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Listening by ‘Staying With’ the Absent Child

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Abstract

This article explores what it means to listen to children by moving beyond the notion of voice and staying with the absences of children. In this way, we include the possibly lost, forgotten or unapproachable children in child and childhood research. Our methodological starting point is to listen by ‘staying with’ the absences of children’s verbal voices and physical bodies in two photographs. These photographs depict material artefacts connected to children in vulnerable situations: shrouds for wrapping stillborn babies’ bodies, and children’s shoes as an emblem of children living in hiding from domestic violence. The idea is to explore how we can listen to children whose verbal or embodied encounters we cannot or do not wish to display. Our aim is to listen to these absences and discuss how they influence and possibly reshape the practices of listening, as well as notions of the child and childhood.

Keywords: *listening, voice, child studies, absence, staying with*

Introduction

This article addresses the challenge of exploring how we, through listening, can include children we cannot see or hear in research. We begin with the idea that it is, and must be, possible to listen to the unspoken, the not-present and the invisible, in order to include all

children in the concept of the child. To do that we turn our listening to the physically and verbally absent child bodies in photographs, that is, the visually absent child. Listening generally means listening *to* something or someone, usually a voice. Voice has been central in the struggle for democracy and, throughout history, groups of people have gradually obtained their formal rights to be heard in society (Qvortrup, 2015). Voicing experiences, claiming the right to be both heard and listened to, has thus become a symbol for political recognition and empowerment, and the primary mode of democratic representation (e.g., James, 2007; Veiera, 2020). For this reason, voice is a central concept in child and childhood studies. Theoretically and politically, it is discussed as breaking children's silence by giving them voice (e.g., James, 2007; Thorne, 2002). It is a way of recognising children as full participants by acknowledging and establishing their agency in research and society (Spyrou, 2016a). Even though researchers today listen to children's voices, not all children can be heard, due to their lack of opportunities to participate in verbal and embodied encounters. Some children are unable, for various reasons, to master verbal language, while others might be living in hiding and/or with secret identities or other restrictions that make it difficult to be heard or seen in research. Such absences can involve being overlooked or excluded from statistics. These children risk being obscured by the verbally expressive child.

In this article, our focus is on the visual absence of children's physical bodies and voices in two photographs. To explore these absences, we approach absence as vibrant as it both effects and affects the world just like any recognised presence (Scott, 2018). In contrast to presence, where the focus is often on the things that people do or are, absence means focusing on seemingly non-beings or non-doings (Scott, 2018) to see what they do. Part of our approach is to make the position of absence as an epistemologically neglected phenomenon (Scott, 2018) the main point.

We do not set out from a standard solution or method to argue for how to listen to absences. This is an exploration of how far our approach can take us, and of its benefits and limitations. We take our initial inspiration from Lipari (2014), to try to listen to the absences of children in order to include them in the theoretical category of children (cf. James and James, 2012).

We explore children's absences through two photographs depicting material artefacts connected to children in vulnerable situations: shrouds for wrapping stillborn babies' bodies and silver-coloured children's shoes as an emblem for children living in hiding from domestic violence. By working with these photographs, we want to recognise these children and listen to what their absence can tell us about the specificities of their situations. This is an exploration into how these children can be acknowledged in the moment for what they are, rather than for what they could be or could have become. The aim of the article is to explore how, by listening to absences, we can bring visually absent children into being: How can listening to bodily and verbal absence help us to rethink concepts like 'listening' and 'the child' in research? Our approach challenges an understanding of listening in which verbal language is favoured over the unsaid.

Listening to children in child and childhood studies

Listening to children has been central within child and childhood studies as a method for gaining insight into the lives, experiences and perspectives of children themselves and for conducting participatory research with children (e.g., Thorne, 2002; James, 2007). The emphasis in these situations is on the concept of voice. Child voice research has recently been criticised, however, for relying on assumptions that children's voices reflect 'authenticity' or 'truth', with the outcome that listening to children has become primarily a methodological question of how to provide the best opportunities for children to speak about their perspectives and experiences in research (Spyrou, 2011, 2016a, 2016b). Participatory methods, which have often been understood as providing these opportunities, have been criticised for their strong reliance on discursive forms of participation, such as verbal or written language (Clark and Richards, 2017; Horgan et al., 2017). To grapple with this critique, new ways of approaching children's voices and participation have emerged, showing that children's voices are not only a methodological and political matter, but also a theoretical and pluralistic concern.

