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THE POLITICS OF LISTENING

Possibilities and
Challenges for
Democratic Life

Leah Bassel



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Possibilities and Challenges for Democratic Life

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Why a *Politics* of Listening?

Abstract This chapter explains the aims of the book: to explore listening as a *social* and *political process*. The politics of listening can disrupt power and privilege and harmful binaries of ‘Us and Them’, with the aim of political equality. The chapter explores *why* we should listen and *how*, in adversarial, tense and unequal political moments. This intervention takes place at the boundary of politics and sociology. Key characteristics of a politics of listening are identified – interdependence, recognition and micropolitics – in dialogue with the work of key scholars Les Back, Susan Bickford and Nick Couldry. The ‘where’ and ‘when’ of a politics of listening are outlined: the possibilities and challenges for democratic life in France, Canada, England, that each chapter then explores.

Keywords Les Back · Susan Bickford · Nick Couldry · Political equality · Micropolitics

Martin Luther King once said that riots gave voice to the voiceless; but the voices of those who felt moved to take to the streets in August are still very much unheard. The lessons from the ‘80s should tell us that ignoring them will come at a cost

Stafford Scott, co-founder of the Broadwater Farm Defence Campaign in 1985, campaigner for Tottenham Rights and The Monitoring Group, speaking about the 2011 English riots in (Bassel [2012b](#): 1)

I started thinking about listening while working in France in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For three years, I was doing emergency outreach work with asylum seekers, refugees and homeless people. A lot of this work was in the areas that had previously been affected by what we refer to as riots and, five years later, were to be affected again.

The people I worked with and interacted with every day – young and old, men and women, citizens and asylum seekers or people without papers – had very complicated and intense relationships with the places where they lived, the authorities and institutions in their areas like the police, schools and social services, and strong ties as well as conflicts with each other.

No one took their context for granted, no one was indifferent – some angry, some proud, some resigned, some optimistic. And this was strongly shaped by the way in which other people in French society, and the French state, perceived people living in areas with certain reputations and postal codes.

Then, as a doctoral researcher, I came back to these areas and also travelled to new ‘sensitive urban zones’, as the French state calls them. I learned all over again about the complicated relationships that made up the communities I was living in: these were stories of not only tensions and conflicts but also solidarity, pride and tremendous dynamism – people were *doing things* and building new types of communities in challenging circumstances.

I was also, incidentally, reassured by local state officials that ‘those riots will never happen again’.

Then came the disturbances of 2005.

I was outraged, upset and angry. There was the difficult, violent nature of the events themselves, triggered by the deaths of two young men, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, who were fleeing the police in a suburb of Paris. And then there was the violence of response from the French state and politicians: the imposition of a state of emergency, the tear gas first ask questions later, the use of a colonial era curfew law to control French citizens, the statement by Minister of the Interior and then French President Nicholas Sarkozy calling young people from housing estates ‘scum’ (*racaille*) and suggesting the racialised suburbs be cleansed with a Karcher (a high pressure washer gun) (Libération 2005).

I can imagine that readers will have different views on these issues, diverging from my own. The experience I want to share is not only of my anger but also of feeling powerless. I was angry in my head, or to my

friends, or to my partner. I used academic concepts to analyse and criticise what was going on – but to an audience of about 10 people. What could I do? It's not my country anyway, it's theirs. And I stood by and watched.

When the events of 2011 began in Tottenham, I felt some of those same emotions again. But I decided that this time would be different, and I stopped saying 'their country' and started saying 'we'. Fortunately, others also wanted to act. And so my work began.

I organised a symposium with two colleagues, Gurminder Bhambra and Ipek Demir, to bring together academics, activists and members of the public and think about what happened, and where now (Bassel et al. 2011). Our aim for the day was to create the space for all of us to engage in a dialogue with an audience beyond academia, for members of the public to take part sharing time, thoughts and positive energy. As any student of deliberative democracy will know, achieving conditions for politically productive dialogue is often fraught, if not impossible. To produce what? By and for whom? and so on. This is well-worn terrain. But as I prepared this event, and then observed and participated in it and others around the 'riots'¹ of 2011, I began to worry more about what I wasn't hearing, the silences and omissions, and the intractable nature of a discussion where if you did not immediately condemn 'feral youth' and 'failed parents', you were inaudible or immediately had to assure interlocutors that 'to explain is not to excuse' (in the words of former Labour Party leader Ed Milliband (Milliband 2011)). This resonated very strongly with previous work I had undertaken with Muslim women in France and Canada where, as one Somali-Canadian women expressed it when speaking about Female Genital Mutilation [sic] in Canada, 'I wish white liberal women would stop saving us. They only listen to you if you bash your culture' (see Chapter 2).

What politics of listening, or lack thereof, allows for such silences and inaudibility? When are these barriers that 'partition the sensible' and the audible and create norms of intelligibility broken?² In this essay rather than espousing a grand theory of listening, I explore the micropolitics of listening as a *social* and *political process*, that can create a responsibility to change roles of speakers and listeners and thereby disrupt power and privilege. The characteristics of this politics emerge by attending to the interdependence of speaking and listening (Bickford 1996)³ in different contexts of conflict and inequality, alienation and distrust, and disaffection with traditional politics among the different groups and places explored in

these pages. Listening, then, can be a different way of doing politics when speaking and listening connect.

Scholars across disciplines have repeatedly noted that listening has been relatively understudied in social and political life, in contrast to the focus on voice and speaking.⁴ Listening assumes multiple guises and functions in this diverse body of work, among which are: a ‘responsiveness to difference’ (Connolly 1997); a ‘receptive generosity’ (Coles 1997); the ‘art’ of the sociologist who is humble and attentive to complexity (Back 2007); a necessary methodological commitment with new spaces and intensities of listening that accompanies ‘voice as value’ as a counter-rationality to neoliberalism (Couldry 2010: 15); ‘listening out’ as an attentive and anticipatory communicative disposition in contrast to ‘listening in’, a receptive and mediated communicative action (Lacey 2013: 8); a means to realise the promise of deliberative democracy through structured disagreement underpinned by ‘apophatic’ listening, where the listener temporarily suspends their expectations, views and frames (Dobson 2014: 123, 175).

This book lies between politics and sociology. While it may sound obvious, the first step for me was to stop talking, to shift from speaking to listening, drawing on the sociological reflection of Les Back that ‘our culture is one that speaks rather than listens’ (Back 2007: 7) and our capacity to hear is damaged in the clamour to be heard, to narrate and gain attention. Through the ‘art’ of listening a sociological ear can listen with humility, rather than charging in with a pet theory and fitting complex events within it. Listening with humility and ethical care can provide a resource to understand the contemporary world while pointing to the possibility of a different kind of future. As a careful listener, the sociologist can disrupt the easy essentialisms that dog public and academic debates and open up the false comforts achieved in absolute moral categories where society is written ‘as if it were populated by Manichean camps of either good or bad people, angels or devils’ which can make the people whose humanity one seeks to defend less than human (Back 2007: 60, 157–158).⁵

My proposal does not sit entirely comfortably with Back’s ‘art’ of listening and this tension between the ‘art’ and ‘politics’ of listening is productive. This is not to suggest that the ‘art’ of listening is apolitical but rather that it eschews a politics of manifestos, privileging instead a commitment to interpretation without legislation (Back 2007: 1) and

indeed explicitly calls for ‘unsettling dialogues with humility’ rather than a ‘stirring manifesto’ (2007: 162). In contrast, my task is to explore how it might be possible to act in the face of conflict and inequality, as Susan Bickford (1996) suggests, and *ensure others listen* – that is, that unheard voices are listened to in moments of heightened tension and anxiety.

In the cases I explore in this book, humility and attention to complexity (Back 2007) are not enough. They are invaluable moorings for sociologists in their own work (and, potentially, as ‘public sociologists’ (Burawoy 2005)): who would disparage the need to admit voices and pay them serious attention, challenge claims placed on the meaning of events and hear voices not listened to? Yet while this may make the case for sociology more compelling, it does not always translate into effective and immediate political action, a tension that Back acknowledges.⁶ As we will see in the coming chapters, there is only too often little public space for complexity. Are we asking all social actors to be sociologists? Is there space for a more complicated version of events from the mouths of those who are not counted as legitimate speakers? And do these stories do good political work in adversarial, unequal and binary political space? My concern, therefore, is how listening can be a form of politics undertaken in adversarial, unequal and tense political moments when complexity is endangered and action must take place here and now.

At the same time a politics of listening musn’t lose all its sociology. Andrew Dobson’s ‘apophatic listening’ involves temporary suspension of one’s own categories, frames and expectations ‘with a view (a) to listening to what is ‘actually being said’, and (b) to listening out for the unexpected and surprising’ (2014: 173). Apophatic listening underpins his conception of dialogue as ‘structured disagreement’ and of ‘dialogic democracy’ which ‘takes its time, it engineers silence, it makes sure all voices have been heard – and then it listens again’ (2014: 138). My objective is not to ‘institutionalise’ listening to improve responsiveness of government and deliberative democracy, a more traditionally political approach (Dobson 2014: Chapter 6), but to pay close attention to how power and privilege of speaking and listening might be, sometimes, shaken by the unheard from the bottom up and what the consequences are when this does not happen. I ask throughout the book how careful listening can be connected to politics.

WHY LISTEN?

Before the *how* of a politics of listening, what it actually involves, we first need to consider the reason to do it: *why listen*? The answer is very simple and impossible at the same time: political equality.

This is the central concern running through this book. It is a starting and endpoint of a politics of listening. The politics of listening has an intrinsic value, as a form of recognition that counters vicious exclusions that combine ‘race’, gender, class and means of rendering people socially abject (Tyler 2013) and, for my purposes, unheard.

The agonistic democratic tradition (particularly the work of Jacques Rancière) reveals how people can and do demand to be recognised as speaking subjects in contexts where they are not recognised as political beings capable of ‘voice’.⁷ Through this lens, new modes of listening and new political subjects emerge that breach the existing order and enact equality rather than waiting for it to be bestowed. Some have questioned the apparent ‘social weightlessness’ of this approach (McNay 2014) which considers the source of political action to be outside of existing identities rather than within them (Bassel 2015). We should nonetheless look (and listen) for the demand to be listened to in contexts where one ‘does not exist’, as inaudible, less-than-human and capable only of noise rather than voice. The politics of listening challenges norms of intelligibility,⁸ with the specific purpose of transforming audibility and breaking down binaries between ‘Us’, the audible, and ‘Them’, the silent or stigmatised Others.

Stereotypes of ‘what’ we are obscure public appearance and who we are beyond social categories (Bickford 1996: 96, 101). Muslim women who are only listened to when ‘bashing’ their culture and religion and young men in the ‘riots’ of 2011, as we will see in Chapters 2 and 3, are only two examples. Unequal concentrations of narrative resources and distributions of symbolic power (e.g. in media resources, popular culture as well as formal political spaces) prevent people less well-placed in the symbolic order from giving accounts of their lives in terms that are satisfactory to them (Couldry 2010: 123). Nick Couldry reminds us of the harms of unequal distributions of narrative resources, which limit which voices can be heard, as some voices are more readily recognised in institutional politics (Couldry 2010: 9). The goal, then, is not ‘authentic clarity’ but equality: that no one have significantly less control or be liable to be more distorted, that control of narrative resources not be so profoundly unequal.

How?

How to make people, powerful people, listen and even transform their views and ways of being with others? The *how* of listening matters as much as the *why*. The ‘politics’ rather than ‘art’ of listening makes explicit the context of conflict and inequality in which communication takes place; these are not the conversations of friendly associates (Bickford 1996). Politics means naming the social forces that deflect attention from particular voices, and is necessarily adversarial as well as active and creative.

There are three features of a politics of listening that I will highlight here, which will then unfold in the cases and contexts we will explore: interdependence; recognition and micropolitics. Here we consider their ‘ideal types’ which I will then rework through the actual struggles of different groups. The communicative ethics of listening is both social and political. I primarily consider Bickford’s (political theory) and Couldry’s (sociological) accounts by way of teasing out this relationship. I recognise Bickford, Couldry and other scholars, as fellow interlocutors in the shared pursuit of understanding the potential of listening. But I do not aim for a grand theory of listening in this work as my focus is on micropolitics, social and political practices. My aim is more modest: to consider the politics of listening, and its absence, as it unfolds in specific cases and moments.

Interdependence

As a form of politics, this communicative ethics requires the interdependence of speakers and listeners, who change roles. For Bickford, it lies on Arendtian grounds: it is important to make one’s presence felt in the world and equally attend the public realm, and this reception and appearance depend on others because we act into web of human relationships (Bickford 1996: 57, 62–63, 69). For Couldry, voice must be attended by listening as a social and political practice that is socially grounded, performed through exchange, reflexive and embodied (2010: 91).

This is a high, demanding normative threshold to meet, particularly in Bickford’s account: everyone is responsible for both speaking and listening and they participate as both a speaker and a listener with these roles shifting equally between peers. They are interdependent because ‘neither of us has meaning without the other...I cannot hear you except against the ground of who I am, and you are speaking

not in the abstract, but to me – to who you think your listeners are’ (1996: 147).

This is, therefore, a qualified political project: understanding can only be imperfect and outcomes are fragile and uncertain. Understanding is imperfect and incomplete because ‘we cannot inhabit others’ perspectives or hold their opinions as they do, we are still travellers coming from somewhere else’ (Bickford 1996: 148). The joint task is to create together a concrete means of getting at each other’s perspectives, as close as we can get and ‘create a path as we travel’ (ibid., 148). Political listening creates ‘a path, a passage to another’s experience’, through which ‘I try to experience the world as you construct it for me, not as you do’, and this construction is not beyond criticism or amendment (ibid., 147–148).

Outcomes are fragile and uncertain because while existing processes can be interrupted and redirected and new processes created, we also can’t control the effect of action though we choose it and are responsible for it (Bickford 1996: 153). The activity of political listening does not necessarily accomplish the resolution or transformation of conflict but does aim to create what Maria Lugones calls an ‘us’ by mutual effort (Lugones 1990; in Bickford 1996: 132). The mutuality of speaking and listening can show a willingness to take seriously what the other has to say and to work together to understand (laden with the risk of revealing deep differences and conflict that cannot be easily reconciled) (1996: 157).

Recognition

Yet as we will see, these qualifications do not go far enough: it is precisely the will to create a common ‘us’ that is at risk when harsh binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ only deem some as worthy of recognition, as legitimate speakers. Often, no path to another’s experience is sought. The challenges that I will explore in [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#) instead demonstrate the denial of voice, and of narratable selves (Cavarero 2000; in Couldry 2010: 98–100), a fundamental misrecognition, the denial of one’s status as human.

For Bickford this is because of the role of reception; one cannot demand to be heard in a particular way. Communicating with others is struggle, and action is as unpredictable and uncontrollable as the other citizens with whom we necessarily engage (1996: 130). The crucial distinction is between being regarded as an object or otherwise not heard

(which is antipolitical) and being heard differently than we want to be. ‘The latter is an unavoidable political possibility’ (130).

But the political challenge is to act and be heard in the face of a lack of will for a common ‘us’ to begin with. The odds are stacked up high against being heard on different terms when you are regarded as an antipolitical object, on the wrong side of the dominant binary of ‘Us and Them’ – such as in the 2011 English riots when young black men and ‘chavs’ who ‘become black’ are criminals ‘pure and simple’, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#). There is no path sought here to another’s experience on the part of powerful actors, to ‘experience the world as you construct it for me’, and they do not stop talking to engage in jointly creating an ‘us’ by mutual effort on different terms. They condemn criminals ‘pure and simple’ (David Cameron, BBC [2011](#)).

When listening *does* work and connects to politics, this can be through horizontal⁹ patterns of exchange that seek the path to the experiences of others that we will explore. New possibilities for political equality then emerge which also make vertical claims on powerful actors. Listening can be a source of recognition and a challenge to existing distributions of narrative resources, however open-ended and uncertain, as we will see when considering citizen journalism and other creative mediated practices in [Chapter 4](#). It can function as ‘an act of attention that registers uniqueness of the other’s narrative’ (Couldry [2010](#): 9), and telling a story can be a form of recognition¹⁰ (*ibid.*, 109) through which we recognise our stories as entangled with the stories of others (Ricoeur [1995](#); in Couldry [2010](#): 131). In Canada, this resulted in the change of political slogans and practices of migrant justice activists acting in solidarity with indigenous peoples, as I explore in [Chapter 5](#).

Micropolitics

As I have already hinted, the normative theory of a politics of listening is a very different matter to struggles on the ground. When I explore the micro-politics of listening as a *social* and *political process*, I look at specific places, groups, practices and what happens to the attempt to create a shared responsibility to change roles of speakers and listeners, and to demand to be heard on different terms. This involves exploring ‘everyday politics’ and narrative strategies¹¹ through which new spaces of narrative exchange can be created, to make areas of life politically relevant rather than part of market functioning (Couldry [2010](#): 147–148).

For example, when we explore citizen journalism and creative mediated practices in response to the 2011 ‘riots’ in [Chapter 4](#), we will consider a very specific face-to-face practice of speaking and listening through which the seeds of a politics of listening are planted: questioning, as a kind of responsive effort that is part of collective work, even if everyone ends up disagreeing. Susan Bickford is right that this form of participation can have transformative dimensions, though we should not exaggerate their extent (1996: 163). In the example of a face-to-face encounter between a ‘mainstream’ journalist and the communities he represented, through questioning, all involved recognised perspectives that would not merge, but meaning was still recast by communication (ibid., 165). The nature and meaning of conflict were clarified which, for Bickford, is promising because ‘we may decide what to do *because* of that revealed conflict’ and are not therefore doomed to inaction. The objective, in her view, is to act in a way so future action is possible, sustaining the possibility of actively making sense together (ibid., 170–173). I aim to carry through on the potential of these recast meanings to consider what enduring practices can be built on a very fleeting moment of questioning and making sense together, and how this might happen at a specific time and place led by unheard, stigmatised groups.

Through attentiveness to different sites, scales and actors I will explore these possibilities, however fleeting, as well as when interdependence, recognition and ‘actively making sense together’ are almost foreclosed because of dominant binaries of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’.

WHERE? WHEN? OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

This is some of the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of a politics of listening. The specific politics will unfold through the rest of the book. Here I introduce the strategies, experiments and challenges that we will explore in greater depth across contexts and issues.

In this book I reflect on my work in three places: France, England and Canada. I consider cases and moments I have encountered that raise important questions about the role of listening in political life, broadly understood. There is no intention here to comprehensively study each place as a ‘case’ or to undertake a structured comparison. Instead the aim is to make connections, consider similarities and think more broadly about when listening does and does not connect to politics, and what kind of ‘Us and Them’ is produced or disrupted.

The scale here is often face-to-face¹² because this book is also a robust defence of micropolitics, a reorientation of political practice toward one another, fellow citizens, alongside politics vis-à-vis formal institutions with power (see also: Bickford 1996: 187). This is not an institutional blueprint, an attempt to ‘institutionalise listening’ and engineer and structure contexts (Dobson 2014: Chapter 6). Instead this book recognises political practices of listening which challenge inaudibility and political inequality.

The chapters move through different modes and levels of speaking and listening: in Chapter 2, towards the state as well as horizontally; in Chapter 3, against it; Chapter 4, horizontally ‘citizen-to-citizen’ as well as making vertical claims by ‘speaking truth to power’; Chapter 5, non-citizen to non-citizen, redefining the mutual ‘Us’ that will be created. As I have suggested above, when listening *does* work and connects to politics, this can be through horizontal patterns of exchange that seek the path to the experiences of others. New possibilities for political equality then emerge which also make vertical claims on powerful actors.

At a time of austerity measures and financial ‘crisis’, we start with what a politics of listening requires in tough times. In Chapter 2 we listen to voices at the intersections of ‘race’, class, gender and legal status – and their inaudibility – when speaking particularly *to the state* as well as horizontally. The challenge here is not being heard on one’s own terms, particularly when the norms of audibility are enforced by state actors through law, political discourse and policy.

Among the injuries of austerity are the obstacles encountered when speech and action are undertaken by the unheard who are considered socially abject (Tyler 2013) and unworthy of the means to subsist, let alone capable of political speech that merits listening. The possibility of forcing the kind of ‘turn taking’ Bickford advocates, in which political listeners must be willing to take on roles of speaking and listening equally as interdependent peers, is constantly diminishing in an environment where the crisis is not only financial but also one of solidarity. For example, in the UK benefit protest is not joined up with migrants’ rights instead pitting marginalised groups against one another (Anderson 2013) and local hostilities reflect national harsh political discourse and measures such as the Immigration Act of 2014 and Bill of 2015 in the UK that spreads the task of immigration enforcement to everybody, for example landlords, the spike in racist attacks post-Brexit referendum (National Police Chiefs’ Council 2016; Institute of Race Relations 2016) following a racist campaign led by elite politicians.

The problem is not simply that of political theory meeting practice. This is a facile way to dismiss what are in fact deep social transformations that condition what we, as speakers and potential listeners, even think we are capable of and desire to be. Bickford identifies as essential to political listening the Arendtian capacities to act together, see each other as citizens and co-builders of a common world, and to see others as capable of recognising us (Bickford 1996: 131). But neoliberalism can also act as a solvent to acting together (Couldry 2010) most recently in the harsh divisions of austerity I explore in Chapter 2, with particular challenges for those at the intersections of ‘race’, class, gender and legal status who wish to be heard on different terms.

