

THE ETHICS OF LISTENING AND EMPATHY'S MOVEMENTS

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Ian Baucom writes about listening as an integral part of Frantz Fanon's textual practices. He notes that, "as a writer, he [Fanon] produced texts that frequently function as transcripts of his diverse acts of listening."¹ It has become the common impulse in critical histories of race and racism, and in Postcolonial studies more broadly, to approach the visibility, or the optics of race, without attention to how race is registered through other sensorial modes. And indeed we owe much to Fanon for his interrogation of the ways in which race/racism operates through the construction of what Achille Mbembe refers to as an "image ontology," that is, "a scopic regime" in which the face – in the Levinasian sense – is de-privileged in exchange for the preeminence of the "surface." Baucom notes that indeed, "Postcolonial criticism is indebted to Fanon for revealing that imperialism works in large part by policing, regulating, and interpreting the visible."² However, what needs further investigation, not only with regards to Fanon's impact in particular, but also in our contemporary critical approaches to race and racism more broadly, is "what Fanon has to teach us about the audible."³ The politics and the pleasures of listening, the intimacies and the animosities of aurally apprehending an Other need to be accounted for in our approaches to a project of racial critique.

Traveling for nearly two weeks on a bus with sixty people from across the academic and creative spectrum, traversing southern Africa, this year's Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism was

animated throughout by the imminent problems and potentialities of listening. As has been written about, both in this volume and elsewhere, the Workshop was staged in various locales across southern Africa, beginning in Johannesburg, moving through Swaziland, Durban, King Williams Town, Ginsberg, and Cape Town. During this time the bus itself was talked about in many ways, mostly as metaphor for myriad conceptions of the project we found ourselves engaged in; from a vessel of traveling critique to its associations with the problematics of academic tourism. Much emphasis was placed on both what we as participants in this Workshop were seeing, as well as how we were being seen as we moved through these spaces. The sight of the bus and what we saw from the bus became the source of much of the debate. But I want to consider briefly what we heard on the bus. Rather, how we listened to one another. If bystanders could have heard the beautiful cacophony and discordant accord of the bus as it passed by they would have perhaps caught an aural glimpse of what it means to not just hear, but to listen to/through multiple registers. I think the act of hearing multiple voices, speaking, lecturing, chatting, poetry reading, crying, singing, singing, is an exercise not simply in trying to understand – itself an act of empathy? – but also involves an act of traveling. To listen to someone – to really hear what they are saying, and to make it part of yourself, you must be willing to move; be willing to come towards one another. An act of *rapprochement*; an act of dis-comforting oneself as much as it is an act of intimacy with an other. Again, Baucom writes that, "Hearing is not only an acoustic experience; it is the expression of desire. Listening is not simply an act of consumption; it is also a productive activity."⁴ The bus of the Johannesburg Workshop was a stage upon which over sixty actors spoke; at moments one

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at a time, over a microphone; at other times all at once, in small groups or one on one. Standing back from this aural field, one could choose what to listen to. One could move between conversations, hearing one in the background, interjecting into another. In each move, one moved and was – possibly – moved. Because in listening, in attempting to understand – both in terms of aurality and comprehension – one can find common ground with the speaker. As an "expression of desire" one must *want* to find this space.

The bus – and perhaps the first time I want to sustain the Workshop bus as metaphor – can in many ways be thought of as an attempt "to fabricate a commonality of experience which...is not a commonality of identity."⁵ That is, in spending some 300 hours together, listening, interpreting, translating, across languages, and disciplines or vocations, and various forms of difference, the bus as a fleeting space, ephemeral and impactful as the spoken sentence, perhaps could be seen a way to talk about the "archives of the non-racial." In other words, as those spaces of communication that exist most powerfully in the moment of their articulation, in the act of being heard. What if, in the act of desire embodied in the moment of listening to someone speak, we might theorize a different form of belonging, or community? What might a commons based on experience – not in the mythical or originary sense – but, rather, a sharing of the spoken event's ephemerality sound like? What if this speech-hearing event, which might form the basis of community, is not

stable either? But rather, like listening, is open; to interpretation, to critique, or more complicated still, to misunderstanding. The event is not the ur-moment for the founding of a community in this sense, but can be that time when a group develops, and develops (listening) practices, which make its member relate to one another, make it relate to itself as a group? Could the power of listening be the measure of solidarity? The better two people, or two groups listen, the closer they have (be-) come towards one another.

