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# Embodied Listening: Disrupting Speech-as-Presence towards Imaginative Ways of Being in the Classroom

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## Abstract

In this paper, we propose embodied listening as pedagogical praxis in which we are receptive to how our whole bodies are involved in communicating with each other. Embodied listening disrupts what we call “speech-as-presence”—normative expectations of student participation emphasizing verbal contributions and privileging particular bodies. These expectations contribute to the reproduction of oppressive logics at work in classrooms—racism, heteropatriarchy, white feminism, masculinism, ableism, colonialism. We argue that embodied listening can serve as a source of knowledge about these logics, supporting transformation of classroom expectations beyond imposed norms. We reflect on our experiences developing embodied listening practices in our undergraduate courses through our observations and students’ own reflections. Our findings demonstrate both the transformative potential of listening in classrooms and the tensions produced as these strategies discomfited students and disrupted classroom norms. Finally, we engage with critical perspectives on listening positionality from Indigenous studies, disability studies, and sound studies towards deepening our understanding of differences and multiplicities in how we listen. We illustrate how we continue to develop ways to incorporate this work in our



classrooms and support students in the exhaustive and uncomfortable work of embodied listening and imaginative ways of being in the classroom.

## Keywords

Embodied listening, feminist pedagogies, listening positionality, speech-as-presence

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## Introduction

As feminist geographers, we seek to build relationships in our classrooms that confront dominant norms and expectations, striving to build more equitable and just learning outcomes. Yet, we are often challenged by knowing how to begin to build relationships with each other in the classroom and to collectively engage across differences to further anti-racist, decolonial, and feminist practices (Daigle and Sundberg 2017; Faria et al. 2019; Fritzsche 2022). In the everyday experiences of our classrooms, student participation is an immediate marker of social relationships and an important source of information as we respond in the moment to the needs and interests of our students. In particular, we were struck by the ways in which we conflated speech-based contributions with participation (Stenberg 2011; Stetz 2001; Waite 2013; Wolters-Hinshaw 2011), leading us to miss other forms of student engagement in the classroom (McMurtie 2022). In order to move beyond speech-based participation, we have worked together to develop embodied listening as a relational practice for ourselves and our students in constructing the classroom space and learning experiences. Embodied listening allows us to consider how participation in its normative form (and as a component of many classroom assessments) is inadequate because it limits students' roles in constructing the classroom and themselves as students. Furthermore, we propose that embodied listening is not simply relevant to participation, but that it has the potential to foster a multiplicity of practices for building classroom spaces.

We asked ourselves how normative expectations of participation can create barriers to the many ways one can engage in the classroom. For us, this conflation creates what we call "speech-as-presence," a dominant norm that shapes classrooms or other group discussion spaces (Hyams 2004), and influences how we interpret people's engagement. Speech-as-presence emphasizes how *verbal* contributions, especially those performed at a fast pace, with white, masculine voice modulations and bodily stances, are overvalued (Tannen 1990 and Giovanni 1994, as cited in Ratcliffe 2005). These performances reproduce expectations of individualistic knowledge production and legitimize the authority of certain bodies and the confident expert imparting knowledge in the classroom—white, ableist, and masculinist performances that devalue feminized presences and underpin neoliberal structures. Neoliberalism is maintained and perpetuated through the work of reproducing other oppressive structures with deeper social histories—including, but not limited to, heteropatriarchy and racism. These structures create and sustain inequities in work and educational experiences within postsecondary education (Brown 2015; Perry 2018). In response, we have worked together to develop an understanding of how we conceive of, value, and even more importantly, make space for presences in the classroom that go beyond speech-as-presence. To disrupt the dominance of speech, as well as ableist and colonial constructions of listening,

we center an embodied approach to listening in our classrooms and invite students and ourselves to consider how an emphasis on listening opens space to recognize and practice other ways of being and relating in the classroom. More than the act of hearing or engagement with sound (Deighton MacIntyre 2019; Robinson 2020), we conceive of listening as an embodied practice in which we are receptive to how our whole bodies, with all of our senses, are involved in communicating with each other. As a fundamentally relational practice, embodied listening is focused on response and serves as a site of responsibility, inviting engagement with difference through decentering the self. We argue that embodied listening can serve as a source of knowledge about the logics at work in classrooms—racism, heteropatriarchy, feminism, masculinism, ableism, colonialism—supporting transformation of classroom expectations beyond imposed norms.

