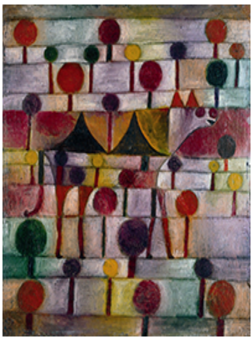

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LISTENING TO CLAIMS OF STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE

Forgetting is absolute injustice and absolute solace at the same time.

Milan Kundera, New York Times *book review 6 Mar. 1988*

Whether in its thinnest guise of regular elections or its most radical forms of agonist and pluralizing collective action, democracy is fundamentally a system that values, sustains, and institutionalizes contestation and potential change. This contestation is often conceived in terms of voice and demand, yet to be democratic it hinges on the capacity to listen to the challenges and potential changes these voices present. A scan of current politics leaves one with a sense that listening is, on the whole, in scarce supply. This is particularly true in conditions of structural injustice, here defined as "institutionalized domination and oppression" (Young, *Justice* 15). Dominant groups benefit from long histories and habits of inattention to such forms of injustice and, when enlisted, often respond with denial, defensiveness, and resentment. From pushback against indigenous rights as "special privilege" to feminism mistaken for misandry, from hearing personal affront in the claim that "Black Lives Matter" to Charlottesville's chorus of "You will not replace us," demands for even basic security or minimal power-sharing are often met with indifference, if not hostility, by dominant groups. Listening, particularly in the context of structural injustice, appears as difficult to achieve as it is integral to democratic politics.

This paper explores what, precisely, lies behind pervasive and persistent failure to listen to such claims. To do so, it develops a novel account of listening that begins to explain why listening to claims of structural injustice proves particularly difficult. It then examines how positions of power shape whether and how one listens to such claims, identifying specific epistemic and affective obstacles to listening that privilege produces. Finally, it explores the implications these challenges have for the design of civic engagement processes seeking to contribute to the redress of various forms of institutionalized injustice. To develop this account of key challenges to and strategies for listening by advantaged groups, I draw together current scholarship regarding listening and structural injustice with original fieldwork on recent and current efforts to engage more advantaged communities

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regarding a specific form of structural injustice: specifically, interviews and observation of the ten organizations across Aotearoa New Zealand most active in efforts to engage communities regarding socio-economic inequality in the country.

wagers of this project

In pursuing such a line of inquiry, I acknowledge three commitments. The first of these is the conviction that certain claims deserve our attention. In this context, I am motivated by the aim not merely to develop our understanding and method for how listening might be cultivated in confronting uneven political contexts but also how such insight might be brought to bear on specific efforts to address current forms of structural injustice.

Second, there is a wager here that meaningful redress of structural injustice demands engagement with those whose relationship to such struggles is far less obvious, and for whom attention to such issues is largely optional: *those in positions of relative advantage*. To date, most democratic projects, whether in the name of inclusion or social justice, have centred on those most marginalized, disenfranchised, or otherwise disadvantaged. Yet occlusion of those who quietly, even invisibly, benefit from the very systems that penalize others overlooks the "other" side of indisputably relational issues, and therefore limits the impact of these very projects. Moreover, as the literature on collective responsibility indebted to Iris Young argues, while those in positions of privilege may not be personally liable (or *morally responsible*) for unjust structural conditions, we are nonetheless *politically responsible* for changing them in light of the benefits we derive from them, the limits they set for individual actions and experiences, and the inability to change them by individuals' acts alone (Young, *Responsibility*; Schiff; Hayward). Some have put this in even starker terms, observing that in light of our greater benefits from as well as greater capacity to impact these structural conditions, "the responsibility for change is not equally shared […] the burden for interrupting it belongs to [those in power]" (DiAngelo 66; hooks). On practical as well as normative grounds, critical attention and concerted action focused on those in positions of relative advantage are integral to addressing structural injustice. Perhaps counter to common understandings, rather than simply implying a ruling class, this takes into (and holds to) account the broader spectrum along any indicator of advantage, including mainstream communities who often disappear from view in discussions of power and privilege.

Finally, I begin from the position that addressing structural injustice requires *implicating challenges* to those who inhabit such positions of relative advantage. A traditional focus on those struggling on the frontlines of various inequalities rather than those who, albeit perhaps unintentionally and indirectly, are related to such struggles by virtue of perpetuating the systems that produce them, has meant steps toward redress are so often nominal and short-lived. Likewise, reliance on strategies to cultivate empathy, while perhaps vital in opening parties to more sustained and challenging engagement, prove fleeting and even voyeuristic when employed alone. Finally, appeal to logics of individual self-interest or shared values ultimately fails to disrupt the invisibility, normalization, and stability of the structural positions from which some benefit at the expense of others. This is not to say that such challenges need be aggressive, or even overtly confrontational – in fact, there's evidence to show that sometimes such challenges are more effectively heard when they are mediated and indirect (Beausoleil) – but changes to structural injustice cannot occur without an often discomfiting focus on the role therein of those who benefit most from it and by whose inaction it persists.

Listening in conditions of inequality, then, hinges on meaningful challenge to relations of power, which inevitably entails implication and thus discomfort for those who benefit from them. The relationship between the structural and interpersonal is far from clear, but this research is premised on a commitment to the

notion that interpersonal encounters and collective actions in response to such experiences have a significant if far from exhaustive role to play in transforming the discourses, policies, and institutions that perpetuate and normalize structural injustice, and that such encounters must address the complex and implicating ways people are connected to one another in the context of such relational injustices.

