PART FOUR

Therapies, Individual and Collective

This page intentionally left blank

17 Free Speech, without Listening? Liberalism and the Problem of Reception

MICHAEL LEMPERT

"Free speech" is guilty of misdirection. It would have us focus on expression while ignoring the simultaneous and complementary role of *listening.* Recent public-sphere debates over free speech, for instance, not only challenge the commonplace of deliberative democracy that it is good to talk to people you disagree with; they also ask whether the right to speech can be revoked – by boycott, deplatforming, or firing – when an individual is said to cause harm or jeopardize safety. Online and off, and across the political spectrum, people ask whether "cancelling" individuals curtails free speech and is bad for liberalism or whether such selective disengagement upholds liberal-democratic values by stopping harmful speech and amplifying marginalized voices. These debates overwhelmingly focus on expression even as they rely on unexamined semiotic ideologies of reception – including when, how, and why to *listen*. They are as much about opening up new forms of reception or protecting people from things they may hear or read as they are about curtailing or promoting speech, and it is to the other side of free speech that I want to turn.

It is hardly a surprise to find the spotlight trained on talk and other modalities of "expression." Apart from the specific liberal-democratic legacy of investment in speech and "voice," there are any number of semiotic ideologies – often criticized but still with us – that privilege speaking and imagine discourse as the linear, unidirectional transfer of information from "sender" to "receiver"; listening tends to be ignored as mere passive reception. Scholarship on social interaction has often stressed that listening is not the mere absence of talk. Listening makes conversation possible, not just through the sheer force of receptive co-presence but also through the way interactants sustain and alter the flow of talk through embodied and verbal displays of attention and reaction. A more "distributed," "ecological" conception of discursive interaction can remind us to attend to the centrality of listening practices in liberal democratic projects, including those concerned with freedom of expression.[1]

1 On ecological and distributed perspectives on conversation, see, for example, Goodwin (2018), Erickson (2004, 2010), and Bavelas, Coates, and Johnson (2000).

To sharpen our sense of why an anthropology of freedom of speech should overcome its speaker-centricity and open itself to receptivity in all its ethnographic and historical complexity, this essay juxtaposes a few scenes wherein receptivity stands out as problematic, either because it is hard to cultivate or because it isn't entirely clear what *kind* of receptivity is needed.

The first scene, drawn from the immediate postwar period in the United States, centres on Kurt Lewin, an influential researcher of group dynamics who was anxious to shore up democracy from below, as it were – in daily face-to-face interactions. Lewin and his students studied what made some interactions democratic and others authoritarian and applied their science to leadership training. In an effort to prefigure democratic lifeways within their own scientific practice, the Lewinians also worked on themselves. They felt obliged to break down the hierarchical relationship of observer to observed in favour of multidirectional "feedback" – a kind of receptivity that was much broader than just face-to-face listening.

The second scene jumps ahead about two decades to the storied discursive institution of second-wave feminism, the "consciousness-raising" (CR) group, which experimented with prefigurative disciplines of audition – especially interactional techniques of listening – aimed at promoting what was sometimes called "internal democracy." In the early years of CR, contestation erupted in radical feminist circles over how best to listen to other women, contestation that centred on what I term "deliberative" versus "validational" registers of listening. Was it okay to interrogate a woman's testimony in collective pursuit of the truth? Or was such questioning androcentric and in need of replacement with a feminized – and psychotherapeutically inflected – register that unconditionally validated what women said?

Similar contestation over deliberative and validational listening recurs in my third scene, which returns us to the present, focusing especially on questions of (il)liberal listening on campuses post-2016. When you listen across difference, as is often urged, are deliberative responses always appropriate, or only under some circumstances? More deeply, deliberative democracy sees dialogue as an unconditional good, but must you feel obligated to listen to those with whom you may strongly disagree – or, worse, to those whose speech you find harmful? On campuses "active bystander workshops" address an equally pressing question: How should students, faculty, and staff respond when they hear or overhear troubling talk, such as verbal microaggressions? I show how these questions related to receptivity are central to liberal contestation over "free speech," "harmful speech," and "cancellation," all of which focus on expression but rely on ideologies of reception.

There are certain historical links among the scenes constructed here, but rather than stitch them together, my purpose is largely comparative. I use these three moments to suggest the enduring if variable place of listening in liberal-democratic projects while inviting us to appreciate – ethnographically, semiotically, and

historically – how listening is configured, enacted, construed, and contested as part of a broader politicization of interaction in socio-historical life.

Liberal Listening

As trope and as topic of study, listening has of course been reclaimed many times before. Feminist methodologies for recovering women's "voices" have at times embraced the trope of listening, for instance. Sound studies has explored how the material affordances of media technologies shape listening practices. Sensorial ethnographers and ethnomusicologists in anthropology have stressed the importance of the sonic and its receptivity. Steven Feld (2015) coined "acoustemology" to capture the way knowing the world can occur centrally through listening. Some linguistic anthropologists have written about the cultural pragmatics of listening and silence, while others have traced the discursive formation of a listening subject.[2] Quite a few have studied the way democratic ideals – and fears of authoritarianism – have inflected ideas about what "democratic communication" is and should be, as with postwar Frankfurt School anxieties about the corrosive power of mass media on susceptible audiences or utopian multimedia experiments from the same period that media historian Fred Turner (2013) has called "democratic surrounds." The Habermasian legacy has argued that intersubjective communication and argument undergirds liberal-democratic life, yet his work, like most, remains uncritically speaker-centric.[3] A handful of political theorists of deliberative democracy – many directly inspired by Habermas – have recently recognized the need to take listening seriously, arguing, for instance, that it isn't enough for informal and formal deliberation to be procedurally "inclusive" of different sociological categories of people, as many insist, because you can always ignore what people say. As Mary Scudder (2020, 16) suggests, listening is how we give – and show – "fair consideration" to others' expressive inputs, for it is "*in* listening [that] we constitute the deliberative act."[4]

---

2 In sound studies, see, for example, Helmreich (2010, 2016); on receptivity and technologically mediated hearing and listening, see Larkin (2014), Semel (2022), Hsieh (2019, 2021); on listening and silence, see Bauman (1983), E.T. Hall (1969), Maltz (1985); for ethnographies of listening, see Bendix (2000), Erlmann (2004); for a genealogy of a "listening subject," see Inoue (2003, 2006); on listening as ethical subject formation, see Hirschkind (2008); and for conversational-analytic studies of listening in interaction, see Gardner (2001).

3 Of the many critical engagements with Habermas, it is telling that few questioned his speaker-centricity; for an important early exception, see Graham (1993). While Habermas (1974, 1984, 1995) reimagined critical rationality as a product of discursive interaction, his vision of argument was ultimately that of monadic speakers who symmetrically alternate turns of *talk*.

