

## **Re-viewing and Ex-tending *Performative Listening: Hearing Others in Qualitative Research***

Devon R. Kehler

*Performative Listening*, by scholar-teacher-trumpeter Chris McRae, is listened into existence through praxis and personal narrative purposed to the production of auto-ethnographic scholarship. Spirited by a lifetime spent listening, playing, and researching Miles Davis' genre-defying musical performances and autobiographical materials, McRae's over-arching goal is to cast listening as a multifarious mobilization of action, performance, accountability, vulnerability, opportunity, sensuality, desire, pleasure, ethics, aesthetics, geographies, pedagogies, and importantly *hope*. Listening is presented as a hoped for and hopeful performative act of carnal inter-connection that fosters relational ethics and reflexivity. Played in the style of tight, serial declaratives and written in keys that modulate through Davis' music, this project sets the stage for listening to be practiced as embodied action with material and conceptual consequences for the researcher-as-listener (aka listening researcher) to engage and learn with/in difference throughout the seven chapters that comprise the book.

### **Objectives of Performative Listening**

The objectives of this multidirectional project consist of re-defining, re-positioning, and re-placing listening. Definitional work centers upon delineating "performative listening as a qualitative method that can be enacted on its own or in conjunction with other qualitative methods" (7). Definitional activity is aug-

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Reviewed in this essay: McRae, Chris. *Performative Listening: Hearing Others in Qualitative Research*. New York: Peter Lang, 2015. 159pp

mented by positioning listening as a fulcrum balancing engagements with lived experience, reflexive learning, critical thinking, relational ethicality, and musical aesthetics that require listening to uphold commitments to continual curiosity, contextual and geo-political located-ness, bodily awareness, and acknowledgment as to how researching-bodies accomplish performances of listening (7). Thus committed, listening can take place as a stance from which to enact pedagogical research methods that “transform the ways we relate to questions of research, pedagogy, difference, and others in terms of a relational ethics (7). Thus committed, *Performative Listening* appeals to scholars-teachers-students in communication studies, music and performance studies, critical pedagogies, cultural studies, critical geography, liberatory pedagogies, as well as intersectional feminisms and rhetorics.

### **Audiences**

This book has something to offer a wide audience, as listening practices transcend disciplinary divides, levels of education, and subjects of inquiry. However, the project’s close-set citationality and mixed methodological frameworks make it most suitable for scholars and students with some pre-existing familiarity with the intellectual commitments surfacing among the aforementioned perspectives. Additionally, audiences in search of heuristics for listening will find this project of interest.

### **Beginnings, Entrances, Starting Points**

While *Performative Listening* is thoroughly trans-disciplinary, the first chapter “Listening for Beginning in Qualitative Research” leans heavily toward communication studies frameworks, evidenced in the way listening is described as a sensorial “communicative act” (15). The chapter’s central claim is that listening finds performative footing and communicative entrances in *prepositions*, which prefigure the transformational possibilities and ability for listening to play a constitutive role in relational experience (14). The fundamental conviction is that “through rehearsal and practice, listening as an embodied way of coming to knowledge can be developed and shaped into a method of researching and learning from various experiences and interactions” (17). The critical placement of rehearsing as partner to and ally with researching allows listening to be felt as always relationally entangled “re” pose.

The four prepositional listening stances McRae outlines are: listening to, listening for, listening with, and listening from (20). These prepositional positionalities are rehearsed and narrated through McRae’s musical encounters with Davis. Listening *to* concerns itself with the “what” of an experience or event. The *for* position is defined as a “kind of purposeful seeking, or an act of search-

ing for sounds that is grounded in a desire to learn from others” (22). When performing *for*, listening is straining toward political and socio-cultural contexts and the ways audio-visual experiences are contextually shaped by and shaping an (un)given located-ness. Generativity is attributed to the *with* preposition—a generativity that can elicit empathy as it concentrates on the *how* of performative productions, and places the “personal” in conversation with “others.” With-ness promotes engagement and change; attempts to loosen embodiment from its known knowledges to facilitate conjunctures with new, unfamiliar sounds, sights, stories and peoples. Finally, listening *from* is the way in which listening gains transformational possibility through locational illocution, making this stance constitutive of reflexive, relational structurality (25).

