What I Heard About Manus Island (When I Listened to 14 Hours of Recordings from Manus Island)*

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Exordium

> What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines. Railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed, and the more passengers that are killed, the more the trains exist…In our haste to measure the historic, significant and revelatory, let's not leave aside the essential: the truly intolerable, the inadmissible. What is scandalous isn't the pit explosion, it's working in coalmines. 'Social problems' aren't 'a matter of concern' when there's a strike, they are intolerable twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, three hundred and sixty-five days a year (Perec 2008: 209).[1]

I know that for the audience, it is quite hard to just sit down and listen to the jungle for ten minutes. And I witnessed that, in Wellington, Dunedin and Auckland. Some people just couldn't stay, they left the

* This essay is one of six pieces in this special issue dedicated to the work of the Manus Recording Project Collective, which you may therefore like to read together. For a general introduction and the curatorial history of the work, start with Parker and Stern (2020). The collection also includes essays by Emma Russell, Andrew Brooks and Poppy de Souza, along with a conversation between André Dao and Behrouz Boochani.

> gallery, and tried to listen to another voice. But that is the reality. We were in that prison, in those circumstances, for more than six years. People in the gallery couldn't listen, couldn't even make it ten minutes…Another thing really that is very important, is that this system treats us in a way where we do not exist. But we do exist. Sometimes we exist in Australia, through these artworks, you know… That is the important thing about this work. That it allows us to say: here we are (Boochani and Dao 2020).

This essay stages a hearing of the first seven recordings (the first 70 minutes, or the first week) of *how are you today*. (Parker and Stern 2020; de Souza 2020).[2] In each case, the hearing is actually a re-hearing, or a re-re-hearing, and so on. As one of the Melbourne-based members of the Manus Recording Project Collective, I first heard these recordings on my phone when Samad or Shamindan – whose recordings I was responsible for uploading to Dropbox – had made a new recording; or on my computer when the other Melbourne-based members – Jon and Michael – had uploaded a new recording from Kazem or Farhad or Behrouz or Aziz to the Dropbox folder which was the digital home of the work; or in the gallery in which they were exhibited. In the case of Samad and Shamindan's recordings, I also discussed with them over WhatsApp ideas for sounds to record, such that I also pre-heard their recordings. In fact, it could be said that I pre-heard all the recordings – through my conversations with Jon and Michael about the other men's ideas; through the titles of the recording, which provide some description of what is to come; and finally through all the articles, reports and media I have consumed about Manus over the years.

In the staging that follows, those re-hearings and pre-hearings are condensed into a single hearing. The staging also condenses some of the many meanings of the word 'hearing'. As Jonathan Sterne writes, '[t]he simple act of hearing implies a medium for sound, a body with ears to hear, a frame of mind to do the same, and a dynamic relation between hearer and heard that allows for the possibility of mutual effects' (Sterne 2015: 65).[3] 'Hearing', as it appears below, shifts between the sonic and the metaphoric, and between the ear and the mind. As a staged hearing, the essay itself gestures to another meaning of the

word – to the trial or the scene of judgment—which is not to say that the hearer in this case has the authority of the judge. To be clear, nothing in this hearing can alter the material circumstances of the six men making the recordings. But, as I have argued elsewhere, we cannot reduce the purpose of the trial to its outcome: guilty/innocent, granted/dismissed, and so on (Dao 2020). Rather, we best understand the purpose of the trial by looking at the right to be heard, which evinces a shared commitment to paying attention to the views of others – to hearing others (Dao 2020; Waldron 2012: 55). It is one of the ways we have of communally making something matter or, to paraphrase both Perec and Boochani, of acknowledging that someone exists. Where the present hearing differs from a legal hearing is that the latter is concerned only with hearing others in the cognitive sense – that is, in hearing someone's logical arguments, or indeed, in hearing the logical arguments made on their behalf by some professional. In contrast, the present hearing is concerned not so much, or not only, with hearing others, but as Sterne puts it, with 'hearing the hearing of others' (Sterne 2015: 74). Such a politics of hearing, Sterne suggests, 'hold[s] onto the idea that the ways people can hear, the limits of that hearing, and the conditions of possibility for hearing all provide points of entry into what it means to be a person at a given time or place' (Sterne 2015: 73.[4] To put it another way, the present hearing is concerned with the question: what is the nature of the relation between the hearer and the one whose hearing is heard?

