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Migrations of Sound:  
Listening and Intersubjectivity  
in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* and  
Chuck Palahniuk's *The Invention of Sound*

The proliferation of literary studies of sound has productively complicated the idea of what it means to 'listen' to texts. In postcolonial criticism, listening as a form of attention often provides a framework for thinking about the ethical encounter with the Other. This case has been made for Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017), a novel that traces the fate of three British Muslims of Pakistani descent in a retelling of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Critics have read the novel's preoccupation with various forms of auditory sensibility in terms of the cultural politics of listening. Listening here is understood as a metaphor for conscious attention to the Other and a means of ensuring intersubjectivity where vision and other senses either fail or actively prevent it. Shamsie's novel, however, also demonstrates that listening as a metaphor for diligent attention to Otherness demands greater awareness of the qualities of listening as a sensory act. This is particularly important because an examination of this act reveals the ambiguous effect of listening, which in turn complicates its abstract understanding as a moral act. This essay investigates this dynamic by comparing Shamsie's exploration of the intersubjective nature of listening with Chuck Palahniuk's exploration of the same idea in *The Invention of Sound* (2020), a novel featuring a protagonist strikingly similar to Shamsie's Parvaiz as regards their auditory sensibilities. It concludes that listening as a sensory experience is far more ambivalent, ethically speaking, than abstract conceptions of sound and listening suggest.

Keywords: sound; hearing; listening; intersubjectivity; Kamila Shamsie; Chuck Palahniuk

## Introduction

Like its linguistic and affective predecessors, the sonic turn in the humanities denotes a broad field of intellectual investigation that neither has a clear starting point nor a narrow theoretical focus.<sup>1</sup> This turn has had its own development in literary studies. Unlike the study of poetry, in which the sound of words can be investigated *as* sound, or of music in literature, for which sonic phenomena can be studied *through* text, the study of sound in novels faces a peculiar challenge. Unless its practitioners are content to describe and analyse representations of sound, they will have to develop frameworks for conceiving of sound in novels as an abstraction to make the concept meaningful for literary analysis. Consequently, the study of novels in sonic terms has proliferated in two directions: on the one hand, historical investigations into the relationship between literary innovation and sound technologies and, on the other, the literary examination of texts as objects whose inner working is best described in terms of sound. While the former approach has been highly productive in shedding light on the ways sound technologies, such as the telephone, gramophone, radio, and sound cinema, shaped writing in modernity,<sup>2</sup> the latter has productively complicated the question of how one can understand what it means to ‘listen’ to novels.

Philipp Schweighauser, author of *The Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985: Toward a History of Literary Acoustics* (2006), a landmark publication in the field of literary studies of sound, locates his own turn towards an abstract conception of sound in the context of the rudimentary overview of sound in novel studies given above. In a retrospective on literary acoustics published nearly a decade after *The Noises of American*

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<sup>1</sup> I share Hans-Joachim Braun’s scepticism about the usefulness of proclaiming a sonic (or acoustic or auditory) turn. As Braun points out, the number of supposed turns in various cultural disciplines are frequently connected to “the competition for intra- and extra-academic resources” (91) rather than a genuine scholarly re-orientation; however, if the number of publications concerned with sound in the humanities alone suffices to establish such a turn, there can be little doubt about its existence.

<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, Sam Halliday’s *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture and the Arts* (2013) and the collections *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* (1998) edited by Adalaide Morris; *Vibratory Modernism* (2013) edited by Anthony Enns and Shelley Trower; and *Sounding Modernism: Rhythm and Sonic Mediation in Modern Literature and Film* (2017) edited by Julian Murphet, Helen Groth, and Penelope Hone.

*Literature*, he describes the realisation that the analysis of the “representational strategies” writers in different eras use to “capture something of the acoustic worlds of their time” (“Literary” 476) warranted a broader scope than that afforded by the mere representation of sound. To put it differently, Schweighauser came to see that to confine oneself to the representation of sound as sound, and of listening as an auditory-sensory process, would unnecessarily restrict the field of literary acoustics to charting descriptions of sound. Finding this approach incapable of accommodating the conceptual sound or, in this case, noise, of modernist texts – their “rhythmic structures; their jarring juxtaposition of different media, genres, and styles; and their textual dislocations and fragmentations” – Schweighauser looked for other means of investigating how texts become “sounding objects” (“Literary” 476). Broadly speaking, noise, in this approach, is turned into an abstraction to offer a framework for analysing stylistic qualities of literary texts, listening into a mode of attention to such stylistic qualities. This conceptual move has positioned sound and listening as highly productive concepts for the analysis not only of texts but of any network of competing discourses. While this approach has been most prevalent in cultural studies, for example in the work of Michel Serres, Jacques Attali, and William R. Paulson, it has more recently become popular in postcolonial and critical race studies.