The relationality underpinning these configurations of prepositionality is fundamental to practicing listening as an activity of ontological import. The “with” position holds particular promise and potential for treating listening as a performative that effects change insofar as “our positions as listeners transforms our acts of listening, and our act of listening also transforms our ways of knowing and being” (20) Each of these prepositional listening positions (to, for, from with) are only briefly treated, however. Furthermore, some modification to the grammars structuring listening’s entrances would help better account for socio-cultural constraints belying the agent-oriented perspectives quietly adhering to the ways these positions are assigned attributes, betrayed by a preponderance of personal pronouns.

As a listening researcher-reader coming to this project with some knowledge of Butlerian performativity and calls to located research practices as they circulate among post-structural and post-colonial feminisms, the authorial “I” and “my” as well of vestiges of directive intentionality limit how possibilities of performative transformation can take place or provide passageways. This chapter brought to mind Trinh T. Minh-ha’s early work *Woman, Native Other* (1989) that queries Cixous’ infamous call to “write the body” in response to phallogocentric censorship. In this query, Trinh contends the use of “crystallized I”—whatever its gender affiliation or identification—sets up a trap that invites egoism and tightness, announced by the presence of a different preposition: about. Trinh warns: “a distinction needs to be made between “Write yourself. Write your body” and write about yourself, your body, your inner life, your fears, inhibitions, desires and pleasures. The first refers to a scriptive act—the emergence of a writing self—the second refers to a consolidation of writing from the self” (28). It is the latter self, a consolidated self, that felt most pronounced in this chapter, even though it seems McRae wants to practice a writing capable of listening performative *becomings*, as evidenced in the critique of “skill-based” models of listening presuming relatively stable subject-hood in the next chapter.

## Listening and Performativity

Primarily sourcing the scholarship of critical communication pedagogy, rhetorical studies, and performance studies, the second chapter “Performative Listening” considers the potentialities, limitations, and assumptions of popular socio-cognitive “skills-based” approaches to listening in order to carve out the definitional terrain of the “performative” in listening. Additionally, listening’s commitments to curiosity, contextualized location, working to and with the body, and developing accountability between micro-practices and macro-structures is more fully explained. The explication of listening’s bodily, emplaced, and exploratory commitments is fairly straightforward. However, the commitment to accountability gave me cause for pause.

I wondered about the terminological choice of *accountability* in connection with a listening commitment because the term resonates with neo-liberalized rhetorics, ideologies, and discourses that mobilize *accountability*—in conjunction with a self-managed form of *responsibility*—as a means to elevate and shore-up the primacy of the disciplined, self-interested, individualized, possessive subjecthood. Such possessiveness is re-enforced, once again, by how listening is articulated through and oriented by possessive adjectives and personal pronouns. Though, Stuart Hall’s notions of “double articulation” are deployed in ways that offset possessive tendencies insofar as listenings produced by and productive of relational structuration are held “accountable” (a logic that Krista Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening project advances) to the ways privileges of whiteness, (presumably hetero-normative) masculinity, and class position inform and are informed by the listenings taking place between Davis’ music and McRae’s positionality. It is notable, however, that sexuality is dropped from the matrices of performative identification to which listening is held accountable. This absence-by-omission is felt throughout, and will likely be noticeable to readers who affiliate queerly with sectarian identity politics.

There’s also something about the pronounced possessiveness (i.e. “my listening”) through which listening becomes committed to accountability that works against more radical performative possibilities of listening. At this juncture in the project—and it’s an important juncture that stages the development of relational listening ethics in the following chapter—a different term and conceptualization of what’s gathered under the auspices of “accountability” could promote greater sociality, conviviality, interdependency, and collective assembly to emerge through listening. Terminologically speaking, accountability does not share well; it insists on individual “answering” for a given incident or experience. Nor does the liability and culpability attending accountability make for a listening that can very easily become performative of mutuality. Conceptually speaking, it’s not the suffix of *ability* but the *accounting* that constrains listening’s commitments. Hence why I believe feminist re-appropriations of responsibility, as they can be

found in Gloria Anzaldúa's *La Frontera* and Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (to name but two), offer more radical possibilities for developing listenings with responsible relational commitments. Take Anzaldúa's definition of responsibility: "The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility..." (42-43) What if Anzaldúa's conceptualization of responsibility were to replace logics of accountability? Listening then becomes a commitment to response...to being respond-able.

