

Listening as Attending to the “Echo of the Otherwise”: On Suffering, Justice, and Education

Sharon Todd
York University

Listening to stories of suffering can be difficult, painful, and even traumatic. Yet listen we do and listen we must. If we do not hear or bear witness to these stories, then we are rendered incapable of responding, of answering for our or other’s actions, of taking a position of responsibility. Thus listening is central to the ways in which educational projects of social justice are conceived. Within these projects there is a legitimate focus on listening to the voices of the marginalized and the wounded, and on giving space and time to those groups to articulate their own experiences, struggles, dilemmas, and needs. In the context of teaching and learning encounters, students are often exposed to narratives that offer them radically different experiences from their own and when these experiences are marked by suffering, their responses can cut across a range of emotional registers: solidarity, pity, empathy, desire, identification, and guilt, to name a few. Such responses reveal some of the ways students “receive” the other and the degree to which they become hosts, as it were, to the other’s narrative presence.

Underlying each of these responses is a certain quality of attentiveness in the listening of those stories; and it is this quality that seems to me to be important for considering ethical relations across difference, and ultimately for relations of justice. For instance, someone who might deeply identify with another who may be suffering (for example, a victim of racial or sexual violence) may not be listening and attending fully to the difference that marks the other’s experience as unique and distinct from one’s own. Thus, in thinking about the ethical significance of encountering the other in education, it is important to explore listening as a quality of attentiveness that promotes responsibility. What is it that we listen to when we listen? How does listening contribute to establishing a specifically ethical attentiveness to difference? And, how might listening open up the possibility for a just response?

I turn to the work of Gemma Corradi Fiumara and Emmanuel Levinas to think through these questions and to elaborate an account of listening that promotes conditions for a non-violent relation to the other. I wish to explore the ways in which listening does not only respect the other’s alterity, but indeed *attends* to it. That is, I seek to show how listening not only *contributes* to an ethical response to suffering, but—through its capacity for attentiveness—how listening *is itself* an ethical response.

THE LANGUAGE OF LISTENING, LISTENING TO LANGUAGE

For Fiumara listening is the “other side of language,” a necessary but forgotten component that is integral to the unfolding of any communication between subjects:¹

No narratives would exist without some disposition to listen. A narrative propensity may be a necessity for regaining a sense of our own history and the continuity of life; in fact our own history may be ultimately construed as being as ancient as life itself.... Yet no narratives could be conceivable in the absence of some listening disposition.²

Fiumara renders language and our use of language (which for her are inseparable) as contingent upon our capacity to listen as much as it is on our capacity for expression. Listening is the structural complement to speech. As such, the narratives of others are, by virtue of their being linguistic expressions, always already participants in the function of listening. Thus, for Fiumara, the kind of listening we bring to a speech situation is crucial for the way in which speech evolves.

This suggests that the stories of suffering that come to students via curriculum, or the teacher, or other students in the class, have already “found” listeners in the very moment of articulation. This means that narratives can only be understood in relation to the listening that conditions their receptivity. Narratives thereby “command” an audience, but the question is how that audience participates in listening, takes on that command, and what forms of attentiveness are structurally embedded in the speaker-listener communication. There are three aspects to attentiveness Fiumara raises that I wish to work with here.

First, Fiumara considers the ways in which the listener “enters” the other’s speech. The listener fully participates in the speech of the other while remaining somewhat distant and outside that speech. This double-valence position is described as follows:

The message from the other will not attain its expressive potential except in the context of a relationship through which the listening interlocutor actually becomes a participant in the nascent thought of the person who is talking. But a listener can only “enter” in a way which is at once paradoxical and committing: ‘by taking leave,’ by standing aside and making room (*OS*, 144).

This “entering” involves the listener in an interaction that seeks not to “take over” the other’s discourse or project oneself into the other; rather “entering” is a symbolic function that enables the listener herself to be fully immersed, as it were, in the other’s speech. Moreover, “taking leave” means that the listener provides opportunities for further speech, for further elaboration to occur, where what matters is not the listener per se, but the speaker being able to speak.

