

Accessing Silence (Through Active Listening) as a Radical Feminist Practice  
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*“Listening, openheartedly and asking opening questions can often unlock the areas that have been tightly bolted down by fear and social pressures.”* - Fran Peavey, Heart Politics

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When I started to create the experimental documentary *Access* I had just experienced a miscarriage.

The pregnancy was unexpected.

I was deep into my masters degree and honestly I wasn't sure that I could handle being pregnant, supporting a family or having a child. I felt isolated, not knowing who I could trust with my confusion. Who would listen even. I had looked into my options on my own, and saw a doctor multiple times. I scoured the internet for any local source of support, yet, on PEI I could find none.

I stood barefoot in the grass and cried. I held my face down in my pillow, and cried. I felt powerless, and alone with the pressures that a culture of silence had placed on my body. The weight was heavy on my mind yet I couldn't confide or seem to trust even the closest of my friends.

In the end the pregnancy terminated. And I was still alone.

I wasn't sure what to do with myself. I had seen the ins and outs of 'standard care' for missed and incomplete miscarriages, and the way I was treated by the system was cold, hushed and secretive. I was left emptied. I felt silenced without ever really feeling as though I had the choice to speak.

At the same time all of this was going on, I was reading *Silence, Feminism and Power: Reflections at the Edge of Sound*, a collection of essays edited by Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carrillo Rowe and a couple of Foucault's writings - *Birth of the Clinic* and *Message or Noise*. I had stumbled into these writings and essays through my research into documentary form, activism and apparatuses of knowledge and power. Serendipitous, perhaps, but ultimately the combination of experience and academia lead me to consider the power of listening or audition as a radical feminist tool or practice. A place to claim power over my own body and advocate for the agencies of others. A place for me to reconnect, and once again re-member my own centre of self authority.

I could get into metaphorical cliches about the female being related to the natural, and the body being related to nature. However, as I see it, feminism is about bodies, and their right to exist, to be visible and to have power over themselves. Be that through their thoughts or their actions. And a considerable institution and discourse that controls the knowledge, visibility and possibilities of bodies is that of medicine.

According to Foucault the individual or the singular body/subject is the privileged object of medical practice. Truth in medical discourse is thus the result of allowing the body to reveal itself in empirical experience. Empirical method, technique and its instruments present the medical practitioner the exclusive power to examine and bring bodies into knowledge and rationality through their gaze. The medical practitioner uses many different techniques and methods to exert their gaze upon individual bodies but undoubtedly the medical gaze is exercised through the senses.

Foucault argues that the visual dominates the empirical experience of medical knowledge. That haptic and olfactory experience along with audition remain in a subservient position to vision in the realm of medical knowledge/power – or the knowledge/power of the individual body. However it can also be argued that the only way to truly visually reveal the workings of the body is to open it up and look. This type of visual understanding can only truly be experienced post-mortum, and as a result I am left to conclude that discourse about the body that relies on vision as the dominant sign is a discourse not for the living at all.

Audition as an apparatus of medical knowledge however, relies on a living body to function, for a dead body or an invisible one doesn't make any notable sound. I for one consider feminism as a practice and as a theory to be living, constantly changing, never static ever evolving and troublesome. My feminisms exists to uncover the possibilities of being, to transform and dismantle power systems that dominate, control, and silence my body and the bodies of others. My feminisms focus on agency and communication both of which rely on the capacity of action, of being seen and heard, of being recognized.

In order for a sound to be recognized there must be a source of sound, which brings into question the notion and action of speech. In an essay titled *Between Speech and Silence: Reflections on Accountability*, Ann Russo acknowledges speech, talking, making yourself known and demonstrating your knowledge through language to be often considered as signs of 'real' engagement, leadership and contribution in many middle-class feminist, queer and social justice organizations. Yet, she also states that the cultures created in speech or auditory centred groups “privilege those most able to demonstrate their powers of knowledge and expertise, and and those who are able to command authority.” This focus on action through speaking up and speaking out, or awareness building reproduces power lines formed by systematic and structural oppressions and privilege even when the stated goal is to dismantle and transform these structures.

Having a voice is important when one thinks of being silenced or when one considers the power of being heard however, I also think it is important to consider ones situated voice and its connection to visibility – an apparatus of medical knowledge and power of the body. Stepping from this perspective I feel it is important to embrace listening as a more transparent feminist approach to action, for listening is less apt to perpetuate power structures and systems when done actively.

Listening is often related to being silent. When one is listening, one is not speaking, hence one is silent. However being silent is not at all like being silenced. Silence forced upon an other is an act of oppression. But, deliberately choosing to be silent could be considered an active form of resilience and resistance. The political impact of being deliberately silent can be noted throughout history through acts of defiance and protest amongst others. This is why I question our custom denial of silence's revolutionary characteristics. Why do we continue to imagine silence and domination to exist solely in the same category? In *Resistant Silences*, Christine Keating refers to silence as an apparatus that can be used to reject, witness against and temper modes of domination. It is only in a world that degenerates silence that it is difficult to ask people to exercise silence as a radical practice.

Once one considers silence as an active form of resistance to modes of domination and structures of oppression it is not a far leap to then consider the possibility of listening as an similar active practice. However, it can be difficult to truly, actively listen. For it is not about making space, which implies ownership or privilege to be relinquished (currently a very trendy concept.) Active listening is about acknowledging spaces that already exist but due to oppressions and modes of domination they have been maintained invisible. It is about shifting power dynamics and revealing knowledge. According to Ann Russo active listening implies an openness to a more collective process, one in which the most privileged are not at the centre, and one in which our ideas and ourselves are open to modification, change and transformation.

I particularly like the idea of shifting the locations of authority, power and knowledge to promote agency and empowerment. Of shifting the authority from making oneself visible through the act of speech to actively listening. To deliberately undermining that presumed entitlement be at the centre of the conversation. To reject the compulsion to speak in universals and to actively relinquish the power of determining the direction of the conversation and agenda. Active listening is now for me a focal point of feminist resistance and is the point from which I approached the experimental documentary *Access*.

To conclude, I ask you now to witness, open up possibilities through radical feminist action via the documentary.

Follow this link to the films:

*Access* #1 <http://vimeo.com/57465750>

*Access* #2 <http://vimeo.com/80559035>

\*Note *Access* is an ongoing project and is not complete, but rather is a journey that may never be fully articulated.

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