In this chapter I extend the core argument of my work on the politics of Muslim women’s integration (Bassel 2012a). The key problem of listening I identify in this chapter was best expressed by the Somali Muslim woman I quoted above who was only listened to by white liberal women when bashing her culture. The binary of ‘Us and Them’ that I challenge in this chapter produces two intelligible subject positions: ‘victim of patriarchal practices’ or ‘entrepreneur’. Muslim women interviewed in my research in France, Canada and the UK (Bassel and Emejulu forthcoming) who speak outside of these subject positions often face disbelief, stigmatisation and hostility and the difficulty of getting the balance right between being audible and playing into stereotypes that ‘fight sexism with racism’ (Razack 1995). I compare across contexts to see what broader similarities might be identified alongside sharp differences (e.g. *laïque*, secular France, in contrast to ‘multicultural’ Canada and the UK). Overall, I demonstrate that in each instance there is ample ‘listening’ to those who speak from the two subject positions identified above that reinforce the binary of ‘Us and Them’, but women who make connections to other issues – such as racism, immigration legislation, unemployment and poverty – are inaudible, or delegitimised as deniers of the ‘reality’ faced by women those most vocal in these debates seek to protect.

Here I emphasise the absence of listening with a focus on attempted communication oriented *toward* the state (as well as fellow citizens) and the distortions that occur through hypervisibility and audibility as ‘victims’ or ‘entrepreneurs’, terms set by the dominant.

Chapter 3 explores the experiences of young people, particularly racialised young men, who are ‘only listened to’ and ‘only remembered’ when they riot and act *against* the state – so effectively are not listened to at all. In this chapter I draw on my work with the Citizen Journalism

Educational Trust and my report entitled *Media and the Riots: A Call for Action* (2012b) as well as research in France. I show the challenges of a politics of listening on the ground in highly charged, adversarial and harsh political moments such as the English riots of August 2011 and in France with the riots of 2005 and their aftermath. I argue that the politics of listening must involve both a sense of past and a political future. Memories and connections to the past are only dimly perceived from outside of affected communities, and often to stigmatise and misrepresent residents – especially young people – from ‘notorious’ neighbourhoods. The invisible past connects to the failures of the present, shaping the future audibility of the ‘feral youth’ or ‘*racaille*’ (‘scum’) whose voices were, for the most part, very selectively represented in mainstream media spaces and public debate during and after 2011 and 2005, respectively. I argue in this chapter that young black men and ‘chavs’ are regarded as objects, or otherwise not heard (which is antipolitical), rather than being heard differently than they want to be, which Bickford suggests is an unavoidable consequence of engaging in democratic life.

Chapters 4 and 5 plead for the attempt to aim towards a different kind of interaction, where people can be heard outside of binaries. I consider the possibility of this kind of engagement in ‘non-ideal’ circumstances and explore how practices of political listening have been demanded and practised to oppose dominant binaries and create an open-ended opportunity for new representations to emerge, and for the unheard to tell their own stories on their own terms.

In Chapter 4, I examine both vertical practices demanding that the powerful listen and horizontal practices through which people aim to access each other’s experiences and create a mutual ‘Us’. I focus on the promise of citizen journalism, for marginalised young people in the wake of the 2011 riots and more broadly, and other creative mediated practices. Despite what may appear to be the pessimism of previous chapters, there are many exciting possibilities to explore, arising from the ashes of the 2011 and the harsh divisions of austerity. While recognising the broader matrix of power relations and inequalities in which these practices are situated, I show the potential of different approaches to create an alternative space for young people, and other ‘ordinary citizens’, to enact political equality. I explore the challenge to hierarchies of knowledge and inequalities of voice and audibility through citizen journalism and the political equality enacted through telling your story on your own terms. By challenging the ‘closed shop’ of professional journalism,

narrative resources can also be redistributed, and a politics of listening is practised through the sociability that results from collaboration in creative mediated practices.

In [Chapter 5](#), in contrast to the ‘citizens’ of citizen journalism and creative mediated practices, here we consider the emerging activism in Canada of two groups of ‘non-citizens’, and the infancy of political listening on the part of migrant justice activists in their growing acknowledgement of the need to recast their actions and ideology to recognise and support the struggles of Indigenous peoples. Movements such as No One Is Illegal have begun to reconsider their understandings of borders and citizenship in recognition of the ways in which their actions have been premised on an understanding of sovereignty and territory that perpetuates the colonial legacy that has dispossessed and disenfranchised First Nations groups. This recognition has required the humility Les Back advocates (2007) and a moment of renouncing a speaking role, to adopt instead the role of listening to First Nations groups. This political listening is very much an unfinished business between actors who are relatively powerless. The need for careful listening is acknowledged and, in turn, may reshape the political agenda of No One Is Illegal beyond token acknowledgements to challenge political inequalities more fundamentally, as well as the legitimacy of the Canadian state and the meaning of sovereignty. This politics of listening has a fundamental reach: it recasts the mutual ‘Us’ that is to be created, away from the state and ‘citizens’. Instead, it creates a separate space of solidarity on autonomous terms, and interdependence between relatively powerless interlocutors who generate new norms of intelligibility and relations of recognition. Because these relations do not rely on the Canadian state or society for approval and legitimacy, they offer the potential for a radical political equality.

Through citizen journalism and creative mediated practices, and solidarities between migrant justice and indigenous activists, we see what promises a politics of listening can keep: a sustained ethic of communicative engagement that is for fleeting moments politically equal, or at least a space to come face-to-face with underlying inequalities and contradictions by changing roles of speakers and listeners and experiencing the world as another constructs it for you. These political practices serve as sources of recognition, interdependence, relationships and creativity for open-ended transformations in ways of being and acting together, breaking binaries of Us and Them.

NOTES

1. As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), for some communities in England the more culturally appropriate term is ‘uprisings’.
2. On the ‘partition of the sensible’, see Jacques Rancière (2000), on ‘norms of intelligibility’, Judith Butler (1993).
3. I am greatly indebted here and throughout to Susan Bickford’s excellent work on ‘political listening’, in which listening is not in hierarchical competition with speaking, or indeed with any of the other senses. As Bickford suggests, the aim is not to elevate one but to understand speaking and listening, as she does, as responses to each other, in a dynamic and interdependent relationship (Bickford 1996: 144).
4. See: Back (2007), Bickford (1996), Coles (2004), Couldry (2010), Dobson (2014), Lacey (2013), Nancy (2007); for a useful general discussion see Schiff (2015). On ‘sensory democracy’ more generally, see Green (2010).
5. This and the following two paragraphs are drawn from (Bassel 2013).
6. He discusses the ‘precious slowness’ of the pace of sociological research and cautions against the temptations of punditry (2007: 19). The tension is between the political necessity for intervention and sociological value in taking time to think carefully and critically (162).
7. Rancière (1995, 1998).
8. On the role of aesthetics more generally, see (Tyler 2013: 215); (Panagia 2009).
9. My use of the term ‘horizontal’ is not meant to mask other inequalities, which I explore in each case.
10. It is beyond the scope of this short essay to resolve debates over the normative stance and role of recognition (see: Fraser and Honneth 2003; Markell 2003; McNay 2008). In this book the focus is on claims to be heard as political equals, which are articulated on the basis of different, context-specific understandings of recognition that are explored in each case. The constant is the underlying demand for political equality.
11. Couldry cites the concept of small acts (Gilroy 1996), and different habits and traditions of political greeting (Iris Young 1990: 200), (2000: 145).
12. See Dobson (2014) on the problem of ‘scaling up’.

They Only Listen When We Bash Our Culture

*I wish white liberal women would stop saving us. They only listen to you if you bash your culture.
Somali woman interviewed in Canada (Bassel 2012a)*

Abstract This chapter explores debates over gender, culture and religion, for example headscarves and the use of religious arbitration (so-called ‘sharia tribunals’) in France, England and Canada. Minority women, most visibly Muslim women, are often only audible when speaking as ‘victims’ or ‘entrepreneurs’. Norms of audibility shaped by a binary division of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ mean minority women are selectively audible: when conforming to racist stereotypes of victimised Muslim women or, under austerity in third sector spaces, when speaking as social entrepreneurs, a neoliberal language which comes at a cost. It is a struggle to connect listening to politics and be heard on one’s own terms, to engage with others as equal, interdependent peers, when speaking both to the state and horizontally to ‘fellow citizens’.

Keywords Minority women · *Laïcité* · Veiling · ‘Shari’a tribunals’ · Religious arbitration · Secularism · Anti-racism · Austerity

In this chapter I begin to consider how listening does, and does not, connect to politics in contexts of conflict and inequality. Specifically I consider debates over gender, culture and religion, for example regarding headscarves and body covering, the use of religious arbitration or so-called ‘sharia tribunals’, forced marriage, in France, England and Canada. The

binary of ‘Us and Them’ that I identify in this chapter results in minority¹ women, most visibly (but not exclusively) Muslim women, often being heard as ‘victims’ or ‘entrepreneurs’. As this chapter will show, women at the heart of these debates who do not decry their status as victims often face disbelief, stigmatisation and hostility and the difficulty of getting the balance right between being audible and playing into stereotypes that ‘fight sexism with racism’ (Razack 1995). And despite different rhetoric, citizenship itself is increasingly marketised (Somers 2008) making audible those who master the language of the market, for example through ‘social enterprise’ and worth/moral value through work (Anderson 2013).

This may be familiar ground to some readers. Ann Phoenix has brilliantly described this as being caught between ‘normative absence and pathological presence’ (Phoenix 1987). Of interest here is what happens when listening comes to the fore. We listen to voices at the intersections of ‘race’, class, gender and legal status and uncover inaudibility when speaking particularly *to the state* but also horizontally. The challenge here is not being heard on one’s own terms, particularly when the norms of audibility are enforced by state actors through law, political discourse and policy.

The much discussed concept of ‘intersectionality’ brings to light the simultaneous and interacting effects of systems of oppression on the basis of gender, ‘race’, religion, class, sexual orientation and national origin.² Intersectionality has proven to be a powerful critique of debates, policies and practices that rely on a fiction of mutually exclusive categories, such as ‘woman’ or ‘black’, which in fact mask intersecting and interacting relations of domination and inequality, power and privilege. Here, intersectionality also provides a way also to think about the politics of listening.

Intersectionality can help uncover inaudibility, or selective audibility, when minority women are ‘only listened to’ and when it is a struggle to be heard, at certain constellations of ‘race’, class and gender. Many women at the centre of debates over gender and culture/religion experience simultaneous and interacting forms of oppression that reinforce and shape each other. Using this concept it is possible to question the way one intersection, between gender and religion/culture, is naturalised, legitimised and routinised in public debate over others, making only some subjects and speakers audible who speak of ‘good Muslims’ or ‘imperilled Muslim women’ (Razack 2007). I have argued elsewhere that the framing of debates can be questioned drawing on intersectionality: rather than ‘is multiculturalism bad for women’ (political scientist Susan Okin (1999) and many others), instead ‘who decides what’s bad for women?’ (Bassel

2012a). Why just gender versus culture/religion?³ Now I consider what kind of listening takes place in the process of making these decisions and framing political debate, whether the role of speaker and listener changes and if listening connects to politics in a way that enables reciprocity, mutual recognition and political equality, moving beyond boundaries of ‘Us and Them’ to create a ‘mutual Us’ through communicative struggle.

I explore the kind of speech that is heard in debates over gender, culture/religion: when minority women stay within binaries of ‘Us and Them’. Listening to minority women who speak outside of the hypervisible and audible positions of ‘victims’ and ‘entrepreneurs’, terms set by the powerful, is rare. It is a struggle to be heard, in both attempted communication oriented towards the state and towards ‘fellow citizens’. I explore the testimonies of grassroots activists, particularly at the intersection of ‘race’, class, gender and legal status, who struggle to be listened to on more equal, less distorting terms, and for roles of speakers and listeners to change.

The challenges of being listened to *politically*, not only when adhering to dominant binaries of ‘Us and Them’ that script intelligible speech only for victims or entrepreneurs, are explored through a range of vantage points including the following: the testimony of women in the French *banlieues* (Bouamama et al. 2013); Women Against Fundamentalism (Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis 2014); and minority women activists in England, Scotland and France (Bassel and Emejulu *forthcoming*).

Overall, I suggest that in each instance there is selective audibility. There is ample ‘listening’ to those who speak from the positions identified that reinforce the binary of ‘Us and Them’, but women who make connections to other issues – such as racism, immigration legislation, unemployment and poverty – are often inaudible, or delegitimised as deniers of the ‘reality’ faced by women who are deemed to need protection. This is not to say that minority women do not speak from other positions, or are never heard. It is that they speak ‘against the grain’ (Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis 2014) which textures patterns of audibility and norms of intelligibility. It is to identify listening, as well as speaking, as a site of struggle and a source of transformation.

SECTION 1: THE VICTIM

‘Saving brown women from brown men’ (Spivak 1988) and the ethnocentrism that underpins a portrayal of voiceless, stereotyped, racialised victims (Mohanty 1988) have been powerfully condemned by postcolonial theorists,

activists and women of colour particularly within feminist movements to demand that ‘white women listen’ (Carby 1997) and not project their own experiences, particularly of white middle-class heterosexual women, as universal. Recently, sexual equality and freedom have been identified as the hallmark of ‘the West’ in new ways, not least through ‘homonationalism’: the racialisation of homophobia as the preserve of the ‘barbaric’, often Muslim, other in contrast to the civilised West (Puar 2007).

In all three examples I will now discuss – in France, England and Canada – I will suggest that a colonial frame of ‘saving brown women from brown men’ persists in these debates, and conditions the politics of listening, specifically the extent to which minority – particularly Muslim – women’s speech is distorted. The lack of a politics of listening results in inequality, whereby women at particular intersections of ‘race’, religion and gender are not heard on terms of their choosing and must negotiate a very tight space to avoid further appropriation and distortion. While strategy and negotiation are an inevitable consequence of engagement in democratic life, which is conflictual, some voices are systematically more distorted than others and some speakers consistently have less control of narrative resources (Couldry 2010). The roles of speaking and listening change on very unequal terms, not through processes of interdependence, reciprocity and recognition. The desire for a mutual ‘us’ in the name of which powerful speakers can then be made to listen cannot be assumed.

In France, Eric Fassin identifies a ‘sexual democracy’ at work in which French republican *laïcité*, or secularism, is the best way to guarantee liberty and equality, particularly that of Muslim women who must be saved from their communities (Fassin 2010). Women’s activism has been caught up in this ‘sexual democracy’ in key instances in the last 15 years which we will now explore.

The social movement *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises* (NPNS) [Neither Whores Nor Submissive], made up of women of ‘immigrant origin’ who live in difficult social and economic conditions in housing estates across France, has mobilised against violence against women, for example in 2002, Sohane Benziane was burnt to death near her home in Vitry sur Seine in the Parisian suburbs, other young women have been gang-raped, all of which have been well-publicised through autobiographical texts.⁴ Leaders of this movement – including Fadela Amara who was Secretary of State in charge of Urban Policy (Politique de la Ville) (2007–2010) – oppose wearing of the headscarf, ‘an intolerable form of discrimination against women’ (*Ni Putes Ni Soumises* 2005).

Women within this movement and others advancing similar positions in France have been highly audible. Mayanthi Fernando notes that they⁵ ‘all claim to be ideally suited to speak on behalf of their sisters silenced by patriarchal Islamic intégristes, and all have achieved levels of political success and media saturation unprecedented for women of colour in France’ (Fernando 2013: 151). This includes political office, bestselling autobiographies and easy access to public platforms. Some members of this movement, young women of North African origin, were chosen to represent ‘Marianne’, the icon of the Revolution. They wore the Phrygian revolutionary cap rather than the veil and their photos were mounted in front of the National Assembly. For Fernando, these ‘Mariannes’ are then appropriated by the state and its mostly male legislators to ‘assume the function of protecting women, and especially brown women, who are then asked to pay homage to their protectors’. They become exhibits of the emancipatory Republic (2013: 153). Critics have argued that as a result ‘dominated women’ are no longer spoken for, instead ‘it is sufficient to put in their mouths the words that dominant feminists do not dare speak, offering them a youth and freshness they could not have hoped for’ (Guénif-Souilamas 2004: 84).

Amara and other members of NPNS did identify other issues – aside from the tension between women’s rights and the headscarf – but they were quickly pushed away. They also attempted to draw attention to poverty, unemployment and racism (Fernando 2013: 152; see also; Bassel 2012a). But in spaces such as the Stasi Commission (convened by Bernard Stasi at the request of President Jacques Chirac to consider the question of *laïcité*), they are unintelligible. Only one veiled woman appeared before the Commission – Saïda Kada, co-author of *L'une voilée, l'autre pas* (One veiled, the other not) (Bouzar and Kada 2003) and activist in the association ‘French women and politically engaged Muslims’ – and while she demanded that discrimination and economic vulnerability be considered as well as oppression within the family/community this position was not reflected in the report of the Commission. As John Bowen notes, unlike the responses by commissioners to unveiled social actors, none of the questions asked of her were informational and all concerned the headscarf. The commissioners did not seek to learn about how girls and women might respond to the law or the challenges Kada identified (Bowen 2007: 118). These women’s voices were amplified only when denouncing the violence of men in their communities.

These are the distortions of the colonial frame, in which the most audible speech is that through which brown women demand to be saved

from brown men. As Fernando notes, in her autobiography, Amara ‘calls on the same state she has just criticised to take the initiative against this menace [the headscarf]: “The state, guarantor of secularism, must protect its fundamental values and responsibilities at school and elsewhere”’ (quoted in Fernando 2013: 152).

This audibility comes at the price of political appropriation and distortion. While male rage is at first identified by Amara as the result of poverty and exclusion, this quickly fades away: the deterioration of gender relations is turned into a matter of secularism, or of a lack thereof, nothing more (Fernando 2013: 156). ‘Books like hers – written as they are by unimpeachable native-experts – have thus helped to forge a political consensus about the need to secure France against the inroads made by Islamic communitarism [‘communitarianism’ in the sense of the French fear of ‘ghettoes’], and to re-establish the authority of the Republic by banning the headscarf’ (Fernando 2013: 157).

This cooption of women’s voices is, in turn, accompanied by the stigmatisation of men, particularly of Maghrebi origin, which resulted from these campaigns (Guenif-Souilamas 2004: 85, 2005). The figure of ‘garçon arabe’ is invoked who is unable to control his uncivilised nature and to internalise the rules of civility and decorum that exist between men and women according to the *exception française* and whose nature pushes him to a violent heterosexuality requiring young women to wear the foulard to protect themselves (Guénif-Souilamas 2004: 85, 2005).

Attempts to address gender violence on these terms are highly resonant and audible. As Mariam Ticktin describes it, this is the question of

how to recognize the very real violence that the founding members of NPNS...endured...how they can speak their violence without being effectively silenced or co-opted by nationalist or postcolonial projects. By being rendered audible only through stereotypes, survivors of violence are silenced as subjects and as anything else other than victims (Ticktin 2008: 884).

The focus for our purposes here is not only on these women as speakers but on their resonance with listeners, with ‘Us’. This resonance is beyond their control, the unpredictable role of reception that is central to democratic life. But, as Bickford reminds us, it is one thing to be heard differently than one wants to be. It is quite another to be systematically and disproportionately distorted with stigmatising implications for oneself, other women and for men in ‘the community’. What then does it say

about the ‘Us’, in the ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’, that these voices are so resonant? Political equality does not result from this type of listening, as the roles of speakers and listeners change on very unequal terms: one is listened to if asking to be saved on highly racialised terms – a brown woman to be saved from brown men – but not as anything else. Other intersections, with class and ‘race’, are briefly mentioned then rendered inaudible, though they define experience and, as we will now see, some political action.

The colonial frame is not total, resulting only in inequality and inaudibility. Other actors have mobilised to create a counter narrative in which it is possible to speak and be heard on different terms: both to challenge the 2004 law itself at the same time as the broader colonial frame. For example, ‘Mouvement des Indigènes de la République’ [Movement of the Indigenous of the Republic] was created in 2005 following the ban on religious signs in state schools. Members include public intellectuals, activists and French youth of African, North African and Caribbean origin, born and raised in France. It became a political party (in February 2010). One of the catalysts for its creation was the passage of the 2004 law banning religious signs in state schools, described in the movement’s founding declaration as ‘Discriminatory, sexist and racist, the anti-headscarf law is a colonial law of exception’ (Indigènes de la République 2005) (see Bassel 2014) in what ‘was a colonial state and remains a colonial state’ (Indigènes de la République 2005). They challenge what Anne Stoler terms ‘colonial aphasia’ (2011). It is this ‘aphasia’ that makes establishing the links between racism and colonialism so difficult (Pereira 2010: 87)⁶ and their challenge has faced resistance (Bancel et al. 2010; Bayart 2010; Blanchard et al. 2005).⁷

When political listening is brought to the fore at particular intersections of ‘race’, gender and religion, it becomes clear how audibility is produced for some intersections to be articulated – gender and culture/religion – and not others, the violence of class and ‘race’. This production of audibility reinforces the national imaginary and erases the colonial nature of this frame. To demand political equality is to demand to be heard and recognised equally and differently from the ‘Us and Them’ binary that dominates the headscarf debate and the politics of ‘race’, gender and citizenship in France more broadly. In the case of the Indigènes, the choice is to name the colonial nature of the frame and demand recognition of political existence as Indigènes *of* the Republic, to return its paradoxes to it. This connection is difficult to make in a context of ‘colonial aphasia’, though the role of history is gradually shifting in French public life (Stoler 2011). The extent to which the Indigènes can build a future political

platform beyond this discursive intervention (Lotem 2016) is an open question, raising the challenge of how these fleeting moments when some actors demand to be listened to on different terms can be connected to longer term politics (a theme I return to in Chapter 4).