24.07.18

AZIZ, LAST WEEK, WATCHING THE WORLD CUP FINAL WITH THE GUYS

I heard an English commentator saying, Modric in! And a series of male voices speaking what I thought was Arabic. I heard the rain falling outside and the many-layered voices of the crowd in Moscow rising and falling. The men speaking Arabic sounded closely packed, as if they were sitting and standing all around the microphone that was

recording them.

I heard a goal going in and the men shouting in joy and triumph, their voices raised and their speech becoming suddenly more rapid. When the immediate excitement subsided, I could hear the English commentator speaking rapidly. I heard the shrill of a referee's whistle.

I could hear the men speaking to each other but I couldn't understand what they were saying. I didn't know if they were talking about the game, which I knew was the World Cup Final between France and Croatia (a game that I myself had been watching at the very same time as the men in the recording). Perhaps they were talking about Manus, the Pacific island off the coast of Papua New Guinea where they have been detained for nearly five years. Perhaps they were talking about home, which I guessed – drawing upon what I knew already about Aziz, the man who had placed the microphone in the room in the middle of these voices – for most of them was Sudan.

I heard another goal go in, and this time the joy was less expressive: there was more clapping, some whooping, but the sound was not deafening – it didn't distort in the headphones I was listening through. I thought that perhaps there were more Croatian fans than French fans in the room. I thought about how what I heard in this recording (which I knew had been made somewhere in Lorengau, the main town on Manus Island) and what I had heard about Manus Island were completely different. I thought that perhaps it was this word, to hear, that was misleading me, for I was using the same word to describe two distinct acts.

I thought of the first act as a physiological one: I used my ears to hear ten minutes' worth of sound made in a room in Lorengau, in the early hours of July 16, 2018. These were sounds that sounded to my ear indistinguishable from the sounds that I would have heard at that time in any of the late night cafés and pool rooms of my home suburb of Footscray, had I been in those cafés and pool rooms. I thought of the second act as cognitive: when I said that I had heard things about Manus Island, I meant that I had somehow absorbed a body of information over an undefined period of time concerning that place (through reading,

watching television, listening to other people talking), much in the same way that Eliot Weinberger learned things about Iraq in two essays for the London Review of Books, 'What I Heard About Iraq' and 'What I Heard About Iraq in 2005' (Weinberger 2005; Weinberger 2006).

In Weinberg's essays, hearing is used as a metaphor for a kind of politics – a politics that might be summed up as listening back to power (though even that is a metaphor, one that exploits listening's connotations of intention and attention – as if power might be countered by an effort of will and perception).[5] Many of the things Weinberger "hears" are words said by the president, the vice-president, Tony Blair, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice and so on. And when he does "hear" the voices of Iraqis, it is not clear to me in what sense he hears them. For instance, when I read that Weinberger heard 'Muhammad Abboud tell how, unable to leave his house to go to a hospital, he had watched his nine-year-old son bleed to death, and how, unable to leave his house to go to the cemetery, he had buried his son in the garden', I wondered how Weinberger had heard Abboud's story (Weinberger 2005). Had he sat down with the grieving father over a hot beverage? Or had he listened, from his office in New York City, to a recording made in Fallujah? Or had he seen Abboud on one of the cable news networks? Or had he read about Abboud in the newspaper? And what language would Abboud have spoken in anyway? Surely not English – but then, who translated?

None of these questions is relevant to Weinberger's project – or, at least, my understanding of his project. For the purposes of listening back to power, it is sufficient that Abboud's story is there in the essay – however it got there – a couple of paragraphs below Donald Rumsfeld saying, 'Innocent civilians in that city have all the guidance they need as to how they can avoid getting into trouble. There aren't going to be large numbers of civilians killed and certainly not by US forces' (Weinberger 2005). Listening back to power is about putting the disempowered (Abboud) and the empowered (Rumsfeld) into their proper relation (Weinberger 2005). To do that, one does not need to hear in the first, physiological sense – only the second, cognitive sense

of hearing is required. But that is not what I am trying to do. At least, that is not what I can do yet. Because first I have to examine – or create – a relation between six men on Manus Island and myself. To do that, I have to pay attention to the quality of the relation between us – and to do that, I have to pay attention to the kind of hearing I am doing, for those different forms of hearing are constitutive of the relation.