I spoke of particular commitments to contributing, in however minor a way, to the redress of structural injustice. More specifically, as a fulcrum for this analysis as well as, aspirationally, a site of future intervention, this article examines the challenges of listening to claims regarding socio-economic inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand.

inequality in aotearoa new zealand

Socio-economic inequality has increased notably across Western developed countries in the last thirty years (OECD; Perry). As a relatively small and well-contained case of this global trend, Aotearoa New Zealand presents a ready fulcrum for examining the various reasons why listening to claims regarding this particular form of structural injustice proves difficult. It is all the more poised for this inquiry given that Aotearoa New Zealand has experienced among the greatest increases in inequality over this period among OECD countries (Cheung; Perry), even as, to date, this has failed to garner sustained and meaningful attention and address.

With clear links to health issues, criminality, declining social trust, and economic instability (Wilkinson and Pickett; Stiglitz), pronounced socio-economic inequality is one of the country's most pressing political issues. Not five years ago, however, it had yet to gain traction and momentum in public discourse and policy despite the incontestability of the data. As Robert Wade has noted, the material reality of such disparity and compelling evidence of the "good reasons" all citizens benefit from greater equality "*should* have prompted […] public debate" (Wade 58). However, despite admirable efforts to move this conversation forward, public discourse has largely failed to move beyond an initial acknowledgement of a still-vaguely defined issue, does not translate into commitment to reduce inequality (Skilling), and has, to date, resulted only in "tinkering" or "first step" policies such as a recent $25 per week rise in unemployment benefits, and consequent decline in public and political concern out of a misplaced sense that these measures have addressed the problem. Needless to say, much remains to be done in sustaining long-term commitment to major structural change (Woods; Barber; N. Turner; Rashbrooke, interview).

Since 2016, I have interviewed and observed the ten non-profit organizations across the country most active in efforts to sensitize, deepen, and broaden public and political attention to this issue, in order to identify their current publics and practices of engagement, as well as their most pressing challenges.[1] How each organization conceives of socio-economic inequality – its metrics, causes, and recommended solutions – as well as the range of publics they engage and strategies they use to do so, are predictably diverse. However, each has worked tirelessly, sometimes for decades, to raise awareness about, hold citizens and governments accountable for, and mobilize publics to act on unjust and harmful inequalities in wealth and income in the country. Though many of the organizations with whom I spoke engage political elites directly via advisories or government submissions, many noted that responsiveness from politicians hinges largely on whether public debate or support has reached thresholds that cannot be ignored. And so much of their effort is focused on engaging key "publics" that might contribute to such a groundswell. This prolific work to cultivate listening among various publics provides rich ground to investigate how listening might be fostered regarding structural injustice.

listening: reception, relation, response

What, in this context, would listening entail? Drawing democratic, receptivity, and

communications scholarship together with this fieldwork, I offer here that listening entails three essential dimensions of *reception*, *relation*, and *response*.

In the 1990s, democratic theory's conventional focus on voice began to give way to a growing interest in the responsibilities and challenges of listening. Yet listening was often taken to signify a disembodied counterpart to deliberative theory's equally disembodied and highly verbal notion of "voice" – the reception and interpretation of discursive meanings and rational arguments – and this depiction persists as a rule in deliberative accounts of listening (Bickford; Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity"; Morgan-Olsen; Dobson). By contrast, scholarship across disciplines as diverse as affect theory, neuroscience, and psychology, as well as political theory, have explored and confirmed the highly embodied and affective nature of reception and cognition, and the inevitable role that factors beyond the verbal – physical, acoustic, rhythmic, spatial, affective, aesthetic – play in structuring the "sounding chambers" (Sloterdijk) that inform both what is available to perceive as well as one's capacity to do so. These dimensions are why, as scholars across these disciplines observe, evidence and argument – however indisputable or ostensibly compelling – are often insufficient to overcome ignorance, correct misunderstanding, or transform perspectives (LeDoux; Barsalou et al.; Nyhan and Reifler; Danzinger et al.; Kahan et al.). The interconnection between perception, affect, and praxis is also apparent in the work on epistemic injustice that, situating listening in the context of history and power, examines the deep investments and interests that actively perpetuate inattention and inaction by dominant groups (Fricker; Alcoff; Mills, "White Ignorance"; Watkins).

And yet the traditional term of "listening" remains more salient in this context than "receptivity," the term employed by those who have been at the fore of grappling with this understanding of the embodied and affective dynamics of attention (Coles, *Rethinking Generosity*; Bennett). This is because, ultimately, receptivity is the precursor to listening, a disposition of openness that makes listening possible. And while reception marks the fulfilment of receptivity's promise, it remains only one of three dimensions of listening as I define it here. While reception of meaning is central, listening just as crucially entails *being affected by* and *responding to* what one listens to. This is supported by the, albeit largely apolitical, field of listening studies that defines listening as "the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages" ("An ILA Definition of Listening"; Wolvin). To be "affected" is, by definition, to let what one hears interact meaningfully with pre-existing frameworks, logics, and dispositions – in other words, to bring it into relation to oneself. In turn, to be affected in this way necessarily provokes an action response: this might be as simple as what listening studies calls "communicative responses" such as blushing, tilting our heads, or tensing our shoulders, but it might also impact how we act (or refrain from acting) beyond a given moment, in light of what we have heard. This does not imply specific responses, whether affective or active – one might heartily disagree with what one encounters, ultimately stand unchanged in one's position, or be moved to act in even opposed or contradictory ways depending on the interaction effects particular to a given interlocutor, at a given time, to a specific expression. Yet to listen is to respond, in multiform ways and on various registers, to what one has let in. Put differently, listening here is taken to entail *reception*, *relation*, and *response*.