Second, in direct relation to this arises for Fiumara the issue of the degree to which we can be self-less in facilitating a listening environment conducive to attending to the other. That is, how do we attend in such a way that refrains from foreclosing on further communication? “The point at issue is whether it is possible to suspend or surpass the most surreptitious or deep-seated automatic responses of approval or recrimination” (*OS*, 152). While Fiumara has no immediate answers to this, she draws out the significance of renunciation both for the speaker and the one who attends to her. That is, there is always a riskiness implicit in the act of speaking and listening where the one who speaks loses an old mode of thought in the process of communicating a new one: “any new attitude must take on the semblance of a loss of the previous mode of seeing things and of evaluating them” (*OS*, 152). Similarly, the listener also goes through “an unavoidable process of mourning” whereby one’s thought shifts as one listens, and one is compelled to alter one’s position (*OS*, 152). That is, as I listen to you and attend to your speech, I realize that what you are saying cannot be mapped on to what I have known before; “we can be confronted with so much difficulty in reaching for language that we may even foresee the risk of having

to ‘transform’ the whole of our vocabulary” (*OS*, 154). In this regard, listening is as risky a proposition as speaking is. What Fiumara taps directly into here is the structure of learning where it is only through a position of ignorance, of misunderstanding, of being challenged that one can learn. As Fiumara expresses it, only listening to what is obvious and easy is not really listening (*OS*, 158).

Third, listening implies a sense of trust on the part of the listener. It is a trust that is born of the uncertainty of the communication, where the vicissitudes of language reveal unpredictable and unqualifiable narratives. In her discussion of how to reawaken an “inner listening,” Fiumara writes:

The assumption that we can approach the optimal use of even the most rudimentary communications and that there is a desire to represent and express oneself is deeply interwoven with this trust. A trust that our interlocutor may convey what is yet unknown, unexpected, or even what might actually be necessary for our own constant renovation (*OS*, 162).

Engaging in a speaker-listener encounter creates a potential space of hope for both the listener and speaker. This is a hope which signals trust in new forms of knowledge and new forms of relationality. Tied to this is how the listener engages with the creative and idiosyncratic means of expression manifested by the speaker. We need to trust in ourselves and in what the other says in order to create the conditions under which listening and speaking can continue.

Fiumara’s insistence on listening as a structural condition for speech—indeed for language—is an important place to begin to think about our inevitable responsibility as listeners at the moment someone speaks. Each of the points raised above suggests a kind of attentiveness to language that makes possible the opening up of certain questions about the nature of listening as something other than “hearing” another. Her pointed insights reveal the paradoxical structure of listening. In the first instance, she identifies an inherent tension within the listener as someone who participates yet remains removed from the spoken exchange between persons. Second, she astutely renders the problem of self-lessness in terms of how the very point of listening puts the self into risk through the difficulties that the words of another impose. And, finally her placing hope in the trust that the listener must have that a communication will open up possibilities for new thoughts and new relationships means that the listener will have to hang on in spite of her own discomfort. For these reasons her work is of central concern for thinking through how attentiveness structures any communicative relation. However, alone, her work may be too easily rendered into a series of applicable “skills” or “attitudes” or “how tos” that not only structures the condition for speech, but would then structure the actual relation between persons in a manner that would seem to be not open—or responsible—to the play and vicissitudes of the other. In this sense, her work does not go far enough in discussing how listening is an attentiveness not only to speech, but also to the other that speaks, to the other that exceeds the spoken words. That is, while I agree that attentiveness to the words spoken is absolutely crucial to communication, I wish to suggest that responsibility can only emerge as an attentiveness to the trace of the embodied presence who signifies, even when the speaker may be an “absent presence” (such as may be the case in video testimony, newspaper interviews, and the like).

