

THE LISTENING ACADEMY / SINGAPORE

REFLECTIONS FROM WORKSHOP FACILITATORS, SINGAPORE

Contributions from Listening Academy Singapore 2023: Loss Attunement co-convenors Alecia Neo and Jill J. Tan, and workshop facilitators Jevon Chandra, Li-chuan Chong, Kristina Mah, Yifan Wang, and Beverly Yuen, with Brandon LaBelle.

Listening Circle Attendees:

Horhaizad Adam
Jevon Chandra
Dapheny Chen
Li-chuan Chong
Hasyimah Harith
Fang-Tze Hsu
Chong Gua Khee
Brandon LaBelle
Bernice Lee
Chan Lishan
Kristina Mah
Alecia Neo
Nurul Rashid
J Shirley Soh
Jill J. Tan
Pat Toh
Yifan Wang

FOR [details](#) ON THE PROGRAM AND WORKSHOPS.





LISTENING, LOSS, ATTUNEMENT

1. The Listening Academy brings attention to listening as a practice that extends across a range of disciplines. What is listening for you? How does it feature in your own practice?

Jill J. Tan: Listening is central to my work as an anthropologist, artist, art writer, and teacher. The coexistence of these practices hones different frequencies of receptivity, reciprocity, and porosity. One thing I noticed in teaching my Writing Creative Ethnographies class at Yale College in Fall 2023 was that my students would often attach playlists alongside their writing: they were teaching me how to hear, in addition to how to read, them—in cultural particularity, mood, asynchronic enplacing. As a multimodal anthropologist, as well as a writer engaged with dance and movement, ethnographic objects enter my field of observation not only through sighting but listening, as a means of immersing in atmospherics.

Alecia Neo: In my ongoing research project Care Index,¹ listening is experienced through the observation and embodiment of another person's movement score. What happens when we adopt postures and gestures of care from another body? What happens to the person who shares their score? What is gained or transmitted in the learning process? The act of listening, for me, also involves the developing of the capacity and willingness to be changed or altered, somehow.

I also find it fascinating that the Chinese traditional character for listening, 聽 (tīng) is composed of different bodily elements, such as the ear, eyes, heart, suggesting the embodiment of focus, one's full engagement in empathy and emotions. Intriguingly, there is also the character 王 (wáng) representing the king, pointing to power, reverence and respect, perhaps the need to obey and to follow the command of those in power. This makes me wonder, who performs listening, and gets to be listened to? In her book "Whose Story Is This?", Rebecca Solnit writes, "We talk about empathy and compassion as virtues, but they are also active practices of paying attention to other people... I pay attention to you because you matter, and if you ignore me, it's because I don't."² Solnit draws our attention to the "asymmetries of audibility" and the perpetuation of inequality, and for me, I find this work of recalibrating these asymmetries an ongoing practice, that I continue to explore in my projects with different collaborators, including caregivers and disabled artists. Many of these projects begin with listening to others as a pathway to find our way back to ourselves.

Jevon Chandra: Listening is yet another way for me to be in and sense the world; and, relatedly, what I should remember others to be able to do also. I think of "listening" literally in that sentence, but treating it as metaphor and heuristic is likewise generative: as yet another way to decenter ocular-centricity from a world that is irrevocably tangled and multimodal. My current practice forces me to consider more rigorously what we can and should do amidst uncertainty, before the unpredictable future that we can neither fully "see" nor "know" – and in sum, doing and thinking about listening help me intimate the complexities of both our inner and outer worlds.