In the discussion that follows, we identify how listening is devalued and reflect on experiences of implementing listening-centric participation and teaching strategies in our classrooms. We draw on experiences in our smaller (10-15 students) undergraduate courses (with some of Kelsey's upper-level courses<sup>1</sup> cross-listed with graduate-level courses), offered between spring 2020 and spring 2022. This timeline notably spans the weeks prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a subsequent period of remote-learning, and a return to in-person learning during the ongoing pandemic. During this time, we were both working in tenure-track/tenured positions in teaching-focused institutions in the Baltimore, MD area.<sup>2</sup> Emily was teaching in the Environmental Studies program at a small private liberal arts college with classroom sizes ~8-25 students, while Kelsey teaches in the Geography program at a large public comprehensive university with classroom size anywhere from ~15-90 students. Our own messy embodied experiences of working through these strategies with students—as they engage with and refuse the discomforts produced by these strategies—inform our analysis. To support our reflections on the strategies to date, we first examine how voice has been central to feminists addressing patriarchal structures and consider how Black feminists and feminists of color draw our attention to the intersectional positionalities of those using voice, as well as the more frequently overlooked complementary discussion of the responsibilities of the listener. Building on this foundation, we turn to and draw on a collection of work in Indigenous studies, sound studies, and disability studies to examine and challenge the assumption that listening is a universal practice that undergirds everyday interactions (Gunaratnam 2021; Kanngieser 2020, 2021; Robinson 2020). This literature demonstrates how our positionalities entrain us into particular listening norms and impose limitations on our relationships. Reflecting on listening positionalities and listening in the classroom, we demonstrate how these practices have potential to build social relationships that disrupt oppressive systems and structures in our classrooms.

### Disrupting Speech-as-Presence

Since at least the 1970s, feminist geographers have worked to demonstrate and destabilize the dominance of white male bodies within the discipline and its masculinist construction of knowledge and academic practices (e.g. Bono et al. 2019; Hanson and Monk

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<sup>1</sup> “Upper-level” undergraduate courses refer to courses aimed at students in the third or fourth year of a four-year degree, while “lower-level” courses are aimed at students in the first two years of their degrees.

<sup>2</sup> After this time period, Emily accepted a faculty position at Florida State University and Kelsey earned tenure.

1982, 2008; Rose 1993; Sanders 1990, 2006). Within and beyond the discipline of geography, voice and speech have played a prominent role in these feminist arguments. Literature rooted in white feminisms has emphasized voice as a strategy to resist patriarchal structures that entrain women into silent and passive positions (hooks 1986; Olsen 1978; Rich 1978, 1979). However, this call for voice in feminism has been thoroughly challenged, particularly by women of color, who demonstrate that rather than a simple binary of the voice/voiceless, speech and voice are experienced through intersectional positionalities that vary between spaces (Abu-Lughod 2013; Carillo Rowe and Malhotra 2013; Haji Molana 2021; Lorde 2020[1977]; Mohanty 1988; Ranjbar 2017; Spivak 1988). bell hooks (1986) discusses how girls and women are subjected to a disciplining of voice—what can be said, who can say it, and where they can say it. Within that context, however, Black women’s everyday lives are filled with speech. For hooks, this disciplining was formative in resisting and cultivating a practice of speaking in ways that could overcome those imposed limitations—to persist in “talking back.” Mitsuye Yamada (1983), writing around the same time, also shares a story of identifying the systems through which voice is marginalized. She demonstrates how Asian American women are positioned as apolitical, limiting acceptable speech to that which is harmless and inconsequential. Within the context of the classroom, Hanieh Haji Molana (2021) describes the experience of being a non-native born student in the US. She reflects on how experiences of speaking with an accent can marginalize student classroom contributions. Haji Molana (2021, np) writes, “the one part of myself I can’t hide is my voice, that is, if I am to speak.”

Voice is a powerful force of relation that has drawn feminist attention; missing within white feminist calls for creating space for marginalized voices, however, is how those in privileged positions must also listen to those voices (Carillo Rowe and Malhotra 2013). hooks argues that the work of overcoming the oppression of white patriarchal society is not “to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech. To make a speech *that compels listeners*, one that is heard” (1986, 124; emphasis added). In so doing, she turns our attention to the potential listener. Audre Lorde, whose work emphasized the importance of making one’s voice heard, reminds us that “where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives” (2020 [1977], 13). Yamada, meanwhile, explicitly highlights that oppressive relations are reproduced when speech is limited or, more insidiously, space is made for voices but others fail to listen “with serious intent” (1983, 40). As Imani Perry writes in considerations of passionate utterances—statements that disrupt the work of reproducing social norms—these are demands to be heard and requires those listening to be vulnerable because the “movement of that passionate utterance is dependent on the kinds of people the rest of us who hear it choose to be” (2018, 216-217). Considered from the position of the listener, talking back and political speech, like passionate utterances, are “an invitation to consider anew. To listen and to imagine, affected by that listening” (Perry 2018, 214).