So, the sounds I heard on Manus Island and the things I heard about Manus Island were very different. The things I had heard about Manus Island were not the kinds of things I expected to find in my home suburb of Footscray; the things I had heard about Manus Island did not include gatherings of men around a television, watching the World Cup Final. Rather, the things I had heard – cognitively speaking – about Manus Island included: that offshore processing was necessary for Australia's border security (*Sydney Morning Herald* 4 October 2013); that human rights groups, including the UN special rapporteur on torture, had condemned indefinite detention on the island as a violation of the right to be free from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (Méndez 2015); that eight of the detainees had died since 2013;[6] that the detention centre had been closed since October 2017 and that the men were no longer detained (The Age 30 August 2017); that genuine refugees would be processed and resettled in the US (*The Guardian* 26 September 2017); that the US were not taking any refugees from a list of suspect countries, including Sudan (*ILA Reporter* undated).

25.07.18

SAMAD, A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO, LISTENING TO SLOW MUSIC

I heard Samad's voice saying, twice: 'we don't have anything to do here.' I heard him saying that he has one friend, and that friend is music. I heard the muffled sound of another voice — perhaps a neighbour in West Haus, where he has been living since the men were evicted from the detention centre that they had made their home. Samad's voice sounded close, direct. He was speaking straight to me. But his voice

also sounded distorted, as if he were too close to the microphone, or as if the levels on the recorder were set too high. I heard him saying that his favourite music was slow music. I heard three piano notes, very loud, creating a sentimental melody. I heard a man's voice singing in a language I didn't understand or recognise, backed by syrupy strings. I imagined Samad sitting in his room in West Haus, listening to this saccharine love song on his own.

I heard the song finish, and in the quiet before the next bit of slow music, I heard the sound of a distant door slamming. I heard – and this is a metaphor now, for this was not a sound that I heard with my ears but the contours of an idea that I perceived with my mind (hearing, then, as a metaphor for imagination, or projection, or empathy) – I heard his terrible loneliness, which is to say: I heard my own loneliness, if I were in his position, listening to sentimental music about love. I heard how my own desires – sexual and spiritual and materialistic and human – would be suffocated beneath all that loneliness, if it had been me, not Samad, on Manus Island for the last five years.

26.07.18

FARHAD, LAST WEEK, PLAYING MUSIC, MAKING TEA AND LISTENING TO SONGS

I heard a kettle boiling and water being poured into a cup. I heard the creak of a chair as weight shifted, the first pluck of an acoustic guitar string. I heard the plucking take on a melody and a rhythm.

I heard the rustle of a packet of some unknown snack (crisps? biscuits?); the crunch of Farhad eating. I heard a song being played through tinny speakers, a singer singing in a language I didn't understand. I heard Farhad singing along in the voice we use when no one else is around.

I heard the song – in its indecipherable language and unfamiliar tune – go on, and I found my attention wavering. I found myself thinking about our dinner plans, about how my daughter had been up all night the night before, vomiting, about holding her small warm

body against me as she slept between rounds of vomiting.

And then I was thinking about how I couldn't give a whole ten minutes of my time to this recording. A whole ten minutes – by that I meant not just sitting as I had done for the duration of the ten-minute recording while it played through headphones on my ears and as my mind wandered, but hearing what there was to hear in each of the 600 seconds of the recording. It was not – should not have been – a difficult task. There are, I thought, still 85,800 seconds left in the day for everything else.

I heard, then – metaphor again (hearing as metaphor for remembering having read or, more precisely, repeating in my mind lines that I had once read) – I heard Sheila Heti asking (writing), in a very different context, whether attention is soul. I heard (said to myself) her saying (writing): 'if I pay attention to my mother's sorrow, does that give it soul? If I pay attention to her unhappiness – if I put it into words, transform it, and make it into something new – can I be like the alchemists, turning lead into gold' (Heti 2018: 24)?