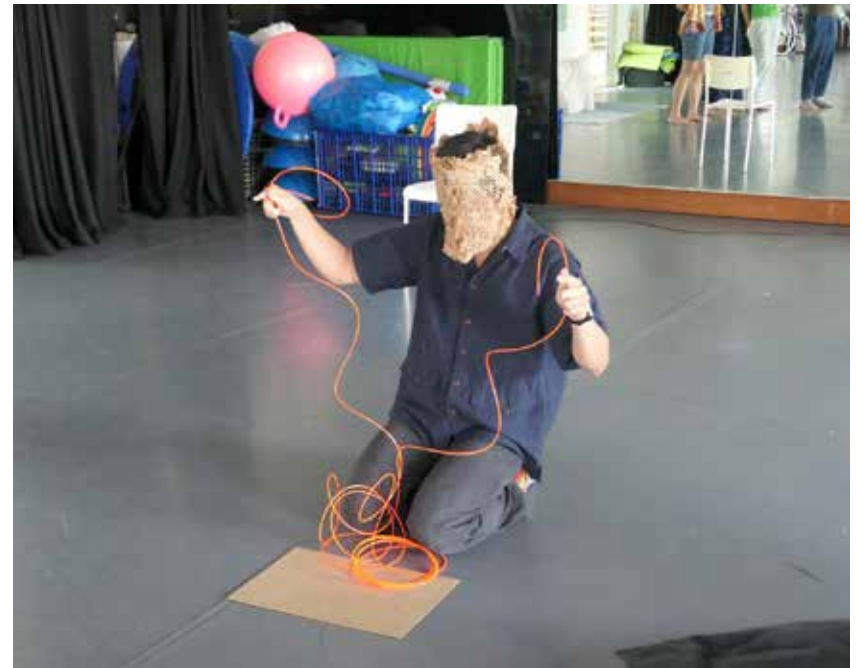
Li-chuan Chong: Sound and listening are central to my practice as a composer. I am interested in using sound as a medium of expression as well as a strategy to think critically of our relationship to the world, to our environment and to one another. I am often asked when I declare myself to be a composer, what kind of music do I write? That is a tough one. I have been interested in identity formation for some time, regarding the materiality of music and the authority of the composer, questioning the ontological and epistemological of the thingness of what I make and present. A placeholder for my endeavors thus far is the notion of "sound — a mutual tuning", which culminates in three provocations: "Is what you hear how you listen?" "Is how you listen what you hear?" "If we hear all the time, when do we (not) listen?" These questions are what I reflect

on as a practitioner and also what I offer to my audience in my presentation, sometimes in the form of a workshop that is usually prefaced by labelling and teasing apart different modes of listening and our understanding of "soundscape" or acoustic ecology. Without pomp and prescription, the provocations above I hope are useful in navigating the treacherous waters of identities personal, political, social, and cultural.

Kristina Mah: Listening and attunement to self, other and world are central to my research art and teaching practice. Although I grew up in Australia, I have noticed a deeper yearning to reconnect with my familial roots. As a martial artist, listening has been train into my body, rooted in Go Ju Ryu karate-do, that I have practiced since I was a child. More recently, I have engaged in dance and movement training that provides me a channel to provoke learned concepts and move beyond prescribed structures.

My work as an arts-led, practice-based research draws from philosophy and contemplative practice to inform the development of methodologies that embed contemplative enquiry and ethical frameworks. For me, listening implies a relationship, an indivisibility between self, other and the environment. It is cradled by silence and space that is both within and between.

Yifan Wang: For me, listening is a uniquely intimate and intricate mode of perceiving, noticing, feeling, relating to and attending to things. It seems particularly pertinent and inspiring when it comes to things that are hidden from sight, brushed over in historical narratives, or erased from our collective imagination. It is most relevant in my series of works concerning the physical infrastructure and materiality of digital technologies, such as the internet, blockchain networks or artificial intelligence softwares. These entities—data centers, undersea cables, telecom base stations, access points, communication protocols and so on—are the concrete, grounded underpinnings of our seemingly weightless ethereal digital lives up in the cloud, as well as the seemingly borderless, city-hopping "new economies" based on informational vectors.³ Yet these infrastructures are all too often made invisible and illegible, both in physical landscapes and in cultural discourses. A significant concern of my practice is thus to experiment with various ways and dimensions on attending to these hidden, non-spectacular objects, codes, machines, cables, people, services, care and labor that go into contemporary information technologies. And listening,



for me, is an indispensable part of this practice. Like a recent project, “sounds of the internet protocol,”⁴ asks: how do we listen and attune to the rumblings and rustlings of our digital spaces and temporalities?

Beverly Yuen: I conducted the workshop Resonating Echoes: Unlocking the Art of Listening in August 2023 as part of The Listening Academy: Loss Attunement. This occurred five months after a knee injury which left me immobilized. Yet, as a physical theatre artist who integrates emotions to promote healing, I questioned: Should I cease movement? The answer? NO.

While I have delved into “listening” in my arts practice on various levels— “listening” to how the body wants to move; “listening” to the environment and how it affects your movement and voice; “listening” to another person in the space and finding ways to connect without words —this workshop marked the first time I encouraged participants to move while seated if their bodies preferred it.

Movement is not about acting against the body; it is about heeding its signals— how it wants to move, what it is asking of you. During my knee injury recovery, I explored movement while seated, seeking ways to move without aggravating my knee. Previously, my work pushed boundaries, daring my body to exceed its limits. But what about those unsure about how to start moving? What about those fearful of taking that first step? These questions inspired the workshop. We moved on chairs, but we were not weak.

