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Eavesdropping with permission: the politics of listening for safer speaking spaces

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This paper explores the possibilities and limits of a politics of 'listening' as a strategy for a privileged white woman to contribute to antiracism in the face of dominant discourses of gendered protectionism. Reflecting on my own role as a co-convenor of a series of workshops aimed at intervening in discourses and policies of 'protection' directed at Indigenous and Muslim women, I suggest that 'eavesdropping with permission' may in some cases contribute to the negotiation of safer speaking spaces. In contrast to 'dialogue' aimed at empathy or understanding, 'eavesdropping with permission' involves the possibility of shifting risk and redistributing discomfort in order to unsettle the privileges of a centralized speaking position.

In this paper I reflect on my role in a series of small workshops focused on the politics of gendered protectionism faced by Indigenous and Muslim women in Australia. My involvement began with a challenge overheard at two events held on the first anniversary of the Cronulla riots, in early December 2006. In very different ways, two conferences held in Sydney at that time ended with some participants interested in creating safe spaces for potentially difficult conversations between Indigenous people and Muslims in Australian. Here I reflect on my experiences as a co-convenor of the resulting 'Gender, Violence, Protection' workshop series in an attempt to analyse some of the possibilities for a white, middle-class woman like myself, influenced by feminisms, antiracism and critical race and whiteness studies, to contribute to developing safer spaces for speaking and listening across differences in the context of Indigenous sovereignty, and despite the persistence of colonial feminism and the privileges of whiteness. Drawing on recent work on the politics of speaking and listening, I suggest that a particular form of 'political listening' (Bickford 1996) or 'eavesdropping' (Raftcliffe 2005) may enable people, like myself, who are discursively privileged, to contribute to antiracism

without dominating the space of conversation. This eavesdropping entails a shift to the margins and an ongoing negotiation of discomfort and permission. In my analysis I highlight the unease and uncertainty provoked by eavesdropping as a register of shifting hierarchies of safety and risk, and also the impossibility of simply 'transcending' networks of privilege and power.

New conversations

The 'challenge' which prompted my involvement in this project was not directed at me in particular, but rather emerged in the closing plenary at a conference convened by Christina Ho (UTS) and myself, '*Not Another Hijab Row': New conversations on gender, race, religion and the making of communities*, held at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) in December 2006, one year after the Cronulla riot (see Ho and Dreher 2009 for a review of the conference). The conference aimed to move beyond the simplistic binaries of many public debates on hijab (an oppression or a liberation? To ban or not to ban?), and the dominant public framing of gender relations in Indigenous and Muslim communities in Australia Organisers and many participants felt that public debate around the rights of Muslim women and of Indigenous women and children too often forces an intractable dilemma: defending communities experiencing racism is positioned as condoning violence against women. In debates around the federal government intervention into Northern Territory Indigenous communities, for example, concerns at the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act are routinely sidelined by the argument that children and women in Indigenous communities must be protected (Watson, I 2009). Media and political debate about the infamous comments of Sheik Taj el-Din al-Hilaly comparing women to 'uncovered meat' inviting sexual assault was framed as a confrontation between Islam assumed to be inherently misogynist and backward, compared to a 'civilised' Australia in which women's rights were secure (Ho 2007). Time and again, Christina Ho has argued, the rights of women in racialised communities are championed at the cost of demonising Indigenous and Muslim men.

With *'Not Another Hijab Row'* we aimed to open up a space where the complexities of these issues could be discussed; for example, critiquing the prevailing narratives depicting Muslim or Indigenous men as inherently violent, as well as condemning the violence of men convicted of rape and sexual assault. In feedback participants identified the development of a 'safe space' as the most significant achievement of the conference — a public space in which Muslim women in particular were not asked to explain or justify themselves in response to either common prejudices or the demands of colonial feminism. Closing the conference, Heather Goodall of UTS noted that one of the most useful aspects of the event was that it opened up a space to compare experiences of different communities who had been marginalised, and in particular, examining points of connection between Muslim and Indigenous Australian communities.

'Criminalisation, selective policing, demands that people police themselves — these have all been faced by both Aboriginal communities and Muslim communities at different times', Goodall stated (2006). The gendered discourse of 'protection' has been a crucial component of this surveillance and policing of Indigenous and Muslim communities in Australia. The Closing Plenary panelists, Tracy Bunda (Flinders), Alia Imtoual (Flinders) and Joumanah El-Matrah (Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria), all expressed a desire for sustained conversations between Indigenous, Muslim and refugee communities and complained of the relative lack of opportunities for such dialogues.