Engaging with these writers provokes us in the work to understand how the listener is a powerful actor in shaping what is said, what is heard, what is engaged with (e.g. Campbell-Kibler 2007). Specifically, we are curious about the potential for listening within feminist pedagogies. Stetz (2001), teaching in a Women’s Studies program in the 1980s into the 1990s, discusses how their feminist pedagogies shifted away from encouraging students to use their voice after recognizing that opening up the space to speak hadn’t been matched

with the development of listening to each other. Stetz (2001, 8) invited students to engage in careful listening practices to better understand both the voices and the silences—arguing that silences can be “speech that someone does not wish to hear.” In what follows, we examine how listening in the classroom has been considered in feminist and other critical pedagogies scholarship, remaining attuned to the critiques of feminists of color to ask what is the relationship between voice-speech and the listener in this work. We note that as scholars critically assess classroom participation, voice-speech/listening-silence binaries are sometimes reproduced.

Feminist scholars have identified curriculum and content as factors underpinning student participation, with specific attention to gender. Nairn (1997, 112) notes that female students were often relegated to an outsider position as “listeners, and they were located on the periphery of the classroom’s physical space.” Shifting the content of the classroom to include stories centering women, paired with structured invitations for students to speak, increased participation and engagement of female students (Nairn 1997). Vaccaro (2017) also demonstrates a connection between students’ ability to relate to the content and their willingness to engage in discussion. Interrogating women’s silences in the classroom through an intersectional lens, Vaccaro finds that women of color often remain silent as a coping strategy, responding to exhaustion of having to educate their peers on race and racism; they also were less likely to engage with narratives that differed from their own experiences as women of color, for instance when social class produced distinct experiences. Moreover, white women may not speak up because of fear, guilt, or shame of being perceived as racist, where they struggle to reflect on the intersection of their gender and privilege (Vaccaro 2017).

This literature also notes how the dominant presence of speech in the classroom marginalizes and devalues other ways of participating, including silence. Because normative classroom expectations associated with participation rely on “speaking up” (Waite 2013, 65; Stenberg 2011), silences are problematized (Reda 2009) and overlooked as a form of participation by the professor, even those who occupy critical positions (Glenn 2004, as cited in Fidyk 2013). Waite (2013) tells a story of teaching one student who remained silent throughout the semester. Only when the student wrote a paper explaining how “speaking up” imposed a normative structure in the classroom did Waite understand how silence actively disrupts and refuses. Writing from a position as a radical, critical, queer scholar encountering their own, previously unrecognized conservatism, suggested to Waite (2013) that there is “something queer about silence, only when it is employed in environments where speech is a model of success” (p. 71). Feminist work on silence has demonstrated the plurality of silences replete with reflection, rest, and resistance (Carrillo Rowe and Malhotra 2013; Ranjbar 2017). In the classroom, silences can be part of an active form of engagement (Fidyk 2013), including purposeful expressions of resistance to course content (Alderman et al. 2021; Vaccaro 2017). Furthermore, the dominant presence of speech in the classroom can marginalize particular bodies. Students navigate the ways in which their voice may be interpreted by listeners to be communicating information on their gender, nationality, sexuality, ability, as well as navigating their own understandings and embodiment of cultural expectations around communication and classroom norms (Campbell-Kibler 2007; Delph-Janiurek 1999, 2000; Gunaratnam 2021; Haji Molana 2021; Tigert and Miller 2021). Speech-as-presence leaves little space to recognize or engage with all the reasons our students might not participate verbally.

## Collaborative Personal Reflexivity on Listening in the Classroom

Embodied listening, as a relational practice in everyday life, emerged from conversations we had together reflecting on our friendship, our research methodologies, and, most pertinent to this paper, our experiences in our classrooms. Moss and Besio argue that the examination of our own everyday experiences holds “radical possibilities” (2019, 314) and we employ these auto-methods in order to work collaboratively to develop pedagogical strategies that challenge neoliberal masculinist, ableist, and racist structures towards creating space for imaginative and non-dominant ways of being. In a process that is akin to what Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) characterize as ‘accidental autoethnography,’ and what Daigle and Sundberg (2017) call ‘embodied and accountable pedagogical praxis,’ we engage with recollections of our past experiences, our informal conversations with each other, our purposeful conversations and collaborative work on classroom strategies, and subsequent conversations as we debriefed and deconstructed our classroom experiences, including feedback from students. We use collaborative critical reflection towards better understanding our own experiences as quiet, white ciswomen within classrooms as both students and professors, to identify the oppressive normative structures influencing expectations and practices, and to navigate our experiences as we develop the idea of ‘embodied listening’ and weave it into our classroom strategies.