2. For the edition of The Listening Academy in Singapore, we focused on the topic of Loss Attunement, and how listening may aid in contending with loss. How do you relate to this topic in your own research?

Jill: My work, in this series of workshops co-created and co-facilitated with Alecia, and more broadly speaking, is engaged in the contending with loss and reaching for permanence in Singapore. In the workshop Alecia and I ran for the Listening Academy in Singapore in 2023, we were exploring structural violence as the primary mode of historical sedimentation of death, but here as well as the other workshop on grieving our kin, the personal and the palpable

always enters. So we are holding space for a practice and a precipice of that which spills over, leaks out, is kept close, finds refuge, alongside but maybe not fully revealed to each other. There is no perfect listening or total attunement—in some ways we are engaged in understanding the loss of our connection to each other through structural and sequestered forms, but also what it means to keep trying to tune in to some form of co-regulation in the workshop space and beyond, however imperfectly.

Alecia: During our workshop, Jill and I were interested in experimenting with possible ways for the session to hold space for listening to different experiences of loss and grief, including the ambiguous, anticipatory and hidden forms of losses. Hidden losses are particularly weighty to me - losses that cannot be openly addressed or considered worthy of grief. We attempted to create a sense of porousness and capaciousness in the exercises and sharing process through the engagement of movement, voice, material and ritual, with a focus on personal choice and collective witnessing and honouring. You choose which parts to reveal and decide the rules of how to engage with these parts. We hope that the process of having the participants craft an invitation and the designing of instructions for a personal ritual for others to witness one’s story of loss, in silence or to respond in more active ways, opened up avenues for reorienting oneself...a rehearsal space for exercising agency and release. I took the chance during our workshop to reflect on my recent project on youth mental health in Singapore, and the violence caused by a culture focused on fixing dysfunction.

Jevon: This question is difficult, but let me try. I think about how many people find it much harder to describe sound than, say, visuals. But at this moment, I consider that unfamiliarity with audiocentric language not as a lack, but as a blur that creates a moment for poesis, spacious precisely because the language is struggling to be complete. It is just as how I sometimes find myself speaking more honestly in a language I am less familiar with, and am more moved by writing and singing by another speaking in their secondary tongue.

Kristina: My workshop centered around a framework for somatic listening or attunement for practitioners to train self-observation of a guided contemplative practice.⁵ The workshop builds on the development of method-



ologies for creative research through contemplative enquiry that began with an autoethnographic study of the daily practice of Tonglen, a Tibetan Buddhist meditation technique for compassion cultivation. The intention of the study responded to the issue that it is not easy to observe our own minds and articulate with precision our lived experience in this act. The intention of the Listening Academy workshop responded to the theme of loss and attunement through a pilot workshop that translated the first-person study into a group experience of “The Nine Contemplations” that is a contemplative practice designed to familiarize the practitioner with death. The participants were introduced to an abridged version of the contemplative technique and the framework for training self-observation was used to structure the stages of the workshop.

As I guided participants through this experience, I used sound to anchor participants in taking “somatic snapshots” that were body scans done in between guided reflection. Body maps⁶ taken at different moments were used to document the unfolding experience. Written journaling was used to reflect on the experience.

Initial reflections of the workshop related to the development of vividness and lucidity while making contact with inner processes in the consciousness as the workshop unfolded.

Beverly: How can listening aid in coping with loss? Loss of mobility, familiarity, identity. An injury strikes deeply. As a physical theatre artist and fitness instructor, losing freedom to move felt like falling into a valley. However, embracing my injury, speaking to my knee, and “listening” to it have led to new artistic approaches and personal growth. Oneness, balance, healing—found through listening to the body. Individual identity has metamorphosed too.

3. Throughout the daily gatherings at The Listening Academy, we spent time exploring ways of listening to the body, to experiences of loss, that might open up to new forms of self-care and care for others. How do you relate to the question of care? And do you see care being practiced in the larger culture of Singapore?

