

Attentiveness as a Vocation:

An Interview with Les Back (Goldsmiths, University of London)

Rafico Ruiz (McGill University)

Rafico Ruiz: I thought that this morning we could talk about this question of sociological attention you raise in your book, *The Art of Listening*. I suppose this is partly a disciplinary intervention you're making, but it could also be useful and instructive to situate that argument and position taking within broader debates around what sort of language is appropriate for scholarly work, which in turn raises questions around accountability, access to knowledge, lifelong learning, and the responsibilities we feel to someone in particular, a "concerned" public (presumably a reading public, in C. Wright Mills' terms). This is tantamount to asking, in very broad terms: where does the humanistic scholarly enterprise fit in particular socio-political contexts?

Les Back: You've picked up on the biggest and most important issue that underscores why I wanted to write a book like this one, and why it's called *The Art of Listening*. The "sociological imagination" as C. Wright Mills would have put it, is not confined to the discipline of sociology or what sociology has become. I think a sociological imagination now connects to, resonates with, is in harmony with a whole series of ways of telling society and the sensibilities we train for that task. Though I use the term "sociology," I really am talking about cultural studies, I'm talking about all kinds of aspects of what now is taught within media and communications, within anthropology, within a sort of broad sense of a kind of engagement with the social world which is also a kind of fusion between what stands for social science and also the humanities. In a way, though I'm constantly talking about "sociology," it's not just

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academic sociology. My good friend and colleague Howard Becker wants to make Jane Austen novels sociology, and he wants to make anything that he thinks has a sociological sensibility admissible, and I kind of feel the same way. There's so much within the vernacular, within popular culture that qualifies within what Mills would have called the "sociological imagination." In fact, the sociological imagination is more alive outside of the discipline of sociology than it is within the discipline of sociology.

The point that you've come to is the question of attentiveness and how to live an attentive life. What is attentiveness? How should we think about listening? And how should we engage with talk? I had felt that within our critical imaginations, within our critical sensibilities, we'd almost foreclosed so much of that commitment to being open to the world and being open to those things we've already figured out. This book project also comes at a personal moment of reckoning for me. There are parts of the book which are about my own relationship with my family, my sense of a kind of intellectual career, a life unfolding. But it also corresponds with a profound sense of what is it that we do? What is the value in what we do, the craft that we train and practice? I've started to be more strident about an argument for a critical sensibility. A critical sensibility which is kind of furnished by the books that we love, by the theorists we find captivating and help us think our relation to the world differently, but also a sensibility that is training attentiveness to the world. My metaphor is listening (but it's more than a metaphor, it's a practice, a palpable set of things), but it's also an openness to the world. It's a vocation in the sense of it being and it leading to a job, hopefully for you and others like you, many others like you, but also it's a vocation in much broader terms that I describe as a way of holding to the world, a practice of living in the world.

R.R.: The first-person singular in sociological writing is present, just as anthropologists sometimes foreground their implication in the scholarly enterprise, but it's rarer to find reflections on the process of writing itself. Your use of language in the book seems to enact what you describe as "commitment to interpretation without legislation." You reflect on an open-ended, processural stance to the world through the ways in which you order and write.

L.B.: That was my aspiration. You can tell me if I achieved it. [shared laughter] I worked on this project really intensely. It was something that was written over quite a long period of time, but there came a point where I asked myself: what is it that I am arguing for? What does it include? What does it stand for? Since writing it, and after the travel of those ideas and of that book, I've realized there were many other people who were at similar crossroads. Andrew Abbott at Chicago, whose work I really admire but didn't know he was so concerned with these kinds of ideas, he coins a lovely phrase in his notion of "lyrical sociology." Which is very captivating to me. One of the things that he argues is that so much of sociological literature is written in a narrative form where the story is already decided: this is the way the world is, I'm gonna tell you how it is. Whereas what Andrew Abbott seems to be arguing for, and I strongly agree with him, is a lyrical sensibility that has a different commitment not just to tell the way the world is and to preach it, in a way, but rather to create forms of writing that can capture a positioned observer's sense of things, and how a positioned observer's critical imagination tries to make sense without foreclosing or without making the account reduced to a single argument. I wanted to try and leave the reader with powerful images of where the issues that I think are important come to

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life. They become imaginative and emblematic scenes or contexts or happenings that then make the reader think “oh yeah, that’s interesting.” A sense of an imaginative opening.