Children's voices have been discussed as constructed through social processes, and attention has thus been directed towards the messiness and ambiguities of children's voices (Eldén, 2013; Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011, 2016a, 2016b). One argument is that we need to listen to 'the fullness of voice' (Spyrou, 2016a, p. 7) by moving beyond the voiced to explore various other features of children's voices, such as silences (e.g., Annerbäck, 2022; Kohli, 2006; Lewis, 2010; Spyrou, 2016a), space and place (Mannion, 2007), other-than-verbal embodied ways of communicating (Gallagher et al., 2017; Komulainen, 2007; Nairn, Munro and Smith, 2005) or visual expressions such as drawings or body-mapping (Eldén, 2013; Morton, Bird-Naytowhow and Hatala, 2021).

From these perspectives, there is a need to rethink voice beyond the discursive. Children's voices are approached as coming into being through the entanglement of their bodies and interactions with other human and non-human agents (Spyrou, 2016a, 2016b). According to Spyrou (2011), it is therefore important to situate knowledge production through children's voices in its proper interactional, institutional and discursive contexts. The importance of attending to other embodied practices than talking have moreover been the focus in research with babies and very young children, where participation has been discussed as extending beyond the discursive (e.g., Alderson, 2005; Elwick, Bradley and Sumsion, 2014; Orrmalm, 2021). Drawing on ethnographic or observational data, embodied practices and relations are discussed as ways in which babies participate through non-verbal means. Here, participation is understood as done through relations and embodied practices, as well as through the effects that children have on others (Elwick, Bradley and Sumsion, 2014; Orrmalm, 2021). In a similar way, Sparrman and Orrmalm (2021) have highlighted how babies' stillness, for example when they sleep, has effects that extend far beyond the babies' bodies. They argue for an understanding of stillness, not as a lack of activity or movement, but as on-goings in themselves that take part in constituting both babies and their surroundings. While not requiring language-based data or methods, these approaches to participation rely on the presence of children's bodies during data collection.

Using an exploratory approach, we want to push this a step further and explore what it means to listen to the verbal and bodily absences of children.

Listening by 'staying with' – a theoretical methodology

Drawing on Lipari (2014, p. 2), we approach listening as a theoretical methodology of 'thinking listening as a way of being', which opens up space for a kind of listening that attends to the opportunities for attunement and interconnectivity of beings and objects (Lipari, 2014). Listening thus becomes a practice in which hearing, looking and being affected are entwined. To achieve this, we have explored a theoretical methodology of listening by 'staying with' (Haraway, 2016) the absence of children's bodies and voices in these photographs (Images 1 and 2). This idea is central as a way of staying with the affects and effects of absences without moving towards conceptualisations of absence as another kind of presence, silence or aspect of voice. Our ambition with this theoretical methodology is to listen without making arguments (Lipari, 2014) on behalf of children but listening, as already described, to bring them into being in research.



Image 1: Images of shrouds woven by textile artist Birgitta Nordström. These shrouds are given to parents whose babies have died during birth or in the hospital to wrap the babies in. For more information, see Nordström, B, (no date). Photo: Peder Hildor.

The ways in which these two photographs circulate in society differ. They can both be found online. They were created and circulated by adults and form part of how news media circulates and creates global concerns by visualising how certain themes appear and connect across the globe (Lee, 2017). They also relate to our own research interests and concerns. Image 1 was chosen because it involves babies and Image 2 because of its focus on domestic violence. The first photograph is from an art project on rituals surrounding the deaths of babies by the Swedish textile artist Birgitta Nordström (Nordström, B., no date). It was found through a radio programme broadcast in 2021 in which the art project was mentioned, and we then searched for it online. The artist describes it as a project on which she initially worked by herself, but then came to share and work on with students, colleagues and friends in a group. The key words when weaving together are 'embrace', 'to hold' and 'to wrap' (Nordström, B., no date).



Image 2: Image of women's and children's shoes in a manifestation that draws attention to the women and children whose lives are hidden. *Photo: Aftonbladet, Magnus Wennman.*

The second photograph has frequently been circulated in Sweden on social media platforms and the websites of news media (Weigl, 2020). It shows adult and child-sized shoes, sprayed silver and placed in public spaces. The display of these shoes is a development of the Mexican campaign that positions red women's shoes in public spaces to emphasise the number of women killed in domestic violence incidents in the country (Orsi, 2020). In Sweden, the silver shoes draw attention to the situation of mothers who need to go into hiding with their children, using protected personal identities and fictional life stories in order to escape violence from abusive partners. The network of Hidden Women (*Gömda kvinnor*) has been active in Sweden since January 2020. The strategic placement of these silver-sprayed shoes outside police stations, courts and social services offices is chosen to illustrate the traces that women and children leave behind them when they go into hiding (*Gömda kvinnor*, 2022). These shoe manifestations take place continuously in different cities all over Sweden. Our aim is to focus on the absent child in the photograph.