Global migration and the increased contact between different cultural expressions pressingly raises the issue of who has a right to speak and, crucially, who is heard. Although hearing here can refer to auditory attention, multicultural societies require a much broader notion of listening to tackle xenophobic opposition to cultural integration and emancipation. Claire Chambers, for example, building on the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, frames listening “as a type of responsiveness or an ethical openness rather than listening *per se*” (169). In the same vein, Nicole Brittingham Furlonge posits listening as a means of exploring the “lower frequencies of representation” of race, gender, and class (2). As much as an auditory-sensory understanding of listening serves as the basis for a reconfiguration of listening as a mode of attention to text in the tradition outlined above, it here becomes a metaphor for a conscious effort involved in acknowledging, respecting, and understanding Otherness. As is the case with the abstraction of sound and listening for stylistic analysis, this abstract conceptualisation of listening has obvious merit. It becomes problematic, however, when listening as ethical openness is considered a corrective to other forms of (literal or metaphorical) sensory perception. Rehana Ahmed, for example, claims that listening in multicultural con-

texts can signal the need for “a means of communicating across difference that bypasses the distorting properties of the image” (1154). The problem does not relate to the potential of listening as metaphor for intersubjective understanding but to its echoes with what Jonathan Sterne discusses as the audio-visual litany.

Named to highlight the dogmatic nature in which sound and hearing are often posed as a counterpart to vision, the litany consists of a series of oversimplifying juxtapositions: “hearing is concerned with interiors, vision is concerned with surfaces”; “hearing places us inside an event, seeing gives us a perspective on the event”; “hearing is about affect, vision is about intellect” (Sterne 15). Here it is important to point out that hearing and listening are not synonymous. Listening implies an intentionality that already exhibits metaphorical shading. As Roland Barthes argues, hearing is “a physiological phenomenon,” listening a “psychological act.” Listening, therefore, cannot be described only with recourse to “acoustics and the physiology of the ear” (245); rather, the analysis of listening requires an analysis of the listening subject and its relation to the object of listening. Since Sterne is concerned with a critique of sweeping generalisations about the properties and effects of the ear and eye as sensory organs, his argument concentrates on hearing rather than listening; however, if one substitutes listening for hearing in the audio-visual litany, one begins to see its applicability to frameworks in which listening does not simply represent a complementary but a more reliable form of intersubjectivity than that provided by vision: an ethical openness to the Other that makes interiority and affect intelligible across visible cultural, racial, ethnic, and personal differences. While I do not wish to suggest that listening, understood as mode of attention to Otherness, cannot function as a corrective to visual-based biases, I contend that such a metaphorical understanding of listening often neglects the curious foreclosure of intersubjective understanding inherent in the physical act of listening.

The present essay seeks to elaborate on the relationship between acute auditory attention and the failure of intersubjectivity by analysing two contemporary novels featuring characters who possess a highly developed ear: Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*, which was first published in 2017, and Chuck Palahniuk’s *The Invention of Sound*, published in 2020. Shamsie’s novel offers the foundation for my analysis of listening as a mode of intersubjective understanding because its engagement with sound has already evoked critical commentary in the context of postcolonial studies. Shamsie was born in Karachi in Pakistan and moved to Britain at the age of thirty-four (Shamsie, “Exiled”). The novel tells the story of the Pasha

family, particularly the siblings Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz, British Muslims of Pakistani descent. Aside from the biographical resonance, Shamsie's novel is best understood as a postcolonial novel because it engages with her personal anxiety about her status as a postcolonial citizen in Britain, particularly in light of British anti-Muslim sentiment at the peak activity of Daesh. Even though Shamsie was made a British citizen and therefore became a dual passport holder before the publication of the novel, she found that the once so solid status of citizenship could all too quickly dissolve into air (Shamsie, "Kamila"). An amendment to the British Nationality Act introduced in April 2003 – that is, less than two years after the 9/11 attacks – granted the British Secretary of State the power to strip British nationals of their citizenship if the Secretary was satisfied that "the person has done anything seriously prejudicial to the vital interests" of the United Kingdom or British overseas territories (Parliament of the United Kingdom, point 2). While this fate did not befall Shamsie, it does one of her characters: Parvaiz Pasha, a young man who is recruited into Daesh and dies while trying to flee the terror organisation. The central conflict in *Home Fire* revolves around the battle of Aneeka, Parvaiz's twin sister, first to allow her brother to return to England, then to have the body of her brother, a British citizen with a claim to Pakistani citizenship, brought back to Britain. She faces the opposition of the novel's Home Secretary, who, invoking the amendment, has stripped Parvaiz of his citizenship and refuses to allow him back into the country, neither dead nor alive. Chambers reads the novel's depiction of the debate over this question, as well as more general questions about the conflict between national and cultural allegiance, in terms of an abstract "politics of listening," more specifically the question, "can the oppressor listen?" (170), on which the novel has much to offer its readers. The novel, however, also pays close attention to listening as a sensory act and, more importantly, to how such listening can prevent or elude openness to the Other.