This shift in focus may be seen as one from utterance to utterer; yet this is no simple appeal to humanism, as though there are predefined subjects who speak and who therefore must be attended to. Rather, what I wish to explore, following Levinas, is how this subject is constituted through speech. That is, speaking not only signifies a signified, but at the same time it “reveals” an other beyond my comprehension of the words themselves. Robert Gibbs puts it this way: “The one who speaks the words is intrinsic to the meaning of those words....The speaker appears across the words spoken....She shows herself by not speaking about herself, but by ‘proposing the world’...she accompanies the sign.”³ Moreover, through speaking the otherness of the other is revealed. As Levinas writes, “The alterity of the Other is in him and is not relative to me; it *reveals* itself.”⁴ This revelation, which exceeds the signified, is what is important for our attentiveness and marks our entry into the sphere of responsibility. Listening as attending to this revelation in speech, then, requires a reworking of Fiumara’s position. Turning to Levinas, I reconsider the tensions Fiumara raises above and elaborate upon the specifically ethical significance of each.

LISTENING AND THE LEVINASIAN PROJECT

To put this reading into some context, it is important to remember that Levinas’s project concerns itself with the constitution of the ethical subject as a relation across difference and for this reason his work is central for developing an understanding of responsibility in terms of human relationality. The dynamics inherent to this constitution revolve around the asymmetry of the self-other relation, the irreducible nature of self and other, and the infinite unknowability of the other. Within this constellation of human relationality is situated the listening subject, the subject who emerges in an encounter with the Other and who does not merely “pay attention to” what is said but *attends to* the other, or more appropriately, the otherness of the other.

Although Levinas does not address listening in any systematic way, his rendering of how responsibility is born of a welcoming of the other; of how the other calls me into question; and of how a communicative openness to the other is sustainable, give us entry points for marking out the ethical terms of listening.

First, the tension between participating in and yet remaining removed from the speech of the other indicates an inherent asymmetry between listener and speaker. That is, there is a different and unequal relation, whereby the other’s speech takes primacy in the relation, a primacy which commands the listener to attend. For Levinas, the speaker is marked by “height,” an elevation that renders the speaker as absolutely other to the listener. Summoned by this height, by the mastery of the other, means the listener is capable of receiving something new, of being taught. “The height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching.... The first teaching teaches this very height...the ethical” (*TI*, 171). Moreover, listening insofar as it is a receiving of alterity, is a learning from the other, is a response to the otherness that reveals itself in the face of the speaker. “The face, preeminently expression, formulates the first word: the signifier arising at the thrust of his sign, as eyes that look at you” (*TI*, 178). The face, as expression, then, is not merely the vehicle through which words are spoken but signifies itself as signifier, as having meaning beyond the words spoken. Thus the attentiveness of listener (who is also

a learner) is a response to something more than speech. That is, as a response to the alterity of the other, listening becomes a responsibility in its attentiveness to the face that signifies. This is not accomplished through “understanding,” “assimilating” or “grasping” the other (which would put the listener and speaker on the same plane), but through an attending to the difference “in order to learn what I cannot make my own.”⁵ To return to Fiumara’s paradox, the listener is always removed from the speech of the other, and only “participates” in the speech of the other to the degree that she responds through her attentiveness to the command of the other.

In light of this, Fiumara’s second point takes on even greater significance, for how can we put ourselves aside as we are exposed to the risks attendant to listening? You will recall that Fiumara understands these risks in terms of how the listener must listen to that which is not easy, and which has the potential of disrupting a sense of self. Levinas takes this a step further. It is precisely at the moment when the speaker calls the listener into question, when the listener is put at risk, that responsibility itself is inaugurated. He writes, “in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response—acuteness of the present—engenders me for responsibility” (*TI*, 178). The time of risk, therefore, is the time of birth for the ethical subject. Responding (or listening) takes place in the immediacy of the communicative encounter; the other person’s questioning of me presents an exigent demand to respond. The speaker, moreover, does this not through the content of what she says (that is, she does not literally question the listener), but through the very revelation of alterity she signifies for the listener. “The calling in question of the I, coextensive with the manifestation of the Other in the face, we call language” (*TI*, 171). What Levinas flags here is not only the significance of listening in language (as Fiumara does); rather he signals listening as an ethical condition of language. The surprising ways, then, the listener is called into question, the unpredictable risks in listening, becomes the ethical enactment of language itself, and it is an enactment that is beyond the reach of consciousness. Levinas states: “Being attentive signifies a surplus of consciousness, and presupposes the call of the other. To be attentive is to recognize the mastery of the other, to receive his command, or more exactly, to receive from him the command to command” (*TI*, 178). Here, Levinas posits that attentiveness to alterity is an ethical reception, a conscience that “welcomes the other person as remaining other.”⁶ And it is this welcome that summons me to speak, not as a speaker “in turn” such as we might find in a typical dialogical relation, but as a listener who always holds herself open to the question and command of the other person. In this way, then, it is not so much that the listener is self-less, but that the listener’s response, her attentiveness, must incorporate her own subversion.