In informal conversation after the closing a group of women identifying variously as Geonpul/Wakka Wakka, Muslim Australian, white and Arab Australian, all in various ways experienced in activism with racialised communities, enthusiastically took up the theme. The discussions identified both a need and a desire for discussions between Indigenous and Muslim women, and also cautioned against the many dangers for such a project. The difficulties identified included: developing a space for conversation that was not dominated by whiteness; ensuring safe, semi-private spaces to explore commonalities and differences away from the pressures of public scrutiny; and addressing racism towards racialised others *within* communities that are themselves subjected to dominant racisms. I left these discussions excited and energised, but also thinking that I had no particular role in ensuring that such dialogues would take place — that was a task for Muslim and Indigenous women themselves.

Suvendrini Perera (2005) has argued that anti-racist politics in Australia must develop alliances and analyses across communities subjected to racism in contrast to the relationships managed by and centred on whiteness. In an oft-cited essay, Ann Curthoys (2000) described connections between Indigenous and multicultural discourses in Australia as an 'uneasy conversation'. The difficulties of such conversations were underscored at a public forum only days after the 'Not Another Hijab Row' conference – an event called 'The Borderpolitics of Communities' which formed a part of the annual conference of the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association. The forum brought together academics and representatives of community organizations to discuss responses to the Cronulla riot one year on. For complex and unplanned reasons, the forum ended with a painful exchange among members of the audience and one of the panelists which seemed to focus on antagonisms within and between Indigenous Australian and Muslim Australian communities, while various white speakers escaped direct challenge (see Osuri 2009 for a fuller discussion). Debriefing with organisers afterwards, there was much discussion of the need to clearly ground such an event in Indigenous sovereignty and to think carefully about how to create safe spaces for difficult conversations.

The dominant logic of 'masculinist protection' (Young 2007) is a pitfall, as well as a point of potential connection for new conversations between Muslim and Indigenous women. The discourse of 'protection' is evident in the justifications and the practices of 'protecting' Aboriginal women and children in the Emergency Response in the Northern Territory (Watson, N 2009a) and the arguments for 'saving' Muslim women during the war on terror. Both the discourse and policies of 'saving' women in communities positioned as 'other' are part of the long history of 'colonial feminism' (Ho 2007). According to Irene Watson, the discourse of rescue and paternalistic protection entails a loss of voice for Indigenous women (2005: 26). The appropriation of the rhetoric of women's rights and the politics of 'rescue' create a 'double bind' (Adelman et al 117, Hussein 2008) or a 'minefield' (Abu-Lughod 2002: 783) for those seeking to address gender inequality without further fuelling racism. During the conservative Howard government, the dilemmas of speaking and silencing impacted most acutely on Indigenous and Muslim women, as that government pursued policies including enthusiastic participation in the 'war on terror', intense surveillance of Muslim communities in Australia and intervention into Indigenous communities all at least partially legitimised by claims to 'rescue' women and children framed as vulnerable, oppressed and incapable of asserting their rights.. Muslim women in Australia have become highly visible in public debate during the 'war on terror' but have also found it extremely difficult to shift news agendas and to be heard on their own terms, instead being asked to constantly respond to the concerns and stereotypes of 'mainstream' audiences (Dreher and Simmons 2006).

Shakira Hussein writes that the constant demand to speak operates not as a 'platform from which Muslim women can discuss their fears, frustrations and hopes for the future', rather media and public discussion on gender and Islam acts as a 'catch-22 confronting Muslim women':

> when they do wish to speak out against anti-Muslim discrimination and harassment, they do so with the encouragement and support of Muslim communities, but are too often treated with hostility or indifference by those outside those communities. On the other hand, if they wish to speak about dysfunctional gender norms within Muslim communities, they have little difficulty in finding an audience among non-Muslims, but their voices are appropriated and woven into anti-Muslim discourse, and they risk being labeled as disloyal by some members of their own communities. (Hussein 2008)

It is for this reason that safe spaces are sought, where women in racialised communities might both critique the discourse of 'protection' and its use to justify colonial practices *and* address concerns around gendered violence and inequalities in *both* dominant and racialised

communities. This is the challenge that I (over)heard in December 2006 and echoed in the following months: to create safe spaces for new conversations at the intersection of feminism, antiracism and critical whiteness studies — and conversations between Indigenous and Muslim women in particular. This challenge was not presented as a task for me, nor did I see it as one. Indeed I assumed that such conversations would proceed without me — and no doubt many did, do and will.

What's a middle class white feminist to do?

Given these pitfalls, what is a middle class white woman to do? Is there any role for me in the work of creating safe spaces for new conversations? Scholarship which works across feminism, antiracism, postcolonial and critical race and whiteness studies offers many provocative suggestions. The tradition of transnational feminism tends to focus on strategies of alliances and intersectional politics, while scholars engaging with whiteness and Indigenous sovereignties emphasise the need to unlearn privilege and give up power. Aileen Moreton-Robinson concludes her analysis of whiteness and Australian feminisms by arguing that, 'the real challenge for white feminists is to theorise the relinquishment of power' (2000: 186). In her analysis of speaking positions, the role of academic research and violence against Indigenous women, Sonia Smallacombe argues that the central challenge is 'whether feminists and their institutions interrogate their own power base and whether they are willing to move aside to give space for Indigenous women's voices' (2004: 51).