Such respond-ability<sup>1</sup> is latent in the discussion on the limitations of socio-cognitive models of listening. McRae finds limits in those views that render "listening as a skill that we can systematically model and teach" which then "works to fix or hold static our notions of identity and what it means to listen" (35). In contrast, "performative listening understands listening to be a communicative act that is textured, interpretive, narrative, dynamic and cultural" (35-36). Listening, as it distances its/selves from skills-based paradigms, becomes more responsive and performative—a conceptual-carnal move that offers more openings for listening practices. It is also here, in the removal of listening from skill-based paradigms and the re-placement of listening within the terrain of performativity that Butlerian performance theory is referenced (36). Which brings me to a lingering question: why is Butler cited exactly once, in truncated terms, and through a very early article appearing in a 1988 issue of *Theatre Journal*? For a book and chapter on the *performative* in listening, I had admittedly different expectations of the project's engagement with performativity. The abbreviated engagement with what makes listening performative prevents this chapter, in particular, from achieving the definitional depth and qualification required for carefully distinguishing between listening as performance versus listening as performative. The quickness of the gloss gives rise to some confusion between *performance* and *performativity* evidenced in the way the terms are often used interchangeably.

### Listening Relations, Ethical Imperatives

Some (loaded) questions: how do listening practices impact, influence, and/or inform bodily exposures to audio-visual musical performance? What are the bodily implications of listening in the (re)making and (un)doing of relationally and ethically formed subject-hood? These questions serve as an analytic meant to sense and feel listening re-forming subject relations arising from prolonged, sustained, and repeated encounters with arts-based study. These are also the questions prompting me to continually revisit this chapter of the project. The third chapter titled "A Relational Ethic of Listening" allows questions like these

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<sup>1</sup> I first came upon this wordplay in Trinh's "Nature's r: A Musical Swoon."

to be trained upon the educative, the instructional, and the pedagogical that surface when listening is cast in the role of student.

The individualism accompanying the accountability of the previous chapter is somewhat lessened (though accountability still circulates in this chapter) by attuning listening practices to material conditions in hopes of establishing dialogical, non-judgmental connection. McRae's goals in situating listening as vital to the process of developing relational ethics are two-fold: connection and provisional understanding (55). Like the prepositions and commitments outlined in earlier chapters, the listening relations proposed in this chapter take on ethical contours through a *four-way* configuration between:

- A bodily stance sensuously and contextually (re)constituted through relational connection.
- A multi-perspectival reflexive practice that questions and attends to the interplay of personal, social, cultural, and political factors as constitutive of listening's relational capacities.
- A critical, Freirean, problem-posing approach to interactively pursuing inquiry as an always collaborative and co-creative process of learning-teaching and knowledge-making.
- A dialogical gathering that pays ongoing attention to the ways listening practices involve bodily processes punctuated with sensation, change, and communal difference.

The four-way crossing of ethically attuned relationality is vital for listening to approach difference as a condition of possibility from which to hear and learn (52). These ethical precepts are accessibly presented. For readers interested in extending the ethical as it relates to listening, this chapter could be productively placed in conversation with projects such as *Thinking, Listening, Being: An Ethics of Attunement* (2014) by Lisbeth Lipari. Lipari's project puts forward a relational listening ethics where "...thinking listening as a way of being creates the possibility of an ethics driven neither by rules and obligations nor by outcomes and consequences, but rather, one that is drawn toward an ethics of attunement—an awareness of and attention to the harmonic interconnectivity of all beings and objects" (2). The *attention* underscoring both McRae's and Lipari's listening ethics may also be generatively connected through *tensions* and *temporalities* of hopefulness, as the chapter closes in pressing at the pleasure-ful and hope-ful possibilities of ethical encounters shaping and shaped by listening.

### **Listening and Learning**

The ethical concern of the third chapter continues to resonate throughout the fourth chapter, most prominently when Dwight Conquergood's notions of four

“ethical pitfalls” common to listening and performance are considered in terms of McRae’s relations with performances of Davis’ music (84-85). While ethicality is kept close at hand, it’s the educational that’s the focus of this chapter. By sourcing various instantiations of critical pedagogies, listening is placed in dialogue with liberatory, transformational, and emergent learning. Throughout, McRae performs listenings that learn lessons in strained hearings of how body, power, context, and history co-act to position listening in the role of student of difference. Instead of writing from the expected perspective of educator—the audiences critical pedagogies frequently write for and to—McRae’s reflexive and critical auto-ethnographic narrative performatively listens forth student-hood. This shift in perspective brings an energy and vitality to the narrative, which hits its stride in this chapter.