To illustrate this thesis, I draw on Palahniuk's novel. While his at times hallucinatory text about a Hollywood sound effects specialist does not engage with the same questions as Shamsie's book, it offers a detailed description of the intersubjective quality of sensory listening. Both novels feature protagonists with a heightened sense of hearing that put this sense to professional use – and both employ their abilities to foreclose sympathetic or empathetic engagement with the Other. I will demonstrate how sound, a primary means of human contact, is an ambiguous guarantor of understanding. In its most basic form, sound is a dynamic phenomenon; its being is defined by movement and vibration. Sound does not only mi-

grate with people who bring the sounds of their own culture and voice to places in which they might not have been heard before. Sound continually migrates between individuals and thereby establishes a particular form of contact between them. This essay is concerned with the question of what the ethical dimension of this contact – literal, physical, sound waves emanating from one person and entering another’s ear – might be. The answer, as I will suggest, is far more ambivalent than abstract conceptions of sound and listening suggest.

***Home Fire*: “Nothing but getting the sound right mattered”**

*Home Fire* is a modern retelling of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, and it is more obviously “saturated with noise” (Chambers 191) than many other novels. Parvaiz Pasha, Shamsie’s version of Polynices and brother to Aneeka (Antigone), his twin, and Isma (Ismene), is the principal reason the novel resounds with various forms of sound and noise.<sup>3</sup> Parvaiz is born with a heightened sense of hearing. As a result, the strand of the narrative focalised through him – the novel is told in five separate parts each centred on one of the protagonists – offers detailed descriptions of sounds, both in the present of the narrative as well as in his memories. For example, he remembers a domestic scene in which he is cooking with Aneeka, cutting onions as her “sous-chef”:

The playlist compiled by their guitarist cousin in Karachi streamed through the speakers – chimta and bass guitar, dholak and drums; overlaid onto it, the sound of Parvaiz’s knife cutting through the yielding onions, hitting the hardness of the board beneath; two slim bracelets on Aneeka’s wrist clinking together as she measured out ingredients; low hum from the refrigerator; a train pulling into Preston Road station almost precisely at

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<sup>3</sup> Much like hearing and listening, sound and noise are not synonymous. As a metaphor, noise has had an illustrious career in cultural studies derived from Shannon’s definition in “The Mathematical Theory of Communication,” which represents a crucial document in the transformation of noise into an abstract concept of interference as it appears in the work of Serres, Attali, and Paulson. The concept has more slowly been gaining traction in literary studies in the past twenty years. While, to my knowledge, Schweighauser’s monograph remains the only sustained engagement with noise and literature, Wai Chee Dimock’s “Theory of Resonance” offers a touchstone for conceiving of literary history as noise. More recent readings of noise in literature include Kessous and Sykes.

the same moment as another train was pulling out; the banter of twins.  
(Shamsie, *Home* 117)

His attention to the everyday soundscape also makes his siblings more attentive to the sounds and noises they encounter. At the beginning of the novel, his older sister Isma moves to Massachusetts to pursue a doctorate in sociology under the supervision of her mentor and friend Hira Shah. When Isma is invited to have dinner at Hira's house, the meal preparation is interrupted by "a strange music" – "a whistling, high-pitched twanginess" (11). Eventually, Isma discovers the source of the sound: hail raining against icicles suspended from the roof. "Parvaiz, a boy never to be seen without his headphones and a mic," Isma thinks, "would have lain out here for as long as the song continued, the wet snow seeping through his clothes, the thud of hail beating down on him, uncaring of anything except capturing something previously unheard" (12). Even if Parvaiz's sensitivity to sound surfaces in the narratives of the other protagonists, it is his own that serves as the primary carrier for the acoustic mediation of the novel. Isma's description of Parvaiz's fascination with unusual sounds, however, should not be taken as indicative of an infatuation with the sonically exceptional. To the contrary, Parvaiz is obsessed with sounds most people do not notice for their commonness. The most pointed example of his auditory fixation is his monumental sound-art project titled "Preston Road Station Heard from the Garden Shed."