Our curiosity about listening in the classroom emerged from our own embodied experiences as students, and following Sara Ahmed (2017), was motivated by a desire to understand and undo structures that impinged upon our student selves. Our experiences were visceral and emotional, contributing to our sense of self as students and, eventually, as academics—we understood ourselves as shy and quiet, slow to process, and out of place in academic spaces. However, together we also reflected on our experiences in classrooms led by feminist geographers where we felt a palpable shift in the construction of that space. Instead of being asked to change our way of being, these shifts occurred when we were invited to relate with our peers and professors in different ways—including, for instance, in-class writing and small group discussion that created room for processing thoughts and working through ideas, as well as being invited to contribute in response to our body language in the midst of competitive and fast-paced seminar discussions.

As we became teachers, we aimed to incorporate feminist pedagogies into our work—including fostering collaborative knowledge production. Yet, in asking our students to be engaged and active participants in the classroom and learning process, we did so in ways that imposed some of the same expectations and practices that had made us uncomfortable as students. We could see that this left some of our own students at the margins. Our observations and information shared by students in the classroom over the last several years have encouraged our ongoing development of how we conceive of participation and engagement. Embodied listening, which we develop through examples of practices that deemphasize verbal contributions and emphasize self-reflection, embodied experience, and relational classroom strategies, centralizes feminist praxis in order to value non-normative and non-dominant ways of being in those spaces. This provides a strategy not only for students to bring diverse ways of being into the classroom space, but also emphasizes relational practice between student and professor that relies on ongoing attunement to each other to build a shared space. We find that this helps to develop collective, critical learning challenging the imposition of dominant norms.

When listening is regarded as a universal practice, listeners become attuned to listening for dominant forms of speech that are actively fostered and rewarded in these spaces. Simply pulling listening up to the same level as voice or speech is unsatisfying and inadequate because it leaves intact listening in opposition to speech. Speech-as-presence and universalized listening privileges particular bodies (overwhelmingly white, able, cis-male bodies) while disciplining other bodies away from reproducing these norms. For instance, speech-as-presence reproduces ableist assumptions for speech that suggest we all embody the same mental and physical abilities to speak and hear in the classroom, marginalizing bodily- and neuro-diversity (Gunaratnam 2021; Tigert and Miller 2021).<sup>3</sup> Instead, by focusing on listening, we work to shift speech, disrupting the space it occupies and its role in relational strategies, including participation. When the space for speech is disrupted, we can attend more fully to the multiplicity of positions within listening. With listening as the point of focus for reimagining the classroom space and participation, we begin with the question of what it might look like to listen in embodied and critical ways, to reflect on where you listen from and how you have been encultured to listen. We ask: what does it mean to listen, to be a listener? Our strategies for embodied listening focus on the potential for listening and becoming listeners, confronting dominant expectations of classroom participation including speech-as-presence.

### Embodied Listening Participation Strategies

In this section, we consider how fostering embodied listening practices can contribute to the construction of undergraduate classroom spaces that attend to diverse and imaginative ways of being. We incorporate the work of embodied listening into the beginning of our semester-long classes, contributing to how we set up our classrooms and establish expectations. We initially developed listening strategies where course content overlapped with discussions of embodied listening, including courses focused on feminist geography and feminist political ecology. We then continued to work with embodied listening to develop feminist pedagogical praxis in our courses more generally. As part of this work, we invite our students to offer what it means to participate in the classroom, encouraging them to identify what they assume is expected of them, what is required to meet those expectations, and other ways of being that might contribute to a collaborative learning environment. We begin this work as a self-reflection, followed by a shared group reflection and discussion, sometimes using anonymous platforms such as Google documents and jamboards as an alternative, non-verbal mode of participation for students who might hesitate when asked to share verbally or benefit from the visual format.<sup>4</sup> In defining participation for the classroom, students often start with speaking—participation is when you contribute verbally to the discussion. When pushed to expand on this, students identify contributions that attend to the material under discussion or that build on the ideas of others. We further prompt our students to consider what is required of them to be able to make those verbal contributions, or what they can do to participate even beyond verbal contributions. Here we have seen students begin to include listening in their definition of participation, as well as note-taking, coming to

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<sup>3</sup> Thank you to Hanieh Haji Molana for encouraging us to emphasize this point.

