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"What They Say is What They Mean" Listening to Someone's Story

Nina Sun Eidsheim and Juliette Bellocq

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“What They Say is What They Mean”: Listening to Someone’s Story

Nina Sun Eidsheim
UCLA
Juliette Bellocq
NAC Architecture

IN WESTERN ACADEMIA AND COLLOQUIALLY, listening to music is often about *measuring*. What I mean by that is that listening is used to assess. Is the sound too loud, too quiet, or just so? Is someone out of line (singing out of tune, or too loudly)? Are they right or wrong (did they play the tune correctly)? There are, of course, all kinds of problems associated with this type of listening, and I have spent the last twenty years addressing this issue. To name some of the problems: first, this kind of listening assumes there is an essential stable object to identify; for example, a knowable, unaltered, “in-tune” pitch. However, any so-called identifiable sound is conjured from a musical-cultural context and a value system. Take something seemingly objective, like singing in or out of tune. What might be considered out of tune within one scalar context can be in tune in another. Second, while there are many different people and a variety of listening and value systems within any given society, if only one such system is deemed correct, all but that one will be repressed by the few in power.

I have dedicated my career to illuminating the limits of this kind of one-dimensional listening and its ramifications. As listening is a total system—meaning it is defined, legislated, promoted, and disputed across the lexical, conceptual, analytical, and sensorial domains—I created the

NINA SUN EIDSHEIM
is the author of *Sensing
Sound: Singing and
Listening as Vibrational
Practice* (2015) and
*The Race of Sound:
Listening, Timbre, and
Vocality in African
American Music* (2019);
Professor of Musicology
(UCLA); founder of
the UCLA Practice-
based Experimental
Epistemology (PEER)
Lab—dedicated to
decolonializing data,
methodology, and
analysis, in and through
multisensory creative
practices.

Practice-based Experimental Epistemology Research (PEER) Lab at UCLA to engage more listening strategies and consider other value systems.

Part of what I wished for the PEER Lab was to communicate our findings in more ways than just academically organized and presented arguments. I invited graphic designer Juliette Bellocq to work with me on this. Together, we work to transfer or metabolize an idea from one domain to another—say from words and logic to visuals and brief, non-argument-driven writing. We also work to translate ideas that seem to live in so-called sonic worlds (for example, sound) to visual worlds.

While all this work has been so inspiring and has added so much to the Lab, the most radical move for me has involved stepping back and learning more about Juliette's relationship to and approach to listening. In contrast to the way I have been encultured to listen, and even to the interventions I have made in that regard, I have learned from Juliette that graphic designers use listening 1) to learn new things; 2) to really hear what people are saying, instead of assuming that it needs translation; and 3) to continuously calibrate and make sure they're hearing the stories being told (as opposed to, for example, inventing subtext).

The following is an excerpt of a conversation between Juliette and myself on this topic where I learn about how she uses listening as a tool in her work, and how she thinks about how she needs to listen in order to do so.

NINA: What is listening for a graphic designer?

JULIETTE: As a graphic designer, I agree to not be the single author of the content of my work. Graphic design, in my practice, means sharing content. I place myself in a situation where I get to translate something I've heard, understood, or seen or reconfigured, and so that means that I have a voice—I am an author—but there is a co-author as well. It can be a client or a community. So listening is essential. As you know, besides working with the PEER Lab, I mainly work with architects in the making of spaces. And the key question when we visit a space or when we meet with people is, what are their stories? Listening is our primary tool and resource.

NINA: Do you listen similarly or differently from architects, or even from graphic designers? If so, how do these kinds of listenings come together?

JULIETTE: I do think that I listen differently than some other designers because my primary goal is not to resolve people's problems, which is a

big part of what graphic design is and can do. [My job now] is to catch something in the air; make it visible for all of us; to see if that becomes something that can participate in a culture; and to transcribe or crystallize ideas that are there for all of us. If I do not listen well, I have nothing to make. Does that make sense?

NINA: It does. But I'm just wondering if listening is like a metaphor for all the ways you absorb things?

JULIETTE: It is not a metaphor. It is note-taking and research to make sure we heard well. It's cross-checking information to make sure that what people meant was what we heard. It is a lot of trying to find out what groups' stories are before producing anything visual, or graphic. It is a kind of listening that is meant to participate in something alive. So, we have to listen in a way that is—hopefully, when we do it well—non-intrusive, not orienting the story, letting people say what they would like to say authentically, and then understanding it in the right context before, finally, proposing something that can participate in the culture it comes from. So, it is listening as a way to circumvent assumed knowledge. As we often say about the PEER Lab, it is listening in a way that helps us go around assumptions.

NINA: I hear you talk about listening as “listening in the service of serving.”

JULIETTE: No one can build their own school by themselves, without facing enormous complexity. That school is needed by a community for their use, for very good reasons. The people I work with are experts on building schools, therefore the community needs them. And yet, the school makers should not make assumptions about what is truly needed in that space. For this, the community is the expert. Without listening, there would be a lot of misused skills and talent! Listening is about perpetuating the sense of community that already exists, letting it make its way into the built environment and into educational systems. It is a type of listening that can translate a sense of community into a brick-and-mortar object.

JULIETTE BELLOCQ

is a graphic designer collaborating on diverse projects for paper, screen, and space. Her studio, Handbuilt, specializes in design for education, healthcare, and other civic projects. She collaborates with space-makers, educators, designers, and artists to provoke civic and cultural experiences.