As its title indicates, the project consists of recordings made on the roof of the garden shed at the back of the Pasha family's home near Preston Road Station. More specifically, it consists of 1,440 one-minute-long recordings, that is, twenty-four hours, that an "ideal listener would play between midnight of one day and the next – a soundscape of every minute of a day from his perch, recorded over 1,440 days" (131). Aside from an incidental recording of Aneeka's voice captured when she climbs up to talk to him, the sound project only records the everyday soundscape. Unlike most other people, Parvaiz notices sounds in terms of their sonic qualities. At one point, he is accosted by a group of boys while recording with his phone and microphone. They beat him up and steal his phone before they pull away in their car. Lying on the ground, Parvaiz listens "as the boys' car screeched past him. The sound envelope: slow attack, short sustain, long decay. Nothing to hear that he hadn't heard before" (123). Envelope, attack, sustain, and decay are technical terms describing the way a sound is heard, in this case, a slow build-up, a brief moment of the sound at its loudest, and a slow decrease in volume. The extent of the "acuteness of his hearing" (121), his sensitivity to the qualitative aspects



of sound, becomes most apparent when Parvaiz meets Farooq, the man who recruits him into Daesh.

Farooq appeals to Parvaiz by feeding the young man legendary stories about his father, Adil Pasha, whom Parvaiz has never truly known. Adil Pasha was taken into American custody after becoming a jihadist and was held at Bagram. He died from the consequences of ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ while being transferred to Guantanamo. Part of Farooq’s recruitment strategy pivots on tales of the torture methods to which Parvaiz’s father was subjected. This includes being chained to the ground while squatting down in a position that neither allows for toppling over nor for sitting down. During one of Parvaiz’s visit to Farooq’s flat, which he shares with two other men, they overwhelm Parvaiz and chain him up in exactly this position:

The chain was so short that it was impossible either to straighten up or topple over entirely, and he could only remain hunched in a squatting position, the pressure on his back increasing by the minute. What started as discomfort eventually became pain, shooting from his back down through his legs. When he tried to move – tried to find a way to roll onto his side – the chains cut into his flesh. (136)

In spite of the pain, Parvaiz still notices the sounds around him. To drown out his screaming and begging, Farooq’s flatmates turn up the volume of the action video game they are playing to the maximum. But the “sound designer hadn’t accounted for cheap speakers,” and to Parvaiz’s ears, “the crackling and distortion were more intolerable than the gunfire and death screams” issuing from the television (137). The scene evokes a practice that has come to be known as an ‘enhanced interrogation technique,’ a legal euphemism for torture coined in the wake of the 9/11 attacks for the purpose of providing a lawful basis for torture (Chwastiak 494). It depicts one technique specifically named in a 2002 memorandum to John Rizzo, the then Acting General Counsel of the CIA: cramped confinement (Bybee 2). It also includes a technique not directly named in the memorandum: sustained exposure to loud noise (Cusick; Stafford Smith). While the memorandum does not speak about sonic torture directly, it does take note of the potential of loud noise as an interrogation technique in the description of ‘walling.’ Walling refers to standing an individual up with their back against a flexible wall and then slamming their shoulder blades into it. Bybee, the author of the memorandum, notes having been previously informed that “the false wall is in part constructed to create a loud sound when the individual hits it, which will further shock or surprise the

individual. In part, the idea is to create a sound that will make the impact seem far worse than it is and that will be far worse than any injury that might result from the action” (2).

What is notable about this scene is Parvaiz’s listening. Shamsie does not dwell on the volume of the sound, usually the most excruciating aspect of being exposed to sonic torture (Hill 218), but concentrates on the quality or, rather, lack of quality, of the sounds. Although in the novel it is not made clear whether Parvaiz does this because his heightened auditory sensibility allows him to do so or if he purposefully focuses on the sounds in order to distract himself from his pain, the scene offers a first illustration of how attention to sound as sound can result in willed inattention to something else. While in this scene the object of inattention is not another human being but his own pain, the novel explicitly develops this idea later on.