Fiona Nicoll (2004) reflects on her own experiences as a middle-class white woman teaching critical race and whiteness studies in Indigenous sovereignties and suggests that this teaching must challenge students to locate 'their own position within racialised networks of power' and should 'shift focus from the racialised oppression of Indigenous Australians to the white middle-class subject position that is a direct product of this oppression'. According to Nicoll, 'the task of non-Indigenous students and teachers becomes that of observing and beginning to denaturalize the everyday invasiveness of policies and practices underpinned by patriarchal white sovereignty' (2004: 6). These are compelling reminders that white women must do their own race work and focus attention on their own privileges and power (see also Ratcliffe 2005: 5-6).

This can be difficult and uncomfortable work, in which good intentions are deeply suspect. Alison Jones (1999) contends that 'even good intentions by the dominant group are not always sufficient to enable their ears to 'hear', and therefore for the other to 'speak'. Many authors analyse the ways in which racism is perpetuated under the guise of 'good intentions' and Damien Riggs (2004: 9) highlights Jane Haggis' suggestion that Australian critical race and whiteness studies 'should not be about making non-Indigenous people 'comfortable', but should instead continue to destabilise the assumptions of privilege

that inform non-Indigenous belonging'. My involvement in this project, and the writing of this paper, has been uncomfortable and uncertain. I have experienced levels of panic far greater than my usual nervousness before public speaking — and this anxiety has manifested bodily, in sleeplessness and loss of appetite and nausea and shivering. Mindful of Sara Ahmed's (2004) analyses of 'bad feeling', I reflect on these discomforts as a register of the violent colonial histories and ongoing racisms which form the possibilities for action and change, rather than as markers of an end to or an overcoming of racism. Rather than transcending 'bad feeling' the challenge is to work to redistribute risk and discomfort as a means to developing better possibilities for listening and speaking.

This unease and uncertainty might also register the ambition as well as the impossibility of unlearning privilege. In a response to Aileen Moreton-Robinson's challenge to theorise giving up power, Fiona Probyn has analysed the impossibility of such a task, arguing that 'the project of giving up power is always a taking and is *strategically essential* for a white critic of whiteness' (2004: 37). For Probyn, the challenge of unlearning privilege too often takes the form of a 'weirdly white ressentiment' (2004: 1) in which privilege is taken as loss and injury. She concludes that:

> white feminist critics of whiteness need to write better histories of our complicity rather than our liberation. … Complicity not as injury but as starting point and the condition of ethics itself. Complicity as a reflection of the mutual implication of domination and resistance, as a critical interest in the effects of one's praxis and as a mode of mutual recognition. … Complicity as form of critique that does not seek to 'get over' the challenge of paradox so zealously (Probyn 2004: 36).

The focus on complicity again turns attention away from intentions (good or bad) and on to unearned privileges and their effects, and reveals strategies for giving up power as both necessary and inadequate. Critical race and whiteness studies also cautions against a paralysing and narcissistic white guilt. Drawing on the work of Audre Lorde and bell hooks, Sara Ahmed argues that 'guilt certainly works as a 'block' to hearing the claims of others in a re-turning to the white self' (2004: 32). Krista Ratcliffe describes her own alternative:

> Convinced that wallowing in guilt and in the desire for absolution is not only non-productive but narcissistic, I determined to bring my embodied racism to consciousness (well, as much as possible anyway) and use it to complicate my feminism, my scholarship, and my daily life (2005: 6).

In contrast to the focus on undoing privilege and the dilemmas of complicity, transnational feminism highlights strategies of coalition and intersectional politics. According to this tradition, the key to

maintaining the possibilities of coalitions across differences is to 'curtail the universalizing tendencies of western feminism' (Probyn 2004: 3). Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) advocates 'working with' communities positioned as other and focusing on larger responsibilities to address global injustices rather than protection or rescue missions. Overall, it is vital to avoid 'polarisations that place feminism on the side of the West' and to 'use a more egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, instead of salvation' (2002: 788, 789). Nira Yuval-Davis has long argued for a 'transversal politics' based on situational dialogues:

> Concretely this means that all feminist (and other forms of democratic) politics should be viewed as a form of coalition politics in which differences among women are recognized and given a voice, without fixating the boundaries of this coalition in terms of 'who' we are but in terms of what we want to achieve. (1994: 188-9)

A transversal politics thus emphasises issues and common concerns rather than fixed identity categories, aiming to create possibilities for working at the intersection of gender, race and religion.