I wondered, then, with Heti's words still ringing in my ears (metaphorically speaking), what it was I was doing by paying attention to – through hearing – Farhad's sorrow. Was I giving it soul? Was I giving soul to Aziz's sorrow? To Samad's and Behrouz's and Shamindan's and Kazem's? Was I transforming their sorrow (bad) into something else (good)?

But what could that good 'something' be? I had long ago given up on the illusion that such individual acts of attention could transform their sorrow into what the men themselves most wanted — that is, into freedom, where freedom means being free of the Australian government's immigration system, free to live lawfully in a safe country, free to pursue their life plans in the same way that I have been free to pursue mine. No, I was not under the impression that this act of listening could change the material situation of these men; I did not believe, as I remembered Julian Burnside once saying he had believed (long ago in 2001), that the problem of Australia's treatment of asylum seekers and refugees was a problem of awareness.[7] We Australians

know what's being done in our name – or at least, we know enough to know better. It is not that we haven't heard (cognitively speaking) enough about Manus Island.

Could it be that it's the hearing that's the thing, not the hearing about? Maybe the kind of attention that gives soul to sorrow isn't the kind of attention we give when we hear about something (i.e. when we read a book about, listen to a podcast about, watch a documentary about). Maybe our attention only gives soul when we hear (or touch or smell or taste or see) someone.

But that still leaves the question: what does it mean to give soul to sorrow? What am I transforming sorrow into? What happens to sorrow if it isn't given soul? And how does any of this relate to this recording Farhad made in July of 2018, the recording I was struggling to pay attention to?

I wondered – not for the first time – whether all my thoughts weren't simply self-serving. Of course Heti wants to believe that writing about her mother's sorrow could be transformative. She had already committed herself to being a writer, and it is in the shadow of that commitment – a commitment that might have been made for any number of reasons (viz. ego, training, romanticism, a lack of viable alternatives) – that she concludes that writing gives soul. The argument is structurally self-justificatory. And so it is here: I have already, clearly, committed myself to this hearing, for reasons that precede and prefigure the reasons I am putting down in this essay. I mean that I am a member of a collective, the Manus Recording Project Collective. But I am not a recorder. So what am I? A discussant, a mixer, an uploader. But mostly I am a hearer. True, the audience in the gallery or online is a hearer too. But where their hearing is casual, my membership in the collective commits me to a different kind of hearing. This commitment casts a heavy shadow over all these musings about attention and sorrow.

If only I could escape that shadow, then I could see more clearly whether this hearing is worthwhile. But to escape the shadow of one's own commitments is to escape – to reject, to deny, to disavow – one's self entirely. And how would one go about doing that?

So I remain in the shadows, where it seems inevitable that I will conclude that paying attention to sorrow – as I believe myself to be doing now – gives that sorrow soul. Perhaps, then, I should ask another question: does the soul given to sorrow take on different forms for different people? Does my hearing what there is to hear in this recording matter only for me (because it makes me feel righteous, or better informed, or artistic) – or does it matter to Farhad too (because someone is listening to his music, which is to say that they are paying the kind of purposive aural attention to his artistry that is commonly meant when we say we listen to music, or because the listener might somehow agitate for his release, or simply because someone is hearing – in a sense less imbued with the attentiveness of musical listening – the sounds he has chosen to record)? Is the soul given to his sorrow for my benefit, or his – or is it independent of both of us, a good-thing-in-itself in the cosmic order of the universe?