Once Parvaiz joins Daesh and has undergone basic combat training, he is assigned to the media wing as a sound producer. Shamsie takes particular care to draw out “auditory media’s capacity to affect sensibilities” (Chambers 191) in the hands of fundamentalists. Charged with setting up the microphones for the recording of a beheading, Parvaiz observes Abu Raees, his superior, interacting with the executioner to determine the position of the microphones for maximum effect: “The executioner pointed off to the side and Abu Raees walked in the direction he was gesturing, just a few feet away. They were anticipating the trajectory of the man’s head when it left his shoulders. Working out where to place the mics” (Shamsie *Home* 168). Unable to stomach this set up, let alone the beheading itself, Parvaiz vomits and is sent back to the car:

For days and days after that, he worked in the studio on sound effects of beheadings, crucifixions, whipping. This was both a test and a punishment. In the studio, he had control of himself. Abstracting himself to that place where nothing but getting the sound right mattered. The fascination of discovering the different pitch and timbre of a nail through flesh, a blade through flesh. (169–170)

Parvaiz explicitly turns his auditory sensibility into a means of self-protection, and in doing so, he practices what in music contexts is known as reduced listening.

Michel Chion describes this practice, which was first defined by Pierre Schaeffer, a pioneering figure of *musique concrète*,<sup>4</sup> as “the listening mode that focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning. Reduced listening takes the sound – verbal, played on an instrument, noises, or whatever – as itself the object to be observed instead of as a vehicle for something else” (29). To be clear, Parvaiz’s mode of listening only shares the quality of attention with reduced listening. The purpose of the latter is to arrive at a more objective understanding of sounds. A common experience among people practicing reduced listening for the first time is the recognition of how deeply our listening is grounded in interpreting sounds as expressions of particular causes. Parvaiz is not trying to understand the sounds better without recourse to their causes; rather, his strained attention suppresses them. The reason reduced listening offers a useful paradigm for his listening is because it points out that this suppression is not the result of a lack but, to the contrary, a surplus of attention. In this function, listening acquires the traits attributed to seeing in the audio-visual litany: it becomes a means of assessing the surface rather than the essence of a sound, its exterior qualities rather than its semantic qualities. Most importantly, it transforms sounds from a carrier of affect into an intellectual object.

While *Home Fire* certainly admonishes its readers “to interpret what we hear with care, especially when the cultural other is speaking, in order to move through the reductive signs and symbols that seduce or repel, or do both together” (Ahmed 1154), the novel also complicates the notion of hearing – and listening – with care. To put it differently, the novel demonstrates that listening as a metaphor for diligent attention to Otherness demands greater awareness of the qualities of auditory-sensory listening, the act in which the metaphor is grounded. This is particularly important because an examination of this act reveals the ambiguous effect of listening, which in turn complicates its abstraction as an ethical process. Shamsie’s portrayal of Parvaiz’s listening reconfigures the framework in which listening serves as a metaphor for attention that functions as a corrective for biases, and it recasts listening with greater nuance as a dynamic of Other-oriented attention and willed, self-focused inattention. Chambers, whose argument represents the most sustained engagement with sound in *Home Fire* to date, is alert to this quality of listening. She argues that Shamsie “removes some of the noise surrounding such public matters as

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<sup>4</sup> The name derives from a compositional technique that uses prefabricated recordings, often field recordings of everyday sounds, as the basis for musical pieces rather than abstract musical notes.

belonging, assimilation, difference, and justice” (182) in the context of the public debate about the rights of young British citizens wanting to return to England after joining Daesh. This awareness of the internal working of attention and inattention might also contribute to Chambers’ carefully hedged positioning of metaphorical listening, which “seems for the most part to be productive and have ethical value” (200), even though she does not dwell on specific examples of how listening might either fail or prevent intersubjectivity. Shamsie’s portrayal of different modes of sensory listening in Parvaiz’s narrative emphasises that listening, in the absence of ear lids, does not allow for closing one’s ears, but that it does allow for listening so intently as to no longer hear what happens at other frequencies – and what happens to another human being. This dimension of listening receives more sustained engagement in Palahniuk’s novel, to which I will turn now before returning to *Home Fire* in the conclusion.

***The Invention of Sound: “You knew how to control the recording levels and the brightness”***

Palahniuk’s *The Invention of Sound*, far from advocating listening as a means for preventing intersubjectivity, begins by illustrating the communal nature of sound and listening, particularly the involuntary community afforded by sonic impulses. It opens with an ambulance racing down a street, which leads all the dogs within earshot of the siren to imitate its wail:

And for that long going-by they were all members of the same pack. And the howls of all dogs, they were one howl. And that howl was so loud it drowned out the siren. Until the sound that had united them all had vanished, and their howling sustained itself. For no dog could bear to abandon, first, that rare moment of their communion. (Palahniuk 3)

Mitzi Ives, one of the novel’s protagonists, explains this response in terms of limbic resonance, that is, a visceral affective response hard-wired into the limbic system, a relic of humanity’s amphibian past, that governs basic emotions and drives.<sup>5</sup> She learns of this involuntary human respons-