At the time of going to press, this prospect appears grim. Statements by the French political class to justify the ‘burkini ban’ demonstrated the spread of ‘sexual democracy’ and state racism to new spaces – the beach – and adult women’s bodies, whose physical presence in the water is linked seamlessly to the threat of terrorist attacks. The city of Nice banned clothing that ‘overtly manifests adherence to a religion at a time when France and places of worship are the target of terrorist attacks’ and its mayor wrote in a letter to the Prime Minister Manuel Valls that ‘hiding the face or wearing a full-body costume to go to the beach is not in keeping with our ideal of social relations’ (The Guardian 2016). While the ban was then overturned on 1st September 2016, it is nonetheless illustrative of the harsh binaries of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ that continue to shape discourse and govern space.

In the United Kingdom, examples of very different types of organisations and mobilisation illustrate similar awareness of the traps of being heard only through dominant ‘Us and Them’ binaries. Members of Southall Black Sisters (SBS) – the not-for-profit organisation established in 1979 to meet the needs of Asian and African-Caribbean women – describe the difficulty of developing a practice that is simultaneously ‘anti-racist and anti-sexist’ (Patel 2002: 136). Members of SBS have opposed trading the rights of the individual woman for the collective rights of the community, though this balance ‘is difficult to get right within a racist society’ (Patel 2002: 136). This is particularly true of the ways in which immigration control intersects with sexism and racism, and they have resisted the use of racist immigration law in the name of minority women’s rights (Siddiqui 2014: 149).

Their sister organisation, Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF), fought to carve a space that does not fight fundamentalism with racism, yet remains true to the core principle of opposing fundamentalism across all religions. Reflecting back on the movement, which has since petered out, activists describe the challenge to

tread the precarious pathway of ‘washing one’s dirty linen in public’ and be anti-racist; to make a distinction between secularism as a separation of religion and the state and secularism as a blanket rejection of any religion or spirituality; to combine all this with a critique of the ethnic ‘community’, the local, the national, the global (Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis 2014: 40).

WAF members describe proving time and again that they could speak out about religious absolutism and simultaneously challenge racism and imperialism rather than give way to it (*ibid.*, 19), for example against the War on Terror *and* fundamentalism (*ibid.*, 21).

When the politics of listening is foregrounded, we see the very deliberate negotiation of this tight space to manoeuvre and from which to be audible outside of the binary of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’: to avoid the appropriations and distortions of ‘saving brown women from brown men’ while at the same time washing ‘dirty linen’ in public. This has been action very much *Against the grain*, as the title of the SBS publication indicates, and one rife with conflict and the need to act now in unequal and binary space. There is a broader message about the politics of listening at the intersections of ‘race’, class, gender, religion: the struggle was to demand recognition on terms that diverge from dominant debate, attempting to create a mutual ‘Us’ which draws lines in the sand from which it is possible to make sense together and clarify the nature of disagreement. But the ‘Us’ produced cannot be as broadly inclusive as what Bickford imagines. It was enough of a challenge to create an ‘Us’ within WAF,⁸ let alone across broader faultlines where recognition and interdependence are absent. WAF and SBS activists have had to speak against many other actors who simply do not wish to engage in interdependent, communicative struggle. Sharing the responsibility to speak and listen is not seen as possible or desirable, this is instead a zero-sum game in which power is lost. Actors do not accept that they do not have meaning without the other and must make sense together. It is difficult to connect listening to politics: to make people listen and engage in creating a path as we travel, to assume the desire for a mutual ‘us’ beyond obvious political allies.

In Canada,⁹ at the same time as the headscarf debate in France, a controversy broke out over the proposal by a small Muslim organisation in the province of Ontario, the Islamic Institute of Civil Justice, to establish a Darul-Qada (judicial tribunal) that would provide arbitration for family and business matters using Islamic law or Shari’a¹⁰ following the example since 1991 of Jewish rabbinical courts (*beit din*) and Ismaili Muslim arbitration panels under the Ontario Arbitration Act who made decisions in a number of areas, including custody and inheritance (Boyd 2004: 55–60).¹¹ Advocates of the inclusion of Muslim groups under the Act protested against the unequal treatment of some Muslim groups; opponents decried the potential for abuse of women’s rights. In September 2005, the Premier of Ontario, Dalton McGuinty declared an

end to all religious arbitration, which will have no legal effect and will not be enforceable by the courts.¹²

Women's organisations, particularly Muslim women's organisations such as the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW), played a central role in opposing religious arbitration. However, this mobilisation was resonant with the larger belief system and its existing cultural myths and narrations, and an opportunity was missed to shift norms of intelligibility.

This was certainly a demand to be listened to but not one that challenged the Us and Them frame itself. Rather it reinforced it, resulting in the unequal, restricted ability of other women targeted by the debate to participate and be listened to on different terms, naming class and 'race' (immigration law) as central to their experiences. Constructing minority women as victims is a way for some activists and their advocates to bring minority women into the public sphere and highlight their inequalities as a public issue requiring policy action. However, minority women pay a very high price for this victimhood identity in that they must accept the role of a passive and vulnerable object in order to be seen and heard by policy-makers, which is in tension with an ideal of political equality that I suggested is central to a politics of listening as a form of recognition, interdependence and reciprocity.

According to Anver Emon, the most glaring omission in the debate was the absence of a substantive discussion of 'shari'a' itself. The debate 'never actually addressed Sharia as a rule of law system or recognised the potential for legal change in a way consistent with Sharia values' (Emon 2008: 418). There was more similarity than difference between proponents and opponents 'who were often those who had left countries like Pakistan and Iran, where the concept of Sharia is embedded in the political discourses of post-colonial nation state identity' (Emon 2008: 418–419). A colonial framing of shari'a was reproduced by all parties.

In contrast to France, Canada is a 'white settler' context that is 'without any colonial history in the Muslim world, and thus without the large Muslim migrant populations such histories usually produce' (Razack 2008: 21). Large-scale immigration is a part of the myth of nation building (Castles and Miller 2009), a myth that silences the colonial genocide and dispossession of Indigenous peoples as we will discuss in Chapter 5. In the white settler society Orientalism permeates both in opposition and support of 'shari'a' and, in Emon's view, this postcolonial contestation of identity had a profound effect on what was even determined to be at stake in the debate.

The binary of Us and Them structured exchange and patterns of audibility. This shows as much about who the listeners are as the speakers: insensible to ongoing histories of colonialism, and reproduction of the colonial frame. Whether speaking for or against religious arbitration, the audible positions are those which adopt this understanding of ‘shari’a’ and which do not admit broader claims that encompass intersections with other social locations.

I return here to France to illustrate other social locations that could not be named in the headscarf debate and which are recognised with difficulty until this day: ‘race’ and class. In a brilliant political statement, the women of the *quartiers populaires* [the working class neighbourhoods] of Blanc-Mesnil (located in the Seine-Saint-Denis department of France that is portrayed by media, politicians and in the popular imagination as an infamous site of disorder and failure) along with sociologist Saïd Bouamama speak against the stigmatisation of their young people, their area, their own identities and the distortion of their voices.

They organised as a collective and published the book *Femmes des quartiers populaires. En résistance contre les discriminations* [Women from the popular neighbourhoods/quarters. In resistance against discriminations] (Bouamama and Femmes du Blanc-Mesnil 2013).

They identify a triple penalty they face: ‘The first is being from *milieu populaires*. The second is to be of immigrant background. And the third is to live in Seine-Saint-Denis’ (2013: 115). The discourse of elite actors, both in mainstream media and by politicians, has characterised them as ‘dirty’, as ‘savages’ and in the infamous words of former president Sarkozy as ‘scum’ [*racaille*] to be cleaned with a Karcher, a high pressure water gun. ‘Our lives are already violent enough for us not to be further insulted... This violence of words that we experience does a lot of damage. It hurts our dignity and barbarises us. The cup is overflowing. We can’t take it anymore’ (2013: 180–181). Tired of hypervisibility alongside inaudibility, they have written this book because

many people speak about us... We worked on this book because we wanted to speak ourselves about our life, our situation, our difficulties. No one knows better than us what we are living. No one knows better the situation of the *quartiers populaires*. *La parole* [voice] has to come back to those who concretely live the situation of *popular quarters*. We don’t want to wait to be given *la parole*. We wanted to simply take it (2013: 200).

‘Race’ and class are invisible due to an inordinate focus by powerful elites on the supposed danger of the headscarf for *laïcité*, along with discourses over

failed parents and ‘communautarisme’ (the French fear of ‘ghettoisation’) all of which ‘have only one objective: to cover up poverty, which is growing, discriminations which are increasing, the inequalities between rich and poor which have never been as great’ (2013: 115). The latest iteration of these debates at the time they were writing was an almost farcical focus on halal meat as the indicator of their lack of integration. They respond powerfully:

Our concern is also with the development of racism which the media and some politicians voluntarily maintain. After the debates over the headscarf, we had pell-mell the minarets, national identity, stripping nationality and now we have halal meat. Honestly, now that we are in the Presidential campaign, they talk to us about food. Who are they kidding? We do indeed have problems with food but this has nothing to do with it being halal or kosher. Our problems with food are to fill our children’s plates, to have meals of better quality. Our problems with food are the prices of food which continues to rise while our income stagnates, meaning dwindles (ibid., 202)

When they are ‘listened to’ by the state this is experienced as a form of violence. In one case, when called to the school for a school appeals commission [commission d’appel] for her daughter one woman explains: ‘I found myself with twelve people I didn’t know: a real tribunal. I felt almost at fault for having wanted to exercise my rights. Of course, no one explained the way the commission worked, or the role of those present. They said to me directly: “We’re listening.” It was so violent. The parents who don’t go are not crazy. They feel judged so they give up on it [ils renoncent]’ (ibid., 112).

They demand that instead of looking for scapegoats, political elites attend to real problems: poverty, unemployment and racism and not young people, the *quartiers* [troubled neighbourhoods] and immigration. ‘It is not only the young people who were in revolt in November 2005 who are enraged. We also can’t take it anymore, even if we don’t express it the same way’ (ibid., 180–181).

This *cri de coeur* is only dimly perceived in a debate that continues to amplify the voices of minority women as victims of men in their communities. The violence of racism and poverty fade into the background. Rather than rioting (which is the subject of the next chapter), these women identify an alternative space in which to speak in a relatively undistorted way – their book – created through local partnerships and with an ‘expert’ male sociologist, which can name the limits of binaries

that structure media and political elite representations, who only are interested in them at election time.

The listening that does take place is highly unequal (the violence of the school ‘hearing’). These women describe persistently being spoken for, decided for and treated as objects, ‘dirtied’ by stigmatising media coverage and elite discourse, rather than political equals who speak on different terms that name degradation and poverty of their neighbourhoods, being ‘outside of the Republic’, the violence of ‘race’ and neoliberalism. The unequal concentration of narrative resources Couldry identifies is clearly at work, concentrated in the hands of mainstream media and political elites, which does not enable these women to give an account of their lives in satisfactory terms. Their book attempts instead to create a different space that tackles these inequalities of voice as well as material inequalities. But who else reads, and listens? These women narrate their lives on different terms but their ‘narratable selves’ (Cavarero 2000) and the uniqueness of their narrative are denied outside of this small, protected space. What other politics can this narration then be connected to, when the entanglement of their narratives (Ricoeur 1995) with those of the political elites, media, general public are rejected unless they position themselves as to be saved?

SECTION 2: THE ENTREPRENEUR

A second figure emerges from my collaborative work with Akwugo Emejulu, where we focused on minority women’s activism in and around third sector¹³ organisations in England, Scotland and France.¹⁴ Here I focus particularly on England and Scotland, where we found that minority women needed to position themselves around the imperative to act as entrepreneurs, as neoliberal citizens who are audible and intelligible when mastering the language of the market. This enterprising action plays into binaries of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ around the ‘deserving’ entrepreneur who is redeemed through work and innovation, in opposition to ‘scroungers’ who are considered socially abject (Tyler 2013) and unworthy of the means to subsist let alone capable of political speech that merits listening.

Enterprise and entrepreneurship are oftentimes used as synonyms for innovation, risk-taking and dynamism. However, the market-derived meanings for these terms have been obscured and these ideas are being promulgated with little thought about what is invoked (and what is silenced) in their use.¹⁵ Through the call to ‘social enterprise’¹⁶ – a concept and practice which emerged within the European third sector in

the 1990s and has always been deeply connected to it (Defourny and Hulgård et al. 2014) – minority women are increasingly interpellated as *enterprising agents*, at the same time as being treated and represented as social problems (Phoenix and Phoenix 2012), ‘failed mothers’ (Allen and Taylor 2012) and victims of their communities (Bassel and Emejulu *forthcoming*). Initiatives identified in the course of our study included highly gendered activities such as community cafes, crèches and sewing groups which, as participants argue, were to serve as sources of activity, employment and income for individual women but also organisational survival for third sector organisations who are increasingly competing with each for limited funding, a competition which undermines solidarity (Bassel and Emejulu 2014).

Our study showed that ‘enterprise’ is an inescapable frame for action regardless of the various organisational or individual positions that are adopted. But it also engenders a multiple subjectivities, some of which are resistant and/or subversive. Norms of intelligibility shift in significant ways.

Some minority women working in third sector organisations described this as coercion: ‘you do it or else you fail’, meaning that organisations close and jobs are lost. In this view, social enterprise is a vehicle for reprivatizing social care with a further twist, where migrant (and minority) women must in turn commodify their labour as key agents of social reproduction under often exploitative conditions. These participants ask: who enterprises? At what cost and on whose terms? This is coerced, the only path to recognition as a respectable and audible actor.

For others acceptance was pragmatic asking instead: with what support? Where before minority, especially migrant, women were understood as ‘natural leaders’ who ‘tend to find their way for some reason better’, as agents of social and political transformation, a deficit approach is adopted identifying what migrant women *lack*, in enterprising terms (e.g. lacking IT skills, business, language skills). In order to be audible and intelligible a language and lens of enterprise are often employed by minority women advocates themselves as a necessity in working with migrant women, in ways that are quite different to past relationships.

Finally, the language of enterprise could also be used to create feminist, subversive spaces. Through her social enterprise, one migrant woman provides welfare rights advice to single migrant mothers in response to dramatic cuts to legal aid (Sommerlad and Sanderson 2013) and in the landscape of xenophobia.¹⁷ Rather than simply informing them of the nature of changes

to their benefits, she tells women they have rights, can appeal decisions, join campaigns, and do something. Social enterprise also provided spaces of face-to-face encounters between white and minority groups – for example through community cafes, around food – in otherwise segregated communities in Scotland, and a way to experience political efficacy in a public sphere where otherwise minority women are interpellated as victims or social problems.

This range of responses points to the centrality of enterprise in determining audibility and norms of intelligible action: it is difficult to act and speak outside of ‘enterprise’, and its attendant binaries.

Some minority women did question whether social enterprise always reflected concerns of women targeted or of organisations desperate to survive, calling the underlying power relations into question. What is significant is the way the norm of ‘enterprise’ conditions audibility and intelligibility, for minority women and more generally, and how ‘we’ listen.

When a politics of listening is conditioned by norms of enterprise, inequality results, alongside subversion and resistance. This is because there is little space for ‘narratable selves’ who do not enterprise and endorse neoliberal norms. These are despised, reviled and rejected figures rather than political equals who should take turns in speaking and listening, as interdependent peers. The legitimate, dominant account of their lives that minority women can give is often couched in enterprising terms or victimhood which, as Couldry notes (in his case speaking of the resources provided by popular culture), are not satisfactory or authentic.

In and around third sector organisations, the space for narrative exchange is diminished (and, as Couldry observes drawing on Richard Sennett (1977), there is a general loss of public space as the site of such exchange (2010: 124)). These spaces that were once imagined as ‘third’ spaces are now increasingly marketised, leaving little possibility for narratives that make other parts of life politically relevant rather than part of market functioning (Couldry 2010). The normative universe is framed as one of enterprise. We have questioned the extent to which social enterprises are open to being shaped by minority women and their interests rather than vice versa (Bassel and Emejulu [forthcoming](#)), and I point here to the troubled relationships between the politics of social enterprise and the politics of listening. This ‘enterprising’ frame can shape ethos and priorities and what is desirable while also being used as a means to an end and a site of subversion. But it conditions ways of speaking and relating to one another. When enterprise becomes the dominant language

and minority women, and all of us, translate ourselves in this register, there is a cost. This is also a cost to listening as a source of political equality, when permeated by enterprise.

The possibility of forcing the kind of ‘turn taking’, interdependence and mutuality which Bickford advocates in which political listeners must be willing to equally take on roles of speaking and listening as interdependent peers is constantly diminishing in an environment where the crisis is not only financial but also one of solidarity. The third sector organisations we studied are increasingly in competition with one another in an environment in which in the UK, benefit protest is not joined up with migrants rights instead pitting marginalised groups against one another (Anderson 2013); local hostilities reflect harsh national political discourse and measures such as the Immigration Act of 2014/ Bill of 2015 that spreads the task of immigration enforcement to everybody (e.g. landlords), and the spike in racist attacks post-Brexit referendum (National Police Chiefs’ Council 2016; Institute of Race Relations 2016) following a racist campaign led by elite politicians.

In the struggle against austerity, social movements opposing austerity have yet to prove the practice of political listening in their own ranks. As this minority woman activist in London expressed this, anti-cuts movements do not always make space to listen to minority women as architects of anti-austerity in their own right:

From the perspective of Black women who perhaps are political, who do want to campaign . . . if they look at the face of the anti-cuts movement and see it’s quite male-dominated that may put them off getting involved, may not give them the confidence to get involved and just because it’s an anti-cuts movement doesn’t mean to say there’s not racism within it.

In this participant’s view there is a particular category of white activists to whom:

You have to explain it and spell it out to them. Now these are supposed to be people that are supposed to understand the history . . . about the context, about what true equality means and what oppression is, and they will say they know that and they will give you all the good headlines or put the good quotes out there but the reality is they don’t really understand it because otherwise you wouldn’t have to remind them over and over again, and you wouldn’t have to spell it out, so it is quite a struggle, it’s quite tough . . . They get very defensive because they don’t want to actually admit they’ve got it wrong.

I insist on the need for political listening all the way down, at the grass-roots heart of whatever alternatives to neoliberalism are on the horizon. This means recognising listening as a site of struggle within these movements, and an essential base from which *first* ostensible political allies must act together to co-build a common world, before engaging foes in the conflictual struggle for a mutual ‘Us’. We will return to the potential of listening within social movements in [Chapter 5](#).

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I considered how listening does, and does not, connect to politics in contexts of conflict and inequality. In debates over gender, culture and religion I identified a binary of ‘Us and Them’ that results in two figures who are hypervisible and audible, but also distortions: the victim and the entrepreneur. Across different contexts – Canada, France, England, Scotland – I identified listening, as well as speaking, as a site of struggle. The colonial frame of debates over the headscarf and ‘shari’a tribunals’ is unacknowledged or rejected; speaking of male violence *and* the politics of ‘race’, and neoliberalism is inaudible. Neoliberal enterprise enters third sector spaces, framing priorities, desires and ethos and acting as a ‘solvent’ on the desire to act together (Couldry 2010), on different terms. Enterprise, as a norm of intelligibility, comes at a cost for political equality for those who do not or cannot act on its terms. The possibilities of a ‘counter rationality’ (Couldry 2010) are undermined when speaking and listening are recoded around enterprise, for action that once upon a time would have had a very different name and employed another vocabulary, such as *social justice* or *rights*.

The minority woman victim is listened to when asking to be saved, asking ‘Us’ to protect her from ‘brown men’. The minority woman entrepreneur joins ‘Us’ the productive, innovative and deserving neoliberal citizens who are morally redeemed through work in contrast to the ‘scroungers’. The possibilities for political listeners to engage with each other as equals, and as co-builders of common world who speak and listen as interdependent peers, seem questionable. Solidarity is at risk even in spaces of ostensible allies, such as movements against austerity, when minority women may not be recognised as equal speakers and listened to. The danger is of mobilisation over austerity affecting ‘the white working class’ and immigration legislation, local and national hostility and far right movements affecting ‘migrants’, as separate entities who are

pitted as rivals rather than similarly subject to state power (Anderson 2013).