27.07.18

BEHROUZ, THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY, WALKING IN THE JUNGLE IN THE MORNING

I heard the sound of a man walking in thongs, the steady rhythm of his feet. I heard Behrouz saying what sounded to me like, Hello, poku (later I heard – as in, I was told, by someone who had been to Manus – that it was probably Papu, a kinship term in the Manus languages). I heard the whirr of air-conditioning units. I heard insects, as loud as the cicadas outside my parents' home in Mt Waverley in the summer, a place I associate with the middlest of middle-class suburbia. I heard the call of a bird – like an electronic pulse – and wondered if this was the chauka, that brown and white bird endemic to Manus, which I'd heard. And this, once again, is hearing as a metaphor for remembering, as the following information about the chauka was information that I had gleaned somewhere, a somewhere now lost in the recesses of my memory. It thus seems more fitting to say that I heard this unsourced information — hearing being somehow suitably imprecise (as opposed,

for example, to reading), as in hearsay: I'd heard that the chauka occupies a central place in the spiritual mythology of Manusians, that the bird is thought to sit in judgment over the desires of the islanders, that its call marks each birth and death on the island.

I heard Behrouz saying, Salaam. I heard him saying, Hello, good morning. I did not hear who he was speaking to. I heard the pace of his steps, quite fast, so that his walking did not seem to me to be leisurely.

I heard a beauty in this recording that I had not heard the first time I had heard it, when it had been playing in the gallery. (I don't know if that was a metaphor – in what sense does one hear beauty? Perhaps it is a metaphor for judgment: to hear beauty is to have come to an aesthetic judgment, even if it is so fundamental, so primal, that we don't experience it cognitively at all – we don't measure what we hear against our standards of beauty and find that it passes. We just hear it, as if it were a natural category.) Listening to this recording for the second time, I felt like I was alone in the jungle, though really I was on a bus: I could hear the rumble of the bus engine, the whoosh of the cars passing on their way to – work, school, normal life – wherever it is that people are driving to in Melbourne mid-morning on a Monday. I could hear the elderly women behind me talking about the maniacs on the roads, how something really ought to be done about them.

I wondered, is giving soul to sorrow just another way of saying empathy? I did not think it was. I did not think that what I was trying to do was empathise with Behrouz. I was not trying to put myself in his shoes (or his thongs, for that matter). Admittedly, my training in literature and the other humanities meant that my consciousness was primed for empathy, so that inevitably, part of what was going on was empathetic, just as I had empathised with Samad's loneliness. But empathy was not my true goal. There are, after all, much more effective ways of empathising than by listening to a ten-minute recording of a lone man walking. I wanted to go beyond empathy.

I heard – metaphor for remembering having read – Behrouz saying (writing) that Australian civil society had been defeated (Boochani 2017: 16). He meant that Australian civil society had failed the asylum

seekers and refugees on Manus. I wondered then whether at the heart of this failure was civil society's reliance on empathy. I heard – metaphor for imagining – civil society saying, 'These boat people, they are just like you, the Australian citizen.' Except they are not, in small and big ways. Perhaps that is why campaigns to get kids out of detention are relatively successful. Maybe one baby is more or less the same as another. But as soon as the infant grows up, difference – through culture, personality, social setting, life experience – begins.

I wanted to believe that it's possible to give soul to sorrow without erasing that difference.

I heard Behrouz's breathing, heavy for the first time in this recording. I heard him handling the recorder, turning it off.

28.07.18

SHAMINDAN, LAST WEEK, SPEAKING WITH SRIRANGAN WHILE HE COOKS FISH CURRY

I heard water running and a knife chopping. I heard Shamindan asking Srirangan what he's doing, and Srirangan replying that he's chopping two fish. I heard what I thought might be a knife scaling the fish, a scraping kind of sound.

I heard the water running as if I was there next to the tap.

I heard Srirangan saying that they are in the laundry, that that is where he cleans his fish. I heard the muffled rumbling as Shamindan picks up the recorder, and their flip-flopping feet as they walk from the laundry to Srirangan's room.

I heard Shamindan asking Srirangan why he bothers cooking when the mess hall serves them three meals a day. I heard Srirangan say, 'I have been living in this camp almost five years. And I am really sick, I am tired. So this food, I used to cook by my own.'

I heard Shamindan saying, 'Ok, ok, good.' I heard – and this isn't metaphorical hearing so much as interpretative hearing, hearing attuned for meaning – I heard the staged quality of their conversation.

That interpretation came easily not just because of the stilted questions and replies, but because I had heard – metaphorically (hearing as metaphor for understanding) – that Shamindan and Srirangan were best friends who spent all their time together, and so had probably, despite Shamindan's questions, prepared fish curries just like this one a dozen times.