4 See also Bickford (1996) and Dobson (2014). For a review of listening in deliberative theory, see Morrell (2018).

As this form of political theory is self-consciously normative, it does not muck about in context. It does not ask what listening – and receptivity more broadly – is taken to be in a given case, and how, why, and with what effects people practise it or avoid it. These are rarely settled issues for actors themselves, of course. In an ethnographic study of a popular Finnish radio show, Harri Englund (2018) explores how the hosts agonized over questions about how best to tell the truth while respecting a diversity of opinions. Through careful interaction with guests and through equally careful editing, the hosts tried to fashion a multivocal dialogue of viewpoints. They thought a lot about reception. One radio host, for instance, reported being "haunted by personal qualms about failing to sustain dialogue on air when interlocutors' views sounded outrageous to him" (102), for he came to realize that "a need to be heard, rather than bigotry, drove many of the contributions" (106). Stressing this "need to be heard," Englund reminds us of the need to consider the entwinement of listening and speech in liberal practice.

In "Can the Subaltern Listen?," James Slotta (2017) draws listening fully out from the shadows. He unsettles universalizing liberal political assumptions by stressing how listening rather than speech is treated as a vehicle for self-determination among people from the Yopno Valley in Papua New Guinea. Subaltern studies, Slotta recounts, embraced the trope of voice in thinking about what is involved in restoring agency to marginalized groups; from this perspective, the converse – listening – appears as if it were always only "an act of deference or even submission." Slotta's ethnographic counter-example details the way Yopno draw on local-cultural sensibilities about the power of "listening well" to control their future.

Even in cases where listening is not explicitly thematized, we can usually find tacit but important assumptions about listening that sometimes start to come into focus for actors themselves. After the Unite the Right white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, local linguistic anthropologists Lise Dobrin and Eve Danziger (2017, 372) noticed this happen in public-sphere debates about the distinction between hate speech and free speech, observing that people "seem ready to move beyond the speaker-centric view of speech as something individuals produce, and think about the wider setting that makes communication – including reception and interpretation – possible within a free society." They continue: "Note that the hearer has an important role to play in all of this." Of late, the issues of reception and "listening" have indeed surfaced in public contestation over free speech, reminding anthropologists of its relevance.

Let me stress immediately that by foregrounding listening, my intent is not to reinstate the sender-receiver model by arguing that one side has received short shrift. Instead, I seek both to decentre "speaking" and to call attention to the way that "listening" – while itself a reductive, ideological abstraction – can

be objectified by actors, troped upon, even technologized. We must remember that the seemingly elementary dyadic relation of "speaking" and "listening" is an ideological construct, a selective and value-laden configuration and elaboration of communicative acts and associated participant roles.[5] We must recognize further that most investments in listening involve a broader ideological investment in *interaction* itself as an epistemic and technical object. To know listening is to know something about interaction in the round. Indeed, we will see below how an interest in listening rests on a reflexive orientation towards social interaction as both ideological site and object to know, and control.[6]

Let me also stress the need to leave "listening" capacious, in order to invite careful ethnographic attention. Erving Goffman famously demonstrated that "speaker" and "hearer" are analytically coarse terms that need to be resolved into finer participant roles,[7] but we can't just drop "listening," to the extent that it has been abstracted out and imbued with significance. Like "voice" or "dialogue," "listening" is often a highly resonant trope and needs to be appreciated as such, coarseness and all.

Nor can we assume in advance what listening even involves. In many cases, listening may well prototypically mean *aural* receptivity to the spoken word. Receptivity quickly touches on much more than hearable speech, especially as interactants draw inferences about listeners based on *how* they listen and respond to their speech (through so-called backchannel vocalizations like *mm* and embodied gestures like head nods that are produced while someone else talks) and what they say next. That is, interactants often treat listener reactions and responses as indexicals that reveal the degree or quality of "involvement" or intersubjective "understanding."[8] Still, invocations of listening often have less to do with observable communicative behaviour and more with, say, the moral condition of the soul or heart or mind that makes a person "receptive" to a message or person or truth. For facilitators of conversations about race, for instance, we sometimes hear appeals to "deep listening," which is less about techniques and more about an internal state of readiness and openness that

5 For an introduction to participant roles, see Sidnell (2014).

6 As Gal and Irvine (2019, 168) suggest, ideological sites should not be defined by their literal socio-spatial location and extension but rather by the way they involve and invite *joint attention* by social actors.

7 Cf. Webb Keane's (2016) stress on the interactional dimensions of ethical life. In revisiting the notion of "dignity" (110, et passim chap. 3), for instance, he emphasizes how this moral concept gets actualized in the communication of deference and demeanor (see also Goffman 1974, 1981). As Charles Goodwin notes (2006, 20–1), Goffman (1981) made finer distinctions among speaking-based participant roles (namely, between author, animator, and principal) than he did for listening.

8 Compare with Goffman's (1957) foundational essay on "involvement" obligations in social interaction.

then makes interactional receptivity possible. As we will see next, quite often listening is more than an interactional practice and instead part of a highly distributed project of cultivating receptivity in domains, modalities, and media other than exclusively the face-to-face.

Freedom as Feedback: Postwar Listening for Leaders circa 1947

In the years after the Second World War, "small group" analysis, as many called it, became a social science boom industry in the United States. Often laboratory-based, technophilic, and technocratic, this new interdisciplinary science studied social interaction in groups that ranged in size from two to about twenty individuals. Disarming by name, small group science had big ambitions. It could analyze any form of interaction, from chess matches to marital disputes, in contexts ranging from cockpits to classrooms. A theme issue of the *American Sociological Review* from 1954 gathered more than a dozen papers that together made "the case for the study of small groups" (Strodtbeck 1954). How *practical* this new form of study was, editor Fred Strodtbeck crowed. Whatever small group analysis meant – and it certainly wasn't unified in theory or method – it was clear that it would be good for social engineering and hence good for postwar social science patronage.

More than a few held that knowledge about group dynamics could help stem authoritarianism and grow democracy, and nobody drew out this potential more than the German Jewish émigré and social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947). Lewin became a major figure in small group science and founded the interdisciplinary Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1945. After his sudden death in 1947, the centre relocated to the University of Michigan.

So confident was Lewin (1945, 131) about the relevance of his science that he alarmed some of his peers with what he came to call "action research." "The main methodological interest," Lewin wrote of his centre at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, would be "the development of group experiments and particularly change experiments." In labour relations, Lewin's group engaged in industrial consulting at a factory in rural Virginia.[9] It tried to heal race relations and curb anti-Semitism. Above all it promoted democracy in interpersonal life.