Jill: I entered into working with Alecia on workshops first as a participant for her workshop on care gestures for the Care Index, and later as a co-creator of a workshop on embodying care infrastructures during the COVID-19 pandemic, Recipes for Wayfinding, under the same project. The workshops we have made on loss under the umbrella of my research on death and loss, I feel, are inextricable from this existing partnership that has explored care in the way we have. Purely retrospectively, I might venture to say it was only possible to even think of making work that tended to loss because we had already been engaged in a praxis of care that invites others in. I think this relates to both the safety and creative space for us as the makers, but also having the capacity and prior experience to invite more collaborators into an interactive space which engages with death, grief, loss, and violence. I can perhaps best speak to how I am seeing care enacted, expressed, desired in the spaces of these workshops: as a resistance to forgetting and a desire to remember, and a way of being together in space and for longer than we are sometimes allowed in Singapore.

Alecia: Recently, I’ve been thinking more about reframing care-giving as care-sharing. A shift from individual provision and attuning to collective resources and developing caring systems. Performing deep care can sometimes come with the experience of loss, due to the inevitable tuning out of the periphery as one zooms in. What comes to mind as an unusual model of care is the work of community-based arts charity, 3Pumpkins⁷ in the neighbourhood of Boon Lay in Singapore. Their work focuses on using participatory methods to support connections and embrace complexity in the community, with a focus on children aged seven to fourteen. Unlike most social service organisations which often have strict rules on who they can serve, 3pumpkins adopts a porous approach that allows the intermingling of residents from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, centering play and dialogue within the community. During a visit to their space, I recall the founder, Lin Shiyun, sharing that conversations involving disagreements or conflicts, often take place in informal, open spaces close to their centre, where members of the community are within sight. This felt to me as a conscious decision to encourage a culture of compassion for each other, instead of shaming the individual.

Jevon: At this moment, “care”, as a word, is hard to confront without some degree of irk; I think we now know how easily co-opted the word can be, and how many mis-assume to have achieved “care” by merely invoking the word.

I am therefore wondering if the concept of care is, today, better apprehended by bypassing the word and concept entirely. That is, of course, possible – our body, heart, simply knows when we have been cared for, even or especially by many who might not be attuned to the contemporary discourse on the politics of care. If words must be used, I think Indonesian poet Sapardi Djoko Damono said it well. “Aku ingin mencintaimu dengan sederhana”, that is to say: I wish to love you plainly. Singapore, as a country so animated by hustle and competition, has long been inching towards burnout; the time feels surely near when we demand – or wrestle for ourselves – a culture more life-giving culture, that cares unambiguously and plainly.

Kristina: Through the Listening Academy, I felt that the daily acts of listening to the body was part of a process to soften and open the mind to different experiences of people and place. Listening and tuning in to what is going on for oneself can be considered as self-care that is a precursor to developing courage to exchange oneself with other.

I am an outsider to the Singaporean context, an uninitiated visitor to many of the social and cultural rituals. The interwoven complex narratives that embody structural violence, marginalised groups, the loss of wild spaces, and colonial assimilation were central to my introduction. My time at the Listening Academy provided a community that created lenses and probes – through the senses, the body and the mind, that I could begin to develop a sensitivity to the ways that care is expressed through a myriad of ways within complexities. I observed processes of care in people through the qualities of the tones in voices, and gestures among strangers, but also the ways that people connect with each other in and through nature. The urban noise seemed to be amplified, yet I saw a soft and quiet nature of care carrying its own song throughout the place.

Yifan: I’m primarily interested in the political economy of care and care labor, which receives far less attention and compensation than care as a moral, normative concept in the abstract. I am now working on a project together with multiple grassroots smartphone repairers in Shenzhen,⁸ and their stories vividly reflect the dichotomy between care as an abstract concept and care as concrete laboring activities: despite growing scholarly interest in electronics repair and analytical discussions that theorize repair as care, repairers in the Global South remain significantly underpaid and their work environments re-

main unsafe with an abundance of toxic materials from the repair process and insufficient protection gears. David Graeber’s discussions on the phenomenon of bullshit jobs are well circulated. But lesser known is his proposal of an opposing type of work and people against the bullshitization of work: the caring class.⁹ At a time when—as Jevon acutely points out above—the language of care is all too often co-opted or made elusive, it is perhaps more useful to instead consider the caring class, consisting of specific people and groups performing various caring activities for the benefit of other specific people and groups in a political economy that structurally undervalues caring labor.

Beverly: Movement heals. Movement inspires. Exercise can be joyful. Now, I encourage others to engage with movement by listening to their bodies—whether in theatre or fitness. It is strength to push boundaries, but it is also a courage to accept oneself and current circumstances. In a competitive society, restraining oneself from doing what one feels one can push oneself to attain can also be a form of “self-care”.