Intersectional analyses and coalition strategies have proved valuable in various attempts to intervene in the 'race debates' of Howard-era Australian politics, including in the 'Women Report Violence in a Time of War' public forum held during the 2001 'border panic' election campaign. Organised by 'a coalition of migrant, refugee and Indigenous women', the forum sought to highlight the 'silenced voices of the election campaign' by focusing on women's experiences of violence in local, national and international contexts (Immigrant Women's Speakout et al 2001). The event foregrounded points of connection and also significant differences in colonial histories and contemporary experiences of violence impacting on women in racialised communities. As in the 'Gender, Violence, Protection' workshop series, resisting gendered protectionism rather than a universalising category of gender provided the most productive starting point for shared conversations. While 'Women Report Violence in a Time of War' was developed as a media intervention, the lack of media coverage also underlined the great difficulty for intersectional analyses to be heard in 'mainstream' public debate (Dreher 2003, 2009).

The series of workshops on gendered protectionism that I reflect on here similarly sought to focus on 'issues' rather than on essentialised identities or 'cultural' understandings. The persistent dilemmas of 'protection' directed at women (and children) in racialised communities provided a productive starting point for conversations. Yet in Australia the 'egalitarian language of alliances and coalitions' seems inadequate to engaging Indigenous sovereignty as the 'ground on which we stand' (Nicoll 2004), Shakira Hussein and Alia Imtoual (2009) explore the fraught politics of alliance in their contribution to

this volume, and Goldie Osuri argues that challenging ongoing colonial relations might be better approached as the impossible but still necessary task of co-existence (Osuri 2009). For my own role I found it essential to grapple with ideas of privilege, whiteness and complicity which complicate strategies of coalition or solidarity.

The politics of speaking and listening

In light of the interest in safe spaces for conversations which was highlighted by the two public events in December 2006, I have been particularly engaged by suggestions which explore the politics of speaking, representation and 'dialogue' which underpin much feminist and antiracist work. In Australia after September 11, 2001, government funding and local-level organising have increasingly turned to Interfaith dialogue and to strategies of speaking up and talking back in order to address racism directed at Arab and Muslim communities (Ho 2006, Ho and Dreher 2006, Dreher 2006). Just as much as contemporary Interfaith work revolves around strategies of dialogue and storytelling, the older tradition of Reconciliation has often manifested in local projects of cross-cultural interaction and dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The series of workshops on gendered protectionism attempted to develop a different mode of organising and interaction, influenced by critiques of the Reconciliation and Interfaith models, and the strategy of 'cross-cultural dialogue' in particular.

Alison Jones (1999) provides a powerful critique of the 'colonising tendencies and desires behind cross-cultural dialogues', arguing that the call for dialogue all too often functions as a plea for reassurance on the part of dominant groups. Her analysis is based on a 'radical plan' developed at an Aotearoa/New Zealand university in 1997, in which most of the education course was divided into two streams, one for Maori and Pacific Islands students, one for Pakeha students, with identical curricula. The teachers' observations and student feedback on the process confirmed that 'the Pakeha students seemed unusually passive and resentful, while the Maori and Pacific Islands student's classes were energetic and positive' (Jones 1999: 301). Jones reads these different responses as symptomatic of very different investments in classroom 'dialogues': while Pakeha students mostly resented what they experienced as a loss of opportunity to 'know' or 'understand' others, Maori and Pacific Island students enjoyed the opportunity to speak without addressing the questions and concerns of Pakeha classmates. On reflection Jones argues that privileged people must 'recognize one's own implication in the racialised social order' and accept 'the possibility that the other cannot or might not want to be 'known' or consumed by them, or to teach them' (1999: 313). In contrast to the imperialising 'romance' of understanding, knowing and empathy behind the desire for dialogue, Jones suggests that we ask who really wants or needs dialogue, and who has little choice but to listen to and understand privileged voices.

Given this compelling critique of 'dialogue' and the long history of feminist debates around the politics of speaking for others, silence often seems to offer the most ethical possibility for a privileged speaker such as myself. Indeed, there are many contexts in which silence or absence on my part is the most appropriate course of action. Yet there are many who argue that silence is not (always) the most appropriate or ethical stance (Alcoff 1991, Bickford 1996, Ratcliffe 2005). Instead, several critics of the politics of speaking advocate an emphasis on the ethical possibilities of listening, rather than silence:

> We certainly want to encourage a more receptive listening on the part of the discursively privileged and discourage presumptuous and oppressive practices of speaking for. But a retreat from speaking for will not result in an increase in receptive listening in all cases; it may result merely in a retreat into a narcissistic yuppie lifestyle in which a privileged person takes no responsibility for her society whatsoever. (Alcoff 1991: 17)

Susan Bickford provides one of the more extensive discussions of the politics and ethics of 'listening' in her book, *The Dissonance of Democracy* (1996). For Bickford it is listening rather than simple dialogue or silence which can serve to challenge discursive hierarchies. Drawing on critical race feminism, her argument shifts attention and responsibility from marginalised voices and on to privileged listeners:

> Just as speakers must reflect on how to speak (and what to say), listeners must be self-conscious about how they listen (and what they hear). Taking responsibility for listening, as an active and creative process, might serve to undermine certain hierarchies of language and voice. If feminist theorists are right that "silence and silencing begins with the dominating enforcement of linguistic conventions (Alarcon 1990, 363) — that is, if oppression happens partly through not hearing certain kinds of expressions from certain kinds of people — then perhaps the reverse is true as well: a particular kind of listening can serve to break up linguistic conventions and create a public realm where a plurality of voices, faces, and languages can be heard and seen and spoken. (Bickford 1996: 129)

While 'listening' might be understood in lay terms as an empathetic or therapeutic activity, Bickford posits political listening as a practice which is not motivated by friendship nor aiming at consensus, but rather as a necessary means for negotiating more just outcomes in a world fundamentally shaped by conflict and inequalities. Following Arendt, Bickford argues that listening across difference is motivated not by love for the other, but rather by love for the world.

Writing within rhetoric and composition studies, Krista Ratcliffe focuses on the importance of avoiding a guilt/blame logic in listening (2005: 3) and argues that what she terms 'rhetorical listening' should invert the term 'understanding' to 'standing under' (2005: 28), as 'standing under the discourses of others and rhetorically listening to them have the potential to transpose a desire for mastery into a self-conscious desire for receptivity' (2005: 29). A 'logic of accountability' is crucial to this conception of listening, suggesting 'an ethical imperative that, regardless of who is responsible for a current situation asks us to recognize our privileges and nonprivileges and then act accordingly' (Ratcliffe 2005: 31-32).

Attention to the politics and ethics of listening brings us again to the challenges of creating safe spaces. Alison Jones engages one such call:

> it must be recognized that white/Anglo women have more power and privilege than Hispanas, or Black women etc. and at the very least they can use such advantage to provide space and time for other women to speak. (Lugones and Spelman in Jones 1999: 305)

Krista Ratcliffe argues that it is vital to make public spaces for discussions of gender, race and whiteness which can avoid the 'guilt/blame trap' (2005: 90). The following sections discuss one small attempt at creating safe spaces for speaking and listening across differences.

Creating safe spaces

These, then, are the challenges, suggestions and dilemmas that echoed in my ears when Goldie Osuri of Macquarie University told me in late 2007 that she had been granted a small amount of funding to develop a project to follow-up on the 'Borderpolitics of Communities' public forum. We reflected on the ways in which the 'Borderpolitics' forum had inadvertently staged an accusatory and painful debate, while the 'Not Another Hijab Row' conference had ended by identifying a need and desire for conversations between Indigenous Australian and Muslim Australian women in safe spaces. With considerable uncertainty I agreed to work on a follow-up project, and to attempt to find an appropriate role for myself within that process. My initial unease and uncertainty continued throughout the process, and Goldie Osuri and I at various times talked about this as the 'uneasy project'. Over several early conversations Goldie Osuri and I decided to organise a series of small discussion workshops, with the format, participants, topics and other framing and organisational details to be determined by an advisory group of Indigenous and Muslim women academics who had previously shown some interest in the idea of exploring possible points of connection across differing experiences of oppression and resistance. Shakira Hussein (ANU), Alia Imtoual (Flinders), Sue Stanton (Charles Darwin University) and

Nicole Watson (UTS) agreed to advise on the direction of the project, and their writings which emerged from that process are included in this volume. An initial phone hook-up with the advisory group set the basic parameters. The point of interest and connection that emerged most clearly in that initial discussion was the ways in which representations of violence against minority women and policies to 'protect' women often reinforce racist narratives about 'barbaric' men and passive women in racialised communities.

The suggestions outlined in the preceding sections informed my thinking about the project and the organising. Indeed, it was the goal of creating safe spaces that Goldie Osuri and I returned to again and again, and this goal also seemed to resonate strongly with the advisory group and with participants in the workshops. We were well aware and constantly reminded of the many pitfalls for such a project, and our more complex discussions focused on the extent to which the workshops should be 'public' or 'closed', who should facilitate the discussions, how to ensure that the project was not dominated by the interests of non-Indigenous and non-Muslim academics without producing an essentialising identity politics and so on (the organizational process behind the workshops is discussed in greater detail in the Editorial Introduction to this volume).

My activities as an organizer/convenor were one attempt to find an appropriate role for myself in working for justice informed by feminisms, antiracism and a critique of whiteness. I would like to examine further one particular decision within the processes of creating safe spaces — my decision to participate in rather than merely organising the workshop discussions. At several points before and during the series of workshops, I suggested to the advisory group that it might be more appropriate for me to be absent from the workshops, that my place was outside rather than in the room. My suggestion was not taken up, and I did attend the workshops. In participating, I attempted to position myself as a listener — I spoke little and instead tried to listen attentively for suggestions made, points of connection identified and key points raised. I assigned myself the task of noting these in order to feed them back into the direction of the project and to make the notes available to those who had participated in the discussions.[1]. The goal was not to collect material for my own research or writing, and I rarely spoke about the contents of the discussions with anyone apart from the participants.