In his far-reaching essay on Lewin, Matthew Hull (2010) rightly conceives of Lewin's science as what he calls a democratic technology of speech. As

9 See Chris Kelty's (2019) thoughtful discussion of Lewin's application of his science to industry.

speech was only half the story, let us stretch this and term it a democratic technology of interaction. Following Latour, technology doesn't name a thing with definable properties but rather an orientation and aspiration that, Hull explains, "guides efforts to demarcate and isolate some sociomaterial process or entity from its myriad connections, especially with humans, in order to make it transferable and usable across different social boundaries" (259). Technologizing a thing means that you try to cut away figure from ground and hold the two apart to such an extent that you can imagine a discrete technology – tool, machine, method, etc. – that humans instrumentally "use," that can be "applied," that can be felt to have "effects" on an independent existing world. Hull outlines Lewin's science of interpersonal democracy in relation to wartime and postwar America and then traces how it was translated and ported over to South Asia in the decolonizing years after the Second World War, such as through Ford Foundation–funded efforts to bring "democratic group life" to Delhi.

Here, let us return to a few highlights that illustrate how this technology was first developed. Lewin's first step towards a democratic technology of interaction began in the 1930s. While a professor at the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station, he worked closely with students Ronald Lippitt and later Ralph White to develop experiments that led to publications in 1938 and 1939 that studied clubs of ten-year-old boys and tested the effects of three different leadership styles: "authoritarian," "democratic," and "laissez-faire" (Lewin, Lippitt, and White 1939).[10]

Lewin (1939, 273) wrote, "On the whole, everything was kept constant except the group atmosphere," to see what difference this made. The democratic leader gave options, for instance, and made "all policies a matter of group discussion." The research burned with relevance. Which group climate incited "rebellion against authority, persecution of a scapegoat, apathetic submissiveness to authoritarian domination, or attack upon an outgroup?" (271). And was there something quietly, dangerously seductive about authoritarianism? It was impossible to miss the allegory of the essays, as one was published some six months before Kristallnacht, another four months before Germany invaded Poland.[11] More than an urgent morality play, more than a refutation of Nazism and Fascism, Lewin offered a way to intervene. The Lewinians concretized democracy, materializing this ideological formation in interaction. They made it palpably small, which opened the possibility not just for knowledge and prediction but also, crucially, for control.

10 See also F. Turner (2013, chap. 2); Bradford (1974); R. White and Lippitt (1960).

11 In 1944, Lewin learned that his mother had perished in a concentration camp in Poland (Marrow 1969, 141).

A Democratic Laboratory in the Wild

If you knew what democratic life looked like face-to-face, what steps could you take to reproduce it? Of course you could share knowledge in the usual ways. At the Chicago Rotary Club, for instance, the Lewinians discussed their findings with film clips, charts, and graphs (White and Lippitt 1960, 10). A far more ambitious solution came in the form of a large annual training "laboratory" for group interaction that Lewin's centre began holding in summers at an old private school in Bethel, western Maine, a remote village of some 2,000 located in the foothills of the White Mountains. The lab would recruit leaders from across the nation.

The two-week National Training Laboratory (NTL) on Group Development, as it was called, was held in late June 1947, just months after Lewin passed away. The centre was never shy about the lab's commitments. One topic was "understanding and working in terms of an explicit democratic philosophy and ethics of change" (NTL 1947, 69). The lab ended on 4 July, Independence Day.

The NTL's 1947 report outlined the mission. The first goal was "to provide research scientists with an opportunity to communicate scientific knowledge of group dynamics to key education and action leaders." The second was "to provide an opportunity for observing, experiencing, and practising basic elements of the democratic group process which are relevant to educational and action leadership." They invited some 133 delegates who hailed from twenty-nine states and four foreign countries (6).[12]

The Bethel lab built on prior work, including Lewin's own experimentation with group "climate." Years earlier, Lewin had democratized his own team. In Berlin he had tried to cultivate a non-hierarchical climate for intellectual discussion. At the heart of this experiment was a discursive ritual. Called *die Quasselstrippe* – "chatter box" or more literally "chatter line" (the analogy here may be to the way people gab on the telephone) – the practice was meant to be an incubator of creativity and open-mindedness (see Marrow 1969). He had launched this in response to what he saw as stifling apprenticeships in which students studied at the feet of analysts like Freud and Adler. This took place in a café located across the street from none other than the Berlin Psychological Institute (Ash 1992, 201). When Lewin relocated to Iowa, he recreated the ritual on the top floor of a restaurant to which his students would bring lunches (Marrow 1969, 88).

12 While the Lewinian's early focus on the boy's clubs suggested a familiar gendering of the political as a "male"-coded domain, women were invited to the first national training laboratory, and these participants were not all wives of male invitees. I thank Matthew Hull for alerting me to the gendering of the political in Lewin's science.

Much as they had learned to engineer their own climate and modify experimentally the climate of the boy's club, so at Bethel the Lewinians knew they needed to construct an environment conducive to democracy, and this required work.

It helped that Bethel was, in ritual fashion, a place set apart. This "intensive practice laboratory in human relations skills, isolated from the pressures of daily work and living, may prove to be the most effective means of learning how to bring behaviour into line with the difficult demands of democratic ideology" (NTL 1947, iii). This freedom from everyday pressures – including the stresses of a hierarchical workplace at home – recalls Jamie Cohen-Cole's argument about the importance of leisure for cultivating liberal-democratic scholarly lifeways (see Cohen-Cole 2009, 2014). Bethel had its recreational activities like square dancing that "gave all delegates a chance to swing partners and *do-se-do*" (NTL 1947, 31). It had its "communal dining hall" (30) and centralized living quarters that allowed participants to "live together" (4–5). "Informal singing" and music would erupt spontaneously before and after meals.

The school's built environment did need tweaks. It had fixed desks. The organizers unbolted and removed them. In their place they found "beautiful oval oak tables that could seat about 20 persons" (Bradford 1974, 44). Wherever possible, seats would be arranged in circles, and everyone would cultivate mindfulness about the inclusive power of the pronoun *we*. Visitors were discouraged from dropping by unannounced, "for much of the value of the experience would depend on the gradual development of intimate group relations and a very cohesive group structure" (Bradford 1974, 16).

The daily log kept for one training session monitored this cohesion. "Group level of morale in Workshop lower today," the journal read just a few days in, though there was a glimmer of "good progress in strengthening group feeling." There were ups and downs, frustrations, even power struggles. By Thursday of the retreat, "sometimes we had attempts at pretty autocratic or formalized leadership," but they "did not get away with it." By Friday of the retreat, "two members had previously seemed to be vying for leadership role" and "today they seemed united against two members: less 'we-ness.'" One day the conveners felt the sting of criticism: "Got rather frank and personal in our evaluation today. We took it, but some of us felt a little sore." A week later, the meetings hit bottom, scoring their lowest rating, "yet by [getting] out a lot of aggression against each other and the leadership," this "cleared the way to move ahead." Indeed, by 3 July, the "final evaluation session was almost a spiritual experience" (Bradford 1974, 139–42).