1. Alecia Neo, careindex.net

2. Rebecca Solnit, *Whose Story Is This? Old Conflicts, New Chapters* (Granta Publications, 2019), page 29

3. McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

4. <https://wangyifan.io/stuff-im-doing/sounds-of-ip/>

5. Mah, K., Loke, L., & Hespanhol, L. (2021). Towards a contemplative research framework for training self-observation in HCI: A study of compassion cultivation. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)*, 28(6), 1-27.

6. Anne Cochrane, K., Mah, K., Ståhl, A., Núñez-Pacheco, C., Balaam, M., Ahmadpour, N., & Loke, L. (2022, February). Body Maps: A Generative Tool for Soma-based Design. In *Proceedings of the Sixteenth International Conference on Tangible, Embedded, and Embodied Interaction* (pp. 1-14).

7. 3pumpkins website, www.3pumpkins.org

8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjtg8nkc9Mo>

9. <http://opentranscripts.org/transcript/managerial-feudalism-revolt-caring-classes/>



SCORES, INSTRUCTIONS, MOVEMENTS

Boundaries & Edges

Alecia Neo

Discover new bodily vocabulary via an exploration of boundaries.

Informed by the constraints placed upon society due to the ongoing pandemic, this exercise* invites us to explore bound and restraint situations. How might we circumvent or navigate these constraints and circumstances? How do we continue to take risks while being mindful of the wellbeing of others and ourselves?

Place yourself in a recalled or imagined difficult situation. What does it look like and feel like in the body?

Try to trace this embodied experience. How do you move through these challenges?

Use these words and phrases as creative prompts

Taking something to the edge

Play with the edges of ourselves

Restraint

Bound situations

Circumventing

Navigating

*This movement score was developed in collaboration with artist Sharda Harrison in 2022 for the Care Index.



Somatic Snapshot

Kristina Mah

Turn your attention to your body and mind.
Sweep your attention over your body and take a snapshot.
There is no need to try to look for anything or hold on to anything, just notice.

PROMPTS:

What sensations, qualities or images are you becoming aware of?

What are you noticing?

What comes to awareness?

How are you sensing your body right now?

How are you experiencing your body right now?

Is there a quality or sensation that stands out?

Where are you experiencing this?

How does this experience happen for you?

This can be done before or after an embodied exercise.

If there is a key moment that you become aware of during an experience, you can use the act of collecting a somatic snapshot to document this moment.

Draw your responses to the prompts on body maps.

Listening Otherwise

a poetry writing exercise by yifan wang

PROMPT:

Consider what things are silent, inaudible, mute, unspeaking, shut-up, muffled, ...?

Write down as many as you can!

Then add the phrase “I want to listen to” or “I hear” before these nouns or clauses.

Select and edit interesting sentences generated from this process and share with me!

EXAMPLES FROM YIFAN:

I want to listen to an aching knee, a tired back, stiff hands, cramping muscles boxed in one out of a billion office cubicles.

I want to listen to free wifi at airports, gentle and soft, covering travelling people and things like a fluffy, invisible blanket of air

I want to listen to the traffic light near my apartment, late at night, no cars to dance with, just a slow song of green, yellow, red

I want to listen to my mother’s dreams when she was my age, too delicate to be spelled out, too enduring to be quieted

I want to listen to unuttered words, forsaken sentences, abandoned languages that awkwardly live at the soft space between lips and heart

I hear the atmosphere warming up

i hear haunting ghosts

Reference:

Mah, K., Loke, L., & Hespanhol, L. (2021). Towards a contemplative research framework for training self-observation in HCI: A study of compassion cultivation. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)*, 28(6), 1-27.

i hear my laptop running too hot

i hear a worldwide pandemic

i hear unresolved losses

i hear collective grieving

Listening, Moving, and Singing

Beverly Yuen

For movement exploration, I would suggest that you can begin with seated movement exploration:

1. Gentle motions on a sturdy chair, as if swimming.
2. Attend to different body parts (such as the neck, shoulders, lower back, knees, and ankles), releasing tension.
3. Breathe naturally.
4. Incorporate sounds.
5. Sing while exploring movement dimensions (including depths, heights, angles, and extension into the space)
6. Conclude with eyes closed, listening to heartbeat and breath.

The Listening Academy, Singapore
9 Aug - 12 Aug 2023
Dance Nucleus and other locations
Organized by Jill J. Tan and Alecia Neo with Brandon LaBelle

Booklet published July 2024 / www.listeningbiennial.net