This definition of listening may hold generally, but the importance of these two latter, less acknowledged dimensions of listening is made especially clear in the context of claims of structural injustice. This is for two reasons: first, in order to persist, such institutionalized injustices – whether racism or sexism or colonialism or socio-economic inequality – rely less on terrible people performing terrible acts, and more on the *inattention*, *indifference*, and *inaction* by the majority. It is for this reason that Iris Marion Young and Clarissa Rile Hayward claim the well-meaning parent who moves

their children to the suburbs simply to find better schools is as implicated as the overt racist who moves to avoid racial integration – because the results, for society, are the same (Young, *Responsibility*; Hayward 398). Good people, simply going about their days, are enough to keep these machines in motion. Second, and far from unrelatedly, listening to claims of structural injustice cannot, by definition, be merely a question of understanding. Young and, more recently, Hayward capture this succinctly if still largely in cognitive terms when they argue that to respond to structural injustice one must not only grasp the issue but also one's *responsibility* and *ability* to act (Young, *Responsibility*; Hayward). Put differently, to attend – and be motivated to attend – to such claims, one must be able to answer three questions, each in itself insufficient but necessary: *what is the issue? How does it relate to me? What can I do about it?*

Identifying these three crucial dimensions to listening begins to clarify why listening to claims of structural injustice proves particularly challenging. This is nowhere clearer than in the three greatest challenges that organizations across Aotearoa New Zealand encounter in engaging more advantaged communities to address the issue of socio-economic inequality. First, organizations repeatedly noted that the complex structural nature of inequality proves *difficult to conceptualize* or "talk about in an easily digestible way" (Barber). This means, while people might feel strongly that inequality is an issue, it is often vaguely understood or functions as a "big blank slate" that is conceived only "through a prism of something else" – often more concrete, localized and "frontline" issues such as child poverty or housing (Barber; Rashbrooke, interview). This failure to grasp the nature of structural inequality is also a failure to comprehend its relationality, for any one of these particular concerns – poverty, as well as related concerns of health, housing, crime, education, or domestic violence – makes sense only in the context of the "bigger picture" that also takes into account how the rules of the economy are "structured in a way to deliver its resources to certain groups" (Rashbrooke, interview). Yet as implicating as these may be, it remains difficult to discern the indirect and elaborate networks and systems that connect the rich to the poor. This is also an issue of perceiving slow-burning and endemic "background conditions" issues that are at once hard to hold in the mind's eye and defy the desire to make an "instant impact" that make charity and front-line solutions so appealing (Barber). And this widespread difficulty in understanding the complex and relational nature of socio-economic inequality means that even strong public concern often fails to "translate into the kind of action" or policy "that will actually make a difference" – long-term, lasting impacts on its root causes (Barber).

Second, the complexity of such structural issues also means it proves difficult, as Paul Barber (policy advisor, Closer Together Whakataata Mai and co-founder of the Equality Network) observes, to find "narratives that *resonate with people*." Listening to the issue of inequality is not simply a question of comprehension but one of connecting with and being moved by what one comes to see. As many organizations noted, breaking through to communities hinges on "an emotional connection," something to "relate to […] personally in some way" (N. Turner; Barber; McIntyre). As Nikki Turner, public spokesperson for Child Poverty Action Group, noted,

> unless we build a picture, people don't identify […] a graph doesn't tell the story […] people can academically hear what you're saying but until they go, "I personally identify with that" […] the times I've had standing ovations is when people go, "yeah! That gives me meaning in my life."

The challenge is not simply because the issue does not lend itself to vivid and affecting distillations; it is also due to a difficulty for everyday citizens in grasping how they are *related* to, and thus responsible for, such processes. Max Rashbrooke, author of *Inequality: A New Zealand Conversation*, has observed that poverty is a more welcome topic than inequality not merely because it is easier to observe and

comprehend but also because "you can hold it at a distance"; it does not involve and thus implicate us. In contrast, he sees the task as one of "very forcefully trying to put [us] back into that story." An inability to feel connected to the struggles of others was said to lie behind a lack of "moral commitment" to addressing the issue, whether it is an employer "earning half a million a year who tell[s] you they can't afford to pay somebody $15 an hour" or the inability to shift the national conversation from acknowledging significant inequality to sustained inquiry and action to address it (Barber; Rashbrooke, interview).

Finally, when a call to action is implicit in all calls to listen regarding socio-economic inequality, organizations repeatedly noted that communities are reluctant to engage because of a *diminished sense of agency and opportunities for action* to address it. Again, not simply comprehension or felt relation but one's response – and perception of the ability to respond – are key to whether communities attend to the issue. Continually organizations emphasized the need to identify solutions as well as problems, to convince people that viable solutions exist, and that they personally have a role to play in realizing them (Elliott; Barber; Rashbrooke, interview; Woods).