Listening to minority women who speak outside of the hypervisible and audible positions of ‘victims’ and ‘entrepreneurs’, terms set by the dominant, is rare. It is a struggle to be heard, when speaking particularly *to the state* as well as horizontally to ‘fellow citizens’. The challenge is of selective audibility, not being heard on one’s own terms, particularly when the norms of audibility are enforced by state actors through law, political discourse and policy.

In the following chapter we consider the experiences of young people, particularly racialised young men, who are ‘only listened to’ and ‘only remembered’ when they riot and act *against* the state – so effectively are not listened to at all.

NOTES

1. With my use of the term ‘minority women’ I draw on my work with Akwugo Emejulu in which we refer to women who experience the effects of processes of racialisation, class and gender domination as well as other sources of inequality, particularly hierarchies of legal status. The term ‘minority women’ implies a process in which women at these intersections are ‘minoritised’ and, in turn, forge their own political identities and strategies drawing on the resources these social locations offer. See Bassel and Emejulu ([forthcoming](#)).
2. For example see Crenshaw (1991), Hill Collins (2000), Hancock (2007a, b), Yuval-Davis (2012). For an overview, see Bassel (2016).
3. The confusion over the boundary between ‘culture’ and religion is well documented. For example, Moira Dustin and Anne Phillips discuss the tendency to represent cultures as more distinct from one another, less marked by internal contestation, and more determining of individual behaviour than is ever the case, and the ways in which culture has been merged with religion (Dustin and Phillips 2008: 408–409).
4. See for example: (Amara and Zappi 2003, 2006); (Djavann 2003); (Otokoré 2005).
5. Women like Amara and Chahdortt Djavann (an Iranian dissident and writer).
6. Black British feminists have claimed these connections for a long time: ‘a privileged interlocutor of the similitudes and differences that constitute postimperial Englishness’ (Samatrai 2002: 2). These connections are expressed with the slogan: ‘We are here because you were there’.

7. In the winter of 2012, Bouteldja was acquitted of the charge of ‘anti-white racism’ in a civil procedure launched by the far-right ‘General Alliance against racism and for the respect of French and Christian identity’ (LexTimes.fr 2012). Critics have asked whether, in invoking the stigma of ‘indigène’ within the Republic to challenge exclusion and affirm political existence, stigma is challenged or reproduced (Robine 2006); (Lindgaard 2007)? These arguments must be situated in a strong backlash in France against the movement, certainly, but also against any mention of colonialism, ‘race’ or identity.
8. For some activists, with the growth of anti-Muslim racism it has become ‘more difficult to confront Muslim fundamentalism while at the same time dissociating from racists and fascists – who also use the language of secularism, feminism, homophobia and human rights to gain their political ground’ (Patel 2014: 64). Others experienced divisions within WAF: they found there was a core within the group who would never challenge Muslim fundamentalist organisations (Saghal 2014: 95); some African Caribbean feminists who joined during the Rushdie Affair left after because they felt WAF did not sufficiently regard the importance of Christian churches as a sanctuary and organising space against racism.
9. The following four paragraphs are adapted from Bassel (2012a).
10. Natasha Bakht notes different definitions and the strength of reactions to the term shari’a by actors in the debate, alternately a ‘value-laden and all-encompassing term’ and ‘code of conduct for Muslims’ (Bakht 2004: 1).
11. Arbitration is considered to be a private system entered into by agreement and parties are permitted to choose any ‘rules of law,’ including religious law, provided they are in accordance with provincial and federal law. ‘The act gives great freedom to parties to design their own processes... Section 32(1) [of the Arbitration Act] allows the parties to choose any “rules of law,” including religious law’ (Canadian Lawyer Magazine 2005: 45).
12. Though in fact they were not ‘illegal’, just not enforceable.
13. The difficulty of defining this term is well documented in the literature (see, for example, Martens (2002), Vakil (1997), Choudry and Shragge (2011).
14. See Bassel and Emejulu (forthcoming).
15. We define enterprise as encompassing the values of ‘individualism, personal achievement... and the assumption of personal responsibility’ (Diochon and Andersons 2011: 96). Entrepreneurship is the independent actions of self-interested individuals for profit making activities (Anderson and Smith 2007).
16. The concept of social enterprise, that is business solutions to social problems, has gone hand in hand with neoliberal policies taking hold in Britain since the 1990s. This is not a new phenomenon (Kamat 2004; Evans et al. 2005; Choudry and Kapoor 2013).
17. The Immigration Bill 2015 compounds the restrictions of the Immigration Act 2014 and, among other things, requires landlords to check immigration

documents or face fines/imprisonment, creates a new offence of illegal working, makes it a criminal offence to hold a driving licence while undocumented, requires banks to take action on accounts of undocumented migrants, restricts support for rejected asylum seekers, removes redress in cases of deportation. Both the Bill and Act have been widely denounced by migrant and race equality advocates for making landlords, universities and others border officials, generating more discrimination against migrants as well as racialised British citizens, creating further divisions and tensions in communities that are open to exploitation by far-right groups.

‘We Are Only Remembered When We Riot’

‘We are only remembered when we riot.’

Stafford Scott (in Bassel 2012b: 12)

Abstract This chapter analyses two instances where young, racialised men have only been listened to and remembered when they act *against* the state: the 2011 English ‘riots’ when young black men and ‘chavs’ were portrayed as criminals ‘pure and simple’ and the French *émeutes* [uprisings] of 2005 where young men in the suburbs were referred to as ‘*racaille*’ (‘scum’) by the then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy. They are seen as antipolitical objects, in contrast to being heard differently than we want to be which is part of political life (Bickford 1996). The binary of ‘Us and Them’, dictated by a law and order agenda, leaves no space for listening to a political reading of events that may require change from ‘Us’. In the process the past is lost.

Keywords 2011 English riots · French *émeutes* 2005 · *Racaille* · Chavs · Sarkozy · Media

As we have already seen, connecting listening to politics is open-ended and uncertain endeavour. For Susan Bickford this is because of the role of reception; one cannot demand to be heard in a particular way. Communicating with others is struggle, and action is as unpredictable and uncontrollable as the other citizens with whom we necessarily engage (1996: 130). The crucial distinction she makes is between being regarded as an

object or otherwise not heard (which is antipolitical) and being heard differently than we want to be. ‘The latter is an unavoidable political possibility’ (1996: 130).

In this chapter we explore the former, being treated as antipolitical and voiceless, through two examples where young people, particularly racialised young men, are ‘only listened to’ and ‘only remembered’ when they riot and act *against* the state: the 2011 English ‘riots’ when young black men and ‘chavs’ who ‘become black’ were portrayed and described as criminals ‘pure and simple’ and the French *émeutes* [uprisings] of 2005 where young men in the French suburbs were infamously referred to as ‘*racaille*’ or ‘scum’ by the then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy and which, as I explained in the introduction to this book, brought me to the study of listening. To be misrecognised as antipolitical and voiceless is political inequality by definition.

I begin with the term ‘riots’ itself. At the Media and the Riots conference of November 2011 held in London, just months after Tottenham and many parts of England burned, one conference participant pointed out that for many present the term ‘uprisings’ may be more culturally appropriate (Bassel 2012b).¹ This term ‘riots’ must be ‘heard’ with scare quotes around it because of the histories and traditions of struggle in which the events of 2011 were embedded. There is a politics of listening at work immediately. Debates over what is and what is not a riot (Bagguley and Hussain 2008: 5)² are themselves often quite revealing of the extent to which the speaker is willing to be also a listener, open to the world as others construct it for them and recognising them as political actors, let alone equals. These debates only too often reveal racism, identified by journalist Raven Rokia, writing in *The New Inquiry*:

The term ‘riot’ implies disorganization, running amok with no end means, goals or demands outside of individual gain. Rioting implies you’re not on the streets for a greater cause or a greater advancement. It implies you’re more interested in looting a store for a television than breaking and taking property as a subversive act. It reproduces the racist claims about black subjects: that they are violent, ignorant, selfish, and depoliticized (Rokia 2013).

In both examples, we will see the difficulty of being heard when speaking outside of the dominant (though not universal) binary of ‘Us and Them’, dictated by a law and order agenda that leaves no space for any form of explanation or political reading of events. In this binary space there is little

recognition of other narratives as equal, or any attempt to consider the world as someone else constructs it for you, to make sense together in recognition of intersubjective equality. Instead there are '*racaille*' and criminality 'pure and simple', an antipolitical rejection of racialised young men and women as objects who are not worthy of this recognition and who are not part of making sense together. This denial is a denial of humanity, of other selves as narratable (Cavarero 2000), and a refusal to listen in a way which may require change from 'Us' rather than condemnation (Section 1).

In the process the past is lost. Because 'to explain is to excuse', there is little history or memory other than that which characterises some neighbourhoods and young people as notorious and outside of the decent political community. Instead we will see the past in the present of 'uprisings' and the difficulty of making these connections (Section 2).

SECTION 1: ON NOT BEING POLITICAL

In Clichy-sous-Bois, on the outskirts of Paris, 17-year-old Zyed Benna and 15-year-old Bouna Traoré of Maghrebain and African origin died after attempting to evade a police patrol on 27 October 2005. They climbed into a power station and were electrocuted. A third young man, 17-year-old Muhittin Altun, of Turkish background, fell from his motor scooter while fleeing and was taken to hospital with severe injuries.³ Following a protest in front of the local police station, 20 nights of violence ensued including attacks on police, police stations and public institutions, and the much-publicised burning of cars. A state of emergency was declared in some areas based on a colonial-era law dating from the Algerian war.

The 2011 English riots were sparked by the death of Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old black man who was shot dead by police in Tottenham on 4 August 2011. Following a demonstration in front of the local police station, arguably the worst riots in recent British history took place (Suttermöller 2014: 40). Duggan's death was the initial catalyst for the unrest that followed in this area of North London and spread to other parts of England. Media headlines at the time suggested he was involved in a shoot-out with police, a statement that was later proved not to be true. The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) announced on 9 August 2011 that Duggan did not fire at police before they shot him, contradicting information the Commission had previously

provided to the effect that shots were exchanged between Duggan and the police, which ‘inadvertently’ misled the media. In January 2014 a public inquest jury concluded by a majority of 8 to 2 that Mr Duggan was lawfully killed by police. This was followed by the verdict of lawful killing upheld by three High Court judges following an appeal by Duggan’s mother, Pamela Duggan (October 2014). Mark Duggan’s family then won the right to launch a judicial review into the inquest’s finding that he was lawfully killed, after challenging the 2014 High Court ruling (October 2015).

The extent of damage, number and nature of arrests, injuries and casualties, policing strategies have been discussed and compared at length⁴ as have the explanations: ‘consumer’ v ‘race riots’ and ‘defective consumers’ at that (Bauman 2011), ‘issueless riots’ first explored in the 1970s by Gary Marx (Marx 1970). The aim of this chapter is not to compare the ‘riots’ as events or to vie for a competing explanation, but to consider the type of listening that did and did not take place during and after these events.

In both contexts political leaders responded very quickly with statements that reinforced a law and order agenda and a sharp division between Us, the decent law abiding citizens, and Them.

Four months before the events of October 2005, Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy made his infamous proposal to clean ‘la cité’, the council estates, with a Karcher, a high pressure water gun, and whatever means necessary after the death of Sid-Ahmed Hammache, an 11-year-old boy who died in the crossfire of conflict between two gangs.⁵ Two days before the *émeutes*, on October 25, he unleashed the violent term ‘*racaille*’. He steadfastly maintained this stance and vocabulary stating ‘They are thugs [voyous], scum [*racailles*], I insist and say it officially [je persiste et je signe].’ He further explained:

I would like someone to come and tell me to my face, a person who dares to hit a firefighter, who throws stones at a firefighter, who throws a washing machine at a firefighter from the top of an apartment building, what do we call them? Young man? Monsieur? We call him a thug because he is a thug... When I say they are *racaille*, they call themselves that. Stop calling them young people (Le Monde 2005).

The image of ‘scum’ to be blasted away with a Karcher cascaded throughout the *émeutes* and beyond, escalating violence and marking the responses

of young men in the *cités* [the 'notorious' housing estates] who then figured in coverage by British journalists. They attributed responsibility to

Les keufs, man, the cops. They're Sarkozy's and Sarkozy must go, he has to shut his mouth, say sorry or just fuck off. He shows no respect. He calls us animals, he says he'll clean the *cités* with a power hose. He's made it worse, man. Every car that goes up, that's one more message for him (Waddington and King 2012: 128).

Other people living in these stigmatised areas, such as the women of the *quartiers populaires* of Blanc-Mesnil of the previous chapter, feel that they are treated as uncivilised, as savages to be educated, and that 'insecurity' and riots are used as an excuse to impose elite priorities. 'It is as if they are at war with the *quartiers populaires* and they want to transform us and not physical space' (2013: 133). They link this attitude on the part of 'pouvoirs publics' [literally 'public powers', as in public authorities] to Sarkozy's infamous pronouncement made eight years before they wrote their book: 'when a President of the Republic speaks about the *quartiers* as "*racaille*", he authorises and encourages people to treat us differently [à part], to discriminate against us' (2013: 151). There are multiple discriminations, at the surface the police, but which build on deeper structures:

You cannot understand these *révoltes* if you forget all the discrimination around employment. Of course, the first cause was the police and its crimes. But this is added to a long experience of discrimination... There, you understand that you are not considered as French like the others, that you do not have the same opportunities as a White person... It is all that which exploded in November 2005... If you do not find work, it is linked to your way of presenting yourself and not to racism. They make you know that you alone are responsible for your situation. The victim is once again turned into the guilty one. And if you insist, they will tell you that you are paranoid and with their new vocabulary this translates into 'you victimise'. Honestly in these situations you want to throw everything up in the air, you become explosive. In fact there are only two options: you internalise it or you explode. In both cases you lose (2013: 157).

This insult is one in a series that assault everyone's dignity, not just young men. 'What does one clean with a Karcher? Buildings or objects that are very dirty or rusty. This shows the image he has of people living in *quartiers populaires*. For him we are dirty [*crasseux*], rusty, and we have

to be cleaned. I felt very insulted. It is not because we are poor that we are dirty. He did not think for a single second of what this insult would provoke in us' (2013: 175–176).

In the law and order agenda there is no space for recognition of young men of the *cités* (or their mothers, sisters, neighbours) as political equals, they are apolitical objects who are not considered able to speak or worthy of recognition. Indeed, as this woman observed, they and other inhabitants of the *cités* are not even factored in as interlocutors – which is recognised as a strategy to ‘take the votes of the Front National’. Young men are not being heard at all, rather than differently than they want to be, and are also denied the status of victims. They are not being heard at all because they are considered to be objects.

As a result, rage explodes:

Words like ‘*racaille*’ or ‘Karcher’ have a heavy cost. The young people experienced this as a provocation and a challenge. You do not touch people’s dignity like that without consequence. These insults played a role in the *révolte* of November 2005. Not only do young people in *quartiers populaires* experience poverty and discrimination, not only do they suffer from scandalous police practices which result even in death, but on top of this they are insulted. The result is that the rage is held back until one event causes it all to overflow. And then it is too late and it spills over (2013: 175–176).

In the UK Prime Minister David Cameron was quick to establish the ‘law and order’ agenda with his characterisation of the 2011 rioting as ‘criminality, pure and simple’ (BBC 2011). This was followed by portrayals of ‘feckless criminal underclass’ or ‘mindless, feral youths’ that had to be brought to justice (Sutterluty 2014: 42; Benyon 2012: 14; Fox-Williams and Malik 2012: 52). Professor David Starkey infamously opined on BBC’s flagship news and current affairs programme *Newsnight* that a ‘Jamaican patois’ had intruded upon English cities transforming these places into foreign territories (Phoenix and Phoenix 2012: 62). For Starkey, deviant ‘black culture’ is contagious and has been adopted by some white working-class people who he refers to with the pejorative label of ‘chavs’ to argue ‘what has happened is that a substantial section of the chavs have become black. The whites have become black’ (Phoenix and Phoenix 2012: 100). This explanation brings together ‘racialisation, gender and (implicitly) social class’ (ibid., 64) but always to pathologise

blackness without addressing underlying the social, economic and political causes of the riots (*ibid.*, 65). Instead, the binaries of 'Us and Them' that a politics of listening seeks to challenge are reinforced.

I began this book with this quote from Tottenham activist Stafford Scott:

Martin Luther King once said that riots gave voice to the voiceless; but the voices of those who felt moved to take to the streets in August are still very much unheard. The lessons from the '80s should tell us that ignoring them will come at a cost (Bassel 2012b).

This is the failure to recognise basic humanity, let alone to recognise other narratives as equal and to consider the world as someone else constructs it for you. No sense is made together in recognition of intersubjective equality, there is no acknowledgement that others are needed to make sense and co-build a common world. In these dominant framings – which are dominant, not universally held – there are '*racaille*' and criminality 'pure and simple', an antipolitical rejection of racialised young men particularly – whether Maghrebi, Black, 'chavs' – as objects who are seen through a moment of rioting, and only through rioting 'making trouble' in order to be heard (Morrell et al. 2011: 46 in; Bassel 2012b: 21). This denial is of humanity, of other selves as narratable (Caverero 2000), and of listening which may require change from 'Us' rather than condemnation.

Mainstream media coverage of the 2011 riots served often as this voice of moral condemnation alongside political elites and in the process elaborated 'race', as Stuart Hall has famously argued, constructing 'a definition of what *race* is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the "problem of race" is understood to be. They [the media] help to classify out the world in terms of categories of race' (Hall 1982). At the Media and the Riots conference, many participants denounced these processes and the 'Us and Them' binaries they produced. Keynote speaker Gus John, professor at the Institute of Education and long-standing activist in the area of race and education, summarised mainstream coverage as 'simply disgraceful' (Bassel 2012b: 13). Journalism professor and conference speaker Sarah Niblock identified precisely this binary in media coverage, 'There was too much emphasis on law and order and an authoritarian stance, driven by too much reliance on official sources and the binary notions of good versus bad and us versus them' (Bassel 2012b: 19). Conference participants were angry and dismayed by unhelpful,

unbalanced media coverage of events beginning with the misrepresentation of the facts surrounding the death of Mark Duggan. For many, this was only the most recent example of complicity between state and media – where media are even perceived by some as ‘being the mouthpiece of the police’ (Bassel 2012b: 12) – to misrepresent the facts surrounding the death of a black man at the hands of police, as well as the profile of the victim.

Coverage was described as stigmatising, a source of incorrect information that may have even disinhibited/incited rioting, overly reliant on official sources, a vehicle for consumerism, and a voice of moral condemnation where coverage took the form of what John referred to as a ‘moral crusade’ that was not colour-blind (Bassel 2012b: 13). As Times sports journalist Tony Evans described it in a speech to the National Union of Journalists, some journalists [in this case Sky reporter Mark Stone] walked around ‘as if they were headmasters’ filming young people on their phones and asking them if they were proud of what they had done. For Evans:

That’s not journalism. Journalism should be the pursuit of the truth and the pursuit of knowledge. And we weren’t seeing knowledge there. We were getting the vicarious thrills of being in the middle of a riot... we have this situation where the government now is allowed to move the dialogue on and suddenly blame gangs. And the newspapers are rushing to report this, and agree with it... you don’t need to get beyond the surface, you can just point fingers... there is an instinctive fear in some journalists – quite a lot of them – to actually confront the preconceptions of the mass of the British public... It’s easier to go along with public perceptions. But that’s not our role. Our role is to come up with the truth. (quoted in Bassel 2012b: 16)

Political listening can be a vital, creative practice that can crack open this binary space of moral condemnation, as we will explore in the next two chapters. But this engagement must be continuous and sustained because it is very easy for binaries to be reproduced. For example, the ‘Riot Clean-up’ movement, the mop-and-pail brigade that was coordinated through social networking sites and assembled large numbers of people to clear debris in affected areas, was broadly acclaimed as a positive, civic response to disorder which evoked the ‘blitz’ and wartime resilience (Jensen 2013).

Yet its coverage did not necessarily counter more generally negative representations of young people in the media. Media reports did not reflect that more young people were involved in the clean-up operation

than the riots, and a submission to the Leveson Inquiry by the Youth Media Agency 'highlighted the "discriminatory attitude of the media towards children and young people during and following the riots"' (Riots Communities and Victims Panel 2012: 84).

As Gus John argued in his keynote address at the conference, 'Riot Clean-up' coverage also arguably served to divide people into 'good' and 'bad' members of society, the latter of whom needed to be swept away:

The language used by the media typifies a process of 'othering'; a process which provides the nation and not least the police and the courts with a justification for treating that section of the community as the 'them' from whom 'we' must be protected, as the alien wedge against whom the state must act on behalf of 'us', the 'them' from whom every decent citizen in Cameron's 'big society' must distance themselves, preferably armed with broom and pail. (Bassel 2012b: 14)

Even seemingly positive opportunities can be diverted into reproducing binary conceptions of 'Us and Them', and fail to enlarge the space in which riots, rioters and underlying inequalities and challenges can be identified and addressed. It therefore becomes all the more important to develop practices of resistance in which unheard people have the chance to oppose these discourses and represent themselves, to tell their own stories on their own terms.

