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“Apprentices of Listening”: Sound Studies in Educational Leadership

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TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS, *What does listening mean within your discipline(s)? and What aspects of sound studies as an interdisciplinary field do you translate/transpose into the approaches you take as a researcher and teacher within a more specific discipline of knowledge and university department?*, I tune in first to philosopher Gemma Fiumara and then to novelist Ralph Ellison.

In *The Other Side of Language*, Fiumara critiques the privileging of speaking and the declarative as modes of knowing in the discipline of philosophy. She asserts, “If we are apprentices of listening rather than masters of discourse, we might perhaps promote a different sort of coexistence among humans: not so much in the form of a utopian ideal but rather as an incipient philosophical solidarity capable of envisaging the common destiny of the species” (57). Fiumara’s turn to apprenticeship highlights the conditional, the possible, and frames listening as a practice that recognizes coexistence. By extension, she offers listening as a “co-” practice—that is, relational, co-generative, and collaborative—where learning and continual practice flourish. Listening, then, has the potential to create a learning culture that amplifies an ethical attentiveness.

I explore such listening in my book *Race Sounds: The Art of Listening in African American Literature*. There, too, Fiumara is an important

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thought partner as I worked to show, through *listening in print*, how African American literature teaches reading audiences about listening and its complexities. The book situates listening as a constellation of practices that actively make meaning, recasting reading and listening “as an aural form of agency, a practice of citizenship, an aural empathy, an ethics of community building, a mode of social and political action, a set of strategies for cultural revision, and a practice of historical thinking” (Furlonge 10). *Race Sounds* brings together methodologies of literary studies, sound studies, black studies, musicology, history, and pedagogy, to “enliven how we read, write, and critique texts” and to “inform how we might be more effective audiences for each other and against injustice in our midst” (17).

Now that my professional appointment is in a School of Education and involves directing a centre that educates in Teaching and Education Leadership, I am focused on exploring the ways in which the interdisciplinary work I engage in across sound studies, literary and cultural studies, pedagogy, and educational leadership can inform our understanding and practice of a *listening leadership* in which listening—more specifically, an apprenticeship of listening—is core. Leadership in schools involves the careful, attentive work of creating an environment with ideal conditions for listening. To posit a *listening leadership* invites a move away from the declarative toward prioritizing a different kind of knowing and leading. Such listening has the capacity to critique an intense bias in education leadership toward leadership that is demonstrated through speech and often ignores the active and ethical role listening can play as a core leadership practice and capacity. For me, connecting the sound studies and literary studies-informed work of *listening in print* is key to understanding the possibilities of a listening leadership. For, if we can’t even bear to listen on the page, then how do we learn to listen when we encounter each other?

Listening is a constellation of practices that allow us to be more fully engaged, active, sensemaking beings. These practices pose personal, relational, and structural/cultural questions for consideration specifically in the field of education leadership: *How might listening be an authentic space of inquiry for leaders? What could the value of listening practices be to one’s leadership practice? As a leader, how do I create the conditions that motivate listening? What kinds of habits and plans do we need for shaping student learning, professional learning, and leadership? How might our schools develop habits, structures, and a culture of listening?*¹ Listening

1 See chapter 5 of *Race Sounds* for a discussion of the deep relationship between listening and learning.

leadership is leadership practised with the competence and aural literacies to recognize, absorb, interpret, and make sense of the sonic-rich ecosystem of school and learning.

In the Education Leadership graduate programs offered through the Klingenstein Center, I often use literature to invite students to engage and practice listening leadership. One assignment is inspired by the character Peter Wheatstraw from Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* and a namesake of 1930's St Louis blues pianist and singer Peetie Wheatstraw. During his first morning in Harlem, Invisible Man encounters Wheatstraw, pushing a cart filled with discarded architectural blueprints down the street. Many have never been used, but so many plans are made that, as Wheatstraw explains, "They get in the way so every once in a while they have to throw 'em out to make place for the new plans. Folks is always making plans and changing 'em" (Ellison 175). While the inexperienced Invisible Man views these adaptations as failure, Wheatstraw understands that making and changing plans, asking questions and exploring various possibilities with agility, is necessary, even vital.

We examine this fictional moment in my class, and then I ask students to listen back over their time in the program and write about these questions: *What is my "bluesprint" (connecting the architectural plans with the blues tradition Wheatstraw is connected to) for listening as an emerging school leader? What do I want to cultivate through listening? How might I serve as a better audience for myself and others?* Here is an excerpt from one student's leadership *bluesprint*:

Listening is invaluable to leadership not only because it provides initial context, but, perhaps more importantly, it allows for *feedback*. When leaders set a precedent of being willing to listen to their community, it invites the opportunity for feedback to exist in its most effective form: as an *ongoing dialogue*. Further, listening is culture-building; leaders who genuinely listen and value feedback from their colleagues and community members create energy and momentum in their respective organizations. On an individual level, listening affords leaders the chance to make the members of their teams, organizations, and communities feel known. It creates empathy and a sense of belonging. Listening also is how we learn and grow; it's how we see what exists beyond our own experiences and worldview. Given that leadership is about the people one is leading, it is impossible to be an effective leader without taking the time to listen.

Here, we are reminded of the importance of listening *as* a fully embodied being carrying beliefs, experiences, knowledge, and assumptions along as we lead. We are reminded, too, that we as leaders listen *for*—for people in our community, for the less audible, for the benefit of others. It is being generous toward misunderstanding. It requires growing attuned to how our varying positionality and our dimensions of identity—for instance, race, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, religious and political beliefs, culture, and sexuality guide our listening capacities, habits and biases. There is no one way to listen, nor one prescription or template for listening. Instead, listening reminds us that there are infinite ways that encounters happen and infinite interpretations. And it offers a pause for these variations to be tended to. What is at stake, then, in such an apprenticeship of listening is the unlearning of what we think we know toward a listening otherwise.

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