These three obstacles map in telling ways onto the three dimensions of listening of *reception*, *relation*, and *response*: structural injustices such as socio-economic inequality (i) are challenging to perceive, as they concern institutionalized and thus highly normalized, opaque, and complex forms of oppression and domination; (ii) are difficult to connect oneself to personally, because of this complexity and invisibility; and (iii) make it difficult to sense whether and how one might act to effectively address the seemingly intractable problems that such complex, wide-reaching, and deeply entrenched structural conditions present. When, as organizations noted, both a change and groundswell of public opinion are crucial to supporting structural changes such as to taxes or wages as well as to shifting decision makers to implement them, attending to this issue simply cannot occur if everyday citizens are unable to comprehend its complexity, feel their relationship to it, and sense their agency to address it (Woods; Barber).

three insulating effects of power

The nature of claims of structural injustice, then, presents particular challenges to the capacity to listen. But so, too, does the position from which advantaged groups hear such claims. To acknowledge the affective and praxic dimensions of listening is also to draw attention to the ways in which affect and experience filter, limit, and even preclude it. More specifically, it enables a critical examination of the various ways in which inhabiting positions of power – whether race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, or settler status – affects whether and how one is capable of attending to marginalized claims. This is more than an arbitrary specification of the broader question of listening, for the question is, I would argue, inevitably if tacitly directed to those in positions of relative power. While navigating the world along lines of penalty necessitates constant attention and response to both the immediate challenges of daily life and the perspectives of those who have shaped the world in which one must move – what DuBois famously called "double vision" – a failure to attend to such realities is both possible and beneficial for those in positions of power. As Carol Gilligan has observed, positions of power are distinguished precisely by their ability to "opt not to listen. And [to] do so with impunity" (62).

Gathering together findings across education, philosophy, psychology, art theory, and history – particularly regarding race, gender and settler-colonialism, where these questions have been most thoroughly explored to date – I offer that this failure to listen is made possible by *three distinct forms of insulation* that positions of relative advantage afford. The first of these is insulation from those who are "other": via the geographic concentration of wealth; via the affirming echo chamber of one's social networks; and via the psychic "walls […] [that] can be slid into place to avoid the direct gaze of others" who might view us differently or

more negatively than we view ourselves (Watkins 190). This lies behind Charles Mills and David Roediger's point regarding asymmetrical racial epistemics rather than merely mutual ignorance between races: while as a matter of survival "blacks have been forced to become lay anthropologists […] of the 'white tribe' that has such a frightening power over them," they are themselves often, as Ralph Ellison coined it, "invisible" (Mills, "White Ignorance" 17; Roediger).

Ultimately, this insulation from other worlds and visions contributes to a discourse of *universalism*. One of the greatest assertions and signs of power is the capacity to "colonize the normal rather than to be superior" (Dyer 44–45). Structural advantage functions, by and large, not through bold spectacle but by shaping prevailing terms in such a way that one all but disappears from view even as others come into high relief as they must explain, defend, and assert themselves to this unquestioned dominant centre. This dynamic is apparent in even ostensibly beneficent efforts to "include marginalized voices" and "celebrate" diversity. Dominance grants the illusion of objectivity and universality, which in turn inoculates against the acknowledgement of difference and its significance in shaping both socialization and relative advantage (DiAngelo 59; Solomon et al. 160–62).

Relative advantage also insulates – amputates – from history. "[W]hile saving [us] from feelings of guilt and shame," Mary Watkins writes regarding the Anglo dominance in the United States, "we end up orphaned in the very world where we want to feel at home" (192). This is, of course, exacerbated and perhaps most explicit in the context of colonization, where there is a wilful forgetting not only of one's previous home or the history of those who inhabit the land one claims but also the acts of violence and theft entailed in the process of settlement. Yet one need only consider the laws of social and material inheritance to see how "living without history" (S. Turner 21) is also necessary to naturalize economic, gender, and racial privilege. This is clear in the discourse of *individualism* that inflects and undergirds so many defences of one's advantages: the ready recourse to notions of "personal choices" or "hard work"; the language of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor; the utter paucity of popular vocabulary for socio-historical forces; and profound offence that many from dominant groups experience when confronted with the possibility that these forces shape personal perspective, opportunity, or action (Solomon et al. 160; hooks 167). As Robin DiAngelo observes, "individualism erases history and hides the ways in which wealth has been distributed and accumulated over generations" (59).

From these forms of insulation follows the third: insulation from challenge or discomfort regarding one's social position. Indeed, privilege has been defined as both the legitimation of one's advantages and the "permission to […] avoid any challenges to this entitlement" (Vodde 144) – to have one's authority and legitimacy undisputed, to experience the world as one in which everything is in its rightful place. Discourses of individualism and universalism, coupled with the capacity to avoid both the present realities and perspectives as well as histories of those who are penalized by the systems from which one benefits, cohere to produce a sense of superiority, which, as Charles Mills states, "insulates itself against refutation" ("White Ignorance" 19). This is what José Medina means by the "epistemic vices" of privilege: an inability to observe one's limits, acknowledge the validity of contending views, and learn from such frictions (30–35). In short, privilege functions via cognitive *incapacities* that often produce what Charles Mills calls the "ironic outcome that [powerful groups are] unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (*Racial Contract* 18).