There is little space to speak outside of the 'respectable Us' and 'feckless, criminal Them' binary that instead reinforces inequalities of voice, and the underlying inequalities of austerity and neoliberalism that act as a solvent to acting together (Couldry 2010). This is as true for young women as young men. In the 2011 riots, in contrast to previous riots, there was what Kim Allen and Yvette Taylor describe as an 'exceptional focus on the young female rioters, most notably 18-year-old Chelsea Ives who was jailed for two years after being found guilty of burglary and violent disorder. The public interest in Chelsea was undoubtedly informed by her status as a "talented athlete" and 2012 "Olympic Ambassador"'. For Allen and Taylor, 'Working-class, black, female selves are always-already failing and, increasingly, such failings must be repudiated, corrected and left behind in order to become intelligible neoliberal subjects' (2012: 16).

It is this intelligibility that is particularly important to a politics of listening in the harsh binaries of Us and Them that followed the 2011 riots. As Allen and Taylor discuss, in her letter to the playwright Gillian Slovo, whose play

‘The Riots’, included first-hand testimony from people involved in the events, Ives reacts to media representations of her as ‘council estate scum’. She says, ‘The public seem to automatically place me in an unnamed category for thick, low-lived [sic] individuals which is not me at all. I haven’t even had the chance to speak for myself [. . .] The public just need to know I’m only accountable for my actions and not everyone else’s and I’m sorry’. Her mother, Adrienne Ives, who turned her daughter over to the police, made similar public statements and refused pathologising representations. Allen and Taylor suggest that this might be interpreted as ‘a sign of agency, an articulation of oppositional meaning which disrupt negative representations of black (and working-class) femininities . . . However, these statements are also replete with repentant, confessional tones, reminding us of the historical legacy in which the working-class have been forced to “tell” themselves in particular ways in order to prove themselves as respectable, reflexive, moral “subjects of value” (Skeggs 2002, 2004). Thus, attempts at ‘fighting back’ can also operate to reinforce rather than disrupting existing relations of power and economies of personhood’ (Allen and Taylor 2012: 17).

When Chelsea makes the chance to ‘speak for herself’ in this letter she (and her mother) reject pathologising representations but endorse the binary and explain, ‘tell’ themselves, using the terms of the dominant. Apology and repentance are audible and respectable for ‘Us’ to make sense of her actions. This is not to second-guess her motivations and the sincerity of her statement, but to point to the kind of speech that is audible and desirable: one that does not require change from ‘Us’ or making new kinds of sense together.

This is also not to suggest that these were the only voices and responses. Important attempts were made to understand why young people were rioting and to contest the dominant framing of people and places as notoriously lawless, with French *banlieues* portrayed by media and some politicians as no-go zones of drug turf wars and delinquency, and representations of Tottenham, where the riots began, as a place with notorious associations of disorder (Murji and Neal 2011: 4.2). In the following chapter I consider specifically the ways in which citizen journalism provided this kind of space, alongside initiatives such as the LSE Reading the Riots project⁶ in England and the mobilisation by the social movement *Indigènes de la République* and others to protest against the colonial French state.

The looting, attacks on police and public institutions, burning of cars, also inevitably meant different things to different people and no attempt is made here to generalise intentions and attribute particular political aims.

For some rioting was expressed as the direct outcome of being unheard and not having any access to the powerful, so on torching cars: 'How else are we going to get our message across to Sarkozy? It is not as if people like us can just turn up at this office' (Waddington and King 2012: 129). In England one strand of explanation was that rioting was a response to inequality, and the distance between haves and have nots. One of the interviewees in reporter Tom Parmenter's Sky News extended interview *Looters* explained that he had targeted a particular store because of the 'disrespect' shown to him when he approached its staff looking for work; another interviewee explained that he looted Boots to get things for his baby because without work he was unable to pay. These testimonies highlight what other reports describe as 'the gap between what was portrayed in the media as representing the "good life" to which people should aspire, and what young people in their communities could actually have, given the poverty of income and opportunity' (Morrell et al. 2011: 48). Others cited deprivation, poverty, unemployment and cuts to the educational maintenance allowance (EMA) (James 2011; Morrell et al. 2011; Bassel 2012b).

The extent to which the English 2011 riots were 'race riots' – a term that has for a long time been unspeakable in public debate in difference-blind France – became a key feature of debate and media coverage, not least because of the visible participation of young white men. Indeed, 'some migrant and/or black and minority communities were valorised as responsible and moral while some white and black and minority groups were vilified as criminal and morally deviant' (Murji and Neal 2011: 4.3). What emerges from the riots, then, is the familiar racism of disorderly 'others' as well as new complications of super-diversity (Vertovec 2007) that result from contemporary formations of multiculturalism in England (Murji and Neal 2011: 4.3). Binaries of 'Us and Them' may, therefore, have become more complex in 2011 discourses than in previous disturbances of 2001 or the 1980s. However, as I will argue in the next section, these histories are connected. Aisha and Ann Phoenix analyse particular examples of post-riot commentary, including David Starkey, and argue for the 'recursiveness of old racialised discourses and hence their availability to be drawn on (often in new ways)' (Phoenix and Phoenix 2012: 63). Starkey in fact 'gives recognition to the multiethnic nature of the riots and to the unacceptability of old ways of racialising social dissent while determinedly racialising them' when he says 'the chavs have become black. The whites have become black... He thus essentialises whiteness as good (and English) and blackness as its antithesis' creating 'afresh an old racialised hierarchy of belonging' (Phoenix and Phoenix 2012: 62–63).

The challenge for connecting, listening and speaking outside of these binaries is that immediately and ferociously ‘to explain’ became ‘to excuse’. For Nicholas Sarkozy, when speaking two years later about repeated violence in the *banlieues*, very simply ‘in wanting too much to explain the inexplicable, you end up excusing the inexcusable’.⁷ In his statement to the Commons about the riots, Labour politician Ed Milliband began with a justification of explanation, that, ‘to seek to explain is not to seek to excuse. Of course these are acts of individual criminality’. But ‘we’ have a duty to ask ourselves why there are people who felt they have nothing to lose and everything to gain from looting and vandalism. The only way to find a solution is to hear from ‘our communities’:

What the decent people I met on the streets of London and Manchester told me, and will tell the prime minister, is that they want their voice to be heard. They want us to go out and listen to them. And before saying we know all the answers, or have simple solutions, we should all do so. Can the prime minister explain how those in areas affected will have their voice heard? Will the prime minister agree that there must be a full independent commission of inquiry, swiftly looking at what has happened in recent days, and what lessons we need to learn. Not an inquiry sitting in Whitehall hearing evidence from academic experts but reaching out and listening to those affected by these terrible events. They deserve and need to be heard (Milliband 2011).

Here the Us and Them binary is again at work, this time embedded *within* the promise of listening. The ‘decent people’ are to be listened to and deserve to be listened to in contrast to the ‘individual’ criminals, individual and criminal because this was not in any way political action. This reproduces rather than breaks with the stigmatising representations we have identified above. And it reproduces the status quo. This is a form of resistance to any account that may require change from ‘Us’ particularly when demanded from ‘below’, an unwillingness to live the tension Bickford identifies between commitment and openness and to recognise the world as indeterminate and to be co-built.

SECTION 2 – ON NOT LISTENING FOR THE PAST

In this refusal the past is lost. Because ‘to explain is to excuse’, there is little history or memory other than that which characterises neighbourhoods and young people as notorious and outside of the decent political

community. Media coverage often excludes the history of communities in which deep-seated anger and collective memory are attached to deaths in custody in a number of controversial cases that family members feel have not been satisfactorily investigated. John Solomos notes the ways in which connections were made in the wider community between Mark Duggan's death and other examples of police deaths in custody with highly charged rumours circulating 'more generally about the role of the police in relation to local black communities generally and black youth in particular' (Solomos 2011: 3.5; Benyon and Solomos 1987).

Across time and space – the uprisings of the 1980s in England and of 2001 in the north of England, the *émeutes urbaines* [urban uprisings] repeated since the 1970s in France (Vaulx-en-Velin, Les Minguettes, Villeurbanne, Vénissieux) including since 2005 – for some communities uprisings or *révoltes* are a response to police, whether to repeated stop and Search/controlle d'identité [identity checks] (Bouamama and Femmes des Quartiers du Blanc Mesnil 2013: 85), death by police shooting/because of being chased by police, death in custody. In both cases, this was the catalyst for violence and expressed by some as a matter of survival and dignity. At the Media and the Riots conference of November 2011, Tottenham community activist and conference speaker Stafford Scott showed conference participants a picture of a group of black people and asked that they identify them. As the audience response demonstrated, 'We are only remembered when we riot'. By this Scott meant that while all the people in the photos had a family member who died in police custody, the (non-activist) members of the audience could only identify those around whose death violent unrest broke out.

For Scott, this was not to endorse these forms of violence but to point to the connections made within collective memory and, implicitly, the connections between memory and listening. Keynote speaker Gus John reminded the audience that these events are connected within communities which have 'a collective memory that encompasses Cynthia Jarrett, Christopher Alder, Roger Sylvester, Joy Gardner, Clinton Mc Curbin, Wayne Douglas and all the other three hundred of them, such that any new death while in the custody of the state must be seen to be handled with the utmost care and sensitivity' (Gus John, Keynote Address in Bassel 2012b).

Understanding riots as political events requires listening to others' accounts of past violence, including those that span time and space in ways that question the founding narrative of the political community and reveal the historical roots of inequality.

In France this means the naming state violence as part of what Indigènes de la République call a ‘colonial continuum’ in which colonial era curfew measures can be used to discipline the descendants of African and North African migrants in 2005. As we have seen, the Indigènes seek to denounce the historical imbrication of Republican principles and practices with colonialism and call for a radical critique of the colonial past-present. Thus the French Republic is ‘mise à nu’, or laid bare, by its immigrants and indigenised peoples – some of whom refuse to play the role they have been attributed in the national imaginary (Guénif-Souilamas 2006, 2010).

In England, the colonial roots of inequality are hidden in different ways. Raven Rakia suggests that historical context is ignored completely allowing black rioters to be rendered antipolitical:

Many on the left called the predominantly black 2011 London uprisings a ‘consumer riot,’ arguing that they were not a moment of resistance but a reflection of greed run amok. Breaking and taking property happens in pairs. Since the elite detest both, they are equally effective. But for black protests, it’s easy for others to fixate their colonial gaze and forget the breaking aspect while focusing in on the looting since, you know, black people steal. The historical context is, of course, conveniently ignored. Since colonization and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, white wealth has been and continues to be built off the backs of black labor, off the exploitation of African resources and bodies. But wait for the courts to grant reparations, and remain waiting. Looting is the opposite of apolitical; it is a direct redistribution of wealth. And yet, even on the left, when a black or African protester destroys and takes property, they are stripped of the tactical or historical will inherent in the decision. It is instead understood through the colonial conception of the political backwardness of black communities: they become apolitical rioters, pure and simple (Rakia 2013).

In both of these cases a politics of listening must involve both a sense of past and future, in the name of recognising the sources of political and material inequality and the colonial past-present. These memories and connections are only dimly perceived from outside of affected communities, and often to stigmatise and misrepresent residents – especially young people – from ‘notorious’ neighbourhoods. The past connects to the failures of the present, shaping the audibility of the ‘feral youth’ or ‘*racaille*’ whose voices were, for the most part, very selectively represented in mainstream media spaces and public debate during and after 2011 and

2005. Instead, sociologist Gail Lewis beautifully expressed this at a 2010 event remembering the 1980s uprisings, 'memory is not just a moment of romance and nostalgia, memory is a moment of learning and planning for the future' (Evans et al. 2011: 331). Tracing 'the relationship between experienced memory, learned history and contemporary issues and actions' (2011: 331–332) is also tracing the possibilities for a politics of listening in which the past is a vital part of co-building the future.

CONCLUSION

We explored the 2011 English 'riots' and the 2005 French *émeutes* as examples of being regarded as an object or otherwise not heard (which is *antipolitical*), a marked contrast to being heard differently than we want to be which is an unavoidable *political* possibility.

In both examples we saw the difficulty of being heard when speaking outside of the binary of 'Us and Them', dictated by a law and order agenda that leaves no space for any form of explanation, let alone a political reading of events. In this binary space there is little recognition of other narratives as equal, or the attempt to consider the world as someone else constructs it for you, to make sense together in recognition of intersubjective equality. Instead there are '*racaille*' and criminality 'pure and simple', a denial of humanity, and a refusal to listen in a way which may require change from Us rather than condemnation.

In the process the past is lost. We explored the past in the present of 'uprisings' and the difficulty of making these connections audible, but also the need to do so in the name of enacting political equality when speaking and acting *against* the state.

In this and the previous chapter we have considered the challenges of connecting listening to politics. But what are the opportunities? Chapters 4 and 5 plead for the attempt to at least aim towards a different kind of interaction, when people demand to be heard outside of binaries. I consider the possibility of this kind of engagement in contexts of conflict and inequality and explore how practices of political listening have been demanded and practised to create the opportunity for new representations to emerge and for the unheard to tell their own stories on their own terms.

In the next chapter I examine both vertical practices demanding that the powerful listen and horizontal practices through which people aim to access each other's experiences and create a mutual 'Us', by exploring citizen journalism and other creative mediated practices.

NOTES

1. I collaborated with the charity *Citizen Journalism Educational Trust* and the citizen journalism website *The-Latest.Com* to write a report about the role of media in the riots. This report, *Media and the Riots: A Call for Action* (that I will refer to as ‘the Report’ and refer to as ‘Bassel 2012b’), shares the insights of a unique opportunity: the *Media and the Riots* conference that took place in November 2011. The audience was made up of activists, young people from riot-affected areas, students, members of the public, former police (e.g. a member of the Black Police Association, Metropolitan Police Authority), representatives from charities and trade unions, academics, and journalists. The conference provided participants with the opportunity to react to media representations of youth culture, young people and their communities during and after the riots. The Report draws on the conference, in which I participated, conference notes I took including observations of interactions, my participation in a breakout group on ‘Young Voices’ and discussions with participants and the organisers. A follow-up survey was conducted for participant feedback. In the Report, I compared the key themes I identified with the findings of other reports on the 2011 riots. The Report has been reviewed and included as part of the Leveson Inquiry. I discuss this initiative in (Bassel 2013), excerpts of which are used here with permission.
2. Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain situate this term historically as often used to refer to the riots of the 1980s ‘in order to give them a common sense of collective political purpose, as if they were part of some co-ordinated assault on state power’ though, in their view, ‘clearly they were nothing of the kind’ (Bagguley and Hussain 2008: 5).
3. See (Sutterlüty 2014) for a useful account of and comparison of events.
4. See: LSE Reading the Riots <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/series/reading-the-riots>; Body-Gendrot (2013), Sutterlüty (2014), Benyon (2012), Waddington et al. (2013).
5. As stated on French television: JT de France, France 2, 29 June 2005. Cette phrase a été prononcée par Nicolas Sarkozy le 19 juin 2005, dans la cité des 4.000 à la Courneuve.
6. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/series/reading-the-riots>
7. As stated on French television: JT de 20 heures, TF1/France 2/France 3, 25 November 2007.

Creative Alternatives

Abstract Alternatives are the focus of this chapter: how practices of political listening can create an opportunity for the unheard and misrepresented to tell their own stories on their own terms, breaking out of damaging binaries of ‘Us and Them’. Political equality can result by seizing the speaking role and demanding that the powerful listen. This chapter first discusses a moment where people from riot-affected communities challenged inequalities of voice and listening and demanded different media representations. It then considers other practices, specifically citizen journalism and creative mediated practices. These are possibilities to challenge power vertically, to tell stories from different spaces of narrative control and counter damaging binaries, and reorient citizens to each other through new forms of sociability to make sense together.

Keywords Citizen journalism · Media and the riots · Professional journalism

In this chapter I consider alternatives: how practices of political listening have created an open-ended opportunity for new representations to emerge and for the unheard and misrepresented to tell their own stories on their own terms, breaking out of the damaging binaries of ‘Us and Them’ that have been our focus until now.

Despite what may appear to be the pessimism of previous chapters, there are many exciting possibilities to explore including those which arose from the ashes of the 2011 riots and the harsh divisions of austerity. I show the potential of spaces young people, and other ‘ordinary citizens’, occupy from which they challenge hierarchies of knowledge and inequalities of voice and listening, and are speakers as well as listeners. They connect to one another as well as speaking vertically to more powerful actors. While not without pitfalls, through a politics of listening political equality can be enacted when the unheard seize the speaking role and place the injunction to listen on different terms on the powerful.

In this chapter I first consider moments of a politics of listening that arose from the events of 2011 in the United Kingdom. I then build on these fleeting possibilities to consider more enduring practices through which roles of speaker and listener can change, specifically creative mediated practices such as citizen journalism and other forms of ‘retelling and resignifying’ (Goode 2009) in virtual and ‘real’ spaces.

MOMENTS OF A POLITICS OF LISTENING

At the *Media and the Riots* conference I discussed in the previous chapter, conflictual interaction took place around traditional news production. However, while participants did not necessarily create a passageway between each others experiences, or a mutual ‘Us’, at least they clarified the nature of misunderstanding and misrepresentation and tried to make sense actively together. This happened through engagement that was adversarial but productive and even creative. If participants were not humble at all times, they started to be more careful.

For the first time, young people from riot-affected areas were able to come face to face with working journalists and media professionals and hold a dialogue with them. In one session Tom Parmenter, a senior Sky News reporter, aired a clip from his extended interview entitled *Looters* in which he spoke with four young black men whose faces were covered and who were connected to/involved in the riots. His motivation, as he explained it, was that he could see that everyone else was having a say but no one was talking to those involved. He described a massive range of negative and positive response to the work, which received an enormous number of hits on YouTube.

In the discussion that followed, communication was a struggle, with the unpredictable and uncontrollable outcomes that Bickford warns us

about. But the opportunity for young people from riot-affected areas was to be heard rather than regarded as an object or misrepresented because of the underlying unequal distribution of social power that makes voices that do not adhere to the binaries discussed in [Chapter 3](#) inaudible. One participant took issue with the camera shots, which focused away from the men's covered faces to zoom in on their (black) hands. Others criticised questions he asked, arguing that they should have been better constructed to draw out the histories of the young men interviewed. Another participant pointed to the fact that young black faces are 'only on Carnival and Crimewatch' with another person echoing that 'there were never so many black people on TV as in the riots'. A young man in the audience at the conference explained to the journalist that when two police officers passed by and listened to part of the interviews, the reason why they did not arrest the young men who were speaking – a source of surprise and relief to the film crew – was because the camera was there.

In the view of one participant, with this heated intervention, the audience demonised a reporter (who is not a top decision-maker). Other feedback from participants emphasised that Parmenter was almost unique in giving these young men a voice, however problematic the way in which this was done. As discussed in the previous chapter, Parmenter's interviewees explained why they had targeted particular stores and demonstrated the gap between portrayals of 'the good life' and their realities.

While the exchanges were certainly heated, this intervention held the possibility for a journalist who was not part of the community that he covered to see his coverage through their eyes, to literally be 'read' in the presence of those whose experience he sought to represent (Back 2007: 151). Learning went both ways in that audience members also had the chance to think about what they expected from journalists, and to re-adopt the role of listeners but in a new key, not as consumers of mediated representations but as political actors equally engaged in adversarial communication (Bickford 1996: 156).

The role of asking questions was an important element of this politics of listening. For instance, the journalist did not know what the longest sentence for MP expense scandals was compared to that for rioting, which caused a very negative reaction from the audience. But as Bickford suggests, this practice also reveals the mutuality of speaking and listening, showing a willingness to take seriously what the other has to say and to work together to understand (laden with the risk of revealing deep differences and conflict

that cannot be easily reconciled, as was the case here) (Bickford 1996: 157). Questioning is a kind of responsive effort that is part of collective work, even if everyone ends up disagreeing. This form of participation has transformative dimensions (1996: 163) (though we should not overstate their extent). New questions can be, and were, raised in the minds and discussions of participants: What can be expected of mainstream journalists who are aiming to represent typically unheard voices yet are not specialised in particular issue areas? How can they be held to account? Therefore even with the recognition of perspectives that will not merge, meaning is still recast by communication (1996: 165).

With the challenging discussion at the conference, participants demonstrated the gap between ‘lives lived in passing’ (Back 2007) and what appears on our screens, even when those generating media content start with ‘good intentions’ to create space for unheard voices. Participants demonstrated this gap themselves, in contrast to top-down proposals for the news media to regulate themselves (e.g., Riots Communities and Victims Panel 2012: 138; Bassel 2012b: 17). This was a bottom-up adversarial process that generated new proposals for ways in which young people and other residents of riot-affected areas might be heard, and new spaces can be created. In an interview with Parmenter produced by young people from the Media Citizens Sutton group immediately following the conference debate, this exchange was recognised as useful but ‘not the final chapter’. Instead the producers argued that this was a first step towards what should be ‘not an investigation *into* young people but the opportunity for young people to express their views’.