Third, the trust and hope which Fiumara identifies as central to the attitude of listening takes on added importance within this ethical framework. The trust required to remain open, to hang on to the words of the other even through difficulty and pain, means that listening must be a continuous, on-going process. It is not as though once I have listened, I have learned from the other and then do not have to listen again. There is a strange interminability to listening insofar as it is a response to another that is never quite finished or complete. This interminable attentiveness to the other is given the term “saying” and becomes the marker of a responsible

response. What matters for a sustained trust and hope in communication does not occur through the content of what one speaks (what Levinas refers to as the said), but through the nearness, closeness, and orientation we bring to the other: the saying is “the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification.”⁷ The saying signifies something beyond the said, and thus our communication always occurs in a double dimension: the said which signifies being (the words which “propose a world”) and the saying which signifies otherwise than being, as the alterity that is not recuperable through language. As Gibbs puts it, the saying is a “deepening of listening.... The attention of listening now becomes a drawing near to another person, which signifies as welcoming the other person.”⁸ Although it may first sound paradoxical, listening becomes a kind of saying in this regard. Listening as saying is an acute attentiveness to otherness of the other, to the “echo of the otherwise.”⁹ Listening, then, is an ethical movement wherein receiving the gift of the other, the listener gives of herself, risking her own suffering. “In saying suffering signifies in the form of giving, even if the price of signification is that the subject run the risk of suffering without reason. If the subject did not run this risk, pain would lose its very painfulness.”¹⁰ Moreover, what one gives in this ethical gesture, is not what is superfluous, but what one needs; it is the very “bread taken from one’s mouth.”¹¹

Trust here becomes a kind of faith in the “fine risk” of communication, where the exposure to suffering leads to the possibility for ethical relationality, for a way to respond to the other that does not violate that which is unknowable about her.¹² This means that one listens not for knowledge about the other, but in order to learn from her, continually. For Levinas, then, hope resides in the possibility of a suffering that is opened up not through cruelty or hatred, but through a profound exposure to the other that constantly risks the rupture of one’s being. For it is only through this rupture that the listener—at this very moment—can give of herself fully.

Rereading the three aspects of attentiveness in Fiumara’s work through these Levinasian terms has the danger of making listening into some masochistic or self-annihilating gesture where the other’s commandment leaves no room for one’s own interest or pleasure (criticisms which are often levied against Levinas’s work). However, I do not think this is what is implied. What Levinas proposes in my view is not a normative discourse for our actions; instead he provokes a way of understanding what may be ethical about listening. Much as Kant sought to lay out the conditions for experience (and not describe experiences themselves), Levinas seeks to lay out the conditions for ethical being. Thus it is not that when we listen we void ourselves of consciousness, but that what is ethical is about attending to the other in ways that exceed the bounds of thought. The difficulty lies in the question: How can I be “awakened to an attending to my attending” in a way that never loses sight of alterity?¹³ How can I attend to my attending so that I hear and respond to the difference upon which more just forms of relationality can be made?

In this regard, I am ultimately concerned with questions of how the attentiveness of listening can be made relevant beyond the dyadic relation between self and other. That is, if listening is part of a responsible response to another, then how might that response contribute to the larger sense of responsibility that social justice education

continually strives for? For it is this larger context that seems to me to be of utmost importance for social justice education.