This begins to explain a lack of receptivity, relation, and responsiveness by advantaged groups in terms of consistent patterns of epistemic blindness – difficulties *perceiving* structural injustice – but also the violent reactions provoked by rare moments when challenges to privilege break through. If insulation renders social advantage invisible, such encounters are viscerally felt as marginalization – being thrown off-kilter and pushed into a corner – rather than attempts to

right an imbalance. Hence the resistance expressed in popular discourse to even minor addressing, via special representation or affirmative action policies, of the disproportionate and systemic disadvantages experienced by indigenous peoples; hence the defensive refrain of "All Lives Matter" in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, or talk of white genocide in the United States; hence the emergence of the men's rights movement and straight pride parades worldwide. When advantage is experienced as a neutral position, attention to demands from the margins and the addressing of deeply entrenched systems of privilege and penalty – even in minor ways – are too easily perceived as threatening.

This difficulty is compounded by the thin skin that a relative absence of uncomfortable encounters produces. This is most thoroughly explored in the context of what Robin DiAngelo among others calls "white fragility" (DiAngelo): low thresholds for uncomfortable or stressful racialized experiences as a consequence of the insulation from such experiences that a life of privilege affords. Structural advantage both readily configures even minor concession as marginalization, and often means a lack of the resilience required to "stay with the trouble" of sustained ambiguity, complexity, or relational implication. Moreover, equipped with *individualist* and *universalist* frameworks, such threats are largely conceivable only in terms of highly personal affront, triggering, in turn, highly personalized reactions of shame or guilt, as well as resentment and revenge when such personal reactions are not only deeply discomfiting but also dimly or vividly felt to be *ill*-fitting of collective, historical, and structural injustices in which one is nonetheless implicated.

If prevailing frameworks revolve around personal liability within "universal" conditions, the very naming of structural injustice not only proves difficult to understand but also breaks taboos and undermines the terms of justification and normalization of one's inheritance of the world (DiAngelo 60). This also means that the most close at hand and thus likely responses will be to shore up one's sense of personal innocence (Fellows and Razack; Solomon et al.) – as if such innocence were not only possible but the target of structural critique. Hence the emphasis on personal intention and character rather than the effect of one's actions or role in the broader constellation of institutions, practices, and discourses that make such inequalities and injustices not only possible but socially acceptable; hence the difficulty in maintaining focus on those impacts even when acknowledged, in the pulsing inflammation of wounded self-image and emotional incapacitation (DiAngelo 65; Shilliam).

Thus a failure to listen characterizes those in positions of power, as both possibility *and* necessity: a luxury that those in positions of penalty can scarce afford, but also crucial in perpetuating the very inequalities that make it possible. This failure to listen is thus conceived not as a passive absence or neglect but an active, dynamic, and constitutive force, fuelled by equally passionate investments. One might "*not need to know*" but one also "*needs not to know*" – that one's society is far from "the best of all possible worlds," that one's well-being is connected to the suffering of others (Mills, "White Ignorance" 13; Medina 34; Alcoff 48). A lack of receptivity, relationality, or responsiveness is also active in the sense that it is bolstered by structural conditions that make obliviousness, indifference, and inaction the path of least resistance and socially functional, even generative, for advantaged groups (Kirsch and Dilley). If understanding the complexity, feeling the relationality, and responding with a sense of agency to claims of structural injustice prove particularly difficult, the position from which one is called to do so exacerbates the difficulty.

These three forms of insulation, and the epistemic and affective obstacles to listening they produce, were certainly present in responses and challenges to organizational efforts regarding socio-economic inequality. In fact, it is because of the insulation of such groups that advocacy efforts rarely "get to the table," let alone influence those who benefit most from inequality and whose views work to maintain it. As Rashbrooke notes, "in the three years

I've been talking about this […] people who disagree very often just don't show up." As a result, many expressed that "one of the worries is you just keep repeating the same messages" to "the converted" (White; Barber; Woods; Rashbrooke, interview; N. Turner; Berentson-Shaw).

This insulation of more advantaged communities also means there is little to challenge the discourses of individualism and universalism that stand in the way of understanding and acting on this issue. Many have noted how the insulation of the wealthy in "self-reinforcing worlds" means that most presume that their experience is widely shared, and thus underestimate the state of inequality and the role of structural advantage. This is supported by various studies that show how commonly people misunderstand their socio-economic position, underestimating their own advantages and, indeed, rarely considering themselves very rich *or* poor (Barber; Rashbrooke, interview; Skilling, "Attitudes to Inequality"; Dawtry et al.). In Rashbrooke's investigation into wealth in Aotearoa New Zealand, the few wealthy parties who were open to being interviewed remained staunchly committed to their belief that they had led "normal lives" with no significant advantages (Rashbrooke, "New Zealanders"). Put differently, without exposure to other worlds and visions, those with economic advantage perceive their position through a lens of universalism.

Berentson-Shaw likewise observed that those without personal experience of financial difficulty infer, from a distance, that the country provides "a fair go for all," thus reinforcing the narrative that poverty is the result of individual failure and poor choices. This observation is supported by the 12,000 responses to the 2017 survey I conducted alongside Max Rashbrooke's Inequality Calculator in the national press: in seeing the high percentile in which one's income was positioned, inequality was regularly justified via this discourse of individualism. As one respondent with an annual household income of $220,000 expressed, "No sympathy for those on the lower rungs of the spectrum. Those in the upper rungs have got there through good life decisions, hard work, and/or good education."[2]

