
Listening to the Democratic Forest with Brian Harnetty

ABSTRACT Sound artist Brian Harnetty talks about his *Forest Listening Rooms* project and reflects on the politics of building interactive, immersive conversations about people and the landscapes that surround them in Appalachia, as well as the artistic and philosophical influences on his unique approach to composition. **KEYWORDS** Sound art, Appalachia, environmentalism

In July 2020 I spoke with composer and sound artist Brian Harnetty about his work—particularly *Forest Listening Rooms* (2018–present), a project that brings diverse groups of Appalachian residents, young and old, activists and oil drillers, to sit and listen in wooded spaces (or “rooms”) and absorb the sounds of a landscape in flux. Appalachia has been transformed by human activity, perhaps most notably and often tragically by extractive industries. But Harnetty’s work is not a moralizing teach-in about the dangers of a despoiled environment. Each listening session is a performance, and no two sessions can be the same because different people are listening and reflecting on different sounds each time. Central to its purpose is an awareness that debates about the environment are too often in the heated abstract, with the residents of Appalachia often unheard, and ideological combatants listening neither to each other nor the natural world itself. *Forest Listening Rooms* offers an encounter with an Appalachia that is changing rapidly, sometimes loudly, as in the clang of an excavator, and sometimes softly, as some ecosystems rebuild in the wake of fossil fuel companies in retreat. It reimagines the space of the forest as one of democratic immediacy.¹

Alex Sayf Cummings: In the United States, we often think figuratively of activism or political engagement as “having a voice,” “speaking out”—speaking, rather than listening. It’s fair to say that few in contemporary American life would associate politics with listening at all. So I was wondering if you could talk about how you think of listening as an aesthetic and political practice.

Brian Harnetty: Listening, when done as openly and objectively as possible, is a radical act of attention, trust, even love. Listening is both vulnerability and strength: you give up control, you acknowledge what may happen next is unknown. Yet this trust and uncertainty is a way to understanding and change. Listening is humanizing, too. I carry so much bias and judgment with me about art, aesthetics, politics, and people, and if I (try to) let it go temporarily, I can begin to hear and pay attention to other things—depth, humor, uneasiness, hope—that allow me to comprehend a person and not only their rhetoric or

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ideology. Listening and speaking are like breathing; you must be able to breathe in to breathe out. And the tensions between the two are akin to how Paulo Freire defines “praxis,” the back-and-forth movement between action and contemplation.

Sound—and by extension listening—is at odds with entrenchment. Nuanced, fleeting, nonlinear, complex, unresolved, contrapuntal, moving around and through things, and containing both signal and noise, sound forces us to contend with places and people and things as they unfold *in time*. Listening, then, is a patient, messy, and time-consuming process. You can see why it is so difficult to apply to politics! Listening is often ignored or seen as a weakness, and there’s so little space left for it because everyone is speaking both at once and loudly. But this attitude is rooted in fear. Instead, I see the vulnerability of listening as a strength, revealing an inner confidence that is not afraid of challenge or critical thought.

Obviously, listening can’t always be deeply profound and connected; there’s a spectrum of attention and situations. That’s why an intermediary can help, such as a listening practice or a place. For *Forest Listening Rooms*, the forest itself becomes a mediator between people from different backgrounds, classes, and ideologies. The forest steps between us and offers an excuse to pay attention to something other than ourselves, and *then* we can start to listen to one another.

ASC: I am originally from West Virginia and still have extensive family there. People in Appalachia are used to feeling like the world has left them behind—they have been abused by big business, ridiculed by the culture at large, forgotten and thoroughly unheard. So they might take heart in the idea that someone wants to listen to them—that you want to listen for the stories inscribed in their landscape. At the same time, some folks there are understandably suspicious of the motives of outsiders. (Certainly, many of my West Virginia kin see environmentalists as meddling busybodies who are trying to take away the only good job they’ll ever have, even if it’s in surface mining that threatens to destroy the land and poison them and their neighbors.)

How did you find that people responded when you approached them about this project? I’m sure there were a range of attitudes, but can you talk about whether people warmed to your idea or, perhaps, regarded it dubiously?

BH: While my parents’ families are from Appalachian Ohio, I was raised and currently live outside of the region, so I don’t identify as Appalachian. Even though I am deeply involved in Appalachian Ohio, I am still an outsider, albeit one with enough family roots to have a way in, an initial trust. This in-between place is helpful for my work and for trying to understand the region in both critical and connected ways. Interestingly, this outsider/in-between status is felt within my family, too, and family relationships have prepared me for this project and all of my work in Appalachian Ohio. The underlying questions I’ve been addressing my entire adult life—how can my ideologies be so different from my family’s? And, can I hold these contradictions together and still love them?—and they inform the slow, patient, even gentle process of my listening practice.