Since finishing it, one of the things I’ve been doing more recently is thinking about the importance of cultivating in writing a sense of enchantment or re-enchantment. Not to make people spellbound or to stop them thinking, but to suddenly think an alignment of things or events differently.

R.R.: What you also argue for is a literary turn within sociological writing, which is allied to Abbott’s “lyrical sociology,” and which foregrounds narrative technique within a critical imaginative framework. You cite this remarkable quote from George Orwell, I think it’s from 1938, wherein he characterized southern England as “the sleekest landscape in the world.” This jumped out at me, especially since you pair it with a description of Croydon and Lunar House in South London [shared laughter], quite possibly the least sleek topography one can imagine. Given that you’re writing within a very particular socio-political-cultural context, as a positioned sociologist, did you feel like this was a conjunctural moment for this writing to come about within the discipline? If sociological attention is a position taking towards the world that involves a multitude of elements, including a particular language in which to convey it, do you think there’s a certain economy of attention right now within sociology?

L.B.: I do. I’ve always felt strongly about the importance of trying to write about public problems in public prose. I’ve rarely been able to write public prose. There’s a joke in the book that comes out of that. I used to write

a lot of journalism and I still try to keep my hand in. You can learn a tremendous amount by writing journalism. The main reason I was writing a lot of journalism was because I was really struggling to pay the bills. Initially, writing journalism was a way of supplementing a very low lecturer rate salary living in an expensive city like London with a three month old baby. It was real that need, but I learned a tremendous amount from writing journalism in that period. On the economy of writing, on the importance of constructing pieces of writing in such a way that each element supports the other and if you take a few of those paragraphs out it all falls to pieces. The first piece I wrote for a newspaper here, they asked for 500 words, I gave them 1500. It was cut to 700 words, and the bits I felt most passionately about were cut. The craft of that kind of writing is such an important skill. Academics often view journalism as low-grade, simple, crude, raw. We have so much to learn from that kind of care with regard to construction of argument and clarity of purpose. I had this funny exchange with a newspaper sub editor, he said “you sociologists, you must hate the English language because the way you write you assassinate it.” He was wrong in the sense that I don’t think sociologists hate the English language, I think we love language so much that we tend to create a meta-language that makes sense to very few people. And we have to learn that language and become inured to it and take it for granted. Being sceptical of those academic types of short hand, the obfuscations of jargon, is important if we’re to have an engagement with a wider audience.

Friends of mine who are lifelong friends are ones who haven’t had formal educations in the same way that I have, but many of them are very attentive to the world and have very strong things to say about the things that I write about. I remember a very good friend of mine, one of my oldest friends, who’s a bus driver, I gave him this book that I had written about popular culture. He

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said, “oh yeah, I’d like to read that.” I see him a few weeks later and I say, “did you read the book,” he said, “I read it,” I said “what did you think of it?,” he said “it really pissed me off!” [shared laughter]. And I said, “what do you mean it pissed you off?,” and he replied “well, you don’t say what you mean, you imply, or you suggest, you seem so uncertain that you have anything to say.” And this made me think about the passive quality of thought that can sometimes come about when we try to communicate it, or the epistemological hypochondria that we’ve become habituated to. It’s not that I think certainty is a good thing, but being clear about the conviction of what one’s trying to say, even if it’s about a conviction that relates to being an advocate of doubt. That’s something I’ve tried to aspire to. Part of the downside of the auditing of academic value, has been that we’ve become much more parochial in our terms and in our audiences. On the one hand, academics are writing for and to our peers, to be judged well by your peers and to be cited extensively by your peers, and this being the most important measurement of value. On the other hand, in the UK and to a degree in the States as well, there’s a lot of rhetoric about engagement, impact, being in some dynamic conversation with the public, whoever they might be. I think academia is in a conflicted, slightly schizophrenic moment. What I wanted to try and do was to write in ways that could be admissible on both sides. But really, at the end of the day it was a very simple thing for me, I just thought “Well, actually, I want to try and write things that are more artful if not art and care about the reader.” I’m a lover of books, and I’m not sure that as academic writers we show that much respect to the readers of our work or care for them.