Finally, the fragility of relatively advantaged groups was also apparent in the vitriol expressed by the public when Rashbrooke shared his findings in the national media. Simply the focus on wealth was the source of such profound offence for some, for while Rashbrooke's study, in his words, "fires no angry salvos at the affluent, calls no-one to the barricades. It simply presents some facts about who can enjoy the opportunities and benefits that wealth brings," he was attacked on social media as "consumed by hatred" and a "dangerous communist" (Henson; Rashbrooke, "New Zealanders"). Given his 2013 book on inequality garnered a groundswell of public support, this backlash reveals both broad misunderstandings about what, exactly, inequality *is* but also how thin-skinned the general public can be when structural *advantage* as well as disadvantage is brought into the frame. Organizations thus struggle to puncture the various forms of insulation that keep divergent or powerful communities out of reach as well as impervious to receptivity, relationality, and responsiveness within a given encounter.

engaging advantaged communities about socio-economic inequality

limits for listening via conventional modes of engagement

> I don't know how you have honest conversations with people […] there's a number of times I've wanted to go back to someone after something and say look, can we just totally off the record, I won't go to the media, just […] what do you really think about this […] how do we talk about this, how do we – and I've just, it's never possible. You just can't do it. (Jolyon White, Anglican Advocacy)

What does this mean for engagement of such groups regarding structural injustices from which they benefit, such as socio-economic inequality? Organizations often acknowledged the limits of digital or mass media for

"genuinely persuasive conversations" (Elliott). National media campaigns might be vital for demonstrating the mass support for change to which politicians respond or to keeping hard-won public awareness of "child poverty" or "inequality" in mind over the long term, and e-mails or videos might quickly relay information or solicit response from already convinced communities, but one-on-one and ideally face-to-face interactions were deemed necessary for any persuasive, transformative exchanges to occur (Elliott; Woods; N. Turner; Berentson-Shaw). And yet, despite this acknowledgement, most still rely on such techniques – social media platforms, sound-bites, and other forms of quick, broad, and digital communication strategies.

Organizations also rely largely on conventional models of engagement based on factual "reason-giving" via informational websites, lobbying groups, conversations, public presentations, petitions, and letter writing. Yet the multitudinous affective, cognitive, and environmental factors that contour the "sounding chambers" through which one listens, as well as the affective and epistemic obstructions specific to those in positions of power, call such strategies into significant question. When new information can provoke deepening entrenchment rather than revision, when relations of power significantly impact whether and how parties are able and disposed to attend to "others," "speaking truth to power" is often insufficient to address prevailing beliefs, values, and positions among those who benefit from them. There was, as we have seen, a keen awareness of the importance of using vivid and compelling stories to help audiences understand and connect with such complexities. Perhaps embedding affective designs beyond interspersed illustration or opening hook to inform the overall architecture of engagement – from public talk to more aesthetic or experiential modes of engagement, for instance – holds the potential to resonate with and move audiences more effectively.

Current strategies share one further characteristic: they are largely unidirectional. While organizations noted how vital and difficult listening is to cultivate among the publics they engage, they varied greatly in the extent to which they conceived listening to play a role in their own work. Lisa Woods, coordinator of the Tick for Kids coalition, noted that though a national campaign's success relies on their ability to listen to the specific values and responses of communities, they typically work to control messaging in a unidirectional dynamic with the public and are poor listeners as a result. Jolyon White, Director of Anglican Advocacy, also noted a lack of listening in the left's "confirmation bias" and "group think" that often stands in the way of pragmatic coalitions across political lines.

Some organizations, cognizant of the limits of online, "reason-giving," and unidirectional forms of engagement, are beginning to experiment so that responsive and transformative interactions might occur. Woods' coalition has begun to consciously relinquish their traditional control over the form of their campaigns by establishing a network of community hubs across the country, led by self-selected community members, with the task of initiating diverse and context-specific conversations in their communities about child poverty. ActionStation recently shifted offline to bring thousands of its diverse constituents around dinner tables across the country for Kai and Kōrero (te reo Māori for "food and dialogue"), to discuss the values and visions that should inform a People's Agenda for Aotearoa ("Kai and Kōrero"). ActionStation and the Morgan Foundation have also recently collaborated to launch an online "Empathy Tool" that works as a "choose your own adventure," giving people an opportunity to step into the lived conditions of those struggling with poverty to experience how personal decisions interface with – and ultimately are continually thwarted by – structural conditions ("Pick a Path").

Yet in all of these online and offline initiatives, organizations focus predominantly on persuading communities to listen in ways that avoid direct challenges to their positions of relative advantage or implication and responsibility in light of them. Instead, they work to mobilize and signal to the "critical mass" of

their existing supporters; appeal to shared values such as fairness and childhood opportunity; or employ logics of personal benefit, whether regarding less employee turnover for businesses that implement a Living Wage or decreased crime and health concerns in a world with greater equality. Even in recent innovations designed to enable sustained interpersonal conversation or empathy among distant parties, these still do not draw attention to either the *relation* of the more privileged "player," in the case of the Empathy Tool, with the struggles about which they learn, or the *discomfort and confrontation* entailed in challenge to such relations, in the case of ActionStation's highly structured Quaker-like elicitation of each participant's individual values in Kai and Kōrero.