Despite working in the region for several years prior to the *Forest Listening Rooms* project, the initial listening sessions were much smaller than I had planned for. I simply

couldn't advertise a session and expect local residents to show up. Instead, the first participants were people I had already made some kind of connection with, and who were willing to do what seems strange: to wander out in the forest with me, sit in silence, listen to old archival recordings, and converse! I suppose it seemed culturally absurd to a lot of people, and there needed to be a deeper trust developed before most were willing to participate. Still, those early sessions were invaluable; I learned how powerful it could be to sit with others in outdoor places, and how conversations expanded as a result of being quiet together.

I changed my strategy, and widened my definition of a "listening room." Instead of only trying to get local residents to trust me, I learned to trust them, and I began meeting them in the places where *they* were comfortable. I also allowed for more intimate solo sessions in addition to the larger group sessions. For example, I followed a local turkey hunter into the forest for a pre-dawn hunt, which felt unnerving to me (I'm not a hunter), but the session also yielded some of the richest field recordings of the project. After chatting with other hunters, I learned that despite political differences hunters fiercely work to protect wild spaces and public lands in particular. I began to think of these people and connections as "unusual allies," where overlapping concerns and a built trust outweighed cultural differences.

Speaking and listening are kinds of performances, so it has been good (and humbling) to understand exactly who my audiences are. I am continually finding ways to remain true to my own background and experiences while simultaneously learning to follow and respect the cues and language of local residents. But, of course, the residents are not homogenous, and are across the spectrum of backgrounds, politics, culture, race, and class. Again, it is a matter of listening and paying attention, making mistakes, and moving toward understanding.

I found that a shared interest in the land was ultimately more powerful than political differences. At the same time, perhaps the greatest inhibitor to this shared interest was the cultural difference in language and how the land was talked about. Consequently, language became extremely important: Opening conversations with a vocabulary familiar to environmentalists only seemed to feed into preconceived notions of local residents. So, the most meaningful conversations worked to resolve these tensions with an initially more neutral language, which seemed to open a space for participants to meet in the middle of their differences.

ASC: It seems that art might not always have a thesis, per se, the way that a writer might think of their writing as being singularly about arguing a point. But as soundwork, as activism, your work does have a perspective, and presumably you do have some kind of effect in mind that you want to get across. Or is it truly about saying: "Here's the world, look at it, listen to it"?

BH: Yes, I came to the project subjectively, with lofty environmental, social, and political goals. Specifically: ending fracking within the Wayne National Forest, and bridging rural/urban divides over land use. These are easy things to declare when writing a project proposal, and much, much harder to implement and measure, especially with

such a subtle and quiet practice. And, as stated above, I learned quickly that these aims were poor ways to open a conversation, and tended to make people shut down.

So, my goals were embedded at the heart of the project, but not on its surface; they informed all of my interactions and helped me to imagine beyond my limitations, but they were not the headline. Instead, I let listening be the method: where conversations often strayed off topic but were nevertheless integral to the messy process of working through and toward change, all with an understanding of my own limitations and with no way to fully know what the final effects will be, if any.

As it turns out, some of the environmental objectives of *Forest Listening Rooms* have been achieved without my help, including recent halts on both fracking and strip mining in the areas where I have been working. I can't lay claim to these victories, but I do pay attention to and celebrate them, and use them as fuel to keep returning and supporting residents.

ASC: I guess what I'm getting at is: Is your aim to provide people with the occasion and the context in which to listen and make their own judgments? Or are you looking to lead participants toward a certain experience, perspective, or set of conclusions?

BH: I'd say my initial aim was to lead participants to a certain experience and conclusion (mine), but that over time I realized that it wasn't necessary to be prescriptive, but to let the forest speak for itself. And this is what I underestimated the most: the forest's active and central role in the exchange between people, coupled with the intensity of a group of people sitting together in the forest in silence. Together, these two things revealed a transformative power that affected me deeply. It confirmed my hopes for the project but changed my approach: I learned to get out of the way and trust the forest to affect the participants in similar ways that it affected me, which became the beginning point for change.

ASC: I was taken by your use of Robinson's Cave as a site, since this was a location where United Mine Workers members went to discuss organizing discreetly, outside of earshot of the bosses—a place of “whispers.” How does your work approach sounds like this—the traces that are not just forgotten or covered up but that are deliberately, intentionally occluded? Perhaps the sounds of workers organizing, or coal companies seeking to muffle or mute the sounds of what they are doing to the landscape, or other secrets and lies—perhaps something else entirely.

BH: Importantly, Robinson's Cave was also a site where miners secretly conspired to set the mines on fire as part of a labor dispute: fires that continue to burn today, 140 years later. So, it serves as a place of change and transformation that gave rise to both labor solidarity and sabotage, and the consequences of these meetings still resonate with us today.