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<sup>5</sup> The term “limbic system” was coined by Paul D. MacLean to replace what he previously called the “visceral brain.” According to Paul LeDoux, the limbic system “evolved to mediate visceral functions and affective behaviors, including feeding, defense, fighting, and reproduction. It underlies the visceral or emotional life of the individual” (98–99).

iveness to acoustic stimuli at the outset of her career as a Foley artist. Foley art refers to the creation of realistic sounds for films in post-production. It is a practice that has its origin in the recognition that many sounds in real life do not sound realistic enough within the context of a motion picture if they simply are recorded during filming. Instead of actual rain fall, rain on film is “really the sound of ball bearings in a wooden box tipped to one side” and thunder “a sheet of flexible aluminum waved in the air” (102). Ives Foley Arts, Mitzi’s company, specialises in human screams, particularly screams occurring during murder and torture, and it is the first scream she sells commercially that offers her insight into what she calls limbic resonance.

When the film producer who will buy her first scream listens to the audio on earphones sitting across from Mitzi, she observes how he

was reduced to being merely a body. His mouth gaped to mimic the sound. That was the hallmark of the best gesture or catchphrase. Like a fishhook, it sank barbs into the audience and became part of them. A parasite, this scream was [...] The producer’s mouth yawned, dropping his chin into his neck, and the all of him reared back as if Mitzi had shot or stabbed him. (33–34)

The scream or, rather, listening to it, unearths a fundamental human connection. The producer’s eyes “bugged and clamped shut as if suffering the same pain” (34) the actor in the recording had imitated. Although it is not entirely clear what it means to be “merely a body,” one can locate the response along a Cartesian division of mind and body, with the latter standing broadly for that which eludes conscious thought and which does not submit to the “cerebral cortex, that grim disciplinarian” – to stay within the neurological realm and to borrow a phrase from Christopher Isherwood (3). While the Cartesian conception of the human has lost much of its currency after the affective turn, the idea of hardwired, involuntary responses moving below the threshold of consciousness or as preceding conscious attention seems to have gained greater acceptance. In his discussion of the bodily autonomy of affect and its relation to higher functions of the brain, such as cognition and volition, Brian Massumi warns his readers not to see affect as “a pre-reflexive, romantically raw domain of primitive experiential richness”:

It is not that. First, because something happening out of mind in a body directly absorbing its outside cannot exactly said to be experienced. Second, because volition, cognition, and presumably other ‘higher’ functions usually presumed to be in the mind, figured as a mysterious contain-

er of mental entities that is somehow separate from body and brain, are present and active in that now not-so-‘raw’ domain. (Massumi 90)

This framework has proven popular in sound studies, particularly in work on the ontology of sound and noise.<sup>6</sup> More remarkable in the quoted scene is the intersubjective quality of listening to the scream since the nameless producer seems to share an affective state with the screamer.

Later in her career, Mitzi will record what she calls “the Jimmy scream” in homage to the “Wilhelm scream” and the “Howie scream,” two of the most illustrious screams in film history that have been used in countless films. Unlike its acoustic forebears, the Jimmy scream causes a much more severe reaction in those who hear it. If a siren functions as a primal sound that causes dogs to join in, then the Jimmy scream becomes a cry like “Walt Whitman’s *barbaric yawp*” that evokes “the primal scream of everyone who heard it” (Palahniuk 147), resulting in a catastrophe at the Academy Awards, where an audience of movie stars, directors, and producers are involuntarily drawn into such a yawp that causes the building to collapse: “The synchronized limbic systems of three and a half thousand people. All of them spurred to hit the same note, like dogs howling along with a fire engine. Hitting the perfect frequency and volume needed to shatter a building as if it were a champagne glass” (169). Although not all screenings of the film featuring the Jimmy scream end as disastrously as the Academy Awards, on two occasions cinemas collapse for the same reason. This is ultimately the reason the film is nominated for Best Sound for the prestigious awards: “Not nominated due to being something good, but nominated due to politics and how the industry needed to prove [...] that moviegoing was safe” (160). This demonstration fails, which begs the question what sets the Jimmy scream apart from other screams. According to the logic of the novel, limbic resonance leads those who hear it to bodily mimic the pain that caused the scream in the first place, or the pain the actor screaming for the recording is trying to convey, which in turn causes a communal scream whose intensity is capable of shattering entire buildings. In other words, the source of its intensity is located in the cause of the sound; therefore, a look at the scene of its production will clarify this point.