This is, certainly, a matter of effective campaigning: if the objective is to mobilize supporters or sway "swing voters" regarding a particular objective, particularly when relying on quick-fire and widespread media, one reads one's audience and arguably engages them through anything *but* the confronting, discomfiting, and messy work of exploring relation and implication to a given issue. Given the earlier discussion of how such confrontations are commonly heard by those in positions of relative advantage, this is arguably sage strategy indeed. But by sidestepping the discomfort entailed in addressing one's role and implication in, and thus political responsibility to act in response to, the structural conditions in which one participates and from which one benefits, this leads not only to popular ignorance regarding the highly relational nature of inequality but also arguably a popular misunderstanding regarding how to effectively create meaningful and lasting systemic change.

possibilities for listening via novel frames and focus

When a lack of receptivity, relationality, or responsiveness are all too easy for those in positions of relative power, cultivating the conditions for listening among such groups arguably hinges on addressing the specific epistemic and affective obstacles to listening that such positions produce. How might confrontation break through the insulating effects not just of geographic or social but also psychic insulation from the demands of "others"? The amnesia of ahistoricity? The powerful logics of individualism and universalism that deny difference and exacerbate reactivity? What might reach past the "passionate ignorance" and fragility that such insulation affords?

Three strategies hold particular promise, in light of the cognitive, affective, and praxic dimensions of listening and the epistemic and affective barriers to achieving them where they are needed most. The first of these is the need to bring into the focus of critique these forms of insulation themselves, in two ways. First, if it is not intentional or individual action that ultimately perpetuates such structural injustices; if in fact it is the *inattention*, *indifference*, and *inaction* of the majority of citizens that is all that is required for them to persist, embedded as they are in the institutions, frameworks, and habits that constitute our daily experience; if, indeed, such a failure to attend to such injustices is thus socially supported and even encouraged by these structural conditions – then a focus on the implication and impact of *inattention*, *indifference*, and *inaction* might prove pivotal to unsettling such easy patterns of behaviour. One promising point of departure for future design would therefore be to explore how these habitual dispositions might be made *the source of* discomfort rather than the path of least resistance. Exposure and critique must also extend to the *specific logics and strategies of rationalization and denial* that insulate more advantaged groups by legitimating and naturalizing one's position, and are commonly mobilized to enable retreat when challenged: an individualist logic of personal merit; a universalist logic of professed egalitarian blindness; a persistent cognitive dissonance between observed experience and such self-affirming discourse.[3] Not merely what must be attended to but how people *react* to such demands thus become the focus of sustained attention. In this way, scrambling efforts to re-establish

"equilibrium" and invisibility come into sharp relief as new sites of contestation, preventing easy recourse to insulation from discomfort and critique.

But such challenges, even if they target some of the most impenetrable aspects of insulation, will for this reason provoke volatile reactions borne of the thin skin that accompanies social advantage. Thus, second, the swift *collectivization* of these confrontations may prove pivotal in cultivating receptivity, relationality, and responsiveness within them. If our challenges can be in the explicit context of the histories and structures that lead to any one person's position, if our challenge is explicitly a *collective* one rather than an attempt to incriminate any one individual, this might yet metabolize highly personalized and immobilizing feelings of *guilt and shame* into a *mobilizing* sense of both responsibility and agency. Shame, after all, is a social affect, as it presumes a relation one has failed and longs to redeem (Sedgwick and Frank; Ahmed). While it manifests in localized withdrawals – one averts one's eyes, flinches or cringes, collapses into the armour of one's shoulders – and while it might provoke the most retaliatory or reactionary of defences, as acknowledgement of a failed relation it also offers rich ground for transformation. To counter the current poverty of conceptual terms for structural causes and collective responsibilities, to foreground one's indebtedness to histories easily lost from view, to diffuse direct challenge as collective burden ensures that such confrontations have the capacity to unsettle positions and motivate action. This, in turn, demands that claims be situated clearly in relational and collective frameworks.

This relational approach does something more than merely temper the most volatile of responses of guilt and victimization among privileged groups: it also offers terms for greater relationality and responsiveness by situating seemingly distant actors in relation to one another and revealing connections between positionalities. Among the most common strategies are those that highlight either frontline struggles or "checking one's privilege." But while the first strategy might provoke empathy and the second implication, both fail to make relation and therefore responsibility tangible. This means these strategies can encourage either a voyeuristic and fleeting form of empathy or reactionary defensiveness and rationalization, even as they rarely translate into sustained commitment to systemic responses such as taxation or a Living Wage. In this context it is thus crucial to focus energies on helping us sense the *relational* nature of privilege and penalty, of mapping the circuitous but no less sinewy routes that enmesh one person's well-being with another's struggle.

Third and finally, confronted with the thin skin borne of insulation from challenge and the need to "metabolize shame" into meaningful reception, relationality, and response, both specific encounters and a broader social discourse might creatively and thoroughly frame the acknowledgement they seek in terms of *alchemy* rather than *source* of shame. Countless reactionisms scramble to shore up one's defences by any means necessary in the wake of perceived guilt and attendant feelings of shame. Countless nations baulk at the call to acknowledge historical wrongs and their present legacies, from the same misperception of the taint that such acknowledgement carries. Yet in a world where no individual or nation is innocent, where in fact the *need* to be innocent stands in the way of redress and reparation (Fellows and Razack; Mills, "White Ignorance"; Applebaum), where we are all inheritors of heavy histories and implicated in social forces that shape our daily lives, I can think of nothing *more* honourable than to acknowledge past injustice and respond to one's responsibility in it – to own one's inheritance and claim responsibility for what one comes to see. Certainly, we can't move beyond what *is* shameful without this first crucial act of listening – of understanding, feeling, and acting in response to shameful realities and relations so we might transform them into something of which we might be proud. As Mary Watkins writes, "we must write shame into our vocabulary for communal and psychological health, seeing it as a step toward living with

others with more compassion and integrity" (195). This not only works against resistances borne of shame but also difficulties perceiving one's agency and role in addressing injustice. How might sites of engagement frame acknowledgement of such inheritance, implication, and responsibility as *honourable* rather than a source of shame? How might we experience shame as merely one stage of a restorative process of redress?