R.R.: One of your own phrases that I landed on in the book surrounds your description of contemporary Britain within which you describe a “shift in

the geography of public concern” taking place, which is a spatialization of critical social issues. You go on to give the example of the drowning of 24 Chinese cockle pickers as a precarious form of labour. Not to trivialize the tragedy, but how do you place sociological attention as an enterprise within that geography of public concern? Amongst graduate students right now there’s a certain shared belief that we should be writing op-ed pieces for major national newspapers, it’s about the power of opinion to shape societal concerns, and the interface is almost always journalism, it is the prime point of intersection with academic work. Do you think there are other ways of integrating sociology into this geography of public concern?

L.B.: I think those spaces of public concern, of interest, of writing, of thinking, of reading, have been completely transformed in our time. Totally transformed. Isn’t it the most anachronistic thing to think of an op-ed context as being the place for public conversation? What’s happening to newspapers? Newspapers are in a total state of crisis. *The New York Times* is having a crisis over whether it’s going to be a print paper for much longer. At the same time, we have an absolute proliferation of public contexts for writing, for dialogue, for discussion. I think we’ve got to be much, much more open to being involved in those spaces. I love books in a way that is almost pathological [shared laughter], the feel of them, the pages yellowed by time but it’s interesting that the project I did subsequent to *The Art of Listening* was to write an on-line virtual book. A book with no paper, which given my obsession with books is almost a contradiction in terms. It is called *Academic Diary* and it is a book about the life of the mind and the value of the university, it is a website that is a book and a book that is a website. It is free and available to anyone in the world who’s interested in it (<http://www.academic->

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diary.co.uk/). It was a really interesting experiment and when you visit the page a sound track starts to play. Writing that can be combined with sound and image in ways that you can't quite do on the page or the page of text becomes a screen too. We're at an unprecedented moment with regard to the range of opportunities that are afforded us. We have systems of auditing and determining value that are utterly conservative in a context where everything is changing.

Going back to the position of young scholars and graduate students. It's hard enough to craft a 90,000 word, book-length monograph for a start. That's a skill, a tough skill. I like to encourage the people that I work with to be open to writing other kinds of things, to experiment with that and use that as opportunities to try things out. There's a lot of extraordinary and creative energy around student magazines and publications and things like that. My favourite one of recent years was a newspaper of ideas called *The High Horse*, which looked like a nineteenth century broadsheet, with 800 copies every edition, with interesting writing, they just did it themselves. It was an amazing thing. They couldn't sustain it of course because they had other things to do, finish their theses, publish their books. I think there's an extraordinary level of opportunity now, probably more than at any other time. I think there's so much for us to think about in terms of what that geography of public concern's shape is, and where the kind of things we might like to write and be involved in might be positioned.

R.R.: That reminds me of the sorts of ways some people have been thinking about an appropriate language for critique. And you bring this up in *The Art of Listening*, mostly through that great quote from C. Wright Mills: "To overcome academic prose you have to first overcome the academic pose."

Is that an attitude or outlook that sociologists think about more than other discipline-specific academic practitioners? Given the ways in which sociological writing and analysis happens, there's a very conscious "doing" upon of a particular social context—narrativizing it, organizing it. As we've been discussing, sociology does have something in particular to offer. Lauren Berlant, in *Cruel Optimism*, writes: "In optimism, the subject leans toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter with her object. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (2011: 24). Obviously this can be analytically moved around in a series of ways, but, in relation to your book, I thought about the sociological enterprise itself as a cruelly optimistic object that you were trying to maneuver. Berlant also addresses the ways in which we can start to think about creating technologies of patience, "that enable a concept of the *later* to suspend questions about the cruelty of the *now*" (2011: 28). So, she's asking how can we go about fashioning ways of working within the systems that we are caught within, whether academic or otherwise, and how we can start coming up with appropriate languages of critique.

