Listening Voice

1.
Whenever I try to think about what is produced or occluded by the term voice in relation to writing, I always find myself coming around to think about listening. Whether among bodies in a room, or on one of our many absent-presence digital platforms, whether listening to a live voice or a recorded one, even in the subvocalization that occurs during the silent reading of digital or analog texts, to attend to voices is to participate in audition, in auricular materiality. Between the sound-waves through space and time, the ennervated fleshy intricacies of the auricular cognitive apparatus, and the technologies of synthetic prosthetics, listening is always dialectically materializing. Because of this, to think about listening is to enter into active political and ethical terrain.

Some provisional thoughts about this:

a. Unlike voice, listening is always embodied

b. Moreso than its distant cousin hearing, which registers sound but doesn't attend to it, to listen is to be willing and able to hold whatever one thinks one knows in a potentializing pause, to let the boundaries of knowing breathe,… in order to

c. favor response. In this, listening negates reactivity.

d. In contemporary capitalist culture, listening is implicitly gendered, discursively placed in relation to "feminine" receptivity. It is also often figured as an activity of the powerless, something those who can't take charge must do. Listening is labor that is often, but not always, a gendered, classed, raced and erased social labor.

e. Because of all of all of the above, everyone's decision about which voices they will listen to, not just hear, is political.

2.
Nancy:
Isn't the philosopher someone who always hears (and who hears everything), but who cannot listen, or who, more precisely, neutralizes listening in himself, so that he can philosophize?

Hearing builds levees, so that certain prime real-estate ideas or beliefs are protected from the floods of listening.

3.
Then there's the story about Stravinsky. How when he was six years old, he listened to a mute peasant who produced unusual sounds with his arms, which the future musician tried to reproduce: he was looking perhaps for a different voice, one more or less vocal than the one that comes from the mouth.

A listening voice.

Or to come at this desire from a slightly different direction, could we come to know voice differently if we could construct a way to *listen* to *hearing*. What would it mean to listen to hearing? A very good listener in this regard, is the poet Stephanie Gray, who is deaf. Because she doesn't hear the way others do, in her forthcoming book *Shorthand and Electric Language Stars,* she listens to everything most of us *only* hear*.*

That *in all saying (and I mean in all discourse, in the whole chain of meaning) there is hearing, and in hearing itself, at the very bottom of it, a listening.*

4.
But what is this listening at the bottom of hearing that becomes a voice.

5.
As in the cognitive science-early cybernetics nexus that Eve Sedgwick speculatively mapped, a model of working memory emerged that put short-term memory systems at the center of language acquisition. In this model, the term *phonological loop* designates a conceptual space where verbal sound, or phonological information, is processed. The loop consists of two parts: a short-term phonological store that contains auditory traces which are subject to rapid decay, and an articulatory loop than can revive memory traces of those sounds. Any auditory verbal information, whether consciously attended to or not, is assumed to enter automatically into the phonological store. Even visually presented language is transformed into

phonological code by silent articulation or subvocalization and stored there. Thus the phonological store acts as an inner ear, while the articulatory process acts as an inner voice that automatically repeats a series of words or other speech elements, such as expressive intonations, on a loop to prevent them from decaying – it is thought that this looping is what allows us to learn languages, and to eventually be able to achieve improvisational syntax and variation via something like phrasal-emotive set theory.

This is interesting to me because it suggests that voice is formed in direct relation to or even via what is heard, most of which is not consciously attended to, not "listened" to at all. All the aural information, all the voices, snippets of conversation, news clips, texts, tweets, official language, announcements, and demotic everyday speech, that is heard but not listened to.

So that "refiguring voice" might be conceived as a practice for listening, and not just for paper or other media, but for the conceptually radical project of critical embodiment. What would it mean to learn to listen to the raw social material of "voice," i.e. to "hearing."

6.
Often I am permitted to return to Kamau Brathwaite's "History of the Voice," wherein he makes the argument that the perceptual models inherited from Colonial education, and English poetry in particular, make its subjects more conscious (in terms of sensibility) to the falling of snow than to the force of hurricanes, even when their lived climate reality is snowless. For Brathwaite, the perceptual model of snow, in this case, is built into "the actual rhythm and the syllables, the very body work of the language" that carries with it a certain kind of sensual rhythmic experience. Power works to reproduce the voice of its experience, at the expense of embodied knowledges of place. The hurricane does not roar in pentameter, as Brathwaite famously said.

Extending this we might say that voice enacts a perceptual model, a geography of experience, in its very shape, its stutter, or cadence, its staccato or rounded edges, the blurring or intensely marked boundaries between word and sound.

In this early period of what will most certainly be intense long-term climate change, and in the racialized and class-based inequities that will most certainly be its unfolding impact, what perceptual syntax is lodged inside our voices.

7.
To listen to everything one doesn't know one hears, everything one doesn't know one says, and everything one doesn't know how to say

8.
But one's voice can also be *made* to say what one doesn't say – just as in our cog science model (which is above all a model of human cognition based on computers) one doesn't consciously hear all that one has heard. Of course we all know this keenly. Katherine Hayles quotes an early BBC editor this way: anyone who has made a recording and been in on the editing session may emerge feeling that he can no longer call himself his own. Cuts and transpositions can be and are made. Halves of sentences spoken at different times can be amalgamated to let a speaker hear himself say the opposite of what he knows he said. Hearing oneself say something and continue with something else said half an hour earlier can be peculiarly disconcerting. You might have the feeling that if you went quickly out of the studio you might catch yourself coming in."

I doubt there are many of us left who can sustain the fantasy of ever having owned "himself" to begin with, but it is curious that what we can do with computers is not that dissimilar to how we might actually learn language to begin with. We essentially splice together a voice out of the detritus in the store and play it through the particularity of a social and physical medium, or, a body.

Like Burroughs in his book The Ticket that Exploded, which Hayles uses to underscore the mediated informatics of voice, we may want to disrupt the voices audibly present, and to create – or expose – new ones in the substrata of the medium itself.

9.

Finally, what architectures support and hold, wound and mark, modulate and transform a voice. As in the composer Alvin Lucier's famous piece "I am sitting in a room", in which his "marked" stuttering voice, is recorded and then played back into the same room and recorded again, and that recording played back into the room and recorded again, and again and again, until finally what we hear are the resonant frequencies of the room itself, not the words, the sonic map of the architecture meeting a voice.

That is one thing I wish for in the failures of poems. To listen to the social architecture of hearing meeting a voice.