<sup>4</sup> The pandemic-related shift to online learning and subsequent return to the classroom led to discussions around the use of digital platforms for in-person learning (e.g. Abrams 2021; Cheng 2022; Darby 2021; Guerra 2022; Miller 2021), with potential for facilitating certain forms of non-verbal participation.

class prepared, and behaviors that take others into consideration, such as waiting for others to have the chance to contribute. While it has been fruitful to engage in these discussions, the degree to which students connect personally with the discussion and engage in a collaborative process of building the classroom together has been limited.

We find that when we pair students' individual reflections on how they like to participate, with small-group reflections on participation, students are able to think about their own presences in the classroom in relation to each other. We have experimented with prompting students to reflect on themselves by inviting them to focus on who they are as students and how this sits in relation to their presence in classroom spaces. In doing so, we encourage them to consider how their identities relate to their practices and experiences in the classroom. In one iteration, we begin by asking students to reflect on their comfort with speaking in front of the class, speaking in small groups, raising a hand first, waiting, or a preference for listening to others, and writing. In another, we ask students to consider whether they are an introvert/extrovert/ambivert or to position themselves as 'listeners' or 'talkers' (or some combination of both) in the classroom. Students who identify similarly are placed into groups to reflect on questions together before sharing with the whole class. Reflection questions include versions of the following:

- 1) How do you prefer to participate?
- 2) What would you like others to know about your experiences participating in a classroom?
- 3) What aspects of the class make it difficult to participate?
- 4) What could others do to create a more comfortable space for participation?

Following this reflexive work, students share their experiences and begin to discuss how to create the classroom space together by focusing on what they would like to experience as classroom participation and developing strategies to support each other and their potentially different ways of being. These collaborative conversations reveal a broad range of embodied classroom experiences. For instance, students discussed the anxiety of speaking in class—the racing hearts and muddled thoughts, as well as the challenges of finding an opening into a conversation, like waiting for a pause that sometimes never comes. Students also discussed the discomfort of silence and the impulse to fill that silence, while others explained how they struggle to stop talking when they get started on a topic. Concrete, embodied experiences discussed openly in the classroom contributes to a space where everyone can better understand the experiences of others and develop and encourage valuation of a variety of participation practices.

Each class has produced a different collection of practices to focus on over the semester, building strategies of embodied listening. These have included:

- 1) listening to the verbal contributions of their peers;
- 2) attending and listening to each other's body language;
- 3) inviting each other into the conversation (including identifying others whose body language suggests they might want to contribute and establishing gestures that communicate someone wants to speak);



- 4) fostering and holding moments of silence within the conversation (including holding off before jumping into a conversation; asking for a few minutes to pause and reflect; in-class writing reflections);
- 5) checking in with each other before moving on to a new topic; and
- 6) naming others when building on their contributions.

As the semester progresses, we return to and build on our experiences and ideas in the ongoing work of constructing the classroom space.

Through a focus on embodied listening, we have approached our courses and our students in ways that prioritize purposeful co-creation of the classroom space. Embodied listening is a way to decenter the self and to prioritize building relationships with others. We encourage our students to attend to themselves in relation with each other, foregrounding how these relationships may contribute to the experiences of others. When we bring embodied listening into our courses through participation, the class does the work of legitimizing multiple forms of participating, potentially upending dominant ways of being in the academy that appear fixed. By both unsettling entrenched forms of relating in academia that reproduce toxic spaces and putting into practice relations that have long been devalued and marginalized, we build on feminist work that invites the creative potential of instability that comes from being attuned to differences, multiplicities, and imaginative academic ways of being. In the next section, we examine this creative potential, including how these practices produced discomfort in ourselves and our students.

### **Discussion: Reflections on Listening Strategies**

Together we have reflected on what our students share with us, as well as our own observations, and it is clear that we experience incredible transformations of classroom spaces. In some classes we have moved beyond normative expectations by developing different modes of participation, encouraging us to build on this work. Yet we also recognize that the experiences of our students and ourselves in this work have been variable. As each of us brings our embodied selves into the room, we attune ourselves to each other's bodies and words in ways that potentially feel vulnerable and discomfiting. This also blurs the lines between inside and outside the classroom, as we build an understanding of how we are all situated differently, embedded in structures—racism, hetero-patriarchy, feminism, masculinity, ableism, colonialism—that shape ourselves in society and underpin the space of the classroom. Furthermore, the classroom is always embodied differently, and it is constant work for all of us to engage in embodied listening in each class, each semester. In what follows, we discuss the variable experiences and uneven development of embodied listening strategies in our classes.

