005, p. 168). For Pascale, Onika’s story highlights the impact of different cultural paradigms around singing—the “Western *Aesthetic A*” that values “performance, perfection, and virtuosity” as compared to the inclusive “*Aesthetic B*” that values “community building, diversity, group collaboration and diversity” (2005, p. 170). Pascale’s differentiation between these two “aesthetics” echoes reflections from Aaron Nelson Moody, bell hooks, and Maxine Greene in associating expression and listening with community building.

While I can foster community amongst others by listening *to* and *for* other’s voices in ways that celebrate their uniqueness, the stories I have reflected on also remind me that offering my own voice to this community is equally important. hooks notes that “engaged pedagogy emphasizes mutual participation,” explaining that:

I never ask students to do an in class writing assignment that I am not willing to do. My willingness to share, to put my thoughts and ideas out there, attests to the

importance of putting thoughts out there, of moving past fear or shame. When we all take risks, we participate mutually in the work of creating a learning community. (2010, p. 20-21)

Of course, in my case, I am not literally asking others to sing, so there is no ethical imperative to jump in on the karaoke night! However, I am called to confront the fear and shame that holds me back, and to continually take risks, stepping into the sense of “integrity” and “wholeness” hooks champions through engaged pedagogy, where “we can be honest, even radically open” (2010, p. 21).

Unlike Onika, who *does* feel like a singer when singing “her” music in Barbados, I don’t feel like a singer in Canada or Mexico, singing in either English or Spanish. My identification as a “non-singer” may be influenced by internalized expectations for perfection in performance, but it also stems from a more fundamental discomfort with my voice as a symbol of displacement, having been a young immigrant to Canada. Stepping into a metaphor of singing can mean seeing my differences and failings as places of learning and growth. To sing can mean to find my voice in other forms of creative expression: the unique way I write and speak, the way I move when I dance, the stroke I make when I draw. To sing can mean no longer asking permission to feel a sense of belonging in the spaces I inhabit, the cultures I identify with, or the visions of myself that I aspire towards. To live in the metaphor of singing is to live with authenticity, as the author of my own life, and to believe that I am of value. And this singing depends on listening ears—attuning my own ears to listen to myself with love, as well as finding spaces where I can be heard in my community in the fullness of my being.

I am the bilingual child, third space child  
sounding foreign both in Canada and in my parents’ homelands

I am the one with the accent  
the one who says o-ven instead of oh-ven  
until my best friend’s laughter bakes my cheeks red  
on the bleachers in sixth grade

The one whose voice unconsciously changes colour  
depending on the intimacy I have with those I speak to:  
a whole spectrum, ranging from warm red home to  
sterile whitish blue, which my partner discovers  
as he, too, hears me colour him with love over time

I am the one who rarely performs my poetry  
knowing that my whole body shakes me nearly to silence  
when I speak in public, afraid that my throat might  
drop the outside voice by mistake,  
leaving me more naked than with no clothes  
they say undress your audience with your eyes,  
but how do you make them sound foreign like you?

I cry when I hear choir leader Vanessa Richards say

“Where else do we feel silence?  
Where else don't we give ourselves permission?  
Because anybody who has ever said to me  
'Oh you don't want to hear me sing,'  
it's because somebody else told them  
'Oh, you shouldn't be singing, please stop.'  
Even if it was a teasing moment, people remember that  
because it's literally like saying  
your voice is of no value, is wrong.”<sup>8</sup>

I want to sing. It is time to sing.  
The second riff of Leggo's poem “Twelve Riffs  
for a Guitar with no Strings” says:  
“I will write as if no one will ever read  
my poems; I will not write for others  
because I will be too eager to please”<sup>9</sup>

But instead, I want to write as if everyone will hear:  
hear it in my voice, in all the voices in me  
that might be exposed  
not to please others, but rather  
to please myself in perhaps not pleasing

I will not let this be my French oral exam:  
the last course I took because the examiner  
stopped me after my first response to comment on  
my curious Spanish accent when speaking his language,  
as if that would boost my confidence  
for the next half hour

I will mis-pronounce. I will mangle.  
I will trip on this language of consonants.  
I will fail grammar and call it poetry.  
I will braid my half-languages to sing in my true voice.

