

On Third Listening

Brandon LaBelle, lecture notes for Third Listening Workshop, Amsterdam, March 23, 2024

My interest is to think through questions of listening, and in particular, how it may contribute to forms of relationality – a being in relation; this includes a focus on elaborating intersubjectivity, and how this can be situated within the context of contemporary struggles or practices. What is intersubjectivity? What shape and form might this take? In what ways does it articulate or manifest itself – in what ways does it impact onto conceptualizations of self and other, as well as community?

Guiding our workshop is the concept of The Third: the Third is put forward as a thinking framework – one that can help give answer as well as support the question of intersubjectivity and its transformative capacity. It is my view that the Third supplies us with a generative ground which can assist in finding our way with others, as well as attending to the complexities of current discussions and realities. This includes mapping a set of coordinates by which to foster ways of speaking, and ways of listening: what we are interested to pose as Third Listening.

To start, we might ask: Where is the voice today, what are its modalities, its frequencies, its silences? Under what pressures does it find itself – within what types of technical formats and platforms is voice figured, and in what ways do these shape what we imagine the voice being or becoming? Furthermore, where is listening within today's environments – within the context of attention economies, how is listening given support, especially for nurturing social connection? If voice is what often fulfills us as individuals, as well as what enables ways of sharing the world, and listening as what supports empathy and understanding, bringing creative attention to their current status seems deeply relevant.

On the Third /

Jessica Benjamin and “relational psychoanalysis”: introduction of feminism into the field, and broader reflections on the role of the analyst in overcoming models of domination:

Focus on the issue of relationality, and the *work of recognition*:

- *its function as a mechanism for social connection and community;
- *to recognize mutual influence as an arena of freedom rather than one of coercion, fear or danger; and where co-creation allows for valuing each other's contribution to a shared world;
- *furthermore, how to rework models of power and the perpetuation of violence?

Develops a theory of intersubjectivity so as to upset a model of power based on “doer and done to”, or a logic of “survival of the fittest” (related to “competition”);

- *and how this plays out within the psychoanalytic experience: shaped by the one who knows (analyst) over the one who doesn't (patient).

Instead, to work at a model of power based on cooperation, partnership, generosity: not an accumulation of power, and the desire to be “right”, but a *giving*, a *surrendering* (to say, I will go first: to make the step toward repair: the *apology*);

- *these ideas lead to the concept of the Third; for Benjamin, processes of repair are enriched by caring for what we do together (analyst / patient): each learns from the other; each is transformed by the other (to transition together);

the Third names this as a process – it is not a thing, but rather, an emergent process.

Importantly, for Benjamin, the Third is posited as a support structure for enabling acknowledgement and recognition of the suffering of others. Approaching each other as partners in a process of encounter and exchange, acknowledging as well as witnessing others, especially those burdened by trauma, impacts greatly on overcoming injury and injustice.

Key to such work is the ability to extend oneself beyond the limits of one's identity – to identify or have an understanding for those that may hurt us, as well as those we may come to harm;

*being able to offer recognition across the lines of perpetrator and victim, “doer and done to”, is imperative for establishing the Third as a moral, material partnership.

Three modes of Thirdness:

The differentiating Third: holding onto individuality while surrendering to the cultivation of the Third; “differentiating-while-joining movement”: to cultivate tactics for holding such a position.

The moral Third: bringing a certain ethical value or concern into our relationalities (a lawful world: “the quality of reliable patterning” – “law of connection”: the world we make together, as a harmonious organization); to also acknowledge failure or breakdown, and to take responsibility.

The rhythmic Third: an embodied movement inherent to being-involved, and in crafting the Third as a process; the question of play (“affective attunement”);

*(analysis as a space of play: what Raffo would call: *unfreezing the body*) – the importance of improvisation (“Yes, And” as opposed to “No, But”).

This leads to an idea of “witnessing” /

To be a witness is to hold the other, to hold a space for what needs to be said, or what needs to resound in its silence. Importantly, this includes not only giving room for the spoken, for saying things, but equally for the unsaid; for hearing over and under the said by attending to the silences, the textures and tonalities, to the fullness of the body.