As a natural space, Robinson's Cave is lovely, but it is its historical context and the way residents have memorialized the space that makes its acoustic qualities more important. Moving further back in time, I also often think of the silences in our knowledge and acknowledgement of Indigenous peoples who lived for thousands of years in the region, and their erasure from the land. For my work, listening and sound happen to be the sensorial gateway into understanding these contexts. With this knowledge, sitting and

listening in proximity to the cave gives the experience a deeper meaning; it's as if we are straining to hear reverberations from those past meetings, or intently listening for fires still smoldering beneath us. This straining becomes part of the piece, where what we desire to hear and comprehend is just beyond our grasp.

During our listening session at Robinson's Cave, I played archival recordings of residents talking about the cave and the mine fire. Listening to the voices of people remembering a place and its significance as we were sitting in that very place had a haunting effect, one that allowed us to be in two places at once but without nostalgia. At the same time, we also got a sense of how much the space has changed since the 1880s, how the once clear-cut hills surrounding the cave are now reforested. One resident commented, "I think the forest is winning, and that's a good thing." Holding this historical and cultural complexity in our minds is akin to musical counterpoint: where the current soundscape of renewed natural beauty alongside a destructive past and an often glossed-over Indigenous history are heard together, real and remembered, and rich with meaning.

*ASC: How do you think about silence in your work? Is anything ever truly silent, in a literal sense? (There are, of course, historical silences, in the way that anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot discussed in his classic 1995 book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, which seems to be a central concern of your work.)²*

BH: My work uses John Cage's statement, "there is no such thing as silence," as a starting point: There is always something vibrating. But listening for silence—as you point out—or for what is missing, is a helpful method for both historical and present soundscapes. For example, an absence of sound in a natural environment could signal environmental degradation, and the increase of sound can point to the return of flora and fauna to a landscape. In Appalachian Ohio, a century of acid mine drainage continues to percolate through the hills and poison waterways, creating hostile environments for an ecosystem to thrive. But mitigation efforts have begun to reverse this process, and consequently, all kinds of animals are returning, and their sounds return, too. A resident told me that a few years after mitigation, he began to hear belted kingfishers in the area, a bird he hadn't heard before. In contrast, Peter Cusack notes that large-scale energy extraction facilities such as nuclear plants "all sound the same," regardless of where they are in the world. This sameness not only replaces and covers up what might be unique to a place but also becomes a marker for transnational industry and power.

ASC: What, if any, artists do you see as precursors to your work? Do you draw inspiration from particular artists or activists who used sound, or who used the landscape—natural and manmade—as the object and medium of their work? I'm intrigued by the places where sound art and land art might meet, or how the history of happenings, installation art, and so on might play into your thinking.

BH: I'm indebted to the art collective Ultra Red, whose listening practices and question, "What did you hear?" have helped me to understand sound as a point of entry into a host of social, historic, and cultural areas; Pauline Oliveros's "deep listening" and Cage's attention to all sounds; my teachers and mentors in music composition: Michael Finnissy's ability to listen historically and critically and use this as material for new works,

and Steve Martland for bringing together music, political knowledge, and action, especially regarding class; artists and writers who chose to stay in a place over a long period of time and influence/or become influenced by a landscape, including Wendell Berry in Kentucky, Ann Hamilton in Ohio, Tom Hansell in North Carolina, and Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses in Texas; the contemplative socially engaged art practices of artists like Brett Cook; and ethnographic and performance writing from authors like Kathleen Stewart and Shannon Jackson, which help provide a foundation of research and careful attention to process, place, archives, and people.

ASC: I am such a huge fan of Wendell Berry. He once spoke of Wallace Stegner's idea that there were two character types in American history: the "boomers" ("those who pillage and run") versus the "stickers" (people who root down and form lasting bonds with a place). It's striking that the term "boomer" not only evokes a sound but also the spirit of extractive industries that denude the land and then move on. Berry said "it all turns on affection"—that is, love of place—while you've spoken of attention.³ What do you think is the relationship between the two?

BH: Yes, I am a fan, too. The term "boomer" immediately makes me think of seemingly endless boom-and-bust extraction cycles that have taken place in Appalachian Ohio over two centuries: including timber, iron ore, clay, coal, gas, oil, and hydraulic fracturing today. Each time, there is a promise of development, jobs, and prosperity. This, however, is at best temporary, and as the booms invariably bust they leave environmental degradation and economic depression in their wake. After following this thread of history you realize these outcomes are not merely bad luck or fate; they are structural and intentional to the "capitalist logic" that Wendell Berry refers to. And they will continue to happen as long as the cycles are allowed to persist.