While the shoe photograph represents children who, for their own security, might not be shown in images or for that matter be able to participate in a research project, the photograph of the shrouds pushes the issue of absences even further, as it depicts the definitive absence of children through death. We do not approach these children as

homogeneous groups but acknowledge that, while sharing certain circumstances connected to their absence, there are a multitude of differences constituting these absences. We use the photographs as tools to illustrate the absences that goes on in different contexts and dimensions, not just in the photographs themselves. This is part of an affective turn developed in photography studies during the last two decades, a turn towards using the senses as a method to listen to and broaden the concept of the image and the human capacity for both listening and seeing. The idea is to listen further than the photographs themselves without falling into analyses of semiotics or meanings related to some hidden symbolic content in the photographs (Cartwright and Wolfson, 2018). This is done by drawing attention to the experience of the photograph by listening *with* the eyes to the absent spaces between the material content of the photographs (cf. Cartwright and Wolfson 2018; Lipari, 2014).

To listen in this way, we stay with and spend time with the absences. This idea rests on Donna Haraway's (2016) take on 'staying with' the trouble (see also Law's 2004 discussion on mess). 'In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvic futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings' (Haraway, 2016, p. 1).

By following Haraway's (2016) idea of being truly present and daring to stay with the possible discomfort of not getting all the answers served up on a silver platter, we explore what it means to stay with absences dealing with what can look like nothingness (Scott, 2018). We commit to staying with the absent voices and physical bodies by listening both together as a collective and individually by ourselves. Methodologically, this means directing attention towards absences while at the same time pulling our own and/or each other's attention away from the most obvious and informed ways of approaching the topics of early child deaths and domestic violence. 'Staying with' thus means slowing down (cf. Horton and Kraftl, 2006) and taking our time to listen as far as possible to what these absences can tell us. We stay with the trouble and the mess, listening beyond words or visual presences. It is a way of bringing these visually absent children into being (Lipari, 2014) and making them part of child and childhood studies.

Listening and affect

Listening to the equivocal nature of absences entails engaging with both affect and the effects that affect has. Lipari (2014) argues that sound, whether we listen or not, makes its way by travelling through our physical bodies. By acknowledging the sound waves inside our bodies, we can listen to non-verbal sounds. Even though our focus is on the absences of sound, our methodological approach also involves the body. For Lipari, listening to sound affects the body. However, bodies need to be trained to learn to listen to these affects. The idea is to focus, not on what bodies are but what they can do, and bodies have the capacity to both affect and be affected (Latour, 2004). This processual body becomes an entanglement between the visually absent physical bodies we listen *to* and the physically affected bodies we look and listen *with* as researchers. Diverse bodies and meanings thus constitute

one another. Through listening, a practice-based compassion that entails alterity, great sensitivity, attunement and a willingness to be transformed appears (Lipari, 2014, p. 183).

This approach means staying with the multitude of affects that emerge with different strengths and at different speeds, in ourselves individually as well as between ourselves as a research team. By using our different knowledges as child studies researchers and our different experiences, we do not perceive ourselves as objective listeners. The idea has rather been to open up a space within and between ourselves to see if there is room for other ways of knowing. This brings to the fore questions concerning how acknowledging and staying with affect when listening can contribute to academic knowledge production (cf. Bränström Öhman, 2008). Moreover, it strengthens Lipari's (2014) idea that listening with, in and out of our bodies is a complex practice that mixes philosophical, cultural and personal ways of listening. We would like to add to this, however, and emphasise the social nature of listening by drawing attention to the fact that the outcomes of listening in this article are the results of the complex and dynamic processes of three people listening to absences in the same photographs.

Through the theoretical methodology we have now presented, we are exploring a way of raising questions about the situations of visually absent children, as well as pushing our own assumptions about how to listen to children. By listening in this way, we challenge the idea that children need to be physically present or materially represented in order to matter in the world.

Listening to absences

In this section, we engage our theoretical methodology with the photographs and listen to the absences by delving into how they emerge in different ways and dimensions. We start with the photograph of the baby shrouds and continue with the photograph of the women's and children's shoes.