I want to briefly consider the role of empathy in listening, as a condition for the movement required in listening. In order to commune, to communicate, with another, there must be a ground towards which both speaker and listener approach; though they might never reach common ground. However, the initial act of approach must happen in order to listen. It is this moment that can be thought of as the time of empathy in the speech-hearing act. One must, initially at least, *desire* to hear the speaker and, thus, must shift their perceptive orientation towards that Other. Desire, if sustained long enough to actually listen, means that one must allow for a movement of self and other towards one another, towards an Other, and an Other's understanding, and potentially away from one's own.

What are the movements of empathy? In other words when empathy happens what has traveled and to where? But also what movements are required as preconditions, as spaces for the possibility of empathy, and thus for understanding. Somewhere in this question is an ethics of listening and a mapping of the movements that happen when one *gives* voice to something and another receives this voice. It raises the question of whether one might give voice to someone else. Not in the way of power, or control of a dominant narrative. But, rather, in a way that implies radical intimacies; so

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close that one might almost hear one's own story in/ through the voice of another.

Nurrudin Farah's novel *Maps* opens with a haunting second person account of the protagonist himself. As we read, we get not only a description of the main character, but are given insight into his interiority as it relates to a larger history. The young boy, who we come to find is named Askar, sits listening to an intimate description of his life, his history, the narratives of his existence. As the reader, repeatedly pronouncing the personal pronoun “you” again and again, it becomes hard to disentangle ourselves from this articulation, and indeed from the life-world we are being entered into. Indeed the point, as seen from the passage below is precisely that Farah has adopted a particular literary form, one predicated on the action of listening that gives a different idea of the aesthetics of the human, and of humanity. The novel opens:

You sit, in a contemplative posture, your features agonized and your expressions pained; you sit for hours and hours and hours, sleepless, looking into darkness, hearing a small snore coming from the room next to yours. And you conjure a past: a past in which you see a horse drop its rider; a past in which you discern a bird breaking out of its shell so it will fly into the heavens of freedom...And you question, you challenge every thought which crosses your mind.

Yes. You are a question to yourself. It is true. You've become a question to all those who meet you, those who have any dealings with you.

You doubt, at times if you exist outside your own thoughts, outside your own head, or Misra's... You exist, you think, the way the heavenly bodies exist, for although one does extend one's fingers and point at the heavens, one knows, yes, that's the word, one *knows* that that is not the heavens. Unless...unless there are, in a sense, as many heavens as there are thinking beings; unless there are as many heavens as there are pointing fingers.

What makes this passage so haunting is the particular form Farah chooses to develop his sympathetic protagonist. Askar, even from this initial introduction, is given a profound interiority, but the development of his consciousness is not from his own articulation but from that of another. Askar's psychic topography is drawn from the outside. This might at first glance feel like a potentially violent act of narration; the violence and silencing of representing someone else. But, what if it is thought of as *giving* a narrative to another, possible only through a deep intimacy that comes with care, and sensitivity and love. Moreover, Askar himself is listening to this description of himself, sitting “contemplatively,” thinking while the narrator/giver describes a world based on these thoughts. We too, the readers, are meant to listen to this building of an interiority through narration and listening. Farah himself talks about how *Maps* was written as a text to be read, and thus as a text to be listened to. Askar listening to his own story. The reader listening to Askar's story, but also the story of an intimacy between the teller and the receiver(s) of this story. In the compounding of the levels of intimacy achieved through these multiple aural engagements, I argue, Farah has articulated – and asked us to listen to – not only an aesthetics of human

rights, but one predicated upon an ethics of listening, and also of empathy.

This is the point then: that to listen, to hear the words of another, requires not only an act of empathy, but also an act of movement. The movement of empathy. It requires one to move from one's places of understanding to/towards another's. Listening then is about movement. I say that these are "acts" because neither listening nor empathy are conditions, they require new acts, new ways of hearing and empathizing with each new hearing. Every time one listens, in order to hear, one has to come closer to the speaker; one has to begin to understand an Other's story by understanding where this story comes from, and where the impetus for the telling itself comes from, as well as where one, as listener, is positioned with respect to its telling. Perhaps comprehension is not really even part of a useful vocabulary here. It is, rather, the act of movement towards another in an attempt to hear them that seems most important; complete comprehension seems to wane when compared to the desire, the want to listen. This seems to be some kind of basis for not only an aesthetics of humanity and human rights, but I've come to think that in the context of the JWTC, this ethics and aesthetics of listening and the movements of empathy required for this aural politics, might move us some steps closer to thinking about race and anti-racial stances, and the various ways that listening as a anti-racial politics might be a new way of relating another.

ENDNOTES

1 Baucom, Ian. "Frantz Fanon's Radio: Solidarity, Diaspora, and the Tactics of Listening." *Contemporary Literature*, 42.1, 2001 (15-49) 15.

2 Ibid., 16.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 22.

5 Ibid.