Spiritual was only half the story. Bethel was a teetotaling town, and that wouldn't be conducive to "we-feeling." Martha Bradford – the wife of Leland Bradford, the director of adult education from Washington, DC, who was both a Bethel trainer and a lab co-organizer – managed the lab's small library. She also

did the "Berlin Run" – to Berlin, New Hampshire – twice a week to ferry booze across state lines. While the locals "usually retired around 9 pm, our group often began drinking and singing into the early morning" – which predictably caused some strain with the community, and when "one participant drove his car around the Academy's racing track, leaving deep ruts in the track and grass," the conveners were sure they'd never be invited back (Bradford 1974, 48).

How would you know if this lab had worked, beyond notes in a journal and ruts in the grass? The conveners had welcomed the delegates with an "informal tea" and supper, and not long after subjected them to "pre-measurements" so you could later see if they changed. For practical reasons, only a handful underwent the full battery of testing, which they did along with the faculty (Bradford 1974, 45). But all were assessed before and after by means of a questionnaire and interview.

The Ideology Questionnaire netted the demographics. Then came seventy-four statements to be evaluated with a five-point scale. Many questions concerned the group discussion itself. Do "group members have a responsibility to draw into the group discussion those who are not participating?" Is it "all right to interrupt other people, if one has an important idea to put across?" (Bradford 1974, 107–11).

The Ideology Interview got personal. "Do you have, or have you ever had, servants working in your home?" "How do you think servants ought to be treated?" "What traits should a good wife have?" "Do you think that character traits are fixed or changeable?" And so on. And, to the crux of the matter: "How should a leader behave in a democratic group?" And a hypothetical that left nothing to chance: "Suppose there was a dictator who would use the techniques of changing people without regard for their welfare … how would you feel about that?"

As the Bethel lab drew to a close, there was the "Final Ideology and 'Change' Interview," which probed the delegates' sense of change. Tellingly, the interviews also solicited feedback on the lab itself and on its trainers. For instance: What were [the trainer's] "assets as a leader" compared to others? "What do you consider his liabilities?" "What sort of relationship would you say exists between you and him?" (Bradford 1974, 105).

The Bethel lab didn't rely only on surveys and interviews. In tow were interaction scientists, led by Harvard's Robert Freed Bales, who would observe in real time how the delegates behaved. Observers were instructed to code the "smallest discriminable act" (NTL 1947, 127). They would remain alert to signs of democratic and anti-democratic tendencies. Bales was using a list of twenty distinct communicative actions to score. One was "autocratic manner," which included "giving bald commands or directions, implying no autonomy for the other" as well as "denying permission, blocking, restricting, prohibiting, disrupting activity" (127).

Yet here again, it wasn't only the expert observers who got to say what had happened. Immediately after each discussion, participants filled out forms that asked how they felt things went. Their "post-meeting reactions" were assessed and plotted over time, so that you could see the changing "temperature" of the group as it warmed, cooled, and warmed again (NTL 1947, 138). At Bethel, observation and assessment were to come from all directions as ongoing, multi-directional "feedback." It was feedback that nurtured self-awareness and sensitivity, which were capacities deemed critical to democratic intersubjectivity.

After Bethel was over, the faculty leaders subjected each other to feedback by drawing on what the delegates had said. They reviewed evaluations, which were sometimes indicting: "very self-assertive," "interrupts frequently," "argues often with one individual ignoring the effects on the group" (Bradford 1974, 160). They debated whether the assessments were fair, and each trainer got a chance to say how they thought things went. And all of this feedback-on-feedback was audio recorded and transcribed. Perhaps if they had time in the future, they would return to this transcript and go meta yet again to see what these discussions revealed about their interaction styles and group dynamics. Endless reflection, feedback forever.

Democratic life wasn't easy. It wasn't simply a matter of doing some communicative actions and not others, because, as an interactional culture, democracy needed constant receptivity. Accountability to others, an openness to feedback, a keen sensitivity to interpersonal action-and-reaction and the way that contributed to group climate – all this constituted the communicative habits of a self-regulating democratic culture.[13] Like a servomechanism, like feedback in its cybernetic sense, one had to be responsive to others. Cultivating receptivity was critical to the Lewinian democratic technology of interaction.

Epistemologically, ethically, and politically, the Lewinians felt they *owed* receptivity to the leaders they sought to know, and change. This required a measure of intellectual vulnerability. They should be willing to field questions and receive comments and candid evaluations, and such "feedback" should in principle be able to come from anywhere and anyone. The liberal receptivity they aspired to cultivate was not primarily about "listening" in a limited, interactional sense; that is, listening as an act and as a participant role to be enacted in face-to-face interaction. It was more varied, distributed, and multimodal.

13 The Lewinian training labs have been cited as a source for the widespread corporate practice of "360-degree feedback" in human resource management (Slater and Coyle 2014). As Kelty (2019, 96) writes, when the Lewinian's democratic technology was trained on the workplace – rather than on cultivating leaders – you could see this effort as a form of "governing through freedom" (to use Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose's [2008] expression, specifically), as "the crafting of a new kind of subject" who was "exhorted to be democratic, independent, autonomous, and eventually entrepreneurial."

Receptivity could indeed mean giving subjects a chance to talk and making sure that one sat and listened well. But it could also mean having them fill out paper surveys and evaluations. At its deepest, receptivity also required an internal willingness to *learn* empirically about oneself, about how one "actually" affected other people interpersonally and, when necessary, a willingness to try new things, to adjust – to improve – one's behaviour. As a feat of interpersonal engineering, it was as if the Lewinians had been trying to correct the imbalanced ratio of "expression" to "reception" so that humans would be better able to mutually know and adjust to one another. At the very least, the very act of *trying* to be more receptive conveyed that you were willing to treat them like a colleague, which would thus prefigure a future of more open, trusting, and communicatively intimate social relations.

Feedback should not be accepted uncritically, however. It was still just data. You had to think and assess and weigh it all. If possible, you should also triangulate, collecting data from different vantage points so that you might converge on the truth. The climate that these social engineers of group dynamics sought to construct was not unlike Lewin's old chatter line in that it facilitated not just free-flowing talk and information but potentially argumentative communication. The receptivity implicit in the Lewinian democratic technology of interaction was, in a word, *deliberative*. It did not require that you unconditionally support others and suspend your forensic concern for the truth.