This combination of listening and organising seems to me to offer one possible manifestation of Susan Bickford's injunction to political listening as a means to breaking down entrenched hierarchies of voice. Crucially, Bickford argues against listening as self-abnegation, as complete silencing or as absence. Audrey Thompson provides an explanation of listening that comes very close to silence or passivity:

> You need to learn to become unintrusive, unimportant, patient to the point of tears, while at the same time open to

> learning any possible lessons. You will also have to come to terms with the sense of alienation, of not belonging, of having your world thoroughly disrupted, having it criticised and scrutinised from the point of view of those who have been harmed by it, having important concepts central to it dismissed, being viewed with mistrust, being seen as of no consequence except as an object of mistrust. (Thompson, 2003, p. 89)

In contrast, Bickford draws on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to explain that:

> in listening I must actively *be with* others. Listening as an act of concentration means that *for the moment* I make myself the background, the horizon, and the speaker the figure I concentrate on. This action is different from trying to make myself an absence that does not impose on the other (1996: 23)

Thus listening does not entail 'abnegating oneself', but instead a muting or backgrounding of one's own voice in order to be able to hear another, as 'without moving ourselves to the background, we cannot hear another at all' (Bickford 1996: 24).

In this sense we might understand listening as making a space — a space for an other to speak and be heard — but a space that is not an absence or a withdrawal, but rather a space that sustains interconnection and interaction. Here listening is not passive nor simple openness or receptiveness, but rather a complex negotiation in which I move to the background while still maintaining a certain attention and engagement, opening up a space of productive tension. While Bickford describes this primarily as an individual process within interpersonal dialogues, the experience of listening and organising suggests something of the resonances between the individual and internal creation of listening space and the more collective creation of safer speaking spaces. Across the personal and the political processes of creating space and listening, the decentring of privileged interests and voices is crucial.

Eavesdropping with permission

Krista Ratcliffe's concept of 'eavesdropping' best captures the mode of 'political listening' employed in my role in the project for creating safer spaces for new conversations around gendered protectionism. Ratcliffe surveys historically changing understandings of 'eavesdropping' in an effort to recover its political and ethical potential.

> Together, these lexical threads weave a composite of *eavesdropping* that signifies an effective rhetorical tactic. Its moves include: choosing to stand outside … in an uncomfortable spot … on the border of knowing and not

> knowing … granting others the inside position … listening to learn. From such a composite, *eavesdropping* emerges not as a gendered busybodiness but as a rhetorical tactic of purposely positioning oneself on the edge of one's own knowing so as to overhear and learn from others and, I would add, from oneself (Ratcliffe 2005: 104).

In this reading, the purposeful overhearing of eavesdropping requires the listener to move from the centre to a place of some discomfort (under the eaves where the water drips) and less certainty. Here the eavesdropper can hear conversations which are directed at others, and which may well foreground what is unfamiliar or difficult. The eavesdropper may also hear a lot about how s/he is perceived by others and the listener may hear of the workings of networks of privilege and power that are difficult to see from within privileged locations. As Ratcliffe argues, 'recovered from its negative connotations of busybodiness, *eavesdropping* is posited here as an ethical tactic for resisting the invisibility of a gendered whiteness in scholarly discourses within rhetoric and composition studies' (2005: 101). Listening in on the workshops described here has certainly exposed me to much talk about the ways in which whiteness is perceived and experienced by some people racialised as non-white, the persistence of colonial feminism and the many reasons why my good intentions count for very little.

It is of course very important to distinguish Ratcliffe's 'eavesdropping' from its more conventional uses as listening in on private conversations and its associations with surveillance. Indeed, during the series of workshops there was regular discussion of the intense surveillance directed at Muslim communities around the world during the 'war on terror', and Nicole Watson (2009a, 2009b) was writing of the role of surveillance in the politics of gendered protection underpinning the Northern Territory Intervention. While Ratcliffe does address the ethical challenges of listening to private conversations, she does not engage the history or the contemporary realities of eavesdropping in the service of imperialism, policing and the control of racialised communities. Clearly it is crucial to be as wary of the colonial legacies and the contemporary challenges of listening strategies as of other tactics for feminist and antiracist work.