Lessons learned in performative listening are grounded and routed through instructive, albeit embarrassing, experiences McRae had while sitting in with local musicians during open jam sessions. These lessons are considered alongside selected excerpts of Davis’ autobiography that showcase how musicians learn from and teach each other by carefully and contextually listening to the fields of relationality that arise in group music-making. There are lessons in preparedness, improvisation, interaction, boundaries, embodied performance practices, ideology, subjectivity, dialogical performance, risk and reflexivity that emerge from McRae’s listenings. These listenings accept what Roland Barthes, in a psychoanalytic register, describes as a inherent riskiness subtending listening’s capacity to recognize “the other’s desire” (256). Listening *is* risky. It cannot be otherwise. The exposures and educative embarrassments revealed in narrative risks demonstrates what can be learned when listening risks the desire to *play*.

### The Musicality of Listening

More argumentative in tone than many of the preceding chapters, the fifth chapter “Listening Musically: Hearing and Aesthetics” pursues an interstitial proposition for approaching performative listening so that listening can facilitate aesthetic, cultural, and ideological coordination between listener, musical performance, and socio-historical conditions of encounter. An interesting discussion on unacknowledged privilege driving the impulse to categorize, label, and evaluate aesthetic forms of music as “good” or “bad,” here considered symptomatic of reductive and restricted listening, prompts McRae to contend that “The act of categorizing music is a practice that may limit or even prevent our ability as listeners to hear or engage with certain kinds of music. The consideration of aesthetic forms as good, or bad, or falling within a specific genre or category is always shaped, in part, by specific cultural structures (95). As such, the *to* and *for* prepositions of listening are engaged to query the social relationality between ideological macro-structures that shape aesthetic forms and individual micro-

practices of listening. It's in the realm of the aesthetic that listening takes the form of *labor* that "works to hear the connections between larger structures and individual practices" such that listening functions as an ethical research method *laboring* to understand how listening co-forms in bodily relation to existing aesthetic formations of musical experience (96).

This chapter takes Davis' *Bitches Brew* as a site through which McRae narratively belabors the strictures that genre-based orientations can place upon listening. Citing scholarship by DeVaux, Frith, Bohlman, Cook, Small, and Auslander (among many more), a fruitful discussion regarding the difficulties attending cultural-categorical function of genres unfolds. In their categorical function, genres often work to "fix, or hold static, aesthetic forms" (98). Additionally, genres can promote exclusionary, identificatory organization and propagate objectification of music (98-99). The argument coalesces around a two-part liminal response to problems posed by generic listening. First, listening can be performatively reoriented so that music becomes a threshold experience located somewhere between product and process. Second—and with a brief, if not underdeveloped, nod to the performative role of repetition—an aesthetic reformation of genre can occur by way of *narrative*. McRae says: "Approaching music as a process or active performance, and understanding genres as narratives working to produce broader cultural values and ideals can help provide a strategy for hearing the link between specific aesthetic performances and cultural structures" (100). In a socio-historical moment where genre-blending and genre-crossing are increasingly common, this is an important re-orientation for both listening and music insofar as it works to circumvent genre's classificatory logics that group, control, and seek compliance with pre-determined qualities, features, and characteristics that can act as pre-tense to listening.

The remainder of the chapter is driven by narrative that concentrates on hearing concatenations of the political, pleasurable, and personal surfacing within social structures appearing when listening with/in music. McRae offers early childhood and adolescent experiences with listening and music in order to reveal how racially gendered and technologically mediated social structures impress upon listening within US familial and educational contexts. The nuclear family unit is identified as a powerful conveyor of binary (and heteronormative) gender structures, informing how listening is socio-historically productive of and reproduced by cultural constructs of gender that connect with gendered musical production, circulation and reception (103). Racialization particular to US contexts is taken up in McRae's reflections on how he learned to hear racial formation through listening to US radio stations, which (then and now) segregate by genre and race. Asserting that "A cultural history of white supremacy and racism in the United States functions as a structure, shaping and constraining musical genres, distribution of music, and the practice of listening" (104), McRae examines the ways listening is mediated through recording technologies that shape



listening, develop collective action and memory, and relate racially gendered musical-listenings to broader cultural institutions. Public educational systems are also structurally considered as something of a disciplinary power inculcating bodily listening practices calibrated to and regulated through skills-based models and Eurocentric curricula.