Benjamin highlights the need to move beyond a position of self-protection, of dissociation; instead, to hold a *connection to suffering*, whether one's own or others, is central to maintaining the Third: to realize that we can survive.

*to be witness to each other provides an important ground for working through disagreement as well as experiences of injustice: importantly, this includes acknowledging the suffering of others as well as validating the truth of what happened.

Benjamin: “In witnessing and confirming what has taken place, we affirm that the victim is worthy of being heard, deserving of dignity, of recognition and caring protection...”

Susan Raffo /

Questions of repair find a point of reference in Susan Raffo's book, *Liberated to the Bone*, which underscores how violence and injury are carried in the body, in the cells and across generations (“slow violence”);

*for Raffo, repair can only begin by ending violence (the project of Healing Justice);

*this is grounded in recognizing how bodies are always particular bodies; that the body is vulnerable to dominant power (some more than others), and the discriminations enacted by certain systems (whether they be class systems, racialized systems, colonial systems, or even more intimate systems, for instance within family relations: to speak of the body one must always keep in mind the politics and history of positionality).

*throughout her writings, Raffo continually emphasizes how listening is central to working at repair – to give attention to the deep tissues and lineages of pain and hurt (one’s own “internal community”);

*listening provides an ongoing step toward sensing, knowing, and moving past the hurt one may carry, and that one may also pass along to others.

She calls upon us to *listen to the body*, to become a witness to ourselves: it is important, as she argues, to *stay in the middle* – as a way of understanding that which is present in the body: the troubles, the power of resilience (parallel to “holding the third”);

*staying in the middle is suggestive for how we may approach thirdness and a third listening: we might speak of “listening from the middle” as a way of bringing attention to all the experiences, languages, histories that come to constitute the body and that we carry with us.

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To gather what we’ve covered so far: Thirdness opens a focus onto intersubjectivity as the basis for mutual recognition, for acknowledging the fact of each other; this impacts onto one’s own sense of self-worth or self-love (to feel recognized greatly supports feeling that one matters) as well as working at building social connection (mutual recognition as the foundation for community and co-ownership). Thirdness emerges as a framework through which to nurture human flourishing.

This extends into processes of repair: how we come to foster as well as maintain thirdness as a form of partnership; to work through a relation to hurt and harm, where one acts as witness for others; in witnessing, as Benjamin suggests, we confirm the dignity and truth of each other.

This includes reflecting upon the body and questions of health: thirdness is never only about language, about voice, it is equally about embodied experience and relation, about vitality and rhythm: to be a witness is to be a body for others – to nurture social connection is to attend to the material bonds that shape our worlds; these are affective, feeling, emotional bonds and embodied experiences (that also extend across personal, collective, intergenerational worlds).

Within this configuration of terms and ideas, listening is positioned as key: as key to mutual recognition, where listening assists in building trust, in creating a holding environment for hearing and confirming the stories of others, and for attending to the body and all that it may carry: where the body emerges as an “inner acoustic” – to listen to the body is to gain awareness as to its history, its needs, its hurt, its joy as a form of reverberation: it is by way of the silences and echoes of memory and experience that we navigate the present.

I'm interested to consider how we might move thirdness into questions of public life, political struggle, and into conceptualizations of democracy and citizenship. How does Third listening appear or perform within such contexts?

Political listening cultures /

We may start by following John Dewey's understanding of democracy as an *ethos* built upon a dynamic public culture; for Dewey, democracy is fundamentally a political ideal that requires an ongoing material work, a form of *experience* – as self-government, government for and by the people, democracy relies upon the movements and voices of people, especially in terms of addressing public problems;

*as Dewey would continually emphasize, democracy is a way of life, not an institution; and it therefore calls individuals and communities into forms of co-responsibility, to work at social equality and just forms of society;

*this finds expression in notions of public culture, as the embodiment of democratic life and process: public culture being the manifestation of voices and views, of robust dialogue and free expression: the circulation of public opinion as grounded in the sharing of differences – to build public orientation and action; or what Dewey calls “trans-action” – or shared action; “To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life.”