LISTENING, SUFFERING, AND JUSTICE

It is not that all attentiveness to alterity occurs in the practice of listening alone. There are other ways of being attentive to the alterity of the other, ones that are perhaps more easily amenable to drawing connections to justice. Yet, there is something about listening insofar as it is an attentiveness that opens up the question of suffering and one's response to suffering, that is fundamental, in my view, to the practice of justice—that is, to a practice that is deeply ethical as well as political.

One of the demands of justice, as Jacques Derrida puts it, consists of “a gift without exchange.”¹⁴ We demand justice for others, not so that they will in turn demand justice for us, but because we have an obligation to respond to the suffering of others; we are, as we have discussed above, commanded by the other into responsibility. Justice requires, then, a sense of exposure, a giving up of one's own sovereignty in the service of something larger than our selves; justice depends on our capacity to be moved, to have ourselves shaken up to the point where the lives of others matter. How we listen to the narratives of the other's suffering takes on significant weight for creating moments of sociality that lend support to how justice is conceived within institutional arrangements.

When we try to attend to our attending, we do so, as Levinas insists, because of justice. The entry of the third party inaugurates justice, comparison, and evaluation between others. And thus justice requires a breaking up of the initial self-other relation, and at times a betrayal of the very singularity that marks each other as unique. It is within this frame of betrayal that the listening subject takes responsibility for its “own being.” In this sense, listening, while borne of the relation to alterity necessarily also gestures to the larger social picture when listening is conceived as part of the responsibility one might take for oneself. The key here, however, is that this responsibility for oneself is always held in check by the call of others; we are responsible for ourselves not because we are autonomous, but because we are responsible for others and must be held accountable to our response.

As we have seen, the ethical responsibility of listening stages many risks for the one who listens. In this sense, if listening to stories of suffering occasions the birth of the ethical subject who herself suffers, then those of us concerned with social justice education need to think carefully about what it is that goes on in our classrooms. In the name of justice, then, we create conditions both for pain and response to pain. I think of asking students to listen to testimonies of Native experiences in residential schools, for example, and what that means for how we think we can attend socially to the people whose lives have been affected so horribly. The listening each one of us brings to such narratives occasions the possibility that we will hear not only the horror, but open ourselves up to the traces of the other—as persons different from ourselves—that exceeds the bounds of what they say. It also occasions, of course, that those who listen will be affected by their own suffering in turn. In this regard, education is fundamentally a violent process in its demand that students be moved to the point of such suffering. Rather than fall into

paralysis or despair, I think as teachers we need to attend to our own attending. Listening as an interminable attentiveness to the echo of the otherwise means understanding that the work of justice is equally interminable, and equally demanding. If our educational practices invite suffering even as they seek a more ethical and just response to suffering, then our work must always be seen as dwelling within the spaces of liminality, where we are striving for that which is always deferred, always not yet.

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1. Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, trans. Charles Lambert (London: Routledge, 1990), 30. This book will be cited as *OS* in the text for all subsequent references.
 2. Corradi Fiumara, *The Symbolic Function: Psychoanalysis and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Brian Keys (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 110-11.
 3. Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 39.
 4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961/1994), 121. This book will be cited as *TI* in the text for all subsequent references.
 5. Gibbs, *Why Ethics?* 34.
 6. *Ibid.*, 43.
 7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1974/1998), 5.
 8. Gibbs, *Why Ethics?* 47.
 9. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 49.
 10. *Ibid.*, 50.
 11. *Ibid.*, 77.
 12. *Ibid.*, 120.
 13. Roger Simon, "The Paradoxical Practice of *Zakhor*: Memories of 'What has Never Been My Fault or My Deed,'" in *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*, ed. Sharon Rosenberg, Roger I. Simon, and Claudia Eppert (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 19.
 14. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundations of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, trans. M. Quaintance, ed. D. Cornell, M. Rosenfeld, and D.G. Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 25.