Second-Wave Listening for Women

As we leap forward now two decades and encounter a very different manifestation of liberal receptivity, the "consciousness-raising" (CR) sessions developed by feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, two important differences from the Lewinians stand out. With CR, receptivity is prototypically interactional. It is about "listening" face-to-face. Second and more importantly, it was at first a live question as to what *kind* of receptivity was needed. For many feminists the "deliberative" kind felt troubling, even androcentric. Rather than listen with an ear towards deliberating critically about truth and falsity, many sought what we might term a *validational* register of listening that owed much to a psychotherapeutic sensibility and that has arguably continued to inform contestation over (il)liberal listening today.

As an interaction ritual, the carefully orchestrated "small group," as consciousness-raising was often called early on, came to feature ostentatiously inclusive methods that were central to its prefigurative design.[14] As some of the

14 For a semiotic treatment of what I have been loosely calling, after Boggs (1977), the "prefigurative" dimensions of interaction ritual, see especially Stasch (2011a) and Silverstein (2004). On the historical instability and plasticity of prefigurative rituals, see Lempert (2012).

guides to CR put it, the group should be a "safe" space, a "free" space, in which each woman got a chance to speak and nobody would be judged. With its special interpersonal methods, the feminist small group foregrounded interaction itself as a domain of social life, making interaction's normative expectations stick out so that they could be critiqued and ritually transformed. Interdiscursively, the feminist small group contrasted poetically with "ordinary" (androcentric and patriarchal) conversation in which women routinely experienced subordination and marginalization.

CR groups met weekly, not in labs but in members' homes, and ranged from as few as five or six to as many as twelve or fifteen (see, for example, Carden 1974, 34; O'Connor 1969, 5, 15; 1970; Jenkins and Kramer 1978, 70). With no men present, women would be free to explore issues each week.[15] "Why did you marry the man you did? How do you feel men see you? How do you feel about housework? … What did you want to do in life?" (Sarachild 1970). By sharing feelings and personal experiences, members would learn about their collective condition.

While ferreting out the indexical meaning of feelings, much as you might do in therapy, this anti-therapy therapy reversed the directionality of causation. Feelings supplied insight into the political, pointing not inward towards ingrained mental states but outward towards patriarchal relations. "Our Politics Begins with Our Feelings" is the title of a statement presented by Lynn O'Connor at a 1970 San Francisco meeting of a Women's Liberation group known as the Redstockings West. "Our first task is to develop our capacity to be aware of our feelings and to pinpoint the events or interactions to which they are valid responses" (O'Connor 1970, 1). When you followed the indexical route from feelings to sources, these sources were not revealed to be individual pathologies like "masochism, self-hate, or inferiority" but rather "a response to some behavior that was in fact designed to humiliate, hurt and oppress us" (1).

CR groups were largely white and tended to draw women of class and educational privilege, which meant that the intense homosocial intimacy that CR members could experience was not simply a performative effect of talking together. Their sense of connection and shared plight was aided by "real" (offstage) similarity – similarity based not on being members of a monolithic, universally oppressed class called "women" but on being a raced and classed subgroup whose commonalities were created in part by postwar suburbanization and redlining, which ensured that these women looked alike and shared a lot well before they set foot in each other's homes. CR groups could also shut their doors whenever they felt they got too big, which, in practice, could be

15 On CR groups that did experiment at including men, see Nachescu (2006).

used for gate-keeping.[16] Their contradictions and exclusions notwithstanding, by 1970, feminist small groups populated major cities across the United States and rapidly became the celebrated interactional technology of second-wave feminism, the "cornerstone" of the whole movement (Dreifus 1973, 5).

Feminists claimed CR as their own while acknowledging that its influences were many. Some credited the Maoist practice of "speaking bitterness" as a source of inspiration, and despite early disavowals by feminists promoting CR, the practice drew deeply on a psychotherapeutic sensibility. Less acknowledged at the time was CR's indebtedness to the New Left circles of the early 1960s, with their prefigurative desire to democratize participation – including how they interacted at their own meetings.[17]

CR's "origins" were discussed and disputed at the time it was popularized, and the practice itself was a moving target. CR underwent changes as it spread. It started in radical feminist circles, yet after 1970, liberal organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW) started to use CR largely as a means of recruitment, and CR often started to look more like a "support group" or a "study group" for women, to the dismay of CR's early architects and promoters.[18] As Anne Enke (2007) stresses, given how decentred the women's movement was, CR was flexible. It could be tailored for local contexts.

As the small group practice spread and evolved, its participation structure experienced ideological elaboration, regimentation, and contestation. Normatively, CR group institutionalization tended to make the practice ever more finely equalitarian. As an early essay about CR noted, the practice experimented with "internal democracy," which involved settling a topic of discussion in advance and ensuring that everyone got a chance to speak. "Some of the rules include no leadership, speak in circles, no one talks a second time until everyone has had her turn, no challenges of the veracity of members' statements, theoretical analysis of a topic only after all have spoken" (Dreifus 1973, 16). In some cases, speaking tokens were distributed, to be cashed in whenever one talked and counted at the end of the session to see who had talked more, and less. Just as one must speak from personal experience, one should ask only clarifying questions of others, thus never "challenging another woman's experience"

16 See Nachescu (2006) who discusses the racial and class-based exclusions of CR while recovering less visible Black and Chicana CR groups. See also Thomlinson (2012). For early reflections on CR's exclusions, see Black feminist Celestine Ware (1970, 35, 108–18), also discussed in Nachescu (2006, 58–62, 143–7).

17 On CR's relation to therapy, see Herman (1995) and Rutherford and Pettit (2015). On CR's roots in the New Left, see Evans (1979, 134–5), Gitlin (1987, 357), and Loss (2011, 292).

18 On CR's movement from radical to liberal circles and its increased resemblance to therapeutic genres, see Rosenthal (1984). Nachescu (2006, 15) suggests that it was white feminists who were more alert to and troubled by the likeness between CR and therapy, because Black feminists, for instance, didn't have the same history of access to therapy.

(Dreifus 1973, 22). Great care was taken to ensure that each member respected a woman's autonomy and her inviolable personal experience, that each listened well and validated others.[19]

Its heterogeneity notwithstanding, CR had crystallized as a "method." Kathie Sarachild [1973] 1978), who had chartered feminist consciousness-raising in late 1968, had contempt for what she saw as such procedural fetishism. For her, giving unconditional support to others was never the point. The aim was to learn from others empirically so that you could generalize and produce knowledge that would then inform and incite political action. Her framing for CR was deliberative. In fact, Sarachild's own small-group facilitation style reportedly could feel "confrontational," as "she did not hesitate to challenge … testimony." Her remarks reveal contestation over what feminist small-group participation should look like, with some within the movement using the gender binary to distinguish "soft" from "hard" CR.[20]

The soft variety won out. CR became seen as a self-consciously feminized organizational ritual (even as men and others experimented with the genre). It was feminized not simply because of the "absolute dictum" that men be excluded (Dreifus 1973, 21) but especially because of its design. The cultivated inclusiveness, the epistemic personalization, the attentiveness and validation of the feelings of each and every member – all amounted to a prefigurative gender politics. At its most utopian, CR became a feminist counter-institution – the mirror-image opposite of all the competitive, hierarchical, androcentric organizations that demeaned, subordinated, and silenced women. Women would "develop a group process not predicated upon dominance and subordination" (O'Connor 1970, 1; Echols and Willis 1989, 186). As Pamela Allen's (1973, 272) influential essay branded it, CR aspired to be a "free space": "the small group is especially suited to freeing women to affirm their own view of reality and to think independently of male-supremacist values."