Adversarial engagement also generated other potential solidarities. Instead of focusing exclusively on criticising individual journalists and making press complaints about stigmatising coverage, the need to support local journalism, in the context of cuts, emerged from the discussion. This support is needed to ensure that local journalists can ‘live and breathe’ their patch, as Professor Sarah Niblock described it. She clarified that her remarks were ‘not any kind of attack on the professionalism of journalists’ but rather identified ‘a cultural sea change that has occurred when new financial priorities made local journalism remote from its readers’ and which becomes a source of reactive rather than pro-active reporting. To the best of Niblock’s knowledge:

No local journalist was apparently on the march by Mark Duggan’s supporters at the police station on Tottenham High Road. I have not been able to

find a single eyewitness journalism report of that event. If a reporter had been at the scene and reported on the exchange between the supporters and police on the steps of the police station then we might have more than rumour and speculation to go by. If the media didn't know it was happening, then why not? (Bassel 2012b: 19)

In the previous chapter we saw the ways in which local history and collective memory were inaudible. Here with the change of roles from listener/news consumer to speaker, conference participants demanded strong local coverage in order to reflect the variations, the different issues at stake in different parts of the UK. Differences between rioting and local histories and dynamics in different parts of England, diverse events with their own causes and histories (Bhattacharyya et al. 2012), did not surface until much later, long after national public perceptions had been shaped (Bassel et al. 2011: 9).¹ Better and more teaching of local journalism could enable journalists to establish relationships of speaking and listening with communities being covered, so those too young to remember the 1981 Scarman report, as Stafford Scott described them (Bassel 2012b: 19), are not just parachuted in.

Public space is therefore pluralized and the nature of disagreement is clarified through a process in which, fleetingly, all speak and listen. Through a politics of listening, alternatives can be developed, as a result of adversarial exchange. These contestations were important in and of themselves, as political acts. In a critical but productive way, participants sought to make sense together actively and recast meaning, outside of binaries, and to demand change in media spaces. They also identified concrete areas for action.

However, what politics of listening can be built on more lasting foundations beyond such specific moments?

CREATIVE MEDIATED PRACTICES

Creative acts of self-expression can engender the shift from listener to speaker, and result not necessarily in consensus but how to act in the face of difference and conflict. Stuart Hall famously described media as not only a powerful source of ideas about race but also 'one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated' (Hall 1982: 35). Specifically with reference to the 2011 English riots and their aftermath, the interest of a politics of listening lies in its potential to challenge the established order of race and other forms of privilege and sources of

distortion, in media spaces and beyond. I will explore the promise of citizen journalism specifically, and other creative mediated practices more generally.

Citizen Journalism

When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism. (Rosen 2008)

Citizen journalism holds the possibility to change roles and challenge hierarchies. The people 'formerly known' as the listening audience can change to the speakers, with the possibility of being heard by new listeners: journalists, politicians and the rest of 'the public'.

The promise in the idea of 'citizen journalism' is that people make their own news and tell their own stories purposefully, intentionally and – to the extent possible – on their own terms. Equality is enacted through forms of self-expression,² with the possibility of being heard in a less distorted way and seizing control of story-telling and meaning-making. This potential is what Bickford alludes to, writing in the mid-90s, when she calls on media to reclaim political deliberation through 'public journalism', whereby citizens frame issues and transform themselves to speakers (Bickford 1996: 180). Since then the spaces of participation have expanded and even exploded, opened by different 'affordances', meaning technologies that 'may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them' (Hutchby 2001: 444), framing but not determining the possibilities for action.

Media scholars have amply discussed the challenge of citizen journalism to press authority, which is often their primary concern.³ Power shifts fundamentally, with the professional journalist no longer 'the one who determines what publics see, hear and read about the world' (Deuze 2005: 451) because 'in a digital environment of 1s and 0s, information is no longer scarce, hard to produce, nor difficult to publish' (Lewis et al. 2010: 165). 'Citizen journalism feeds the democratic imagination largely because it fosters an unprecedented potential, at least, for news and journalism to become part of a *conversation*' (Goode 2009: 1294).

However, as Engin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert remind us, it is a mistake to focus too narrowly on the journalism aspect rather than the citizen aspect

(2015: 138). This is a tendency of some media scholars who use the term ‘citizen’ as

nothing more than a metaphor indicating either ‘amateur’ or ‘ordinary’. Their gaze is really focused on the threat that ‘citizen’ journalism poses to professional journalism as a genre of news production conducted by non-expert, non-elite, non-gatekeeper subjects. So the term seems to cover these aspects of citizen journalism rather than citizens making rights claims (Isin and Ruppert 2015: 155n).

Part of the potential of citizen journalism is precisely its quality of surprise or accident when ‘amateur’ ordinary citizens ‘temporarily adopt the role of a journalist in order to participate in news making, often spontaneously during a time of crisis, accident, tragedy or disaster’ ((Allan 2013: 9) in (Isin and Ruppert 2015: 140)). These are portrayed as unpremeditated actions of ordinary people who feel compelled to adopt the role of a news reporter (Allan and Thorsen 2009). ‘Armed with cell-phones, BlackBerries or iPhones, the average Joe is now a walking eye on the world, a citizen journalist, able to take a photo, add a caption or a short story and upload it to the internet for all their friends, and usually everyone else, to see’ (Peat 2010; quoted in Greer and McLaughlin 2010: 1045).⁴

Yet while a politics of listening certainly embraces the spontaneous and unpredictable nature of democratic life, it is also an intentional and purposive intervention in demanding a *shared* responsibility to both speak and listen, and thereby assume responsibility and interrupt and redirect existing processes and create new ones. It is admittedly an uncertain promise: we can’t control the effect of action but choose it (Bickford 1996: 153). But it is a promise nonetheless because of the changing of roles, when citizen journalism means that all involved in the process of news production shift back and forth from speaking to listening.

When ‘everyone’s account counts’ – for example through blogging – one can emerge ‘from the spectating audience as a player and maker of meanings’ (Coleman 2005: 274). ‘Metajournalism’ also creates ‘new possibilities for citizen participation at various points along those chains of sense-making that shape news’ (Goode 2009: 1291) by curating the news, circulating, sorting, tagging – not just ‘breaking’ news and generating new stories. The audience can thereby challenge the story selection process that was otherwise invisible. Citizen journalism provides the prospect of participating in this agenda-setting process and becoming

producers of meaning ‘rendering the agenda-setting processes of established professional media outlets radically provisional, malleable and susceptible to critical intervention’ (Goode 2009: 1292–1293).

But a politics of listening can also go a step further: not just ‘to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires’ (Bowman and Willis 2003) but to tell one’s own story on own terms. Rather than ‘objectivity’, it involves seeking spaces of narrative control to counteract the distorted versions of oneself in mainstream media representations and to engage in processes of collaboration, coproduction, conflict. Sometimes horizontal, sometimes vertical, sometimes both, citizen journalism can also be understood, sometimes, as transformative. This is because of the listening required in the processes citizen journalism and other creative mediated practices engender: collaboration or conflict, co-production or rejection. While perspectives may not merge, the nature of conflict and of power relations can be clarified identifying more sharply what is at stake. Criticism can be combined with knowledge and awareness of constraints and a positive alternative might be articulated that can begin to pluralise public space.

But Who Listens?

Yet the moments of a politics of listening at the *Media and the Riots* conference and the possibilities of citizen journalism and creative mediated practices more generally must be read in a broader matrix of power relations which are sometimes bypassed or subverted but not fully escaped. As many suggest, ‘all may speak, if not be heard’ (Bissonnette 2014: 395) and circulation may be for its own sake.⁵ This is the problem of the echo chamber, and the overload of information from a range of sources (which also poses the risk of selective audibility to those with power we explored in Chapter 2). In his brief treatment of ‘social media’ and digital environments, Dobson identifies these dangers of circulation rather than meaningful dialogue and ‘speaking without hearing’. Blogs may ‘declaim’ rather than listen (Dobson 2014: 184).

Market conditions may enable professionals, elites, power-holders and experts (including professional journalists and editors) to *feed into and feed off* this ongoing conversation (Goode 2009: 1294). In this way, journalism work is outsourced to unpaid volunteers, an interpellation of the citizen-consumer as a citizen-colleague without necessarily investing in training, monitoring or protecting (Deuze 2009: 259). In exploring

the case of CNN's iReport platform, Bissonnette suggests that CNN remains the expert, its power unchecked, and users are its foot soldiers. Democratic forums may only exist to the extent that they coincide with commercial interests, what Zizi Papacharissi refers to as a 'commercially public medium' (Papacharissi 2013). Citizen journalism is thus tilted to commercial gain, not democratic discourse (i.e. it creates raw info and stylised final report for media corporation, increases users (page views) and advertisers (Bissonnette 2014)). Citizen journalism may thus be a side effect of corporate power rather than an alternative to it, fragmenting citizen journalists into countless individual public spheres (Deuze 2009: 260). Market conditions in the media sector undermine sources for political alternatives (Couldry 2010: 88).

These are real threats, but these risks and promises are part of the uncertainty of engagement in democratic life. These forms of speaking and listening may never escape certain forms of power, however much they bypass or subvert them, but the attempt is significant in and of itself as an enactment of political equality. Kate Lacey reminds us that 'Any intervention in the public sphere is undertaken in the hope, faith or expectation that there is a public out there, ready to listen and to engage . . . there is a faith in the act of listening that there will be some resonance with the address' (Lacey 2013: 11). The possibilities of citizen journalism and the politics of listening that it can involve lie in the fleeting moment between submission and subversion, the ways to break with the convention to which one has submitted but within the possibilities and affordances of conventions (Isin and Ruppert 2015: 41).⁶ This is possible only in a liminal space between 'anarchy of information and infinite voices and the tyranny of media conglomerates and structures of authority that collide in the virtual world' (Bissonnette 2014: 395).

In my *Media and the Riots* work people identified this liminal space, in which citizen journalism lies, as an opportunity for people, particularly young people, to tell their own stories. They felt that the original accounts of the experiences of those involved in the riots and the aftermath needed to be published. Participants believed that these stories were 'out there' on social media but were being ignored in the mainstream media. Many agreed that the ability of ordinary citizens to take photographs and record video on mobile phones was a very positive development as it meant that, for instance, the public could 'film what the establishment don't want us (the public) to see'. It was wrong that the veracity of citizen reporting was sometimes questioned while mainstream media reporting was 'filled with lies' but rarely scrutinised and held to account (Bassel 2012b: 22).

The politics of listening therefore evokes the ‘right to be understood’ (Husband 1996, 2000) to complement the (assumed) right to communicate in a ‘multi-ethnic public sphere’. Tania Dreher elaborates on this ‘right’ and connects it to a responsibility to listen, and shift responsibility for change ‘from marginalized voices and on to the conventions, institutions and privileges which shape who and what can be heard in the media . . . The right to be understood would confer upon all a crucial obligation – to actively seek to comprehend the Other’ (Dreher 2009: 447).⁷ Misrecognised Others demand to be understood on different terms through processes of mediation and the use of different affordances. Equality can be enacted in the process of challenging hierarchies, conflicting, co-producing, collaborating, rejecting, providing the chance to seize role of speaker rather than waiting for it to be granted and shifting responsibility to more powerful actors to listen.

Vertical Challenges

‘Speaking truth to power’ is key to the appeal of citizen journalism, to challenge the official version of events such as the unrest in Tottenham in August 2011. ‘Citizen journalism’ emerges in the context of decline of trust in institutions, representative politics and mainstream news (Deuze 2009: 259). Reacting to mainstream media coverage of the events of August 2011 at the *Media and the Riots* conference, National Union of Journalists President Donnacha DeLong expressed deep concern regarding distrust of journalists because of their apparent reliance on official sources, claiming:

One of the worst parts of the post-riots coverage was where the content of newspapers came directly from the police . . . Instead of analysing and going deeper into the story and finding out why it happened, they were simply helping the police arrest people. That is not what journalism is for . . . If journalists are seen simply as being the mouthpiece of the police and of the state, nobody is going to trust us and in some cases people are going to react violently when they see a journalist. . . . If you haven’t got the time and the capacity to go out and do some interviews, but the police are happy to provide you with a direct line and provide you with their view of the story, too often that’s what ends up in the media (Dobson-Smith 2012; cited in Bassel 2012b: 12).⁸

In contrast, because citizen journalists are independent of the systems of rules that professional journalists have to follow, this increased autonomy

from communication nodes can increase the possibility of introducing messages that challenge dominant values and interests (Greer and McLaughlin 2010). And at some times, in some places, those in ‘power’ are forced to listen. While horizontal, peer-to-peer conversation characterises much of what is called citizen journalism, there are also ‘significant threads of communication that run vertically within this environment’ (Goode 2009: 1294). These are demands on the (more) powerful to listen, to conflict, to collaborate and to co-produce, or part ways with meaning transformed. Knowledge hierarchies and ‘hierarchies of credibility’ (Becker 1967; in Greer and McLaughlin 2010) are challenged. In the case Greer and McLaughlin analyse – news reporting of the 2009 G20-protests in London and the death of Ian Tomlinson, who died after being struck by a police officer and falling to the ground – they argue that it was actually possible to shift the news frame from ‘protestor violence’ to ‘police violence’ because technologically empowered citizen journalists were able to produce information that challenged the ‘official’ version of events (including a decisive moment when *The Guardian* broadcast mobile phone footage handed to the newspaper by an American fund manager that appeared to provide clear evidence of police violence against Tomlinson minutes before he collapsed).

Deuze suggests that this kind of engagement, initiated by the decline in trust, is therefore monitorial, individualised and anti-hierarchical, ‘grounded in an impotence of people in their identities as citizens, consumer and workers’ (2009: 259; see also; Ratto and Boler 2014: 308). Yet the promise of the politics of listening we have explored here demonstrates the possibilities of collective engagement rather than the impotence of identities: while perspectives may not merge, the nature of conflict and of power relations can be clarified identifying more sharply what is at stake. As the moment of the conference showed, the demand to be heard can also lead to articulating positive alternatives that can begin to pluralise media spaces and create connections (and some forms of solidarity) rather than isolating individuals. Real possibilities were identified: the public could ‘film what the establishment don’t want us (the public) to see’ and hold mainstream media reporting to account. People felt this collaboration would ensure that stories important to and affecting local communities are widely publicised, enabling people to tell their own stories on their own terms rather than simply monitoring and responding to the ways in which experiences are being represented, the form of engagement that Deuze suggests. Equality is enacted through speaking on one’s own terms

with the possibility of being heard in a less distorted way and seizing control of story-telling and meaning-making. A broader audience can also be reached leading to new relationships and coalitions (as we explore in the next chapter).

New Elites?

Citizen journalism cannot, however, magically erase all forms of inequality. Some forms may be reproduced and new elites emerge. New participation gaps are evident when those ‘who have the education, skills, financial resources, and time required to navigate the sea of cultural choice will gain access to new cultural opportunities’ as citizen journalists, while others ‘will be trapped on the wrong side of the cultural divide’ (Jenkins et al. 2009). Some actors are even ‘formally vested with gatekeeping powers in citizen journalism sites [and] exercise that power, and the codes, values and routines that inform their practices’ (Goode 2009: 1303).⁹ Citizen journalism is inevitably embedded in neoliberal values and mechanisms and, in new ways, it may amplify rather than increase voice; given that these are not funded newsrooms, there may be constraints on building effective alternatives (Couldry 2010).

The promise of citizen journalism for a politics of listening is not that it will erase existing material inequalities in its practice. Its promise is as one space in which to enact *political* equality and in the process make visible these underlying material inequalities, to seize narrative control and challenge damaging binaries of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ through the use of widely – though not universally or equally – available affordances. By ‘changing roles’ citizen journalists can therefore challenge the existing distribution of narrative resources, the ‘closed shop’ of professional journalism that participants in my *Media and the Riots* work decried. We extensively discussed the nature of this ‘closed shop’: that journalists increasingly hail from the most privileged demographics, are no longer trained on the job but have to shoulder the costs of pre-entry training themselves, and only those with affluent backgrounds can afford the requisite fees, living expenses and extensive periods of unpaid work experience.¹⁰ As Professor Sarah Niblock noted at the conference, journalists who covered the riots were not really part of the communities they represent. More generally, the New Statesman’s senior editor (politics) Mehdi Hasan has asked: ‘How long can newspaper editors carry on hiring and publishing columnists who have little or no experience of these lives, backgrounds, cultures or faiths?’

In 2012, 64 years after the arrival of the Empire Windrush on our shores, 36 years after the passage of the third Race Relations Act, 19 years after the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence, the great British commentariat is, in effect, a mono-racial, monocultural closed shop' (Hassan 2012).

Through the politics of listening at work in the moment of the *Media and the Riots* conference, specific and enduring ways to address the inequalities of media spaces were developed drawing on the challenge citizen journalism poses to the established order of speakers and listeners. Participants urged more training courses in journalism, particularly broadcast media, targeted at young people who live in impoverished inner city areas. They suggested that advisory panels could be set up for this purpose. Participants also suggested that mentoring schemes should be formed involving media professionals and young people in schools. This would be a crucial way for decision-makers in the media to gain a better understanding of young people's concerns, especially black youth, and essential for young people's access to journalism. Diversity in newsrooms and editorial decision-making could also promote a better understanding by politicians particularly of the black community. Information about existing schemes could be more widely shared to make sure young people are aware of opportunities.

Following my recommendation, a Young Black Minority Ethnic Columnist of the Year Competition was organised by the Citizen Journalism Educational Trust and [The-Latest.com](#) in collaboration with *The Guardian*. The winner received £250 and an interview for a journalistic internship at *The Guardian*. This is one of many examples in which citizen journalism can act as a stepping-stone to professional journalism rather than a source of unpaid volunteers in a matrix of neoliberal practices.¹¹ It is also a means to change speaking and listening roles beyond a moment of adversarial engagement, to create new, wider spaces of participation where narrative resources are redistributed, distortions might be challenged and new representations emerge.

Creative Mediated Practices

When we venture beyond classical understandings of 'reporting' news, we can find further possibilities in the 'retelling and resignifying' that media scholars bring to our attention (Goode 2009) – for example photoshop collages of political debates, digital sampling in hip hop music, video mashups that bring popular culture and news together. In Jenkins' view

these works might not necessarily be called journalism, citizen or otherwise, because ‘They don’t involve reporting and they don’t involve the exercise of news judgment. Yet, they depend for their power on the viewer’s pre-existing awareness of events in the real world and they offer some powerful new metaphors for comprehending the importance and impact of those events. These videos work because they avoid the rhetoric of traditional politics and appeal to us as fans even as they ask us to act as citizens’ (Jenkins 2006). But I would suggest that they are both political and citizenship acts: in the act of ‘appealing’ a politics of listening is at work through making horizontal claims to be recognised as speaking subjects who speak truth *about* power, if not directly to it, and on more self-determined terms that create a path between their own and others’ experiences.

These kinds of ‘critical making’ activities can be understood as politically transformative, enabling people to become producers and consumers and make themselves up as they go along, as DIY citizens (Ratto and Boler 2014: 5). A growing number of young people particularly are embracing practices identified as ‘participatory politics’ – understood as ‘interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern’ (Kahne et al. 2014) – with shifts in communication unleashing new political dynamism that is achieved ‘by any media necessary’ (Jenkins et al. 2016).

These activities can certainly take the more conventional form of social movements and ‘face to-face’ local organising. Sajida Madni of Birmingham Citizens explains her group’s mobilisation following the 2011 riots:

We trained 700 young people to build and sustain relationships, to get meetings with MPs. Young people feel powerless, their voices are not heard. We provide an alternative for voices to be heard legally and to provide a seat at the table with power players. And people have pulled together: out of the tragedy there have been some positive outcomes. We can work on that momentum and think about the positives and how to heal the city (Bassel 2012b)

But a politics of listening can also result within the sociability involved in the creative collaboration that less traditional mediated practices involve, when collectively seeking alternative spaces of narrative control to counteract the distorted versions of oneself in mainstream media representations.¹² Processes of collaboration, coproduction, adversarial engagement

require a politics of listening. As Malcolm James suggests in his discussion of discourses on and performances of nihilism surrounding the release of the grime music video *Kill all a Dem* by young people in Leyham, East London, the video simultaneously communicated nihilism *and* ‘was evidence of the perseverance, and digital relocation of the urban paradox – the existence of intense collaboration alongside conflict (Back 1994). The video’s nihilistic communications were founded in openness and through syncretism. Its racialized anti-sociability was underwritten by a diasporic sociability mediated through cheap and ubiquitous digital technology’ (James 2014: 714). Despite its aggressive theatre, it operated through the ethics of sociability ‘behind the scenes’: in making the video diverse young people worked together and cooperated with musicians in other postcodes and countries to deliver an autochthonous message (2014: 714).

These creative mediated practices generate new forms of sociability and, I suggest, a politics of listening. Intense collaboration and conflict (Back 1994) are ways of living with the tension between openness and commitment that, for Bickford, is what citizenship is about. It is also, for her, something else: a source of joy, happiness as well as fear and exasperation. With its performance of nihilism, ‘behind the scenes’ of *Kill all a dem* James suggests that there is also something else: a moment of cooperation and sociability. Here the tension between openness and commitment is the site of creativity. The joint task of this politics of listening is to create a means to get at each other’s perspectives and experience the world as constructed for each other, and here this is undertaken together to then generate a self-determined message.