Ratcliffe does canvass a number of ethical issues, including the concern for privacy, the danger of romanticizing the position of the outsider, and the ethical necessity of not merely eavesdropping, but being prepared to hear (2005: 106). The solution, for Ratcliffe, is to 'take care, at all times, not to fall into old patterns but to eavesdrop with care, respect and reflection' (2005: 106). I would like to suggest a further injunction — to eavesdrop only *with permission*. There are two key features of my role in the workshops described here that I think are particularly unusual, significant and productive: firstly the role of eavesdropping on conversations that were not directed or addressed to me, and secondly the fact that my presence, location and role was

nevertheless (more or less) visible and agreed. One important detail is that the conversations were not directed at me, which seems to me to offer slightly different possibilities to the debates around dialogue and speaking. What if the privileged listener is not an interlocutor but rather an eavesdropper? What if, as in the workshops on gendered protectionism, a privileged listener (me) is present and yet the conversation proceeds without (much) reference to her interests and ignorances. Ratcliffe asks:

> What if we position ourselves so that these authoritative voices are not addressing us directly? … In other words, eavesdropping is a tactic for listening to the discourses of others, for hearing over the edges of our own knowing, for thinking what is commonly unthinkable within our own logics. (2005: 105).

My response is to suggest that this form of eavesdropping offers one possibility for working in spaces that both enable marginalized voices to speak *and* serve to ever-so-slightly shift or decenter the listening privileges of whiteness. Where Ratcliffe argues for an 'accompanying ethic of care' (2005: 105), I suggest also the need for transparency around the eavesdoppers' role and presence. Eavesdroppers must be constantly alert to the possibility that their listening in is (no longer) welcome or appropriate, must listen carefully for if and when permission to listen is granted or refused and must be mindful that there are many situations in which absence is indeed the appropriate action.

My role as eavesdropping organiser is certainly not the only example of eavesdropping with permission. The role of non-Indigenous listeners to Indigenous community media such as Koori Radio and the Black2Blak2 forum held in Sydney in 2008 suggest other possibilities. As an occasional listener to Koori Radio 93.7FM, 'Sydney's only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander full-time community radio station' (Gadigal online), I 'listen in' on media which is primarily addressed to an Indigenous audience While many Koori Radio broadcasters are keen to attract non-Indigenous listeners, the station prioritises the needs, interests and perspectives of Indigenous audiences. The presence of non-Indigenous eavesdroppers is assumed but does not necessarily determine the production process.

The Black2Blak2 NSW Aboriginal Visual Arts Conference held in western Sydney during September 2008 began with a more overt statement of speaking and listening protocols which explicitly positioned non-Indigenous participants as eavesdroppers with permission. A colleague, Alissar Chidiac, who attended the event, paraphrases the opening statement:

> all the people speaking during this conference are aboriginal.

> all questions and comments from the floor are to come from aboriginal people.
>
> this is our chance to explain our selves to our selves.
>
> if you are not aboriginal, you can listen.
>
> in plain english - 'shut the fuck up'.
>
> i don't think anything is lost in translation here. (Chidiac 2008)

Non-Indigenous eavesdroppers at the forum were also told that they were welcome to approach the MC, Djon Mundine privately with questions or comments — but their role during formal presentations and conversations at the forum was to listen. The examples of Koori Radio, Black2Blak2 and the 'Gender, Violence, Protection' workshop series demonstrate various ways in which eavesdropping and permission are negotiated in different spaces.

Redistributing safety and risk

In emphasising the importance of accountability for rhetorical listening, including eavesdropping, Ratcliffe argues that a logic of accountability offers an alternative, not only to guilt/blame, but also to a desire for absolution (2005: 5-6). It is essential that privileged listeners are accountable during and also after eavesdropping, and it is in this spirit that I attempt to think through my participation in the workshop series on gendered protectionism. I reflect on the project and my role not so much as an exemplar or a model of 'success' or 'best practice', but rather as a deeply imperfect process, approached with much uncertainty on my part, and squeezed always into the cracks between many other projects and demands, with never enough time to pick up on many of the possibilities that arose. My attempts to think through some of what was and wasn't achieved are here put into the domain of academic conversation in a spirit of accountability, interested in response and critique.

An emphasis on space and location has, it seems to me, been productive in this project, yet signals also the limits of what eavesdropping might achieve in undoing privilege. Alison Jones (1999: 306) remarks that the metaphor of space is ubiquitous in discourses on radical pedagogical dialogues: 'Talk of margin, centre, inclusion, exclusion, mapping, positioning, location, territory, space, gap, border, and boundary marks the terrain'. She also reminds us that strategies of 'inclusion' are often posited as the logical response to practices of marginalisation or exclusion. In contrast, an emphasis on 'listening', and on the liminal space of 'eavesdropping' in particular, attempts to decentre privilege and to shift the terrain, rather than 'including' previously excluded voices into existing dialogues or spaces. At the very least, the workshops on gendered protectionism did seem to avoid some of the more obvious pitfalls of tokenism as

exemplified in the regular invitations to an Indigenous speaker or a Muslim women academic to address an academic conference which in all other respects ignores the claims of Indigenous sovereignty and of Islamic feminism. While the project may not have created a completely safe space (as if this were either possible or desirable), the feedback suggests that for many of the participants it was a saf*er* space than those of most academic or public debate (see Stanton et al 2009).

