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Guest Editors' Introduction: Community Writing, Community Listening

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Guest Editors' Introduction

Community Writing, Community Listening

Jenn Fishman and Lauren Rosenberg

Listen!

Community writing depends on community listening, which we understand as a literacy practice that involves deep, direct engagement with individuals and groups working to address urgent issues in everyday life, issues anchored by long histories and complicated by competing interpretations as well as clashing modes of expression. When we speak of community listening, we are not simply talking about paying attention, though keen attention is vital to any deep listening practice. Likewise, community listening is not the same as being absorbed as a reader lost in a good book. Instead, community listening is an active, layered, intentional practice. It includes awareness of, as well as responsibility for, being part of an evolving process. It also demands alertness to different interactions and openness to being changed by them. There is always an element of risk to community listening because responding in an ethical and engaged way to others means being willing to change.

Our position is informed by many perspectives, starting with feminist scholars of rhetoric and composition/writing studies who value listening prominently. Echoing Jacqueline Jones Royster, we are interested in connecting questions of listening to community contexts. Namely:

- ▶ When do we listen?
- ▶ How do we listen?
- ▶ How do we demonstrate that we honor and respect the person talking and what that person is saying, or what the person might say if we valued someone other than ourselves having a turn to speak?
- ▶ How do we translate listening into language and action, into the creation of an appropriate response? (“When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own” 38)

Royster’s words resonate with us as imperative to the work of community engagement, including writing in and with communities. We are further guided by Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch’s work, which extends the idea of listening in research relationships. They offer the concept of strategic contemplation as one of four “terms of engagement” that together “help create new knowledge and understanding” (84). Specifically, “building on critical imagination,” strategic contemplation enables researchers to “linger deliberately inside of their research tasks” in order to take in space and place as well as the “impacts and consequences” of both physical and temporal embodiments (84-85). This stance invites us to pay careful attention to “not-so-obvious parts of research,” including previously unexplored or undervalued aspects of community interactions, and it encourages us to suspend judgement in order to “resist

coming to closure too soon.” For Royster and Kirsch, leaping to judgment occurs at the expense of “creativity, wonder, and inspiration” (85). For us, suspending judgment is vital to community listening, which we understand as a praxis that has many locations and occasions and is always dependent on deep human interactions.

We could not have developed our understanding of community listening without Krista Ratcliffe’s response to Royster’s question: “How do we translate listening into language and action, into the creation of an appropriate response?” This is the project of rhetorical listening. In her book of the same title, Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as “a trope for interpretive invention and more particularly as a code of cross-cultural conduct,” which “signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to *any* person, text, or culture” (17). She draws our attention to rhetorical topoi (i.e., opportunities for identification, disidentification, and non-identification) and cultural sites (i.e., public debates, scholarly discourse, formal classroom settings) where rhetorical listening does—and does not—occur. Ratcliffe’s concern is action: from attending to the cultural logics behind the operations of gender and race to “challenging . . . unearned privilege and power” in our work as scholars and teachers (16). We follow this trajectory through Ratcliffe’s appendix of college-level teaching materials and into community writing contexts. These include the multiple sites where community members come together to write and, through writing, to challenge constructions of privilege and power.

We turn to Linda Flower’s work on community literacy for retrospective illumination. In *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, Flower reminds us that community literacy is a discourse of engagement between willing participants: “The community literacy I am hoping to document is an intercultural dialogue *with others* on issues that *they* define as sites of struggle” (19). The emphasis Flower places on “with” and “they” is imperative. It calls attention to how, when we listen, we must prioritize what others are saying and how they say it. We refer to the language people choose as well as the ways they embody that language and occupy the setting and moment in which they speak. This kind of dialogue with others, as Flower, Elenore Long, and Lorraine Higgins discuss in *Learning to Rival*, requires hearing and being heard deliberately because “[t]o be heard is power” and “to hear—to really hear—is to be transformed” (21). As Ratcliffe remarks about listening, hearing is epistemic. Flower, Long, and Higgins observe, “[W]hen the metaphor changes from reception to construction, the question then becomes what must we and our students (marginalized and mainstream alike) do to *construct* such knowledge?” (22). In their answer, they focus on negotiating meaning through the process of “rivaling,” which centers intercultural inquiry. We understand community listening as a related praxis that centers community building through interlocutors’ commitment to paying ongoing, self-interrogative attention to people, places, and situations.