As a rule, Mitzi receives a script and a description of a scene during which an actor’s actual scream will have to be overdubbed with one of her creations. Unlike other Foley artists, Mitzi is too sensitive to the nu-

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Goodman and Hainge. For a critique of such approaches, see Kane.

ances of human screams, which differ from the sound of thunder or of bone breaking, to deal in simulacra. If she is asked to dub the scream of a woman repeatedly stabbed in her vagina, she delivers a track whose title “Praying Girl, Stabbed Brutally, Rapid Exsanguination” is as much a description of the scene in the film as the scene of the recording’s production. Additionally, Mitzi is careful to imitate the scene as authentically as possible. During a meeting with Schlo, the producer who tasks her with creating the audio for this scene, she asks him for the make of the knife used in the scene. Then she wants to know if the victim is stabbed once or multiple times, because “with a multiple there would be the sound of the knife coming out. A suction noise. A sucking followed by the rush of blood or air from inside the wound. It was complicated” (21). She also adopts this model for the recording of the Jimmy scream or, as it was first called, “Riverside Thugster, Sudden and Traumatic Orchiectomy.” If the term orchiectomy is unfamiliar, Palahniuk’s description of its production should provide sufficient clarity.

The scene begins with the Riverside Thugster, that is, Jimmy, waking up after being drugged, tied up spread-eagle on a wooden platform:

Mitzi had tied a long strand of piano wire to a hook in the studio ceiling. This led down to where a small noose lay against his sunken belly. She looped the noose around the top of his scrotum and cinched it snug ... She placed a gloved hand on a cold metal handle and cranked it half a rotation. The handles drove squeaky gears. The mechanism was archaic and rusty and hadn’t been used... She muscled it, and the platform lowered until the wire to the ceiling drew taut ... the platform would lower while Jimmy’s wrists and ankles would stay bound at the original height. If he could keep his entire body rigid, the noose wouldn’t pull tighter and do any damage. As long as he could hold all of his muscles tensed and keep his body hanging stiffly in space, he’d keep his testicles. (90–92)

Without spoiling more of the action, the existence of the Jimmy scream in the world of *The Invention of Sound* provides a clue as to what happens next.

The reason for the excessive response to the Jimmy scream is the excessive brutality and painfulness of the experience it communicates. The film industry as presented in the novel measures the value of a scream (and this value, in the case of Ives Foley Arts, is in the five-figure range) by its ability to disturb an audience to such a degree that it needs to consume a film repeatedly: “the only way a person had to process an experience so troubling was by sharing it [...] A troubled person wanted everyone else to see and hear it on the big screen. Multiple times. Ticket after

ticket. Until the experience stopped leaving them so shaken” (27). In this view, the Jimmy scream is perfect, were it not for the fact that most people who hear it in the proximity of others end up underneath a pile of rubble. The Jimmy scream, then, functions as a sardonic comment on the commodification of pain, on the transformation of humans into human resources. In this regard, the novel can be read as a critique of an industry that thrives on the fungibility of authenticity, or at least it does so until it has taken in more than its tympan can suffer. If it was not for Mitzi, *The Invention of Sound*, and the Jimmy scream in particular, could be read as a confirmation of the values attributed to hearing in the audio-visual litany.

Unlike other people, Mitzi remains curiously unaffected by any of the screams she records. This might not seem particularly curious in view of her ability to torture and kill people, which clearly indicates a psychopathic tendency and attendant inability to feel empathy, were it not for the revelation that Mitzi neither tortured nor murdered anyone herself – she only manages the recordings. Without going into the details of this revelation, it is important to point out that she habitually drugs herself with Ambien and wine before she begins her work, which is the reason she considers herself the murderer until she discovers the truth. If Mitzi is not a psychopath, the question of why she remains unaffected by the screams that reduce other people to being merely a body becomes more pressing. On several occasions, readers witness how she browses through her large archive of recorded screams without showing any particular emotion. The novel does not explicitly contextualise this seeming disaffection as an act of concentrated attention to sound *as* sound, as is the case for Parvaiz, but the text strongly implies a similar strategy on Mitzi’s part, be it conscious or not.

The novel unusually insists on the specificity of the technical set-up for Mitzi’s seemingly gruesome recordings, for example, for the “Praying Girl” recording, once again featuring the subject tied up underneath an array of microphones:

She [Mitzi] lowered a Shure Vocal SM57 until it almost touched the girl’s lips. Next to it, an old-school ribbon mic waited, like something left over from Orson Welles’s radio days. Reaching in from other directions were can mics. A shotgun mic dangled down. Each connected to its own preamp. She waited for the girl to speak, watching for the needles to jump on each of the VU meters in this, her palace of analog. (41–42)