The scholar Lawrence Waks develops a reading of Dewey's work, highlighting how public culture requires not only robust dialogue, but a deeply articulated form of listening – a “trans-actional listening”: listening that supports public culture. Trans-actional listening captures thirdness, moving it from spaces of therapy toward the areas of public culture; from intersubjective ethics to a culture of politics.

Such views are extended by Gideon Calder, who makes a distinction between “listening to” and “listening out for”; in the context of politics, *listening to* does a lot to build trust; it works at attending to the needs of others, at fostering dialogical processes, for creating greater awareness and understanding as to particular issues, but also what's at stake for different communities. Importantly though, to ensure a deeper political process, it's imperative that one equally *listens out for* the voices of the marginalized – *listening out for* moves the lines often demarcating dominant power, giving room for the hearing of dissenting views, as well as demands for change;

*this helps shift the responsibility from the margin to the center, to suggest that it is imperative not only that the marginalized speak up, but that the center learns to listen better.

How to truly listen to voices that one does not recognize, or that one disagrees with? If the political is about addressing the public and its problems, how can one nurture greater forms of hearing that which is far from one's own social circles?

Lawrence Waks makes a distinction between “cataphatic” (affirming one's knowledge) and “apophatic listening” (negating one's knowledge); while cataphatic listening involves prefigured categories, and that often hears what it wants to hear, confirming what it knows already, apophatic listening puts categories *on hold*; it follows from the capacity to immerse oneself in what others say, to suspend judgement, and where meaning is emergent;

*apophatic as a “decolonial practice” in terms of balancing uneven power relations.

Following such views, listening is essential to supporting political processes – it can be argued that listening is what defines political process, especially in relation to democracy. Such a view is grounded in understanding the ways in which governments, or political bodies, may undermine political process by limiting the degree to which public opinion may influence decision-making, or directing a given outcome, thereby excluding a range of alternative viewpoints. Such forms of “de-politicization” come to reduce engaging with a greater public sphere;

*for Andrew Dobson, arguing for listening in such contexts operates to “re-politicize” particular issues or situations. As he outlines: “Depoliticization is an act (or a succession of acts) of closure” against which listening may work, for listening is “the performance of opening out and opening up.” Developing listening practices in the context of political process enhances the capacity for dialogue, it supports understanding across difference, fostering empathy as well as allowing for the suspension of judgement. The *opening out* and *opening up* that listening performs is crucial for fulfilling the democratic promise of responsive government.

How can we think further about the opening out and opening up of listening? And in what ways does transactional, apophatic listening truly move us toward a richer form of democracy? Here, I want to turn to what is termed Deep Democracy. Developed by psychotherapist and quantum physicist Arnold Mindell, Deep Democracy is a method of facilitation that emerged in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa; with a grounding in Taoist philosophy, it incorporates a sense for the emotional, psychological experiences or backgrounds of individuals, seeking to bring to the surface the feelings that are often suppressed when confronting uneven power relations in which some voices dominate;

*Mindell’s idea of “the dreaming background” operative within any organization or group.

As Mindell argues, organizations are *living systems* constituted by formal procedures *and* emotional worlds, rules of conduct *and* spirited desires, abstract principles *and* suppressed communication; within any given assembly or community, finding ways of working together can only be realized if processes include noticing “the feelings, dreaming, and social power” present within any given moment. Accordingly, “We need a ... deeper democracy, based on awareness of what is happening inside ourselves and others.”

*whereas a great deal of democratic theory argues for an informed public citizenry, Mindell recognizes how dialogue and deliberation are always haunted by unstated feelings.

Danielle Allen furthers such views through the concept of “political friendship”: for Allen, politics is founded on the capacity to “talk with strangers”, recognizing that a public is constituted by those we know *and* don’t know; it is full of a diversity of positions and views, cultural languages and values; to talk with strangers becomes fundamental to how it is we may work through the problems of the public;

*political friendship is posed as a guiding concept; this is not friendship as we experience it within our intimate relationships, rather, political friendship is based on equity, the mutual recognition and respect of differences – in fact, political friendships are often shaped by having to deal with those we might not even like. Importantly, political friendship helps build *political trust*: as Allen argues, distrust paralyzes democracy. Political trust gives room for vulnerability, it supports the ability to show oneself without fear of harm – and where needs and emotions are given room alongside more rational arguments.