L.B.: Lauren Berlant first circulated that formulation in a short essay that I completely consumed when I first read it; and taught, and used, and have been thinking with. Partly because I wanted to write a book about hope. It was going to be called *The Ethnography of Hope*, but I never did it. I imagine I will, though. That central sense that she captures—that optimism is cruel—is the kind of optimism that is being articulated, hoped, believed in. It exists in conditions in which it can never be realized. That's the cruelty of it. And I think we live in exceptionally cruel times. It's particularly useful because I think it captures that sense of a promise, by the very nature of the way in

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which it's made, makes its realization impossible. So much of what's happening in the world now has that sort of quality. You know Gramsci's formulation, "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will," so there is will, there is action, there is culpability, but there is also, not a free choice, but there is a choice, some aspect in which we can make decisions about the things we invest in. That's not a cruel promise, but something to live with. To live with the decisions that you make on a daily basis. In the academy there is tremendous cruelty that's meted out in very small, everyday actions. We have to protect ourselves from those cruelties, from being the agents of them.

Something Lauren Berlant is also onto in an important way is the relationship between thought, critique and time. She seems to be suggesting that there is in an important value in taking time, in thinking carefully. I was just writing about this. My friend, Nirmal Puwar, and I are just finishing up a book which is a collection of essays called *Live Methods* (to be published by Wiley Blackwell in late 2012). For the beginning of the book we thought it would be a bit playful to write a manifesto for sociological craft, one aspect of which addresses the importance of taking time. Reflection, careful reflection. Patient critique. These are qualities that we need to renew as our fundamental intellectual commitments. This means that we should not be comfortable within the terms that are delivered to us in relation to what academic work is and what it can be. We need to insist that it can be other things too. That intellectual craft is constantly in the process of being made and remade.

R.R.: In the book you end on this question of "live sociology." Within what could be thought of as an academic culture made up of diverse and overlapping economies of attention the place of time is absolutely central yet very often not really acknowledged.

L.B.: This comes back to what I said before, I think we have many more choices to make about how we conduct academic labour than it seems that we have. It's a kind of Foucauldian nightmare the way in which many of us have become self-regulated around the things that are important and the things that aren't important. The metrics that determine that which is important and that which is trivial are more elaborate than at any time in my experience of working in the university, and this is my 25th year. It's laid out very starkly in the measures and forms of audit, and then at the same time paradoxically the hierarchies of value are unspoken. It goes back to that question of a vocation that you live, everyday. Our culpability at being drawn into a zone of grey consciences in relation to that machine happens everyday. It's very hard to be vigilant and also to retain a sense of openness. I just think we have to not be possessed by the tool.

R.R.: In a way, we're in this present moment where the idea of the machine is increasingly articulated in terms of a three-dimensional environment, think of the personal computer and its software applications as a "world" for us to inhabit, and yet this has somehow obscured the fact that we live in a societal machine within which we are regulated through particular technologies, and perhaps most so in our diverse labour contexts, so when you're describing all these various measures within which value is assessed in an academic context this brought me to think about Raymond Williams' understanding of a cultural technology. The ways in the relationships between a society and its technologies are in constant evolution, that are almost always so mobile that we can hardly make them out. This is also that "sleek landscape" of technology in our everyday lives. It's always hard to think about

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what we do as a “vocation” because a lot of people are conditioned into separating off these forms of labour, but in a way it is also the privilege of academic labour that you can constantly enact it.