Students have shared, in the form of informal and formal conversations and written reflections, how the incorporation of listening practices contributed not only to their learning of course materials, but to their understanding of how others were learning and experiencing the classroom space. Such was the case during the 2020 shift to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic in a combined graduate/undergraduate feminist geography seminar with a diverse group of students, both in terms of gender and ethnicity, as well as traditional and “non-traditional” older students. Students reflected that the practices established in person contributed to a relatively smooth transition to virtual seminars, while at the same time

elicited feelings of loss and frustration related to the disruption in the interpersonal connections they had incorporated into participation and shared learning. These practices emphasized responsibility across the group for attending to each other's presence in the seminar. The impact on building relationships through embodied listening is clear as some students identified that being attuned to others allowed them to be aware of how the class's critical engagement with feminist scholarship developed over the semester; other students noted that they became attuned to each other's needs and negotiated appropriate forms of support with each other. In this context, the collaborative development of listening practices was more than just participation—it strengthened particular kinds of relationships in the classroom and created a supportive environment for both in-person and virtual seminars.

At the same time, in other classes we noted the profound sense of discomfort and frustration that our strategies produced. Our observations suggested these discomforts were compounded and complicated by a year of online learning and the return to in-person learning. We also noted our own unpreparedness for some of these reactions and our own exhaustion during the pandemic, exacerbated by expectations of our neoliberal universities (e.g. Zielke et al. 2022). The emotions of returning to in-person learning, the elation of seeing friends and the profound sense of loss due to the pandemic, and the ongoing precarity and/or heavy workloads taken on beyond the classroom were overwhelming for some students to manage and process. Asking students to bring their whole, embodied selves into the classroom is potentially destabilizing, and in a time of ongoing pandemic (but an imposed "return to normal"), when the ground is already so unstable, we found it hard to prepare students for these disruptions. Furthermore, the mental toll of doing this work is exhausting for us all. Students' embodied frustrations, including refusal to engage in listening to others and asking for more non-participatory content-delivery, also prompted difficult but productive reflection on what it means to develop careful, gentle, purposeful relations in a classroom.

These reflections illustrated that while holding the potential to strengthen relationships and the construction of knowledges, embodied listening also necessarily discomfits and exhausts students as normative practices and expectations are disrupted—which can be experienced as a burdensome demand of effort on top of the 'regular' workload of a course. While we have been able to observe changes in students' practices, we also recognize that students may not always be with us in making these connections or engaging with the political work involved. We use these observations to develop additional strategies that might expand how we listen, deepening what it means to engage in embodied listening in the classroom.

### ***Listening Positionalities and Student Resistance and Discomfort***

Drawing on scholars who consider what it means to listen and who we are as listeners beyond the context of western, white settler perception and human interpersonal listening (Kanngieser, 2013; Robinson, 2020), we pushed ourselves to further reflect on how our own experiences as students informed the classrooms we wanted to build. These reflections made space for our own listening positionalities, but may not have reached the point of considering a multiplicity of listening positionalities. Robinson suggests that we carry with us "listening privilege, listening biases, and listening ability" (2020, 10) such that our perceptions are shaped by normative narratives that render sensible certain content while delegitimizing other content, experiences, and feelings of sounds and forms (2020, 39-40; Sharpe 2012).

These biases also influence our engagement with each other's voices. The inflections of voice, the soundings, and language are reflective of power: class, economics, race, nationality, and gender are embedded into how we communicate and pace, accent, intonation, frequency, and silence of voice all "affect our capacity to listen and respond to each other" (Kanngieser 2013, 234; Campbell-Kibler 2007; Delph-Janiurek 1999; 2000; Haji Molana 2021). In other words, *how* and *from where* we listen shapes what we engage with and how we respond.

As we reflected on the tensions revealed by embodied listening in our classrooms, we started to think critically and expansively about what it means to be a listener and how we might better foster engagement with the ongoing, shifting, and multiplicitous experiences of being an embodied listener. The strategies we had employed did not actively incorporate space to reflect on how power might influence how we listen. We did not explicitly encourage or prompt our students to consider how listening/being a listener is intersectional with other facets of their identities. We worry that we may have reproduced our own imposed expectations of listening, rather than creating space for multiple expectations. The inequities of our institutions and the academic spaces we shape therein are reflected back to us in our own discomfort as we consider our own listening positions and struggles to engage with students who are all positioned differently in the institution. Indeed, we continue to reflect on how our identities may also be a source of discomfort for students, and their refusal to engage the result of our embodied identities as white, settler, cis-women.