Baby shrouds (Image 1)

The baby shrouds were woven as part of a textile research project on death and rituals (Nordström, B., no date). The shrouds shown here are displayed in an art exhibition within the research project, depicting them in a colour-tuned and aesthetic way. The baby shrouds are presented one by one next to each other on a flat, decontextualised surface. It is difficult to determine simply from the photographs that these shrouds were made to be wrapped around stillborn babies' bodies. Each shroud was woven with a unique pattern and design.

By staying with the absences within the photograph and listening to the unseen and unsaid, small, fragile bodies slowly take shape and affect us. We are staying with one of the most difficult parts of life: early death. The eternal absences of stillborn babies bring forth the question of how we can account for them as part of what we call childhood, or the category of children (cf. James and James, 2012). We stay with the shrouds, and the space between them and the missing bodies. We listen with our eyes and bodies to the absences of these babies and how these absences are managed with care. We listen to moments of

chaos or mess when a baby is unexpectedly born without signs of life: the spontaneous reactions, the rapid movements as every possible measure is taken to revive the baby while there is still hope of being able to fight off the oncoming absence. A baby being rushed out of the room, rather than being held by its parents. We listen to a different kind of chaos or mess that might emerge when a baby is expectedly born dead. In the moment of encountering the absence as a still and silent baby, a baby that will never scream or move. When being able to look at and hold the baby who has become absent, and whose body soon will be too.

The shrouds could be understood as drawing attention to the not-becoming of these babies, to a childhood that never began, to what is *not* there. The photograph of the shrouds does not capture a moment when the babies' futures as visually and verbally present were still possible, but rather the moment when those futures became impossible. It thus pushes us into a finite kind of absence. When thinking through the babies themselves, these shrouds woven for them can be read as both the *being* – that is, the absences – of these babies, and the end of a childhood. Listening to the absences of the stillborn babies in these photographs pushes us to stay in one spot, for a few moments, and stay with whatever affect the babies have on us right there and then (cf. Lee, 2017).

The shrouds could be read as part of a set of practices that create some sense of order in the absences (Hetherington, 2004); when the absence of a life and a future is managed through the practice of care by a weaving hand, offering a shroud to the baby's parents. We listen to these babies as they are being wrapped with soft movements, perhaps in a room of silence. We thus listen to a moment when the absence is already a fact and when its ordering has begun; an ordering through shrouds that gives a sense that these babies, while born dead, are nevertheless cared for. Listening to the absences of these small bodies wrapped in shrouds makes us aware of their presence in someone's life. It is through the absence of a life for this baby that has been born but that, through its short presence and the absence which now prevails, has great effects. We listen to the threads of the shrouds, and we see how they are carried forward in verbal and silent encounters through the lifelines of parents, siblings, families and others involved in the practices around the births and deaths of these babies. It shows us how the absences of these stillborn babies are implicated in the social relations surrounding them, shaping the ways in which others manage and live with these absences in and beyond the moment of birth (cf. Hetherington, 2004).

We follow the absence in the photographs by listening further to the absences of other dead babies, babies either already dead or left to die. Babies that might be known to the authorities, or not known or ever registered as existing (e.g., Dailard, 2000; Perez, 2008). Baby bodies that are not necessarily given a place in the social world in the same way as the babies being wrapped in these shrouds. By staying with the troubles and mess of babies being born dead, and the fact that these deaths and absences may be managed and dealt with in vastly different ways, we also encounter absences through practices that appear less caring and less in order. Absences that, when listening beyond the shrouds, can be encountered as even more unfinished and unresolved because they are involved in relations and practices that unsettle our conceptions of, for example, values or identity when a baby is born (cf. Hetherington, 2004). By listening to the differences between the deaths

that emerge, we recognise that the absences of babies, like the shrouds in the image, are woven in unique patterns. When listening, we can understand that what is going on in the absences is more than we could perceive at first glance, which emphasises the unfinished configurations and infinite meanings of a dead baby (cf. Haraway, 2016).

Women's and children's shoes (Image 2)

We are looking at three pairs of used silver-coloured shoes. One adult pair, which could be read as female, and two pairs of children's shoes in different sizes. They are grouped together on the pavement outside the Swedish parliament building, exposed to passers-by. We want to bring attention to the children associated with these shoes, who are living in hiding from domestic violence in Sweden (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2020; Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2022). Listening to the absent bodies of two children of different ages raises questions: How are they? Where are they? And who are they? There are, of course, no answers to these questions, but their absences encourage us to consider how the bodies have come to be absent. To listen, we need to use our own bodies, our eyes in combination with affect, and to recognise these absent bodies, their nows, as echoes of both past and future nows. Just as taking the photograph was a political action to highlight how women and children are forced to move into absence, so too does listening to this photograph become a political action (cf. Lipari, 2014).