These strategies are not, by any means, the exhaustive answer to the particular challenges that privilege presents where listening is required but typically absent. But by developing a language to make these forms and effects of insulation a source of discomfort, by engaging "discourses of denial" as they emerge, by collectivizing implication, and by foregrounding listening as a crucial dimension to restoring honour, challenges might yet puncture the insulation and mitigate the reactions that stand in the way of broad commitment to attending to structural injustice. In the context of inequality, they also potentially address vague understandings of this complex issue, neglect of its relational nature, and perceived lack of personal agency to change it, in so far as they foreground the collective and relational nature of such injustice and reclaim the role of personal acknowledgement and response.

concluding remarks

I began by way of a set of overt commitments that found and fuel this project; I end by way of one caveat that chastens what has emerged from them, regarding the limit of interpersonal encounters in ushering in structural change. I admit I feel this even more keenly in the wake of Charlottesville and countless examples since of hate speech and terrorism by dominant groups – not only their display of reactive, vengeful extremism but also the much quieter but thus more insidious contexts and communities that surround and inform them, that by equivocation and distance, lack of commitment and action give them strength and mark them as extreme rather than exception. We cannot, as Hayward notes, depend on modes of political engagement designed to persuade those in positions of relative advantage to "do the right thing" (406). We cannot, in the face of widespread, highly invested and deeply entrenched practices, identities, and systems, delude ourselves that transforming the perspectives, commitments, and actions of those in positions of power is either effective in itself *or* sufficient for structural change when taken as the sole strategy. Indeed, as transformative as any particular encounter might be, when these are unsupported by other measures the force of habit and institutionalized incentives for normalized behaviour can still prove too strong a current to swim against. For this reason, such encounters must work in tandem with other forms of political intervention, such as disruptive politics that "make it all but impossible for the privileged to not hear the voices of […] the oppressed" (ibid.), as well as a pre-figurative politics that enacts the world one wishes to see as we wait for broader change.

But disruptive and pre-figurative politics are likewise insufficient. As we have seen with the "whitelash" of Trump and Brexit supporters, what is not transformed goes underground until it finds another way through. Aggressive tactics or focus on policy or law rather than public opinion may push change through and even enable softer strategies to be heard and effective, but in the absence of meaningful address of the lack of comprehension, felt relationship, and sense of agency regarding structural injustice such initiatives can also too often be fleeting and, in fact, generate backlash. Indeed, as Romand Coles has shown recently, any one initiative is itself more resonant and contributes to broader change more substantially when it is positioned within mutually amplifying interaction with highly diverse modes of action, functioning simultaneously in multiple sites on multiple registers (*Visionary Pragmatism*). Within the context of such wider and varied initiatives, transformative encounters with those in positions of relative advantage undoubtedly play a role, and systemic redress simply cannot occur without them.

"Evidence," as Linda Tuhiwai Smith observes in the context of socio-economic inequality in

Aotearoa New Zealand, "needs compelling stories […] [and c]ompelling stories need new language that moves people to act" (228). In highlighting how the insulating effects of privilege structure and limit listening, this paper has sought to clarify the complex affective and epistemic defences with which any challenge to power might contend. It has, in light of these clarifications, begun to articulate what, in Smith's terms, a "new language" for more effective challenges might be. To acknowledge the specific epistemic and affective obstacles to listening from positions of dominance is not to de-claw or domesticate the radical challenges presented to us. Rather, it is a strategic imperative if such contestations are to be heard at all.

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1 Paul Barber (Policy Advisor, Closer Together Whakataata Mai, co-founder, Equality Network); Marianne Elliott (Co-Director, ActionStation): Diana Provoost (Children's Commissioner NZ); Nikki Turner (Wellington Public Spokesperson, Child Poverty Action Group); Lyndy McIntyre (community organizer, Living Wage Aotearoa); Max Rashbrooke (journalist and author, *Inequality and Wealth*); Jolyon White (Director, Anglican Advocacy); Jessica Berentson-Shaw (Head of Research, Morgan Foundation); Lisa Woods (Executive Officer, Every Child Counts); Anna Cox and Kyro Selket (volunteer organizers, Poverty Action Waikato). For more information, see the following websites: <closertogether.org.nz/about-us/>; <www.equalitynetwork.org.nz>; <www.actionstation.org.nz>; <www.cpag.org.nz>; <www.occ.org.nz/about-us/our-role-and-purpose>; <www.anglicanadvocacy.org.nz>; <www.inequality.org.nz>; <everychildcounts.org.nz>; <povertyactionwaikato.wordpress.com>; <www.livingwage.org.nz>; <http://morganfoundation.org.nz/pennies-from-heaven/>.

2 Published in the *New Zealand Herald* 19 Sept. 2017. You can find the Inequality Calculator at <insights.nzherald.co.nz/article/inequality-calculator/>.

3 Solomon et al. have identified three "discourses of denial" regarding white privilege in critical race pedagogy that map roughly onto these listed here, and also follow from the preceding discussion.

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