The pushback from students in having to do the work of embodied listening suggested that it is disruptive, but also that the very thing students wanted to push away—feeling tired, frustrated, challenged—might actually be a site of rich investigation. Engaging with these tensions, we understand embodied listening as a powerful strategy to disrupt normative classroom practices; to contribute to attuning ourselves and students to working with each other to communicate and build knowledge; to build awareness of the value of multiple ways of being and contributing in a classroom. As we move deeper into this work, embodied listening can open up space for building on multiplicitous ways of being to develop embodied experiential knowledge of how structuring logics operate on differently positioned bodies. In turn, we can examine how these logics intersect with what it means for each of us to listen and become more critical, embodied listeners. In the next section we discuss how we are deepening this work to expand our classroom strategies in ways that engage with the potentially productive discomfiting experiences of embodied practice.

### ***A Politics of Embodied Listening: Additional Strategies and Practices***

We understand the development and fostering of embodied listening practices as political work, a site of response and responsibility. A politics of embodied listening can help us better understand the multiple listening positions that make up the classroom rooted within socially constructed systems that govern how we relate to one another. With listening positionalities in mind, we have started to incorporate additional embodied listening work in our courses to reflect on the participation practices we developed and pull in the political work of these practices. First, we continue to introduce students to listening through the use of our whole bodies to feel and to experience, distinguishing it from simply hearing and the physical presence of sound waves (Deighton MacIntyre 2019; Hartman 2019; Kanngieser 2020, 2021). Second, we build on this by emphasizing the ways in which listening is a socially and culturally constructed practice, varying across positionalities and place (Kanngieser 2020,

2021; Robinson 2020; Sharpe 2012). In this final section, we consider how to more explicitly incorporate our students into a politics of embodied listening.

Acknowledging the exhausting work of engaging in embodied listening practices in the classroom, we have strived to slow down our semester-long classes. We pause weekly reading and discussion to create space for reflection exercises, as well as time for peer review and individual writing. We explain to students that slowing down can open space for them to care for themselves, whether through rest or creating more room for processing of ideas. Slowing down the classroom experience allows students to reflect on who they are as listeners and the implications of doing this political work (Kanngieser 2020, 2021).

In an undergraduate feminist political ecology course, which met twice a week for 110 minutes in each block, students participated in critical listening practices rooted in decolonial and Indigenous knowledges to embrace not-knowing, being uncertain of what one is hearing, "to divest from the authority of certainty" (Kanngieser 30 Nov 2020, 2021 np). Following the model of a virtual listening workshop hosted by AM Kanngieser (2022), students attuned themselves to their embodied presences in one outdoor space. They not only listened to and felt the sounds of their bodies, but attuned themselves to the sounds of the outdoor environment, reflecting on their presence in a specific environment. Students considered what they know about the histories of the place where they are located; how and why they are located where they are; how they feel in this space; and, how the various layers of sound, both internal and external, construct their relationships in place. This work troubles dominant western paradigms that position nature in opposition to society, where listening also means moving beyond human relationships, inviting encounters and attuning ourselves to the more-than-human with possibility for building new relationships and worlds otherwise (Kanngieser and Todd, 2021; Gumbs, 2020). Moreover, it foregrounds the work of Indigenous studies, deaf studies, and disability studies scholarship to resist and disrupt normative ideas of sound, voice, and listening. To "hear deafly" demands recognition of the ways in which sounds can be both heard and felt (DiBernardo Jones 2016, as cited in Deighton MacIntyre 2019) and to be attuned to the ways "the body distributes the voice" to include non-aural communication like gestures and facial expression (Deighton MacIntyre 2019, np). Listening becomes a relational and embodied practice wherein we use all of our senses to become aware of ourselves in relation to other elements in the world around us and to each other.

Pushing listening further, other scholars examine listening as a practice when working with contemporary and archival texts (Hartman 2019; Sharpe 2012). Saidiya Hartman (2019) listens to archival photos and documents, attuning herself away from the racialized narratives that shaped the conditions under which the material was collected to instead hear the silenced traces, whispered stories, music, and all the sounds of everyday life that lie within. This work illustrates the ways in which texts are embedded with layers of sound and how positionality influences the sounds and stories engaged with by the listener. Drawing on this literature, we invite students to listen to texts in a variety of ways. In one iteration of this work, students are asked to reflect on their response to a set of readings in a qualitative methods class which were chosen to push these students to consider the potential for qualitative methods and what kinds of knowledges are possible. Rather than explicitly focusing on the argument presented, we considered what we can learn through our embodied responses to text. For students who have expressed comfort and familiarity with work that is presented as

scientific and quantitative, what might it mean to recognize the physical discomfort and resistance experienced when reading work that challenges those approaches, such as bringing together Indigenous oral histories and physical science (King et al. 2013; Wright et al. 2012)? These embodied responses were used as a foundation to discuss the ways in which previous entrainment into the value of western science over other forms of knowledge can influence our capacity and willingness to listen to other knowledges.