I heard in the staged quality of their conversation a number of different things – which is to say, that the sounds that I heard were ambivalent, amenable to many different interpretations. I heard two friends cooking a curry. I heard a man awkwardly interviewing his friend while they cooked dinner. I heard two men trying to make a recording that would be interesting to an audience they could barely imagine. I heard two men from Sri Lanka speaking in English, for the benefit of that imagined audience. I heard (metaphor for remembering, for using my memory to imagine) the other men, in the other recordings, speaking in languages I did not understand. I heard two refugees trying to make their sorrow worthy of the attention of that audience. I heard – metaphor for remembering having read – Susan Sontag saying (writing) that, 'People want to weep. Pathos, in the form of narrative, does not wear out' (Sontag 2003: 65). But of all the things I heard from Shamindan and Srirangan, what I did not hear was a narrative that wanted me to weep. I did not hear any narrative at all.

I heard Srirangan saying, in an echo of Samad, I have nothing to do here.

29.07.18

KAZEM, A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO, TALKING TO MANSOUR IN THE EAST LORENGAU CAMP

I heard Kazem beginning with a greeting, Salaam. I heard the screeching of the insects again, as Kazem and Mansour speak in a language I do not understand.

I heard Kazem switching over to English, asking Mansour, 'Ok, my brother Mansour, tell me about your day.' I heard Mansour replying,

'When I wake up I make some food for myself, exercise, run and walk with my friends. I spend my time being busy with my friends. I do my best to be a good person, to be a positive person.'

I heard someone laughing in the background.

I heard a dull buzzing, some kind of electronic distortion, and I thought of the distance between us – the 3,983 kilometres – and the technology we were using to bring each other into a kind of proximity: the Zoom H1 recorder with a fluffy wind sock (sent over by plane with a refugee advocate from Australia), the SD card on which the recording was written and stored, the laptop Kazem used to upload the recording, the international telecommunications network which allowed the recording to be sent, via WhatsApp, to Jon in Melbourne, who downloaded it on to his laptop, where he mastered the recording and uploaded it again, this time to our group Dropbox folder, which was where I downloaded the recording to listen to it on my phone while I sat in my kitchen-cum-office as my toddler daughter played on the floor at my feet.

I heard Mansour talking about buying lollies from the store to give away to local children, just to see them happy. I heard him saying, 'I feel peace through my heart when I do this.' I heard – interpretatively – the kindness in Mansour's voice. I heard him talking about converting from Islam to Christianity, about how the conversion happened after he watched The Last Temptation of Christ. I heard him saying, 'We are living in a strange world – miracles bend us to our destiny.'

I heard – metaphor again, hearing as remembering – echoes of my Christian education. I heard what faith could be for someone who has been detained on Manus Island for five years. This metaphorical hearing made me think of another convert, Simone Weil, who wrote sceptically about the rights of man: 'Words like "I have the right" or "you have no right to" evoke a latent war', she said (wrote), 'and awaken the spirit of contention'. She said (wrote): 'If you say to someone who has ears to hear: "What you are doing to me is not just," you may touch and awaken at its source the spirit of attention and love' (Weil 1986: 63).

I have been thinking about those words for a long time – long

before I started hearing recordings from Manus Island. I have been wondering what it means to have ears to hear. What kind of hearing does Weil mean? Not the kind of hearing I have been doing, or at least, not just that kind of hearing. It's not enough just to hear the sounds that are there to be heard, even when those sounds are recorded and reproduced with sufficient fidelity to approximate proximity, to make you feel as if you are really there. You have to hear in a way that awakens the spirit of attention.

Ok, so it's a metaphorical kind of hearing – but hearing as a metaphor for what? Elsewhere, Weil said (wrote) that 'attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity' (Weil in Petrement 1976: 462). So perhaps Weil means for us to hear as a metaphor for generosity.

Could we say then, that if proximity alone is not enough, that what we need is an attentive proximity? A generous proximity?