Absenting these children was not done with the purpose of turning them into nothing (cf. Lee, 2017); their absence is to keep them safe from violence. However, keeping safe has consequences. While moving into hiding is a strategy for keeping women and children safe from domestic violence, it can also be understood as a way for a society to manage the troubles and mess of domestic violence (cf. Hetherington, 2004). As long as the women and children are out of the range of the abuser, their absence is managed in a way that, drawing on Hetherington (2004), could be read as effective because it resolves the problem of immediate domestic violence. Women and children are moved away, and kept absent from the presence of the abuser. We listen, not just to the protection and safety created by this ordering of absences, but also to the kind of presence it enables and manages. By listening, we tune into the frustrations that arise when the presence of domestic violence is managed by moving children, and mothers, into absence, while the abuser can remain present.

We further listen to how the children must be affected by leaving what they know as home; they have left behind loved ones, friends, teachers, everything they know in their everyday lives. The difficulties it must entail to start over, to begin a new life with a new life story (cf. Barnombudsmannen, 2012; Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2022). This absence might be filled with newness, estrangement and social isolation – and yet it enables safety. Listening to the directions that children's absences take in the photograph means staying with their multiple meanings (cf. Haraway, 2016). It means staying with the potential ambiguities, both tears and laughter, relief and sorrow, and the absence of an abusive person replaced by the absence of these children. Listening to this insecure way of living causes us to stumble over the life choices to which hidden children are subjected.

What strikes us here is the impossibility of even imagining a similar photograph with the visual bodies present, because one absence follows upon another. These children will not appear in their school photographs, or in photos taken of their new soccer team. They will be absent from social media to avoid putting themselves and their mother at risk (cf. Barnombudsmannen 2012; Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2022). What we are listening to is absences done through a myriad of everyday practices that cut across the distinction between the life they live in and out of hiding, between difficulties and fun, between the everyday and the extraordinary. It is done in social relations and through practices involving children, parents, social services, new friends, teachers, the police and other actors. Practices and relations that involve the transition into hiding, as well as what it takes to sustain that absence, possibly for a very long time. Remaining absent due to domestic violence for children also entails managing absence in the presence of an abusive parent who still has legal right of access to their children, or when needing to appear in court (cf. Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2022; Överlien and Hydén, 2009).

We have to pause and take a breath to be able to stay with the trouble without grasping for solutions or imagining a better future for these children, or speaking on their behalf. Our listening here means staying with complex layers of absence. How living with violence has probably required these children to hide parts of themselves and their everyday lives, even before going into hiding. To protect the impression of their families as quite normal, as not in trouble. They might have created micro-absences by hiding under a bed or pretending to be asleep under a blanket when violence occurred (cf. Överlien, 2016). Remaining absent until they hear the sounds or silence that make it clear they can appear again. Feeling unsafe in what ought to be a safe space (cf. Barnombudsmannen, 2012). Listening, according to Lipari (2014), involves all parts of the body and our bodily impulse that makes us listen to ourselves and beyond.

For us, following Lipari's (2014) argument that we must be sensitive to vibrations in order to catch sound means listening to its multiple forms of absence: as loss and/or as an enforcement (see also Lee, 2017). It means approaching absences as involving motility, movement and transformation, rather than as a state (cf. Hetherington, 2004). By listening to the absent child bodies living in hiding, we are affected by how these absences might need to ongoingly manage living in and out of absence, both in and out of presence. We listen to how absences are moved along, not in a linear sense but back and forth, and around (cf. Hetherington, 2004). This challenges the time frame of the listening and the motions of what is before, after and now (cf. Lipari, 2014). Listening to the absence of a stillborn baby challenges us to listen not only to the infinite absence ahead, but also to the brevity of a childhood ending. When listening beyond the photographs by combining hearing, looking and affect, we listen to how these absent bodies live in multiple worlds. What our theoretical methodology of listening has helped us to do is to listen as far as we can, for now. These absent children have not been brought into being as clearly distinct subjects; rather, they take the shape of unfinished and ongoing absences with the potential to influence child and childhood studies.