Creative mediated practices are often horizontal exchanges with their own histories, cultures and aims. Their commonality is the importance of the process, the *how* of a politics of listening as well as the *what*, the sociability engendered which enables getting at each others perspectives and experiences to listen, and then to speak differently. This is where the potential of these practices lies and, as we shall see in the next chapter, they can serve as a site of solidarity for broader mobilisation.

CONCLUSION

We have considered how practices of political listening can create an open-ended opportunity for new representations to emerge, and for the unheard and misrepresented to tell their own stories on their own terms. A moment

of the 2011 *Media and the Riots* conference demonstrated a politics of listening where participants challenged inequalities of voice and listening demanded media spaces in which to be speakers as well as listeners.

We then explored what more enduring practices could be built on this foundation in the form of citizen journalism and other creative mediated practices. A politics of listening emerges through enacting political equality, seizing the speaking role, and the injunction to listen this can then place on the powerful.

Certainly, the promise of creative mediated practices is uncertain. Citizen journalism may not always ensure that others listen, not least when embedded within corporate power rather than an alternative to it (Deuze 2009: 260) or an extremely limited alternative (Couldry 2010) which enables the emergence of new gatekeepers and elites (Goode 2009; Jenkins et al. 2009). But at the same time, citizen journalism is a possibility to challenge power vertically, to tell stories from different spaces of narrative control and counter damaging binaries, to challenge the 'closed shop' of professional journalism. Creative mediated practices can reorient citizens to each other through the processes of political listening they involve, their new forms of sociability (James 2014) that create a pathway to one another's experience and a way to try to make sense together. These forms of communication power converge (Castells 2000, 2009), with political space and identities in flux between citizen journalists, digital activists and mediated protesters who mobilise so effectively, as in the Black Lives Matter movement. The images and sounds that have been shared globally are undeniable evidence of police violence in the United States. At the time of going to press, the Black Lives Matter movement was just beginning to be publicly recognized in the UK with high-profile protests and arrests following blockades near Heathrow and Birmingham airports, and the closure of London City airport to protest that 'climate change is a racist crisis' (Barker 2016; Kelbert 2016). The capacity to make a vertical claim on the powerful, for roles of speakers and listeners to change, and for Black lives to matter in the UK remain to be seen.

In the next chapter, in contrast to the 'citizens' of citizen journalism and creative mediated practices, we consider the emerging activism in Canada of two groups of 'non-citizens': migrant justice and Indigenous activists. Through a horizontal politics of listening they redefine the mutual 'Us' that listening creates away from the state and 'citizens'. Instead a separate space of solidarity is created on autonomous terms and political equality enacted.

NOTES

1. Community media also have an important role to play here, as a form of self-representation and participation (Rennie 2006). *The Voice of Africa's* journalist Space Clotney reported at the *Media and the Riots* conference on the ways in which this black community radio station sent their reporters to Tottenham to report on what was happening and generate an alternative narrative.
2. See Hartley (1999) on 'semiotic self-determination' (and discussion in Annany 2014 in relation to the 'public right to hear').
3. In his PressThink blog titled 'Audience Atomization Overcome: Why the Internet Weakens the Authority of the Press' Jay Rosen argues that the press has lost the ability to define the sphere of legitimate debate with 'the falling cost for like-minded people to locate each other, share information, trade impressions and realize their number. Among the first things they may do is establish that the echosphere of legitimate debate as defined by journalists doesn't match up with their own definition. In the past there was nowhere for this kind of sentiment to go. Now it collects, solidifies and expresses itself online. Bloggers tap into it to gain a following and serve demand. Journalists call this the echo chamber, which is their way of downgrading it as a reliable source. But what's really happening is that the authority of the press to assume consensus, define deviance and set the terms for legitimate debate is weaker when people can connect horizontally around and about the news.' See <http://archive.pressthink.org/2009/01/12/atomization.html>
4. Or the concern is with participation as a means of securing social ties (with reference to Putnam in the case of Henry Jenkins' 'civic media' where citizenship is equated with participation that strengthens social cohesion). The 'citizen' aspect centres here around shaping young people 'as future and actual online citizens who are empowered to take responsibility for their actions and accountable for the choices they make as media producers or as members of online communities.' See <http://henryjenkins.org/>
5. According to Zizi Papcharissi: 'There is something about the context of social media that urges us to share, and in sharing, we get the feeling that something is happening, that we are somehow contributing to a greater evolving narrative . . . Sometimes, unless we are aware of what we are sharing and why, there is a real danger to get caught in a self-sustaining feedback loop that keeps us at standstill, rather than moving us forward' (Papcharissi and Jenkins 2015).
6. This means recognising ubiquitous corporate power as well as the increasing overlap between cyberspace and borders of nation states, and that this is not a smooth space but one which is striated with a multiplicity of controls, authority, checkpoints, boundaries (Isin and Ruppert 2015: 42).

7. Plurality is an essential component to politics of listening, as recognised by Mike Annany who insists on a ‘public right to hear’ in which the press as a listening institution must guarantee the public the right to encounter ideas one wouldn’t otherwise, to affirm democratic freedom (2014: 364).
8. See also (Ratto and Boler 2014), introduction.
9. Software code itself cannot be understood as neutral and objective and the ‘politics of code’ must also be interrogated by engaging with citizen journalism sites’ aesthetics, information architecture, interface and algorithms, so the role that software code plays in shaping meanings, messages and world-views (Goode 2009: 1303) also comes under scrutiny.
10. Reports by a number of bodies such as the educational charity The Sutton Trust reveal that journalists increasingly hail from the most privileged demographics – private school and postgraduate courses (Sutton Trust 2006; see also Champion 2006).
11. Citizen Journalism Educational Trust uses community-based journalism to further the personal and social skills of disadvantaged young people <http://www.cjet.org.uk/>.
12. ‘There is something about the context of social media that urges us to share, and in sharing, we get the feeling that something is happening, that we are somehow contributing to a greater evolving narrative’ (Papacharissi, in Jenkins and Papacharissi 2015).

Listening as Solidarity

Abstract The emerging activism of two groups of ‘non-citizens’ in Canada is considered: migrant justice and Indigenous activists. Some migrant justice activists increasingly acknowledge the need to recast their actions and ideology to recognise and support the struggles of Indigenous peoples. These relatively powerless actors listen to one another and reconfigure meanings of land, nation and justice. Migrant justice activists change political slogans and practices. Meaning is recast through reciprocal, interdependent exchange creating a passageway between the experiences of people otherwise divided by ongoing colonisation. Through a horizontal politics of listening they redefine the mutual ‘Us’ that listening creates, away from the state and ‘citizens’. Instead a separate space of solidarity is created on autonomous terms and political equality enacted.

Keywords Indigenous resurgence · Canada · Idle no more · No one is illegal · Solidarity · Harsha Walia · Glen Coulthard

In contrast to the ‘citizens’ of citizen journalism and the creative mediated practices we have just explored, in this chapter we consider the emerging activism in Canada of two groups of ‘non-citizens’. This reveals the infancy of political listening on the part of migrant justice activists in their growing acknowledgement of the need to recast their actions and

ideology to recognise and support the struggles of indigenous peoples. Here listening functions not only as ‘an act of attention that registers uniqueness of the other’s narrative’ (Couldry 2010: 9) but also as a *political* form of recognition. Because ‘our’ stories are recognised as entangled with the stories of others (Ricoeur 1995) political ethos and action must be and are transformed. The result is the change of political slogans and practices of migrant justice activists acting in solidarity with Indigenous peoples in Canada.

We will see a politics of listening with a fundamental reach: it recasts the mutual ‘Us’ that is to be created, away from the recognition of state and ‘citizens’. Instead a separate space of solidarity is created on autonomous terms, and interdependence is between relatively powerless interlocutors who create new norms of intelligibility and relations of interdependence and recognition that do not rely on the Canadian state or society for approval and legitimacy, thereby enacting a radical political equality.

We will first explore the challenge of solidarity that migrant justice activists and indigenous activists navigate. We then consider method, the ‘how’ of a politics of listening, which meanings are recast and disagreements clarified and what changes in political action. Finally we revisit what these meanings and actions entail for solidarity and political equality.

SECTION I: THE CHALLENGE OF SOLIDARITY

Anishinaabekwe activist Jen Meunier delivers a powerful message in her poem addressed to ‘well intentioned white activists’, who she reminds:

‘we’ll fill the cells you’ve left,
again and again and again and again.
we’ll live your slogans tomorrow
and return to the spaces you borrow’
Jen Meunier, Anishinaabekwe (*r/ally chapbook of poetry* Vancouver,
NOII, 2010) in (Walia 2012: 240)

This poem is part of an ongoing dialogue between Indigenous activists, migrant justice activists and those engaged in other social justice struggles. Meunier is quoted here in the volume *Undoing Border Imperialism*, written and edited by migrant justice activist Harsha Walia. Walia was for a long time an exception in migrant activist circles in Canada where

Indigenous people have been invisible and unheard. She is part of No One is Illegal (NOII), Vancouver, Canada, an autonomous network founded in 2002 in Montreal, and now in Vancouver, Toronto and other sites across Canada.¹ An important story of an incipient politics of listening lies at the heart of NOII, both its rhetoric and political practice. NOII is different from many other migrant rights mobilisations in Canada (and elsewhere), the majority of which seek incorporation into society in the form of legal status and cultural accommodation in the (Canadian) multi-cultural ideology and policy framework. The listening on the part of NOII (who represent some but not all migrant justice activists) is to the claims of (some but not all) Indigenous activists to reject this ideology and framework.

We first explore the politics of solidarity from the perspective of Indigenous activists who reject what Dene scholar Glen Coulthard calls a statist colonial ‘politics of recognition’, then the ways in which migrant justice activists listen and try to understand this challenge.

INDIGENOUS RESURGENCE AND THE POLITICS OF SOLIDARITY

The ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples in Canada is the untold story of what is so often exported internationally as a ‘multicultural success story’, which in the same moment recognises the humanity of refugees while dehumanising indigenous peoples (Razack 2014). The Canadian national narrative has successfully erased from public consciousness the genocide which founded Canada, and horrors such as the residential school system, indigenous deaths in custody and missing Indigenous women (Razack 2015). For Coulthard, who draws on the work of Franz Fanon, in the Canadian statist colonial politics of recognition the Master does not need the slave’s recognition and ‘grants’ it, and recognition as ‘granted’ does not transcend the colonial relationship (Coulthard 2014: 30). Abuse is left ‘in the past’ as a ‘sad chapter’ to be overcome while the colonial-settler present remains unscathed (Coulthard 2014: 22, 125).

Through the politics of Indigenous resurgence this colonial status quo is challenged. Most recently, the Idle No More movement began in 2012 as part of a broader politics of Indigenous resurgence, whereby Indigenous peoples demand representation on their own terms (foodscapes, landscapes,

place names) to restore and reconnect a place-based existence (Snelgrove et al. 2014: 25) and enact ‘self-recognition’ (Coulthard 2014).² Idle No More began as educational work by four women from the Prairies – Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, Jessica Gordon and Sheelah McLean – against Bill C-45, the ‘Jobs and Growth Act’. The Act’s budget implementation provisions changed federal legislation, particularly by unilaterally undermining ‘Aboriginal and treaty rights by making it easier for First Nations’ band councils to lease out reserve lands with minimal community input or support, by gutting environmental protection for lakes and rivers, and by reducing the number of resource development projects that would have required environmental assessment under previous legislation’ (Coulthard 2014: 128). Initial educational work by these four women was followed by an intense social media campaign, a hunger strike by Chief Teresa Spence of the Attawapiskat Cree Nation, and a powerful, broader grassroots struggle. For Coulthard, its aim is to ‘transform the colonial relationship itself’ (ibid., 128) – it can be read as part of a resurgent politics of recognition based on ‘grounded normativity’ which advances a place-based critique (ibid., 53) and alternative to colonial economic and political development (ibid., 98).

Coulthard draws on rich and deep Indigenous traditions in his conception of ‘grounded normativity’, which is at a conceptual and political distance from many migrant justice struggles. He explains, ‘The theory and practice of Indigenous anticolonialism, including Indigenous anticapitalism, is best understood as a struggle inspired by and oriented around *the question of land* – a struggle not only *for* land in the material sense, but also deeply *informed* by what the land *as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations* can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms’ (2014, 13).

It is a profound misunderstanding to think of land or place as simply some material object of profound importance to Indigenous cultures (although it is this too); instead, it ought to be understood as a field of ‘relationships of things to each other’ (Deloria 2001). Place is a way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world and with others; and sometimes these relational practices and forms of knowledge guide forms of resistance against other rationalisations of the world that threaten to erase or destroy our senses of place (ibid., 61).

These meanings of land and politics of place fundamentally challenge the legitimacy and sovereignty of the Canadian state and its logic of membership and property. They run counter to existing norms of intelligibility where forgiveness and reconciliation take place ‘on terms still largely dictated by the colonial state’ (ibid., 128) and ‘Indigenous subjects are the primary objects of repair, not the colonial relationship’ (ibid., 127). In his view, the struggle is to break with the colonial narrative taking as the starting point the settler-colonial *present*, not past and finished, and to be heard on these terms. Rather than recognition of Indigenous peoples as what Coulthard calls ‘objects of repair’, to be cared for, they are to be listened to as speaking for themselves in different ways that colonialism renders inaudible:

[W]hat gets implicitly represented by the state as a form of Indigenous *resentiment* – namely, Indigenous peoples’ seemingly pathological inability to get over harms inflicted in the past – is actually a manifestation of our *righteous resentment*: that is, our bitter indignation and persistent anger at being treated unjustly by a colonial state both historically and in the present. In other words, what is treated in the Canadian discourse of reconciliation as an unhealthy and debilitating incapacity to forgive and move on is actually a sign of our *critical consciousness*, of our sense of justice and injustice, and of our awareness of and unwillingness to *reconcile* ourselves with a structural and symbolic violence that is still very much present in our lives (ibid., 126).

Indigenous people’s anger and resentment can generate ‘forms of decolonized subjectivity and anticolonial practice that we ought to critically affirm’ rather than the trap of ‘forgiveness and reconciliation’. ‘Holding on to our anger and resentment can serve as an important emotional reminder that settler-colonialism is still very much alive and well in Canada, despite the state’s repeated assertions otherwise’ (ibid., 128).

Political work with settler activists in general has been fraught and unequal because of lack of listening and building meaningful relationships:

Settler activists need to spend more time listening and building relationships with Indigenous people. They often seem oblivious and careless about who we are and what we face. I’ve heard settler activists say: ‘Hey for the Olympics wouldn’t it be great if the world was watching hundreds of Native people getting beat?’ For me this points to a lack of any modicum of care for indigenous people beyond political opportunism. I’ve also heard

things like, ‘I get the whole “sovereignty indigenous leadership” thing, but let’s just deal with the people we have here’ – in a room full of white people except me and another Native man (Anonymous Indigenous activist in Amadahy 2008)

Listening is specifically identified as a challenge for solidarity and joint action:

At the reclamation site, some settler activists came and wanted to fight the police. They yelled, threw things and egged the other side on, getting our people all worked up. We have to live there. Remember, no white people were arrested in that raid but 50 of our people have been charged. If they want to help, they have to listen, take direction and stick around (Doreen Silversmith in Amadahy 2008)

Often when support for Indigenous struggles has been offered, it has not only been problematic but also short-lived. NOII activists such as Walia identify a broader problem of securing mass support within social movements for Indigenous struggles rather than specific cases and issues. ‘What has rarely been achieved...has been an effort to build mass popular support around Indigenous sovereignty generally, rather than a specific community or demand’ (Walia 2012: 248). Migrant justice and other settler activists do not, therefore, all have a history of either ‘sticking around’ or listening.

NOII AND THE CHALLENGE OF SOLIDARITY

The challenge for migrant justice activists in the network of diverse groups that loosely come together as No One is Illegal is to listen to Indigenous activists who express this resurgent politics of recognition (Coulthard 2014) ‘unfiltered by colonialism, which keeps us apart’ (Grewal, quoted in Walia 2013: 238). They seek to redefine political action and rights, not vis-à-vis the colonial state, but in terms of a different ‘liberatory vision’ which ‘is based less on pathways to citizenship in a settler state, than on questioning the logics of the settler state itself’ (Andrea Smith, foreword to Walia 2013: p. xiii).

In the past Indigenous peoples have been absent from the migrant and anti-racism movements of Canada. In their influential critique ‘Decolonising Racism’, Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua argue that

instead anti-racism is segregated from Indigenous peoples whose struggles are placed alongside other issues in a liberal pluralist framework (Lawrence and Dua 2005: 133), as one struggle among others (Walia 2012: 242) rather than centring Indigenous dispossession in struggles over free movement and legal status. While lip service is often paid, as Jeff Corntassel argues, the ‘original logic of colonialism is then reaffirmed by subsequently reinscribing settler names and histories on the landscapes’ (Snelgrove et al. 2014: 16). This reaffirmation is part of a broader failure to centre Indigenous struggles in migrant justice and other movements.

The challenge for NOII activists is to listen outside of the settler-colonial relationship to Indigenous people who are not ‘to be cared for’ but equally ‘capable of taking an interest in the world and speaking for themselves, capable of political action, and therefore meant to be listened to’ (Bickford 1996: 77). NOII activists consequently recenter ongoing colonialism and reconfigure understandings of land, movement and sovereignty when claiming ‘no one is illegal’. Specifically, activists have tried to consider how their calls for ‘open borders’ may undermine struggles for title and against land loss, struggles to reclaim land and nation, and create divisions between communities already marginalised (Lawrence and Dua 2005: 136).

NOII aims, therefore, to take seriously the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. This involves taking a further step, beyond the initial ‘postnational paradox’ of seeking to transcend yet asking the state to be guarantor of rights (Abji 2013) and balancing immediate reform-oriented strategies with long-term revolutionary change (Walia 2013: 183).³ Moving beyond this, when ongoing colonisation is centred, the challenge NOII activists face is to question the legitimacy of borders while demanding regularisation of non-status people, *on stolen land*. It is the last three words that are the most important: *on stolen land*.

In NOII activists have struggled to understand these conceptions of Indigenous nationhood, the ‘grounded normativity’ Coulthard shares with us, to create ‘a passage to another’s experience’ (Bickford 1996: 148). But this does not mean NOII activists inhabit the perspectives of Indigenous allies. Collectively, there is the opportunity to create a path as they travel and jointly make sense together. This is not understanding the world as you do, but as you construct it for me. A politics of listening has been at work through which NOII activists recast the meaning of land in their movement, as a system of relationships for Indigenous peoples and stewardship rather

then ownership, and rethink migrant justice as a result. In the words of Harjap Grewal, who is based in Vancouver (Indigenous Coast Salish Territories) and active in NOII-Vancouver as well as other campaigns:

The responsibility of immigrants and migrant justice movements is to make visible our support for Indigenous values . . . Our struggles for migrant justice cannot be limited to gaining access to nation-states or property. Migrants' relationship to the land needs to be rooted in stewardship of the land rather than colonial and capitalist ideas of landownership. Even though colonization has entrenched property ownership to such an extent that it is difficult to exist outside of it, decolonization requires us to overturn this regime. Though we may not overturn the regime tomorrow, we can decolonize our relations. Wet'suwet'en and Tsilhqot'in communities have welcomed us on to their territories after asking us what our intentions are when we arrive. These moments project an anticolonial analysis of migration, in which free movement is not governed by the state or capital relations but instead is understood as respecting Indigenous traditions and shared responsibility for the land (Grewal, in Walia 2013: 240)

The attempt here is by one set of relatively powerless actors (with important power differences of 'race', class and gender within their ranks) to listen to another and reconfigure meanings of land, nation and justice through their interaction. Activists thereby reconfigure relations of interdependence and recognition, the 'Us' created through mutual effort, and who recognises whom. The aim is not recognition by 'the state' but to recognise the continued violence which underpins it and take direction from Indigenous rejections of its logic (Simpson, foreword to Walia 2013), and consequently to reinvent migrant justice. Political equality, the central concern of this work, is thereby enacted through a politics of listening as solidarity which guides the recognition of others as capable of political action and therefore meant to be listened to, not cared for (Bickford 1996: 77).

What would and does it mean to 'listen, take direction and stick around' (Amadahy 2008)? That is the focus of the next section.

SECTION 2: THE POLITICS OF LISTENING AT WORK

NOII have begun to reconsider their understandings of borders and citizenship in recognition of the ways in which their actions have been premised on an understanding of sovereignty and territory that in fact perpetuates the colonial legacy that has dispossessed and disenfranchised

Indigenous groups. This recognition has required the humility Les Back advocates (2007) and a moment of renouncing a speaking role, to *stop talking*. But how? And what changes?

HOW? METHODS OF LISTENING

As we have seen throughout this book, the ‘how’ matters as much as the ‘why’ of the politics of listening. We consider now how listening has been practised and connected to politics.

According to scholar and activist Craig Fortier – who participates in movements for migrant justice and Indigenous sovereignty as an ally (Walia 2013: 211) – the challenge is to ‘decolonize resistance’ and ensure that campaigns on behalf of precarious status migrants occur within ‘diverse yet imperfect models for Indigenous solidarity’ (Fortier 2013: 282). This has involved building strong relations, especially but not exclusively between NOII Vancouver and Coast Salish Indigenous communities in British Columbia. ‘This relationship with Indigenous sovereignty struggles influenced both the political goals and tactics of NOII-Vancouver’ (2013: 280). The way these goals have been formulated and tactics to achieve them developed illustrate how listening can be connected to politics.