L.B.: It is the most extraordinary privilege, and a gift. What you do with that gift is really, really important. I also feel very strongly that it is incumbent upon us individually to act in the way that our best teachers have acted. To take from those things you have benefited from, individually, and be inhabited by the ghost of those gracious scholarly actions. I feel that very strongly even though that’s an unfashionable thing to say. I would also say that it’s an extraordinary privilege and one that academic scholars lose sight of too often, myself included. It seems to me that the values, and what’s valuable in the vocation, are made and defined anew in every moment of dialogue like this, every encounter with a student, every lecture. And sometimes they go badly, sometimes they go really well. I’m reluctant to accept the large scale, big canvas transformation-analyses of the university, per se. I can see the validity in the argument, that actually the changes have *killed thinking* to use Mary Evan’s phrase. But it is up to us to bring thought to life, bring attention to life, in the lecture room. I suppose I’m still hopeful about that. I don’t know if it’s a cruel optimism, it might be. [shared laughter] I still think that life and re-enchantment is borne out in the traffic, the circulation, of thought and ideas.

R.R.: You assert that “sociological attention need not hide its authority in false diffidence; it is historically situated, reflective, contestable, uncomfortable, partisan and fraught” (Back 2007: 22). When one’s thinking about a project you’re going to undertake it always seems like the present is

sidestepped, yet your description of sociological attention reminds me of the ways in which we try to engage with the present moment in a serious way. So Berlant also asks: “How long have people thought about the present as having weight, as being a thing disconnected from other things, as an obstacle to living?” (2011: 29) I think we’ve been addressing this over the course of our conversation. How sociology is so obviously a “science of the present,” in a way; while it is also possible to do a form historicized sociology. Does the present in the sociological enterprise hold this kind of imperative for you as a sociologist?

L.B.: Everett Hughes, a very influential sociologist of the 1940s and 50s, said that sociology had become the science of the interview. The science of what is said. And I think he’s right. Our way of attending to the world has been mediated by the ascendancy of the tape recorder. I ask you questions, or you ask me questions, and that’s the quantum of sociological knowledge. That’s the present. The recorded voice. It seems to me that that way of thinking about a relation to the present as the unfolding of life is what I’m interested in.

R.R.: You describe it as a “vitalist sociology.”

L.B.: I’m interested in ways of writing about the social world that don’t assassinate the life that’s in it. I’m not sure if I achieve it, but that’s an aspiration. To try to engage with that unfolding. That way of attending to the world that reduces what culture, history, social relations are to talk is profoundly limited. I want to argue for a more sensuous, multi-sensory, embodied attention to the social world, to the now, to life passed in living. An

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epitaph to that living. And we're constantly dealing with social vitality that has passed. The now is never completely confined to the temporality of the last second. To the click of the finger. The now is composed of that which has passed and that which is emerging. This doesn't really answer Lauren Berlant's question, but I'm interested in that movement. A condition of emergence that contains within it the residue of the past and also the direction of the future. The present is the moment when and where we are in the same kind of temporal and, sometimes, geographical space. This comes back to Walter Benjamin's limiting of what dimensions of the real we can apprehend and capture. It's too overwhelming in our time. Yet we can get that a pearl that makes vivid that interplay between history and biography, as C Wright Mills would have it.

There's a strong sense across the social sciences and humanities that we're facing a crisis. A crisis because humankind is producing information at an unprecedented level. We are broadcasting ourselves in unprecedented ways. The circulation of information in a hyper-connected world is occurring at an unprecedented scale and frequency. Some people argue that that means we're facing a crisis of the empirical. What value can there be for the humanities and social sciences in a world of prodigious, extraordinary, powerful corporate and state information machines. That's one way of thinking about it—as a crisis and informational struggle that we're completely impotent in the face of. I have a different feeling about it. It comes back to the training of a certain attentiveness, of slowing down the pace of thought, of asking different questions, and having a different kind of attention. It's a tough enterprise. And the fact that it's hard makes it important. We need the time to think carefully, to ask difficult questions, and to challenge our own assumptions about what we think is the case. To cultivate that patient

openness to the problems that keep us awake at night and that we feel passionately about.

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