In that moment, the young woman wakes up from a drug-induced slumber, expressing relief when she recognises Mitzi, with whom she talked at



a restaurant and who invited her for a recording. Mitzi seems unaware of the woman other than as a recording subject: “I need to check my levels. Can you tell me what you had for breakfast?” The answer to this question leads to further acoustic calibrations: “The popping *p*’s and *b*’s pegged the analog needles into the red. Over-saturating the recording, making it warm. But clipping the digital, turning it into useless static. Mitzi pulled the Shure back a little more” (42). I said that the novel *unusually* insists on the details of the set-up because it repeats it word-for-word in a later passage (181). This repetition seems, in part, intended to instil in readers a vague sense of déjà-vu that accompanies Mitzi’s Ambien-and-wine-addled short-term memory. It also comments on Hollywood’s basic economic premise of “turning people’s basic humanity into something that could be bought and sold” (34). Additionally, and for the purposes of my argument, most importantly, the insistence on the elaborate technical set-up, which in turn hints at Mitzi’s obsession with getting the sound right, contextualises Mitzi’s disaffection as a form of inattention mediated through concentrated attention on an object: sound. It is, in part, by focusing on the popping *p*’s and *b*’s that Mitzi manages to dissociate herself from her victims. Mitzi, who, like Parvaiz, has a much keener sense of the properties of sound than most people, uses this ability to distract herself from what the sounds represent. As in Parvaiz’s case, a keen auditory sensibility can be turned against intersubjective understanding.

### **Conclusion: More of the Same Heard from the Garden Shed**

The purpose of this essay has not been to dwell on listening as a sensory act to debunk the ethical potential of a metaphorical conception of listening. Instead, I contend that the ready availability of listening as a metaphor for understanding runs the risk of falling in line with an easy celebration of sound as a means of affective intersubjectivity. Attentive listening, I hope to have shown, is as much a matter of intellection and intersubjective distance as it is of sympathy and understanding. To conclude, I want to indicate a way in which attentive listening understood in concrete and sensory terms might yet provide a means of bridging the divide between humans at odds with each other. To do so, I need to return to *Home Fire* and Parvaiz’s sound project as well as his radicalisation.

Shamsie makes clear that one reason Parvaiz gravitates towards Farooq is not simply his yearning for a masculine father figure but the fact that this older man takes his acoustic sensitivity seriously – or at least

feigns interest in it. He is the only person who offers to listen to Parvaiz's recordings, a reel of sound effects he is compiling to be sent out to video game companies in the hope of securing a job. Farooq also appeals to Parvaiz's interest more directly during his recruitment. In the Caliphate, Farooq promises him, "someone like you would find himself working in a state-of-the-art studio" (Shamsie 144). In contrast, Isma and Aneeka respond less enthusiastically, if not dismissively, to Parvaiz's interest in sound. This is understandable given that Parvaiz's idea of future planning consists of working on said reel of video game sound effects. Confronted with his older sister's hard-faced pragmatism, he feels indignant at Isma not having faith in him being "good enough to find work doing what he loved, [that she] didn't see that his sound reel was as much of an investment in the future as Aneeka's law degree" (119). While Aneeka does not adopt this stance towards his plans, she is blithely uninterested in them. For example, she good-humouredly ridicules his sound project as "More of the Same Heard from the Garden Shed," and it is this project, more specifically her sonic presence in this project, that becomes the most damning indication in the novel that the people in Parvaiz's lives failed to listen to him – not because they did not listen to his words, but because they failed to listen to what he listens to.

During one recording session, Aneeka, who has not seen much of Parvaiz at the time, climbs up onto the shed and asks him what is on his mind. Her question is caught on the recording. "It might be nice to leave in that 'Where are you these days?' between 20:13 and 20:14," Parvaiz thinks; it would be "the only human voice" in the audio files making up his project. While waiting for his plane to take off from London to Istanbul and, eventually, to Raqqa, Parvaiz searches his phone for this audio file. He uploads it to a shared cloud account and then deletes Aneeka from his phone. Aside from its obvious sentimentality, which is not devoid of the mock-heroic gesture of a young man believing himself on the way to glory and righteous action, the gesture expresses a complex affectivity: as a track excised from his larger project, rather than the entire project itself, it retains a passive-aggressive note, suggesting that Aneeka would not care for the parts that do not contain her voice. In this regard, the gesture is an accusation, and it suggests that the soundscape, that which Parvaiz was listening to, would have been an opportunity to understand him in a way that he came to believe only someone like Farooq could. Literal listening, in this perspective, might offer a means for sympathy, but rather than listening to another person, meaningful intersubjectivity might emerge from the type of shared listening that had its heyday in the (first)

era of mix tapes. In other words, to understand someone by listening to what they are listening to.<sup>7</sup>

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