(Il)liberal Listening for Students, Post 2016

If we return, finally, to the present, we discover tensions reminiscent of the early feminist tension between soft and hard CR, between validational and deliberative listening, respectively. Receptivity here still prototypically means interactional and especially face-to-face listening, yet contestation over receptivity today is far more distributed than this, manifesting itself most notoriously in the interactive virtual environs of social media, but also – in terms of higher-education

19 For a notable first-hand case study of CR communication, see Susan Kalčik (1975, 4–6).

20 On soft and hard CR, see Dreifus (1973, 13–14). On Sarachild's confrontational style, see Echols and Willis (1989, 88).

campuses – in numerous sites, from library catalogues (see efforts to remediate "harmful language in library metadata") to campus building names and statues that commemorate people with troubling pasts and that are felt to cause ongoing harm for vulnerable recipients. Even as the sites of liberal receptivity are many and hence far exceed the hearing and overhearing of "speech" in co-present interaction, the face-to-face retains a special importance.

On campuses – and elsewhere – countless in-person community "conversations" and "dialogues" were convened after the 2016 presidential election with the aim of cultivating democratic sensibilities through speaking across differences. At the University of Michigan where I teach, public messaging entreated students to "engage civilly." In the lead up to and aftermath of that divisive election, as our campus was rocked by acts of intimidation and racist flyering, large university posters cast in Michigan's totemic blue and maize made pleas for respectful engagement while the campus scrambled to offer opportunities for students to come together face-to-face as a community. Whatever else such appeals were meant to do, they seemed to cue well-rehearsed ideals of deliberative democracy, where decision-making depends on a willingness to talk and argue and *listen*. This stance usually has an implicit ethical grounding. You should listen not for reasons of etiquette – to avoid being, say, a "conversational bore" (to recall a figure from twentieth-century etiquette manuals, which referred to someone who failed to take turns reciprocally, failed to yield the floor and listen); nor do you listen strategically, out of self-interest, to find fault or plan what point to make next. Instead, you listen because you remain *open* to the possibility that you might change your mind as a result of the very dialogue in which you are engaged. Some call this *deliberative listening*, and I will do the same.[21]

21 See especially Morrell (2018). To be clear, by captioning varieties of listening in this chapter, I mean to call attention to their status as historically emerging interactional "registers" of listening. Naming them as distinct has heuristic benefits but should not be taken to mean that such registers exist as sharply defined repertoires akin to well-developed speech registers, such as Received Pronunciation, which have both inventories of features and a high degree of social recognizability *as* registers. Asif Agha's (2007) processual notion of *enregisterment* is critical here, as it allows for various states of formation. Agha also recognizes the multimodality of register, for unlike the sociolinguistic usage of the concept, he does not limit register to speech and writing. While I cannot develop this argument here, register is arguably also useful for the way it highlights a range of practices on which social actors can draw – albeit with different degrees of fluency – as they navigate different pragmatic contexts, since speakers are exposed to and acquire experience with numerous registers during the course of socialization. Compare with "genre," which has also been used to conceptualize distinct forms of listening (e.g., Kapchan 2017, 5–6; Marsilli-Vargas 2014, 2022). See especially Xochitl Marsilli-Vargas's (2014, 2022) work on psychoanalytic listening in Argentina, where she writes of "genres of listening" akin to "speech genres" described in linguistic anthropology and the ethnography of communication. In her book length treatment, she mobilizes the notion of genre to explore a widespread psychoanalytic culture of listening in Buenos Aires.

Yet many now dispute whether deliberative listening is an unmitigated good and instead ask whether public condemnation and selective disengagement – "cancelling," as this has been contentiously captioned – can be a positive refusal to stay silent in the face of injurious communication and a way to redirect attention to and amplify minoritized voices. Liberalism is again cued here, albeit different aspects of it; this, despite the fact that advocates of these views rarely recognize the liberal dimensions of these stances and instead often target capital-L liberalism as a pernicious ideological formation to be transcended.[22] Relevant here is the long liberal legacy of interest in "harm" (notably, Mill's harm principle) and the associated issue of when to curtail individual freedoms, while the paired tropes of "voice" and "amplification" cue the liberal-democratic problem of representation in a multiracial politics of recognition.

Let us hold off on exploring such tensions directly and instead turn sideways and consider other pedagogic and institutional practices on campuses that feature liberal listening. We might compare cancellation with other progressive interventions on campuses such as "active bystander intervention," for instance. This training has its origins in efforts to stem sexual violence. It mobilizes social-psychological literature on passivity to equip future passers-by with strategies that will allow them to overcome this natural if moral weakness and *do* something (without jeopardizing one's own safety). This type of training has been extended to cover not just physical but also verbal harm of many kinds. As a pedagogy, it coaches participants in how to react when they hear or overhear a verbal microaggression, for instance, such as a tacitly racist remark. The point is to cultivate sensitivity towards the harms of speech and behaviour with the hope that this training might translate into reactive and proactive behaviour. You should learn to recognize and anticipate how seemingly mundane expressions can harm vulnerable receivers – and you should be vigilant, not only by monitoring your own talk but also by intervening when you hear or overhear something troubling.[23] This training ethicalizes communication deemed harmful and advocates new sequential normativities of interaction that concern what you – as hearer or overhearer – should do "next." This training does not advocate public shaming or firing, yet it is similarly *allocentric* in seeking to hold others "accountable" for what they say while making *you* accountable for your own reaction – or inaction. Indeed, while the Lewinians sought continual 360-degree feedback, because that is what democracy as an intersubjective practice demanded, bystander training seems to demand continual 360-degree "accountability." After all, keeping others accountable includes

22 On the way liberal assumptions inform recent efforts at scholarly decolonization despite the criticism and disavowal of liberalism, see Yasmin Moll (2023).