At the same time, Berry notes that "stickers" are people who "settle," who choose the difficult path of staying in a place and taking care of it. In one sense, to "settle" is to compromise and to acknowledge our limitations (another theme Berry is fond of), notions that are not very popular in our current capitalist culture. Additionally, "stickers" are people who live with their mistakes and find ways to correct them, rather than follow patterns of extraction, exploitation, and moving on to the next place and resource. For Berry, settling is a radical act, and this mending and care of the land results in what he calls a "geography of scars."⁴ In a way, all of my work in Appalachian Ohio is formed around this phrase and its implications. These scars are visible everywhere: century-old gob piles and iron-red acidic streams and the remnants of mine fires. But there are also signs of healing, of mitigation efforts and returning forest. It's just that it takes a careful and subtle understanding to see the healing take place, which really only comes over time and with "affection."

Still, unlike Berry I am not sure I have a place "to stay," since I do not live in Shawnee or own a family farm or land there (I live in Columbus, an hour north of Appalachian Ohio). I have a more tenuous relationship, one where I remain a visitor and outsider, and one where I acknowledge I cannot act as an authority or spokesperson for Shawnee or the larger region. I also recognize that Berry's ability to fuse his identity to his farm so completely (he states that "I am fairly literally flesh of its flesh") is at least partially

through situation and privilege and timing, which is not always possible for others to have. My “sticking” is divided, which complicates things, but I am guessing it is a more common experience, too. This is all the more apparent during the pandemic, since I am staying away and all of our community meetings are done remotely. And yet this in-between place is also a fertile one, with its own set of values and contributions. I am able to offer a perspective that is both rooted and detached, with its own kind of settling. Hopefully, I am showing there are many ways to contribute and “to stay.”

ASC: Finally, your work feels like a direct challenge to contemporary capitalism, which is restless and unreflective, by advocating stillness and generosity. How do you see this work being experienced by other audiences, all the people who were not present in the listening rooms of the forest? How does the work travel, practically speaking? And how do you think it might prompt others to ask these same kinds of questions of their own homes, communities, and surrounding landscapes?

BH: I think both your question and my answer are directly related to the previous question! *Forest Listening Rooms* was designed to not travel, and it doesn't really have an end date. Its main audience is the local residents, and after some initial trust was established, I began inviting people from outside the region to participate. In this way, the project expands outward. Some of the most meaningful exchanges have occurred at these later listening sessions, where there were a mix of locals and visitors, each with a different perspective, but also finding connection through the forest. So, instead of traveling the project works to radiate in wider circles, slowly bringing outsiders into the fold. Obviously, this means documentation becomes very important, and the project has another life through essays, recordings, music, photos, and a series of short videos.

There's also some confusion in my mind as to what is part of the project, and what is not. I spent a year as an Americorps volunteer in Shawnee, and continue to work for a nonprofit there to help build an economy not based on extraction. But, is this work part of the project, or is it community organizing? The lines between the two are blurry. Sometimes, my identity as an artist seems to disappear; it just isn't what is needed at that moment. And yet, my experiences as an artist inform how I comprehend the region and my interactions with others. So perhaps it is still present, just not on the surface. Likewise, aesthetics seem to play a smaller role, which has sometimes been difficult for me to accept; it is another way of letting go and giving up some of the control. Ideally, the projects are more about social change and what the work does, rather than how it appears.

Finally, I have found that sharing and talking about my projects with other communities has been an important way to be a part of a national discussion on land use, rural/urban divides, labor struggles, and environment. Last year, for example, I was invited to Bakersfield College, in California, to talk with students about my work in Appalachian Ohio. Bakersfield College is a community college, where the vast majority of students are from the surrounding San Joaquin Valley and two-thirds of the students are Hispanic. Geographically, Bakersfield and Appalachian Ohio couldn't be more different; and yet there are deeply shared themes and histories surrounding extraction, labor, environmental disaster, and economic depression. In this way, the Bakersfield students immediately grasped the deeper meanings of my stories and could relate them to their own experiences,

even though almost no one there had been to Ohio. The message became less about a specific place, and more about finding ways to see where you are and where you are from in new ways, all while using both celebratory and critical lenses. And then, to make something of it—a field recording, a map, an essay, an image—is a step toward understanding, meaning, and change.

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Brian Harnetty's works include the recordings The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (2004), Silent City (2009), and Shawnee, Ohio (2019), *among many others. He has been the recipient of the Creative Capital Performing Arts Award (2016), A Blade of Grass Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art in Contemplative Practices (2018), and, on two occasions, MOJO Magazine's "Underground Album of the Year" (2013 and 2019). Learn more about his work at brianharnetty.com.*

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NOTES

1. I have borrowed the lyrical image of the “democratic forest” from the work of color photography pioneer William Eggleston. See William Holborn, ed., *William Eggleston: The Democratic Forest* (New York: Doubleday, 1989) and William Eggleston III, ed., *William Eggleston: The Democratic Forest, Selected Works* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2016).
2. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
3. Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012), 10–11.
4. Wendell Berry, *What Are People For? Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1990), 7.