This is greatly enhanced by placing listening at the center of political institutions, and by bringing attention to the dreaming backgrounds always present;

*As Walter Parker argues, political trust is based on giving room for hearing and being heard; yet, it is not enough simply to listen – one must *practice* listening, which includes integrating reciprocity, humility and caution into our listening.

Listening as diplomatic force /

Following these different perspectives, I want to suggest listening, or third listening, as a *diplomatic force*: a listening that impacts onto political struggle – that contributes to dialogue as well as negotiation: third listening as a craft of diplomacy.

In her article, “We Are Divided,” Isabelle Stengers offers a critical questioning of capitalism and its impact onto the planet. Her argument is centered around recognizing the degree to which capitalism institutionalizes an “operational logic” that degrades our capacity to participate and care for the interdependency underpinning life. Stengers elaborates a critical opposition by posing diplomacy as a path toward reclaiming interdependency as a guiding formulation. It is the *diplomatic arts* that afford ways of working together, of finding agreement across often divisive issues, and that function as the foundation for cooperation. Fundamental to the diplomatic arts is the relation to what Stengers highlights as “obligation” – or, that which obligates us to each other. “To be obligated is to know one is indebted to something other than oneself for what one is.” This integrates recognition as to the interdependent realities shaping relationships, communities and environments – that the capacity for life is beholden to an ecology of relations and practices, not to mention material sources and resources. Extending this toward greater political arenas, obligation can function to help guarantee a level of cooperation, because it is founded on recognizing the degree to which all those involved benefit from a shared world. Such cooperative possibilities are put into motion by way of the diplomatic arts, not only because they help nurture ways of working together, of reaching agreement and compromise; importantly, “the art of the diplomat requires hesitation.” Hesitation, as Stengers highlights, helps foster a process of consideration, especially as to proposed agreements, treaties or laws; by pausing to consider, one also tables the motion before a group of peers or experts, allowing for questioning and debate.

The art of consultation central to diplomacy is precisely what has gone missing within current systems of capitalistic power Stengers argues. For capitalism “unravels relationships of interdependence”, replacing cooperation with competition. These developments crucially undermine the capacity to *feel interdependency* as what grounds us and that calls us into a greater sense for what obligates us to others. These are feelings that must be “reactivated” and which may “reassert” the importance of the diplomat as the one who hesitates, who consults – and for our discussion today, the one who listens; who calls us into a political form of thirdness.

From thirdness as a space of cooperative repair and healing to apophatic listening and the art of the diplomat, we may start to map third listening as what supports reactivating feelings of interdependency and that contributes to deep democracy – it is along these lines that we may approach the notion of the *listening citizen*: while we may argue on behalf of the freedom of speech, we may also consider “the right to listen” as central to our democratic way of life.

Becoming a listening citizen /

Underscoring listening as a diplomatic force is grounded in recognizing the role listening plays in democratic process, in the working through of conflict, and how central it is to peace building. From deep democracy to public cultures and the re-politicization of urgent issues, listening greatly influences how communities, societies and nations find ways of working and living together. Importantly, listening as a diplomatic force captures a sense for how listening moves across scales, from the nurturing of intimacy and empathy amongst families, friends and relations in general, to supporting community work, the social bonds and encounters in which listening aids in facilitating the acknowledgment of others; and further, to the macropolitical struggles and scenes whose vocalized debates and deliberations necessitate an equally impassioned form of listening. While each of these situations and environments may require different modes of listening, different approaches and expectations, they all impart a deep sense for the importance of listening in bettering the world.

Yet, it is not enough to only work at different listening positionalities and modalities, to care for the responsibility listening entails; if listening is fundamental to the dynamics of power and politics, it behooves us to conceive of more pronounced structures of listening – what Jim Macnamara calls “architectures of listening” – so as to enhance listening cultures across society. These are architectures as techniques in themselves, that function as apparatuses, rituals, temporal and spatial configurations, and acoustic situations by which to conduct listening enactments. To become a *listening citizen* seems fundamental, not only in terms of performing as a political subject within an established arena of power, but to also keep attuned to the power of listening itself.