23 On the ethicalization of social interaction, see Lempert (2013) and Keane and Lempert (2023).

a willingness to be held accountable by others. Let us broadly and provisionally call this form of receptivity *interventionist listening.*

A third register of listening is rather different. In its focus, it is egocentric rather than allocentric and has a strong psychotherapeutic sensibility. It is strongly reminiscent of CR in that it involves validating rather than questioning another's experience. Many argue that when people of colour tell those with white privilege about their experiences with everyday racism, for instance, the latter should affirm rather than question because the event should not be framed as deliberative. It's not a debate, not a time to interrogate a person about evidence, and so on. There are various names proposed for this, but let us call this, again, *validational listening.*

Consider, for instance, one of the many advice pieces written on mainstream media platforms for people aspiring to be white allies, during the intense waves of anti-racist activism that followed the brutal police murder of George Floyd. A July 2020 piece from CNN, "How to Talk with Your Black Friends about Race," combined first-person reflection from a Black author with advice from experts. "If your friend is open to talking, it's important to listen without trying to invalidate his experiences," one recommends. "Don't ask a bunch of pointed questions about how they're doing or request they explain their feelings," the author writes, because – quoting another expert – "that kind of prodding can 'feel invasive,'" because "to experience racism is trauma" (Rogers 2020). At work here is an effort to promote an interpersonal stance that is not forensic or deliberative. (It may be no accident that some of this advice resembles calls to *believe* victims who bring forth allegations of sexual violence, as it may well be that the transposition from physical to verbal harm here was effected first in relation to harm against the female body.) This discipline of listening involves self-restraint. You should take care to mute yourself – to cede the floor, to let others speak, to avoid "interruption."[24] It is through such restraint that you can support those who experience harm and allow their voices to resonate within and without.[25]

This inflection of listening owes much, I think, to a broadly psychotherapeutic take on listening that was popularized in part through the spread of feminist CR and through its subsequent institutionalization in diverse domains of life. But this is no simple story of the spread if not triumph of psychotherapeutic registers. In practice, this register of listening has had its own host of problems. It has been no easy substitute for deliberative listening, not even for its advocates. Pragmatically, therapeutic framings of communicative behaviour tend to be highly unstable and in some cases can be construed as patronizing and

24 On the politicization of "interruption" in second-wave feminism, see Lempert (2024).

25 On the importance of listening and being "heard" as a way of addressing social injustice and trauma, see Stauffer (2015).

even harmful. As a metadiscursive framing, this mode of listening – insofar as it is socially recognizable as "therapeutic" in register – risks inviting an asymmetrical definition of the situation that can undermine the listener's proclaimed state of status-lowered "openness" and "vulnerability." That is, insofar as validational listening is felt to resemble the receptivity of a therapist seated before a (vulnerable?) client, this willy-nilly raises the listener: it invites you to see an asymmetry in expertise and status. Worse, validational listening can also invite you to think that it is the speaking individual alone – and not the listener – who is saddled with pathology: it is *their* problem, not a problem whose etiology is sociogenic. (Recall, again, feminists who insisted that their small group practice may resemble therapy but, unlike therapy, CR did *not* promote "adjustment" to unjust social regimes – to patriarchy.)

Needless to say, in tentatively distinguishing among three registers of listening – deliberative, interventionist, and validational – I do not wish to suggest a high degree of regimentation, as if these were isolable "kinds" that can be included in an inventory. (You can find public-facing scholarship that does offer neat inventories of listening without providing evidence as to whether and, crucially, *for whom* these exist as distinguishable forms.) Nor do I wish to suggest that such forms of listening occur separately, as alternatives, in practice. Some, for instance, do advocate for exclusively validational listening in some contexts, yet this register does not usually occur on its own; rather, it usually precedes deliberative engagement. The recipe, at base, is simple and familiar. First, listen attentively and validate; *then* it's okay to pursue the truth.

Of late, blends of validational and deliberative listening seem particularly volatile. Consider a scene from the Netflix series *The Chair* (2021), set at Pembroke University, a fictitious northeastern Ivy League institution. Irreverent English professor Bill Dobson finds himself in crisis after he gets video recorded and memed on social media for allegedly "using" a Nazi salute during a classroom discussion of Fascism and absurdism. His administration pleads with him to issue a carefully worded written apology. He doesn't take the advice. Instead, he decides to convene a student town hall to speak directly with concerned students.

"Obviously I am not a member of the Jewish community, and I'm not in a position to tell you what is or is not offensive," he leads. "But I am a member of the Pembroke community, and I want to understand your point of view." "No Nazis at Pembroke," one student throws out. "Hate speech has no place here," another says. "Are you harboring neo-Nazi sentiments?" yet another presses. After some exchanges with the crowd that begin to get testy, he voices the tried-and-true value of deliberative freedom: "The university should be a place to uphold free discourse, the exchange of ideas without fear."

Yet the discussion only gets more heated. At last Dobson stops holding back. He defends his action. "If you are suggesting that what I did is the same as propagating neo-Nazism, that's inaccurate. That is a willful misrecognition of

what was clearly –" A student cuts him off with a question as outrage builds. Finally, a student who will hear no more asks him curtly, "Are you going to apologize?" Dobson pauses to gather himself. Fateful orchestral music swells. "I am sorry if I made anyone feel –" He cannot finish. The students will not listen. His speech gets broken up by noise and jeers, during which one student says pointedly, and on the nose, "You're minimizing your responsibility by saying you're sorry for how we *feel*."

Note the appeal to interior states ("feelings"). No apology so framed could be performatively felicitous, even with the causative *made* ("I *made* you feel") through which Dobson assumes some responsibility. To be sure, this is itself a cliché; to acknowledge "how you feel" in an apology is a therapeutic bromide. But in this context, given the widespread semiotic distinction between "intention" and "impact" familiar in progressive circles and taught on campus through workshops of various kinds, appeals to feelings can be particularly fraught. In soft CR the situation had been different. "Feelings" were a desired epistemological object – something you drew out in small group practice. Once elicited, feelings were to be validated, even if their *significance* in terms of sexism would need to be uncovered so that everyone grasped what these feelings "really" indexed.

Courts of law sometimes adjudicate intent, just as people sometimes strain to spell out what people intended, but some argue that you cannot adjudicate "impact" the same way, in large part because the evidence for impact is positional and experiential; in effect, impact is something that only those harmed by speech can reliably report, and in this way impact is not up for debate; it is not a deliberative object open in principle to all. Without delving deeper into this contestation over harmful speech, let me say only that *any* appeal to inner states by someone accused of causing harm creates the possibility of *different* and possibly competing interpretations of action – and this smuggles deliberation back in. After all, appeals to interiority can imply – and often do imply – that it is possible to *adjudicate* among perspectives and arrive at a truth, even if that truth is a perspectivalist one, namely, that people can experience "the same" speech or behaviour differently. Ultimately, then, it does not matter what Dobson intended, what lurked in his heart or mind; nor does it matter what social and semiotic circumstances ("context") surrounded and inflected his ill-fated Nazi salute. In this fictional, filmic universe anyway, context doesn't matter; what matters is only the isolable sign and its impact on vulnerable others.[26] Dobson does try to acknowledge and apologize for impact – if

26 For ethnographic cases in which people are held responsible for the effects of speech rather than on their original "intentions," see Rosaldo (1982) and Duranti (1993a, 1993b). On the way discrete, isolable signs can be treated as intrinsically performative, irrespective of "context," see Luke Fleming's discussions of "rigid performativity" in taboo language in Fleming (2011) and Fleming and Lempert (2011, 2014).

only impact on "feelings" – but his apology isn't accepted, nor is his attempt to contextualize his actions. Dobson's apology is rejected by the students as profoundly insincere.