<sup>8</sup> Richards (2015)

<sup>9</sup> Leggo, 2009a, p. 166

## Tanda 6: I Listen On

*Beneath this pink there lurked a greenness, though,  
Which listened and now fades away, all knowing.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “Pink Hydrangea” translated by Walter Arndt

## Sharing the Art of Creative Listening

Thursday morning in the office, my colleague and I meet for a sharing of listenings. We have both read, analyzed and assigned themes to the same set of notes gathered from a public engagement initiative. After our meeting, she will go on to analyze the rest of the data and write our classic *What We Heard* report, communicating the findings from the engagement to the Ministry, public, and key stakeholders.

I have spent years analyzing data and writing similar reports for public engagement processes that have informed local, provincial, and federal programs, services, and policies. As with transcribing, I originally “fell into” this role: a literature student hired into public engagement projects because of my writing skills, but lacking any formal training in data analysis in the fields of social sciences or public policy.

Reporting on *what we heard* was initially a solitary scramble: late nights swamped in data, drawing and re-drawing tentacular mind-maps, desperately scrawling on post-it notes as new connections emerged, grasping in the dark for the right words. Deadlines loomed—there is always a hurry to report on *what we heard*, despite how time and energy-intensive deep listening is. And all the while, I felt weighed down with a pressing sense of ethical responsibility to do justice to the voices I heard, especially when those voices have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised.

The art of “hosting” is a cornerstone to public engagement—working to make people feel safe, comfortable, and heard in the room—however I would add that through the process of reporting back we continue to enact a back-room hospitality, opening space through language so the voices of the public can later be heard in the boardrooms where power sits.

Describing the themes she found in the data, my colleague’s blue eyes sparkle, gazing upwards to an abstract point as if reaching for a thought that is just beyond tangible. I recognise the immersion into what Tilley & Powick (2004) describe as *thinking-as-speaking*, or what Lipari (2014) calls *interlistening*, where listening, speaking, and thinking come together. The act of voicing her idea allows me to hear my colleague, but more importantly, it allows her to listen to

*herself* as a shapeshifting concept emerges. She pauses to add, *Thanks for listening to me, because this is helping me think through this right now...* I pick up on the passing mention of listening and something in me quickens.

After years of exploring experiences of listening in my life and work, I am always delighted when the concept of listening re-emerges unexpectedly. Almost every situation—from an angry fight to a pensive stroll on the beach—requires listening to transform into a moment of connection, insight, love, justice...

Up to that point, I had not been consciously thinking of how I was listening, but I welcome her expression of gratitude as a call to listen with particular care in this space. I tune into her words, rhythms and intonations, the gestures and postures. I step into the dance of leaving enough space, yet offering thoughts when it may help develop our ideas. The air in the room changes, electrifying.

In research terms, you would say my colleague and I are engaged in team-based analysis in order to increase the reliability and validity of the report's findings. Our team's approach to public engagement focuses on small-group dialogues and long-form surveys, so the majority of the data we gather is complex, narrative-based, qualitative, and therefore open to subjective interpretation.

The field of qualitative research has long acknowledged that we all listen to data differently—as Hruschka et al. (2004) describe, “conclusions made by a lone interpreter of text may not reflect what others would conclude if allowed to examine the same set of texts” (p. 320). What's more, analysis of complex or large quantities of data increases the risk of biased readings or random errors (Armstrong et al., 1997; MacPhail et al., 2016; Hruschka et al., 2004). When we're reporting on public engagement to inform policy-makers, these divergent, limited, biased, or erroneous listenings—or omissions made from a failure to listen—can translate into wasted resources, policies that negatively impact communities, and/or the erosion of public trust and deeper disenfranchisement of marginalized groups if participants feel that our *What We Heard* report doesn't accurately reflect their voice.

First our faces, then our hands, then the white-board walls around us come alive with our listenings. Listening in colors and arrows; excited interruptions and

agreements; curiosities, appreciation, possibilities, and questions. In this space, it is easy to let go of my own way of listening to the material, the filters through which I see the world, as I marvel at my colleague's deep perceptiveness and the insights I would have never thought of alone. This is a space of true "in-sight": listening together, we enter a prism through which we can see a fuller spectrum of light.

The pressure of conducting deeply subjective analysis leading to real-world impacts used to keep me up at night, however today it propels me to foster practices of careful listening. When I am offered an opportunity to become a mentor for our growing team of data analysts, I see an opportunity to share what I have learnt about listening—from my years of experience analyzing data, as well as from my experiences as a literature student, poet, and dancer—in order to enrich our work.