The politics of social location for racialised migrants is a particularly sensitive and difficult question, as racialised migrants have experienced both privilege and oppression. For some this social location is best understood as the position of simultaneously victims and complicit (Andrea Smith, in Walia 2013: 126); others distinguish between privilege and complicity (Jaffri, in Walia 2013: 128); while for still others people of colour are settlers, whose entry into Canada put them into colonial relations in which they participate and they are complicit, not least when they resist marginalisation through official multicultural policies and discourses in ways that make Aboriginal people invisible, for example language policy (Lawrence and Dua 2005: 134–135).

Racialised activists have reflected extensively on how to plan political action on the basis of their critical awareness of their own locations and identities, and as a result of their listening to Indigenous allies:

Relationships between racialized and Indigenous people are not great. Racialized immigrants are suffering, but sometimes they create a hierarchy of suffering and put themselves on top, which is problematic. There’s a lack of understanding of how fundamental the eradication of Indigenous culture

is to a settler society. All ‘-isms’ in settler society exist, but you can’t forget its foundations. The Indigenous struggle is fundamental. All questions should flow from it because we benefit from the continuing violations of Indigenous sovereignty and are, in many ways, complicit in this colonial project. Newcomers need to engage in more critical self-reflection on their locations. (Anonymous Racialized Activist in Amadahy 2008)

But as Grewal notes, ‘Even with shared experiences of racism and violence at the hands of colonizers, the struggle to defend an Indigenous way of life is not shared by all people of color’ (Grewal, in Walia 2013: 240).⁴ Under the colonial ‘politics of recognition’, incorporation in multicultural Canada is highly desirable as ‘model minorities’, a position that is endorsed and sought after actively by some racialised migrants who seek to ‘integrate’ and succeed on the terms of the settler state. Those who do share the struggle to defend Indigenous ways of life demand of other racialised settlers that they not participate as ‘model minorities’ in settler colonial capitalist projects, and instead that they engage in a politics of listening between relatively powerless actors.

As in Chapter 3 on the French and English riots, history must be understood differently. Here the binary space to be cracked open is one that also excludes the complex history of racialised migrants in national narratives of white ‘settlers’ entering *terra nullius*. Speaking and listening from migrant locations can redefine this narrative:

I didn’t come here as a settler, I came here as a refugee. That makes a great difference and we can only know about that if we talk about it. You can’t say many of the racialized people here are privileged but they still don’t know anything about Aboriginal history or people. I see myself as having a role there. (Magaly San Martin in Amadahy 2008)

Different political opportunities emerge. Instead of ‘model minorities’ who are given the equal opportunity to embed themselves in settler colonial capitalism through multicultural politics, there is the possibility to become allies of Indigenous peoples engaged in a politics of resurgence.

Historical solidarities, omitted in a narrative which either erases or appropriates racialised migrants, become instead sites of exchange. Grewal explains:

Some of us regularly bridge between Indigenous and migrant communities – for example, by having discussions in our immigrant spaces about colonization.

We evoke the historic solidarities between Indigenous communities and early Chinese migrants . . . We had several conversations with Secwepemc antimining activist Neskie Manuel, who had found documentation of a traditional immigration policy from his community (Walia 2013: 239)

Direct dialogue builds sustainable relationships of mutual aid, but they embed listening in the type of speaking that is involved, ‘not based on abstract Eurocentric theory or radical Left analysis; rather, they arise out of the valued relations that go beyond momentary solidarity for a single campaign. This happens, for example, when we come together at community dinners and demonstrations to share our stories and histories of resistance’ (Grewal, in Walia 2013: 238).

Rather than a passive act solidarity is a conversation in which relationships are built over the long-term (Walia 2013: 179–180). Yet:

Solidarity activists need to constantly engage in self-education to see how they are a part of, and contribute to, settler society. The best opportunities for self-education have come from joint work that takes us out of classroom-type meetings and into Indigenous spaces or shared activities. There has to be joint work and struggle, followed by time to reflect on these activities (Anonymous Racialized Activist in Amadahy 2008)

While direction is taken from Indigenous allies, activists take responsibility for themselves through sustained and active exchange.

WHAT CHANGES? MEANINGS RECAST

As listening connects to politics, meanings are recast and actions are redefined.

First, the understanding of land changes, from something to possess to something to care for, to which ‘we belong’ rather than vice versa (Walia 2013: 234). This does not mean that NOII activists inhabit Indigenous perspectives – an impossible and offensive prospect – or that they exchange their views for ‘grounded normativity’. It means that they engage in difficult conversations about free movement, land as provider rather than property, and Indigenous host laws and what they mean for migrants today (Hussan, in Walia 2013: 235). Syed Khalid Hussan – NOII-Toronto organiser working with undocumented and migrant people and in defense of Indigenous

sovereignty (Walia 2013: 210) – shares experiences of challenging and politically productive dialogues, and how direction has been taken:

When countering Canadian immigration laws, we were instructed [by Stó:Lō Nation elder Lee Maracle] that we must posit Indigenous host laws. We have since tried to understand for ourselves what respecting these host laws would mean for migrants today and initiated conversations using this framework, most recently with organizers in Native Youth Sexual Health Network and some land defenders in Six Nations. This serves as the basis of conversation about migrant justice as opposed to colonization and settlements. These have been difficult discussions, but conversations emerge, mind-sets change, and the struggle continues (Walia 2013: 235).

The relationships between Indigenous and migrant struggles are, therefore, irrevocably changed through an ethic of reciprocity in which roles of speaking and listening are shared. Ruby Smith Díaz – a Chilean Jamaican person based out of unceded Indigenous Coast Salish territories and NOII-Vancouver member – describes the impact of Indigenous solidarity on her view of the reciprocal relationship between struggles and of migrant justice:

I have seen some pretty inspiring messages of these reciprocal relationships. Recently the Lhe Lin Liyin of the Grassroots Wet’suwet’en stated,

The future generations amongst Indigenous, refugee, and settler societies have an opportunity today to make known that we all as human family require respect, compassion, and a home to live in, and our status to be complete and recognized . . . If the occupation of Canada will not recognize the status of refugees and migrant peoples the Indigenous peoples who are the true owners of these lands will!

Enough said.

For me, the notion of free migration and Indigenous sovereignty are not contradictory. People have always moved – whether for food, safety, celebration, love. What matters in most cases was that respect for the land and peoples in that area would be upheld. That we don’t see our struggles as separate, but as relationships of solidarity. So let’s dream on. Let’s build our dreams together (Smith Díaz, in Walia 2013: 237)

The nature of disagreement is clarified as meanings of land and struggle are recast. This kind of collective work can have transformative dimensions, even with disagreement (Bickford 1996: 163). Perspectives may partially merge, meaning of conflict can be clarified and, most importantly, speakers and listeners are not doomed to inaction (*ibid.*, 165). The possibility is sustained not just of actively making sense together (*ibid.*, 170–173) but of acting together.

Through recasting the meaning of land, nation is also understood differently by recognising indigenous understandings and practices that do not mirror oppressive nation-state structures. Craig Fortier explains the process of discovering these understandings of nationhood:

[M]embers of No One Is Illegal-Toronto were forced to contend with whether the framing of the ‘no borders, no nations . . .’ chant contradicts the collective’s goals to support struggles for Indigenous sovereignty . . . through relationship-building with Haudenosaunee, Anishinabek, Algonquin, and other Indigenous nations, members of the No One Is Illegal-Toronto collective have come to understand that Indigenous conceptions of nationhood are diverse and while some include an appeal to state-like structures, many (if not most) Indigenous conceptions that they encountered pre-figure social and political relationships outside of the confines of the state. In this sense nationhood acts not as an exclusionary, hierarchal political structure, but as a means to enact relationships of mutuality with territories, other living beings, other Indigenous peoples, and settler society (Fortier 2015)

Nationhood, therefore, can be understood by migrant justice activists differently, through listening, and a different political praxis developed.⁵

Without this reciprocal practice of speaking and listening that shifts between peers (though we must always question how interdependent and equal they are), migrant justice activists may ‘replicate the state’s assimilation by forcing Indigenous struggles to fit within our existing narratives’ and ‘subordinate and compartmentalize Indigenous struggle within existing parameters of leftist narratives’ (Walia 2013: 252). Instead, ‘struggles to decolonize from settler colonialism and ongoing genocide demand our understanding and solidarity on their own terms’ (Walia 2013: 253), which is where the *how* of political listening, the meanings it recasts, shapes the *why* of acting together.

WHAT CHANGES? ACTION OUTSIDE OF SOLIDARITY SPACES

The Idle No More movement ‘calls on allies to join a revolution which honours and fulfills Indigenous sovereignty and protects the land and water for a sustainable future for all’ (INM press release, quoted in Walia 2013: 253). Here, more than ever, the connection between listening and politics can be dynamic, moving beyond token acknowledgement at the beginning of political meetings that ‘we live on stolen land’ or ‘I am a settler’ that can become ‘performative’ and lead to paralysis (Snelgrove et al. 2014). As we have seen, the need for careful listening, when acknowledged and acted on, can reshape the political agenda of NOII beyond these token acknowledgements. Coalition, rather than competition which accepts the logic of a hierarchy of oppressions, can result.

Through the interdependence of speaking and listening, different interventions are made. Fortier describes new experiments resulting from listening to Indigenous expressions of nationhood:

This has led activists to experiment with different slogans and chants that better reflect the affinities migrant justice organizers see between their struggles and those of Indigenous peoples. Given these discussions, ‘no borders, no nations’ has waned in its usage in recent rallies (Fortier 2015)

Listening becomes the precondition to action, redefined. The recognition of Canada as a settler state becomes the starting point of political struggle:

While it is clearly important to work these issues out in the slogans used during demonstrations, it is even more important to develop practices that can turn these chants into tangible material, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual acts of decolonization. This often requires more listening than it does chanting (Fortier 2015).

Listening then leads to new ways of speaking. Migrant justice activists have adopted new slogans such as ‘No-one is Illegal, Canada is Illegal’ (Walia 2013: 125) and, in support of Idle No More, ‘our homes are built on the ruins of others’, ‘solidarity for communities whose lands we reside on’ (Walia 2013: 156).

Reciprocity built on careful listening guides action beyond slogans. Indigenous support of migrant struggles has been experienced by migrant justice activists as profoundly important, for example Sewepemc community

hosting refugees facing deportation. ‘These offers being extended to refugees facing deportation are a humbling and inspiring gesture of the relationship developing between Indigenous and migrant movements’. ‘Immigration authorities’ were named as opponents of Wet’suwet’en land defenders in opposition to the pipeline running through their territories, Akwesane Mohawk took a stand against the arming of Canadian Border Security Agency guards in their territory and effectively shut down a border crossing (Walia 2013: 152), Indigenous communities have adopted migrants at risk of deportation to protect them from the jurisdiction of the Canadian state.

Migrant justice activists have joined broader anti-capitalist struggles to make Indigenous self-determination central to the opposition to the 2010 Olympics, organising as ‘No One Is Illegal, Canada is Illegal’ contingent in the 2010 No Olympics on Stolen Land convergence (Walia 2013: 153–154). Aside from specific mobilisations, this was also an opportunity for widespread dialogue at the national level about strengthening anti-colonial politics and understanding links between colonialism and capitalism (*ibid.*, 143). For Walia, to ‘decolonize resistance’ is to ‘undo’ border imperialism for a world where ‘people have the right to stay, the freedom to move and the right to return’ (*ibid.*, 145). She demands of herself and fellow activists that they exercise their sovereignties differently, configure cultural spaces based on shared experiences and visions (*ibid.*, 251) and think and act ‘with intentionality, creativity, militancy, humility, and above all, a deep sense of responsibility and reciprocity’ (*ibid.*, 249). She emphasises the role of communication in this process of building long-term relationships of accountability ‘never assuming or taking for granted the trust that nonnatives may earn from Indigenous peoples over time’ (*ibid.*, 253).

When considered as a politics of listening there is a broader significance to these actions precisely in the way they reconfigure the ‘Us’ created through mutual effort, in reciprocal and interdependent spaces of exchange. Communities are reconstituted in ‘cobuilding’ a different common world. The relations of attention where neither has meaning without the other in this case do not involve ‘the state’ or ‘the public’ or ‘fellow citizens’. Their recognition is not the prerequisite for action or its desired goal, on settler-colonial terms. Instead the politics of listening here involves the recognition of allies in struggle, whose solidarity is under constant threat of disintegration through misunderstanding and outside force. Solidarity requires recasting meaning, to hear Indigenous struggles on their own terms and to reimagine migrant justice as a result.

SECTION 3: LISTENING, SOLIDARITY AND POLITICAL EQUALITY

In this reimagining political equality is enacted, not bestowed. Through reciprocal, respectful speaking and listening, dialogue breaks with the dynamic of colonial intrusion. This politics of listening relies on existing relationships of trust, active participation in struggle and reconstituting communities along shared values and ideals (Walia 2012: 250).

This politics of listening enacts political equality, by seeing and listening to others as interdependent equals. Solidarity guides common action with others. Through these relations of attention activists do not re-present established views but arouse new thoughts and demand changes from themselves. This is a radical form of political equality because of the ways in which this politics of listening is oriented to each other, not the state. This politics of listening is horizontal, in contrast to the inaudibility of minority women unless speaking *to the state* as ‘victims’ or ‘entrepreneurs’ in Chapter 2, or the anti-political objectification of rioting young men *acting against* the state in Chapter 3. These were cases of the unwillingness of powerful actors to listen to the marginalised.

Meaning is recast through reciprocal, interdependent exchange. New norms of intelligibility are created through a reconfigured ‘Us’ through mutual effort. The aim is not recognition by ‘the state’ and ‘the society’ but to recognise and take direction from Indigenous rejections of its logic (Simpson foreword, in Walia 2013) and the continued violence which underpins it when reinventing migrant justice. Political equality, the central concern of this work, is thereby enacted – rather than granted through statist recognition of Indigenous peoples as ‘objects of repair’ (Coulthard 2014) or migrants as ‘model minorities’ (Walia 2013) – through a politics of listening as solidarity.

Like the citizen journalism conference discussed in the previous chapter, this involves face-to-face encounters rooted in particular places, spaces and histories. But what we have explored here is not only the importance of rooting listening in its context but more fundamentally ‘place’ and ‘land’ at the heart of struggle as these relatively powerless actors listen to one another and reconfigure meanings of land, nation and justice through their (unpredictable, challenging and exhilarating) interactions. Indigenous self-determination becomes the foundation of migrant justice struggles.

In this politics of listening lies the possibility of creating a passageway between the experiences of people otherwise divided by ongoing colonisation. Through the spontaneous quality of speaking and listening collective

action is possible. The politics of listening here results in a migrant justice politics with Indigenous self-determination as its starting point, a very different logic to the Europe-based examples of the previous chapters and only the beginnings of what global politics of listening might look like.

NOTES

1. See (Nyers [2010](#)).
2. Coulthard explores the ‘most explicit theorization of the Indigenous resurgence paradigm’ in the work of scholar/activists Anishinaabe feminist Leanne Simpson ([2011](#)) and Mohawk political scientist Taiaiake Alfred ([2005](#)).
3. See also Coulthard [Chapter 6](#) on not vacating state spaces but treating them with greater scepticism.
4. Nor is it shared by all migrant justice activists and scholar-activists, who do not all configure their politics around the understanding of land as a system of relationships to insist on the place-based nature of struggles and understanding of nation (Dhamoon [2015](#): 24, 27). See (Sharma and Wright [2009](#)) in response to (Lawrence and Dua [2005](#)).
5. ‘For many activists, questions of nationalism and sovereignty and how they are understood within a politics of Indigenous decolonization are critical to the practice of a politics of solidarity. ‘Discussions around Indigenous nationhood and sovereignty and the negotiation of (un)belonging for non-Indigenous peoples within and outside of the structures of the settler colonial state are asserted and practiced within the anti-authoritarian current of migrant justice movements in three main ways: (1) through a recognition of the multiple positionalities in which we are situated in relation to settler colonialism; (2) through a political praxis that understands settler colonialism as foundational to the process of displacement and exploitation of migrant labour; and (3) through an imagining of relations of solidarity with Indigenous struggles for sovereignty that exists outside of the nation-state structure’ (Fortier [2015](#)).

Conclusion

Abstract This chapter asks the broader question: who *should* listen? Interdependent speakers and listeners who are always willing to change roles, equally, as peers struggling with and against each other to create a mutual ‘us’ are perhaps often the creatures of ideal theory. Who, then, can and does at least advocate a politics of listening? The role of academics is considered, and the need to avoid land-grabbing and appropriation and instead leverage the different forms of capital the University affords to work, as many do, with actors beyond the campus who are creative and effective in generating new spaces for speaking and listening. *How* matters as much as *why* listen, for an active and continuous practice with political equality as its aim.

Keywords Public sociology

We have explored how listening can be, but often is not, connected to politics. Too often there is little space or political will to hear a different and often more complicated version of events from the mouths of those who are not counted as legitimate speakers. This is particularly true when what ‘they’ say may demand change from ‘Us’ and challenges existing distributions of voice and power.

A politics of listening that has political equality at its core requires listening completely, not selectively when speaking to the state, and to hear

demands, not to dehumanise as ‘antipolitical’ or seek to ‘excuse’, when action is against the state (Chapters 2 and 3). This requires listening also for the past, to recognise rather than erase the historical roots of unequal social relations that condition the visible, present moment of conflict. This listening recasts the story being told and who is able to tell it, and shifts roles of speaking and listening within new relations of interdependence and recognition. This is micropolitics, embedded in social and political processes that need to be understood within their cultural and historical contexts but also connect across and transcend them.

My concern has not just been with the failures to listen but also with how listening can be a form of politics undertaken in these adversarial, unequal and tense political moments when complexity is an endangered species and action must take place here and now. Chapters 4 and 5 explored alternatives: both horizontal and vertical, citizen journalism and other creative mediated practices in Chapter 4, and horizontal politics of listening between ‘non-citizens’ in Chapter 5 with new solidarities developing between two groups that both reject the sovereignty of Canada and its legitimacy as a political entity and define themselves and the mutual ‘Us’ they create in different terms. While the latter were often face-to-face encounters, the former included virtual commons and digital activism and engagement. Through horizontal patterns of exchange that seek out the experiences of others, new possibilities for political equality emerge, which also make vertical claims on powerful actors. In both cases the elusive promise of political equality is realised, at some moments and in some places and spaces.

WHO SHOULD LISTEN? THE ROLE OF THE ACADEMY

These contexts and cases tell us interesting things about who does (and doesn’t) listen. But we are left with a broader question: who *should* listen?

Interdependent speakers and listeners who are always willing to change roles, equally, as peers struggling with and against each other to create a mutual ‘us’ are perhaps more often the creatures of ideal theory rather than the powerful actors in the unequal and harsh moments we have explored. Who, then, can and does at least advocate political listening and demand processes that are less binary and exclusive?

Academics have long debated their implication in these forms of public debate, as the literature on public sociology demonstrates (Burawoy 2005). The danger is that the push from careful complex listening to mobilisation

can quickly become undemocratic, authorising pundits (including academics) as spokespeople who convey messages best delivered by those directly affected. Events such as, for example, those of August 2011 in England or 2005 in France should not generate a ‘land grab’ mentality where academics – including myself – scramble to appropriate these events, to take them under the particular umbrella of specific institutions and authors and ‘own’ them. In the era of ‘impact agendas’ and an enterprise culture in which researchers are also complicit, these are real dangers.

From the academy a politics of listening can leverage the different forms of capital the University affords to work, as many colleagues do, with those who are often more creative and effective in generating new spaces for speaking and listening (cf. screenings of the documentary *Riot from Wrong*¹ and the play *The Riots*² provided opportunities for listening and discussion and have served as a public inquiry where none yet has been forthcoming from the government).

If academics want to take on ‘public’ rather than ‘professional’ roles (Burawoy 2005), information sharing and leveraging capital may be a way to avoid land grabbing and appropriation. Process and method are, therefore, as political and as important as substance – political listening lies in the *how* as much as the *why*.³

In the context of the hateful politics of Brexit, the ‘burkini ban’ and mass surveillance of Muslims in France, the continued dispossession and revolt of Indigenous peoples in Canada and the global refugee crisis, a politics of listening is needed now more than ever, as an active and continuous practice with political equality as both its starting and end point.

NOTES

1. See: <http://riotfromwrong.com/>
2. By Gillian Slovo. See <http://www.tricycle.co.uk/home/about-the-tricycle-pages/about-us-tab-menu/archive/archived-theatre-production/the-riots/>
3. Following the publication of the Media and the Riots report I had the opportunity to discuss the work with *Generation 2012*. Three members of this group of young Londoners – Eveline Mendes, Hakim Kay and Kieran Gordon – produced their own citizen journalist report on the riots “Voices of the Unheard” A Citizen Journalist Report on the Riots of August 2011 one year on’ (Mendes et al. 2012).

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