31.07.18

AZIZ, THE WEEK BEFORE LAST, CONSOLING HIS SOMALI FRIEND WITH SOME SOMALI MUSIC

I heard a couple of notes of a jangling guitar line and then Aziz's voice saying, I'm sitting right next to one of my friends today and he's actually trying to remember his country, so he got a little bit depressed and he thought that if he could listen to some of his country's music it would help him calm down.

I thought about what it means to console someone. To console is not to solve or fix or empathise. It is not a verb, I thought, so much as the name for an active relation. I thought about the many ways in which we console someone: we sit with them, we put an arm around their shoulder, we drop off casseroles, we send cards or texts or make phone calls and say that we wish we could be there with them. Perhaps, I thought, that is what attention transforms sorrow into – consolation.

But consolation for whom? I heard – metaphor for imagining, for self-reflective thought – my conscience saying, 'As often as not, it is the

consoler – the casserole-maker, the card-writer, the shoulder-holder – who is comforted.' Which is another way of saying: what if this hearing is only meaningful for me (for us), the guilty one(s)? What if this relation only goes one way – so that with every recording I listen to, I declaim my responsibility for what I hear?

There is a part of my conscience – the part I was now hearing, metaphorically – that demands proofs. This part of my conscience has only instrumental ears, the kind of ears I used as a lawyer – ears that can only hear that which has utility. And there was a great comfort in that, for I knew that what I heard with those ears could help someone win their freedom, or a medical transfer, or a permanent visa, or a compensation payout. I did not have to worry that what I was doing had no benefit to the people I heard.

But if part of my conscience wishes for the certainty of instrumental ears, there is another part of me – still under the influence of Weil, no doubt – that hears (metaphor, for thinking) the difference between the language of rights and the language of justice. The professional lawyer hears in the register of rights. And that is good and fine – as far as it goes. By which I mean that even when we have all our rights, sorrow remains, and that those who have been trained to have instrumental ears have also been trained not to hear sorrow.

What happens, then, to unattended sorrow?

I thought of all that I had heard about – cognitively speaking – the mental health crisis on Manus Island: the steady drip of suicide attempts, the substance abuse, the despair. I thought that this is what unattended sorrow does: it separates us from each other – it corrodes the links between the sorrowful person and the world around them.

And so it must be that attending to sorrow does the opposite. It must be that consolation, in the form of paying attention to someone's sorrow, reforges those corroded links. It must be that to give soul to sorrow is to create a community – a community of people responsible for each other's sorrow.

For the duration of the recording, I didn't hear Aziz and his friend talking. Instead, I heard the synthesised beat and reverb-heavy vocals

of Somali pop music. I heard Aziz's friend clicking his fingers and singing aloud to the choruses. I heard the sudden silences as the song was changed, or as a message was received on the phone that was playing the music. I heard two friends sitting in a room in Lorengau, one from Sudan and one from Somalia, listening to music while a recorder sat between them, so that I could listen too.

Endnotes

1. I am grateful to Ellena Savage for bringing this reading to my attention.
2. The archive of the recordings are available to listen to online at <https://manusrecordingproject.com/>.
3. I am grateful to James Parker for bringing my attention to this reading, and also for his helpful comments on this piece more generally.
4. See also James Parker and Joel Stern, 'Eavesdropping' in James Parker and Joel Stern (ed), *Eavesdropping: A Reader* (2019), 24 on Australia's regime of offshore detention itself (and not sound, or technical infrastructure like Dropbox or WhatsApp) being the medium or the "condition of possibility" of *how are you today*.
5. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who reminded me that listening generally denotes attentive and purposeful aural perception.
6. The eight detainees and the dates of their deaths were Reza Barati (17 February 2014), Hamid Kehazaei (5 September 2014), Fazel Chegani (8 November 2015), Kamil Hussain (2 August 2016), Faysal Ishak (24 December 2016), Hamed Shamshiripour (7 August 2017), Rajeev Rajendran (2 October 2017), Salim (22 May 2018): Australian Border Deaths Database, <https://www.monash.edu/arts/border-crossing-observatory/research-agenda/australian-border-deaths-database>, last accessed 1 July 2020.
7. Julian Burnside, Launch of the Behind the Wire website (Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 11 June 2015).

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