I intuitively begin to encourage a team-based approach to data analysis, offering the kind of support I craved when I was left alone with the responsibility of listening. When possible, two or three colleagues look at a small set of notes, and individually construct architectures of the themes and subthemes they hear. We then meet to share our perspectives and co-create a path forward. I advocate for longer timelines for report-writing, and schedule long "coding comparison meetings" so we can linger in our listening, instead of rushing by...

The rivers of colour on the walls have come to rest around a tentative framing. There is a thoughtful pause as we consider our work. This is not the kind of meeting where we have *nailed something down*; rather, we have unpinned our listenings. There are new spaces, echoes, dances and crocheted threads that we may strive to keep alive in the report. The static *what we heard* becomes an active *what we are hearing* that invites the reader to enter our listening dialogue as well.

Due to the uniqueness of everyone's form of listening, it is essentially impossible to achieve a high degree of consensus, or "inter-coder reliability" between data analysts within the initial round of team-coding (Hruschka et al., 2004). When time and funding allows, robust research teams may conduct multiple rounds of coding, comparison, and discussion, statistically measuring their growing convergence until they are satisfied with

the reliability of their coding structure (Hruschka et al., 2014). However, our team is small, and after the initial meeting, usually only one of us can move forward to analyze and report on the remaining material. What is the point, I wondered, of advocating for team-based analysis if we can't reach reliability?

Laughter.

Voices.

"Yes! And..."

"I really like that"

"This is harder than I thought..."

The energy in the room is the first validation. Our co-listening forges a community, a sense of camaraderie that breaks down the anxieties and self-doubts that used to plague me as a solitary analyst, potentially to the detriment of my very capacity of listening and writing.

The ideas on the walls—blooming yet incomplete—are a further testament, reframing our understanding of what it means to listen. Indeed, some researchers have pushed back against applying positivistic paradigms of reliability onto the wild beauty of qualitative research (Hruschka et al., 2014). For instance, Armstrong et al. (1997) propose that team-based analysis can be used as a method of triangulation, where instead of striving for convergence and measuring percentages of inter-coder reliability, the *difference* between our interpretations can lead to deeper understanding.

One could argue, then, that our inability to reach reliability can be seen as an invitation to practice another kind of listening, a *creative* listening that echoes the ideas and values I found in my inquiries into listening in reading, dance, transcribing or facilitating art engagement. Listening as a creative practice enlivens our desire to reach for new ideas through gaps in understanding; listening creatively implies opening spaces where we may bring our voice and our dance; listening creatively enacts understanding as a practice of letting go in order to receive. Listening creatively allows us to build community by celebrating one another's' unique voices and sharing our own.

*Thanks for listening to me, because I'm just thinking through this right now...*

I lean into the unexpected, yet deeply awakening, call to listen, eager to perform and inquire into my listening on just another Thursday morning...

## Living Questions of a Listening Inquiry

I have been listening to my listening for over four years. My inquiry has followed me during the slow progression of my graduate studies and my rapidly evolving personal and professional life. I find it remarkable, however, that the question of *who is my listening self?* has never lost relevance. If anything, each new chapter of my life renews the question with a deeper appreciation for its importance: how can I listen in my different jobs? How do I listen in my marriage? How do I listen across the multiple cultures and languages of my expanding family? How might I one day listen as a mother? How do I listen to my own mother, as our relationship evolves with my entry to adulthood? How do I listen to the earth crying under my feet? How do I listen to my body in times of sickness and health?

Further, I question how can I continue my listening inquiry informally when my thesis is complete? Meg Zuccaro reminds me that “to remember to listen is one way, to remember to live the listening is quite another” (2004, p. 70). However, as I found in my inquiry into transcribing, understandings and insights often become increasingly ephemeral as precisely when they are most important and profound. How can I dance with the music I hear in my ongoing living inquiry so that I can embody its lessons instead of muting them an effort to capture it?

I know I have engaged in a good listening inquiry because I reach the end with more questions than answers. I listen on...

## I Listen On

Hey,

Are you listening?

We can close our eyes but not our ears: I am always listening

But am I *listening*?

Listening in ways that hold space for another?

Listening creatively?

Listening to let go?

Listening others into being?

Listening is a practice of mindfulness, of being in the present. It's an exercise, a performance. I drop in and out of my costume.

I know, in my body, in my heart, when I am Listening.

Listening in all the life-giving ways

I strive to listen. I know when I'm not.

I listen on....

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