I recall this televisual scene in part to sample some of the current contestation over receptivity – especially what many take to be an inability or unwillingness to listen – but also, more broadly, to illustrate how people have been reflecting on and objectifying "listening" as a problem to understand and address. If we turn back a few years, stirrings of such contestation over liberal listening can be found in any number of Op-Eds and published letters. In "Listening to Ta-Nehisi Coates While White," for instance, the *New York Times* conservative commentator David Brooks (2015) went meta about receptivity. "I suppose the first obligation is to sit with it, to make sure the testimony is respected and sinks in," he writes, before asking (rhetorically), "But I have to ask, am I displaying my privilege if I disagree? Is my job just to respect your experience and accept your conclusions?" For Brooks, the answers to both were a resounding no. He went on to disagree – while still claiming to have been genuinely affected by Ta-Nehisi Coates's "testimony." Brooks seems to sit squarely in the deliberative always-everywhere camp, yet he entertained, if only for a moment, what is now a familiar progressive position, that differences in social and positional identities can and should affect how you listen. That was 2015. The contestation since has intensified.[27]

Conclusion

The differences among the three scenes juxtaposed here remind us how liberal receptivity can be variously imagined and configured. As for modalities, for the Lewinians, receptivity came in the form of panoramic 360-degree "feedback" that could take the material form of face-to-face talk but also of ratings from paper instruments like a survey. For CR, receptivity was more modular, concentrated as it was in an interpersonal ritual. Receptivity manifested itself especially in the technique of "listening well" to other women in small groups, a practice that could be evaluated based on how you reacted and responded to someone else's talk. On campuses, liberal receptivity takes many forms but it is interpersonal "listening" that remains important if not prototypical.

---

27 This chapter was written before the wave of violent crackdowns on students protesters in the United States who criticize Israeli policy in its war in Gaza. In the name of curbing anti-Semitism and ensuring community "safety," universities have called in police who have used pepper spray, tear gas, tasers, and zip ties to arrest unarmed students and faculty – including many who are themselves Jewish. Many have noted how this reveals a familiar irony: that liberal norms of "free speech" are selectively applied, and so dropped when they aren't expedient. Some have also noted how progressive discourses on receptive "harm" and "safety" have been recruited to argue that vulnerable others should not have to hear – let alone listen to – speech that makes them feel "uncomfortable" or "unsafe."

All three scenes reveal the struggle to meet the demands of liberal receptivity. These demands at times could be considerable, sometimes because it was hard to execute, and sometimes because it wasn't clear what it looked like and sounded like to "listen well."

Indeed, a tension common to my last two scenes has been the changing valence of deliberative responsiveness. Some have asked whether deliberative listening is appropriate in some contexts but not others. Some have wondered whether this register of listening should be replaced or supplemented with some kind of (feminized) validational receptivity that affirms and supports speakers in part by restraining from interrogating alter's truth claims. Brooks's (2015) restraint in his Op-Ed letter was held for a while but remained sequentially "first"; *after* showing his receptivity – how the book affected him, how he "learned" much from it – he then turned decisively to argue with it, with the disjunctive *but* as the hinge. Is a phase of receptive restraint that gives way to critical probing okay, then? Or would *any* deliberative action – any questioning of alter's claims, however brief – upset the whole tilt of the event, making it potentially harmful?

These are questions that should be addressed ethnographically, which I cannot do here, but we should at least sense how, in general, "the interpersonal" (as a constructed "domain" of political action and ideological site) has resurfaced, even as many on and off campuses remain ambivalent about its relative importance and vexed about the relationship between the "interpersonal" and the "institutional," as this interscalar antinomy has long been called. Indeed, all three scenes involve the objectification of social interaction as an ideological site of great importance. For the Lewinians, who were confident democratic engineers of the interpersonal, this objectification involved marshalling social-scientific knowledge on small-group dynamics while simultaneously lowering themselves and opening themselves to democratizing feedback, for they, too, would need to listen well. Participants in feminist consciousness-raising sessions were equally preoccupied with "internal democracy" as well as with the co-present interpersonal practice of listening to other women. In this they made the interpersonal political.[28] Campus DEI-themed workshops have been acutely concerned as well with interpersonal harms caused by speech and behaviour.

Together, these scenes of liberal listening should serve as a caution. They should remind us that we must not take literally and uncritically the overt focus

28 I adapt here Carol Hanisch's famous second-wave adage "the personal is political." For a historical account that traces how the interpersonal became political through feminist research on interaction, see Lempert (2024).

on expression in captions like "free speech." We should not let the speaker-centricity of free speech cause us to neglect the interactional breadth of liberal-democratic practices and projects, because, after all, without listening, who would free speech be *to* or *for*?

Acknowledgments

This chapter was originally written for the conference "Freedom of Speech: Anthropological Perspectives" (Cambridge University, June 2021), for which I thank organizers Matei Candea, Taras Fedirko, Paolo Heywood, Adam Reed, and Fiona Wright. A revised version was presented in October 2021 at the Sociology Workshop on Aesthetics, Meaning, and Power (SWAMP), Department of Sociology, University of Virginia. There I want to acknowledge especially Fiona Greenland, Richard Handler, and Isaac Reed, as well as Eve Danziger, Lise Dobrin, and Dan Lefkowitz. For valuable feedback on this chapter, I also thank James Slotta and Fiona Wright. I owe a special debt to Yasmin Moll, who read drafts and helped me think through issues raised in the chapter. In 2021, I began a collaborative, team-based ethnography that explores tensions over (il)liberal listening on a university campus, in sites such as active bystander trainings, student educational theatre, anti-racist and DEI workshops, and classes that teach students how to facilitate dialogues across difference, for which I thank support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. I do not incorporate findings from this in-progress fieldwork here but wish to acknowledge my research team – Benjamin Davis, Alex Forrest, Cameron Johnson, Greta Kruse, Tina Zou, and Charles Zuckerman – and weekly "Listening Lab" for many stimulating conversations about listening. Portions of this chapter were adapted with permission from Lempert (2024).