The intention behind these additional approaches to embodied listening in the classroom include asking ourselves how we listen so that we can begin to attune ourselves to spaces and systems (Deighton MacIntyre 2019; Kanngieser 2020, 2021; Robinson 2020). Self-reflexive engagement with our positionalities as listeners, or what Robinson (2020) refers to as critical listening positionality, can contribute to a practice of listening that places us in relation to others at all times, including more-than-human natures. This engagement prompts ambiguity and disruption as we let go of anticipation and normative expectations, positioning Anglo-Europeans, especially, to learn when we shouldn't be listening (Kanngieser 2020, 2021; Robinson 2020; Teawia 2005; Todd 2017).

The discussions in this paper are just one step of a larger embodied listening practice—where the embodied practices of this work may show up outside of the classroom and beyond the end of the semester. This unsettling work to develop listening positionalities and an awareness of the norms of perception that shape engagement while listening can help to dislocate the fixity of universalized listening. We hope to invite more flexible listening practices “that situate listening as a relational action that occurs not merely between listener and listened-to, but between the layers of our individual positionalities” (Robinson 2020, p. 58). By listening to layers, we may open space to begin to listen to each other more fully, generating new possibilities for being in relation with each other. This work allows us to ask who we are as listeners and who we can become as listeners, attuning ourselves to other positions.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have focused on the classroom to consider how an embodied approach to participation strategies can work to reproduce or disrupt oppressive structural forces such as hetero-patriarchy, white feminism, masculinism, ableism, racism, and colonialism. We argue that attending to embodied listening produces and shapes classrooms, creating space to build beyond oppressive logics. The work of embodied listening contributes to feminist and other critical pedagogical work within geography and cognate disciplines towards the interruption of ongoing social injustices and oppressions within higher education (Alderman et al. 2021; Freire 1993 [1970]; hooks 1994; Puāwai Collective 2019; Rice et al. 2021; University of Kentucky Critical Pedagogy Working Group 2015; Wood et al. 2020), specifically neoliberal processes that transform the pace and tenor of our everyday work in academia and university settings (e.g. Horton 2020; Mountz et al. 2015; Shahjahan 2020; Zielke et al. 2022). Critical and feminist pedagogies highlight how dominant approaches to classroom participation produce hierarchies and suppress feminized and other non-normative ways of engaging and producing knowledges (see McMurtie 2022).

Through this ‘accidental autoethnographic’ work, we have considered how our own desires to show up in the classroom constituted our subjectivities and the “pictures we want

to paint of ourselves" as scholars and teachers (Whitson 2016, 299). In order to resist reproducing the masculinist neoliberal norms of institutions that shape some of these classroom relations, including normative classroom participation expectations emphasizing "speech-as-presence," we have worked to develop embodied listening strategies. We offer our experiences and strategies of embodied listening as practices that help us better understand how neoliberal university norms are enacted in and through our bodies and how we can disrupt them. Extending embodied listening practices into our classrooms invites students to reflect on their embodied experiences as sources of knowledge about the logics at work. This knowledge can support engaging with non-normative forms of participation and ways of being in the classroom, such as slowing down the pace of discussion and eliciting non-verbal exchange of ideas.

We demonstrate that embodied listening is a practice, and must be developed in critical, relational ways. To listen is a form of communication, one into which we are encultured and entrained—and thus the perception that we all listen in the same way (and therefore engage) is false. Indeed, to assume universal listening is reductionist, ableist, and racist (Kanngieser 2020, 2021; Robinson 2020) and contributes to the reproduction of forms of engagement centered on voice and on individualistic performance. By listening to layers and engaging critically with our listening positionalities, we may open space to begin to listen to each other more fully, creating room to generate new possibilities for being in relation with each other. Understanding ourselves as listeners and building a critical practice of listening requires that we let go of knowing how we will be received, of knowing how what we say will be received based on our own ideas, and this is constant work (Kanngieser 2020, 2021; Stenberg 2011). Embodied listening is a responsive and relational strategy for learning and constructing classroom spaces with our students in which we attune ourselves to each other by decentering the self, acknowledging our listening positionalities, and confronting norms and hierarchies. This is also political work, producing tension and discomfort, but opening space for multiple ways of knowing, relating, and caring for one another, imagining worlds otherwise.

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