The goal of 'creating spaces' also marks the limits of what eavesdropping can achieve. As discussed in previous sections, the aim of creating or providing space for marginalised voices is central to much feminist and antiracist work (see Jones 1999 cited above). Krista Ratcliffe suggests working to create 'a ground in between … a ground that belongs to noone, not even the creator' (2005: 93). In the Australian context, the desire for a 'ground that belongs to noone' evokes disturbing resonances with the idea of *Terra Nullius* [1] which underpins the denial of Indigenous sovereignty. The aim, then, to 'create' spaces for marginalised voices can operate as a form of hospitality which erases Indigenous ownership and the contemporary work of dispossession and exclusion which secures white privilege and possession. I suggest that, rather than 'creating' space, for privileged listeners the goals of redistributing safety and risk, or shifting entrenched patterns of comfort and discomfort within spaces of conversation and interaction might serve as more modest but better aims. Turning to focus on unsettling comfort and security that rests on white occupation of the space of Indigenous sovereignty might enable a white middle class feminist to work for safer spaces while alert to the pitfalls of 'creating' or claiming space.

For my own part, my eavesdropping suggests the usefulness of listening for cues to action, and listening to understand networks of privilege and power. Eavesdropping with permission might enable another subtle shift, from seeking better understanding of an 'other' to listening for better understanding of relationships and complicities, issues and the workings of privilege. Alison Jones suggests:

> Ultimately, for dominant group members, supporting struggles for a just social order may necessarily involve both knowing about the historical structures of privilege and inequality within which we all live, and a gracious acceptance of not having to know the other (1999: 316).

In listening in as an organiser on conversations not directly addressed to me, perhaps I was able at some moments to listen, not so much to 'know' or to 'understand' 'other women', as I was listening for instructions for my own work of organising. I tried to listen to hear - what should happen next? Where might this constructively be taken? Who else should be involved? What are the most important or

[1] I am very grateful to the anonymous referee who formulated this point.

significant or interesting issues? What are the dangers and challenges? and so on. In this sense I was listening for suggestions that I (and Goldie and Elaine) should work on. Listening for cues to action may have enabled a small shift in the distribution of labour for *organising* new conversations, where my role was to take on some of the work of emailing, finding funding, liaising, photocopying etc.

While eavesdropping does seem to me to offer better possibilities for working across difference, it does not easily produce certainty or comfort for privileged listeners. Indeed, Ratcliffe reminds us that eavesdropping is to put oneself in the uncomfortable position where water drips off the eaves. As mentioned earlier, my role in this project has provoked heightened levels of discomfort and anxiety. These symptoms might just signal a 'productive unease' (Jones 1999) that comes from being decentred and taking risks. And Susan Bickford reminds us that 'the riskiness of listening comes partly from the possibility that what we hear will require change from us' (1996: 149). In this sense working for safer spaces might be less about an absolute security in which there is no risk, no pain and no difficult conversations, but rather more about a redistribution of the risks and discomforts of speaking and organising. My moments of discomfort may be one marker of the ever-so-slight redistribution of insecurity, risk and anxiety in the 'Gender, Violence, Protection' project, shifting some of the organisational risk (will this work? What if noone shows up? Who can speak on their own terms? Who will listen? etc) as well as some of the psychic and organisational labour onto convenors who are not scrutinized as Indigenous or Muslim women. The challenge seems to be to resist the tendency to try to 'resolve' this discomfort and to seek 'redemption' (Nicoll 2004), aiming not to 'get over' but rather to develop a new relationship to 'bad feeling' (Ahmed 2004).

There is considerable tension between strategies of unsettling, moving to the margins and 'eavesdropping' and the activities of organising and convening a series of workshops. Working in the ways that I have in this project – eavesdropping and organising – has not been a simple giving up of power. Nor does it absolve me from the many ways in which I benefit from unearned privileges in this and many other activities in my professional and personal life. As Fiona Probyn argues, we cannot so easily escape our complicities. For academics in particular, Jane Haggis and Suzanne Schech remind us that 'we cannot cede or give away the power this institutional and professional location accords our voices and texts' (2000: 396). While I began the project thinking there would be no concrete outcome for me, here I have written a paper that, if published, will extend my CV and contribute to research quantum at my institution. There is also a risk that musing on eavesdropping and organising simply returns whiteness to the centre of scholarly attention (Ahmed 2004). It would also be disingenuous to argue that my interests and priorities, the questions that intrigue me and the people that engage me, played no part in the framing and the direction of the workshop discussions. Working for safer spaces and eavesdropping cannot overcome the impossibility of standing outside networks of privilege and power.

Nevertheless, in reflecting on this series of workshops through a logic of accountability, it seems to me that, for people who are discursively privileged, sometimes moving aside and shifting the risk and discomfort of speaking might contribute to better outcomes, particularly if we are all the while alert to the times when our absence or silence is necessary.

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Notes

[1] Goldie Osuri (Macquarie) and Elaine Laforteza (Macquarie) also took notes, which Elaine compiled and distributed.

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