Concluding discussion

Listening to children's voices has, for at least the last thirty years, been significant for making children's voices heard in research with children and in society. Children's words, their laughter, screams and verbal complaints, as well as their silences, have been investigated by researchers in order to give children voice (e.g., Thorne, 2002; James, 2007). Participatory methods with all their differences have become a key phrase for child studies research (Clark and Richards, 2017; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). We argue that this focus on direct verbal and silent accounts made by children has created a discourse that centres verbal language and bodily presence within the research field. The consequence is that groups of children who are not able, or do not have the opportunity, to express themselves either verbally or through silence are left behind in research. At best, they float around as indistinct awareness with which individual researchers struggle without ever making them explicit (cf. Bränström Öhman, 2008). The focus in this text is on the indistinct children at the margins of verblivity and bodily presence.

By bringing together knowledge from different areas, such as looking, listening and feeling, this article gives us, as child studies researchers, the opportunity to explore what it means to listen to children by challenging approaches centred on listening and/or the bodily presence of children. To do so, our approach has been to develop the theoretical and methodological tactic of listening to the absent physical child bodies in two photographs. We are listening to how, just like a physically present child body, these visually absent bodies affect their surroundings, including us as researchers (cf. Sparrman and Orrmalm, 2021).

The visibility of absence in the photographs has helped us to concretise absence and strengthen the presence of listening and affect. It has also made us aware of the struggles involved in staying with the absence of voice while still contributing academic knowledge. We have used a theoretical methodology of slowing down (Horton and Kraftl, 2006), of taking the time to stay with (Haraway, 2016) and listen beyond the photographs. The affective turn in photography studies (Campt, 2017; Cartwright and Wolfson, 2018) has shown us a way of listening with our eyes by repeatedly returning to the photographs, looking at them, staying with them, listening – again and again and again – making it clear to us that absence is a situated practice (cf. Lipari, 2014).

The process involves 'thinking listening' in order to bring these children at the margins into being (cf. Lipari, 2014). By staying with the visual absences, we have heard differences in the modalities of the quietness and sounds in the absences (Campt, 2017). Through our eyes, we hear the differences in the sounds that precede the photographs; for example, violence (domestic violence) or hospital sounds (shrouds), as well as the aftermath of the practices that the photographs depict: the mundane sounds of everyday life (picking up life in a new place after domestic violence) and the still, soft sounds surrounding the deaths of stillborn babies and/or the crying and screaming triggered by loss. This listening affects us. The question, however, is: how does this exploration into listening to the absence of children's verbal and bodily accounts contribute to child and childhood studies?

In research with children, all of their verbal and bodily accounts are interpreted and presented by adults. It is we, the adult researchers, who authorise how and when children are heard and seen. It is our research that creates taken-for-granted discourses on children and childhood. This means that it is us who need to dare to challenge conventional normativities, such as voice or, for that matter, what we mean by knowledge of the child.

The theoretical methodology explored here, to think about children who are verbally and bodily absent, has been a way for us to broaden the notion of the child through a more expansive approach to knowledge. We avoid distinguishing between an either/or by replacing it with a both/and in order to stay with dissonance and multiplicity (Bränström Öhman, 2008). The theoretical method of 'thinking listening' by staying with absence challenges voice and notions of the verbal or physically present child. What it also does is to challenge ourselves as researchers. This is not unique to this specific theoretical method. Our analyses have been a struggle for balance, to avoid universality, to avoid speaking on behalf of the absent child by listening to the absences in the marginality. The struggle becomes even more visible as we draw on different senses – sight, hearing, bodily affects – in combination with our academic knowledge.

In making analyses of verbal and bodily accounts, the difference is that our theoretical method exposes our own subjective assets and limitations as researchers to a greater degree because we have to be open with our struggles. This is an openness that is not often required when analysing spoken words or unspoken silences. When writing, we must, at least to some extent, order affects in a way that might make them seem far more clear-cut, or unanimous, than they have been during the process of listening, by ourselves and together. As academic writers, we have certainly filled in many cracks even while challenging ourselves to know and to write in a way that acknowledges the frictions that emerge between different ways of knowing (cf. Bränström Öhman, 2008). At times, this has raised questions rather than providing solutions, questions concerning what it is possible to do with our way of listening in academic texts, how we let the frictions show and, perhaps even more so, how to find ways of knowing through those frictions.

Our endeavour has not been to suggest a specific, 'good' way of listening, nor has it been about making a list of how to be a good listener (Lipari, 2014). What it has been about is to dare to move into the – for us – unknown, and to listen in order to explore how we can broaden the notion of the child by bringing the absent child, living on the margins of our theories and methods, into being in child and childhood studies.

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