The chapter closes by rendering listening as a hopeful aesthetic performance of invention and transformation that can function as a collective utopic performative. The inventional possibilities of listening are found in a participatory understanding of performativity that figures “audiences as always playing an active role in creating new and better relationships and realities” (109). The transformational arises from a double vision and minimally doubled-consciousness wherein listening recognizes the ways cultural structures “constrain and enable” while simultaneously working toward differently imagining how subject-structure-aesthetic meet in listening. The utopic comes with placing listening in roles of social change-maker-audience-member. “The utopian performatives are not only moments in which possibilities for change are recognized; they are also moments when change is created by an audience” (110). Giving audience to music through listening is figured as an action through which cultures, life-worlds, and systems of inequity are often reified but capable of being reimagined.

### Writing the Earth into Listening: On the Geo-graphic

A brick from the now-demolished Tuscan Masonic Lodge that Miles Davis once performed at in Carbondale, IL, inspires McRae to extend the performative possibilities of listening into space and place. Citing Michel de Certeau’s rendering of space as “practiced place” and relating it to notions of rehearsal and reflexivity found earlier in the book, McRae turns toward physical place in order to offer heuristics for “locating listening” as responsive and attentive to the geo-political interplay between sounds, sights/sites of research, listeners, and listening that both constrain and enable performance to take *place* (116-118). Locating listening in a material *somewhere* and with a physical *some/body* returns readers once more to ethical and educative imperatives, this time through emplacements particular to McRae’s listening histories.

Locating listening geographically also provides pathways to different conceptualizations and praxes of emplaced listening. Possibilist phenomenological listening projects like *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound* (2014) by Salomé Voegelin are exemplary in this regard. Taking an affective approach to landscaping the “sonic geography” of listening through the not-yet and could be of inhabiting, innovating, and generating possible worlds, a reciprocal but contingent ex-tensional process unfolds: “Listening to the landscape’s pluralities and possibilities, hearing the dense multiplicity of its mobile productions, allows

us to challenge the singularity of actuality and articulate a difference sense of place and a different sense of self that lives in those possibilities and shows us how else things could be" (22).

McRae's processes for attuning listening geographically are discussed as a performative "double articulation" (another deployment of Stuart Hall), developed through a doubled *prepositional* listening. The *to* and *from* stances of the first chapter reappear and redouble as requisite for developing recognition of listening's multi-locatedness among a complex of cultural productions and existing social structures (118-119). Importantly, the practice of doubled listening returns readers to hope: "Together, the process of listening from and to a location can work to cultivate a critically reflexive consideration of a geographic location with the hope of articulating new and better locations" (118). Hope spurs listening practices to establish emplaced inter-connections between bodies, performances, sociality, and cultural contexts, with bodily self-hood figuring as a location that shapes and is shaped by practices of placing listening.

Attending to the role of the geo-graphic—what the earth draws or writes—as it relates to listening further realizes what might sound like critical conscious raising (CCR) to some readers. Statements such as "Listening to a location is not a matter of accounting for all the sounds in and of a space, but rather of cultivating an awareness of some of the sounds of a location" (128) are shortly followed by goals of "attending to our embodied experience of a location" and "open(ing) up the possibility for cultivating new ways of listening that might expand our listening practices" (128-129). These statements place geographic listening in service to generating sensate awareness of the ways bodies and place think-feel each other, thereby infusing the reflexive motions of this chapter with a relational, sonic sensuality.

### **Listening Calls**

In the final, short chapter readers are left with two imperatives: continue to cultivate listening as a performative of imagination; assume stances that openly invite voices, songs, sounds, and words to listen one another into existence. The book concludes by rendering performative listening as an action that is simultaneously imaginative and invitational, making listening a performative of educative extensionality. Hoping, educating, inviting, pleasuring, learning, opening, connecting, transforming, responsible researching—these are the potentialities and promises of performative listening.

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