We offer community listening as an explicitly feminist intervention into community writing work. In the opening of his keynote address at the first Conference on Community Writing in 2015, Eli Goldblatt acknowledged Flower as “the mother of us all.” This compelling phrase is the title of Gertrude Stein’s operatic tribute to women’s suffrage pioneer Susan B. Anthony. It is also a fitting acknowledgment of Flower,

whose research and scholarship on community literacy is foundational to community writing. The conversations we recall from the first CCW, whether in plenaries, deep think tanks, or individual sessions, often returned to sustainability, challenging assumptions and subject position, questioning the authenticity we bring to community work: all concerns derived from Flower's example.

In their introduction to the issue of *Community Literacy Journal* that followed the first conference, editors Veronica House, Seth Myers, and Shannon Carter comment, "We realize, and want to highlight in this special issue, the obstacles, challenges, and paradoxes of working in community writing. For one, as the astute reader will no doubt notice, definitions of community range widely. The same is true for what counts as writing" (1). A couple of years later, as we continue to build our understanding of "community" and "writing," we emphasize listening as an essential component in all community writing work. House, Myers, and Carter also state, "First, we find the recurring emphasis on relationships particularly compelling: between colleagues, partners, mentors and mentees, students and teachers, writing programs and communities, and even oppressors and oppressed" (3). Their focus on writing as necessarily relational points to the core of community listening. When we speak of community listening—and here as we theorize it—our purpose is to find ways to make relationships more productive and substantial with the goal of meaningful change. The "listening stance" that Paul Feigenbaum advocated in his keynote address resonates with us as well. For Feigenbaum, a "flow cultivation milieu" occurs when community members commit to listening: "A third factor involves fostering a listening stance amid distributed rhetorical activity" (34). Feigenbaum's remarks return us to the explicitly feminist arguments made by Ratcliffe, Royster, and Royster and Kirsch, who insist on listening as a means of reconfiguring academic and community relationships. Their work, together with Flower's, helps us articulate our own argument for community listening as specific, focused, ongoing attention to the people and flow of activity within community.

Community listening arises from the recognition that none of us is ever outside of our communities. We are never teaching or researching or organizing or writing unmoored from the communities to which we belong, from what surrounds us, or from the people with whom we engage. We agree with Goldblatt and Steve Parks who remind us that we inhabit multiple identities. Thus, when we do community writing work, when we enact community listening, we may be simultaneously academics and activists, students and organizers, community members and leaders, and more. Whether we are listening in a researcher-researched scenario, or in other sites of engagement, community listening is about being immersed in the experience of understanding and non-understanding, trying and trying again with empathy. The listener is in a position of generous openness. From this stance, it becomes possible to pay ongoing, unflinching attention where it is needed most, heedful of dynamics of identity that feminists teach us must always be part of our considerations in our everyday lives, social interactions, and cultural commitments. This is what we mean when we define community listening as a feminist praxis. By engaging in it, we become better able to know each other, to find new levels of meaning, to challenge assumptions and

biases as well as preconceptions. We become better able to do the work, and as a result, we become better community members.

Our goal in this issue of *Community Literacy Journal* is not to offer a comprehensive overview of community listening or to establish hard and fast parameters for its practice. Instead, through the pieces that follow, we offer a deliberate introduction to community listening as a praxis that we believe is already embedded in community writing. Our goal is to make community listening more readily recognizable so that we can use it effectively in our ongoing work. In the pages that follow, we start with two powerful provocations, which are designed to evoke immediate impact not only through their brevity but also through the way they command listening through the stories they tell, the memories they revisit, and the encounters they illustrate. In the hands of Romeo García and Erica Stone, this genre offers direct and intentional engagement with critiques of listening at the same time that it invites taking personal responsibility for the politics of listening and writing.

Both García and Stone frame community listening as encounters. In “Creating Presence from Absence and the Material,” García looks back from his current academic position to memories of his family, and he challenges hegemonic assumptions about what it means to engage with conventional culture and language. He argues that we must always listen with intent: “listening for humanity in the stories and places of shadows, bodies, and voices . . . community listening is about creating presence from absence and sound from silence. It invites a politics of memory (Derrida) as much as it implicates us in a rhetoric of responsibility.” While García looks toward teaching to challenge hegemony through listening, Stone identifies community projects as opportunities for making community writing more fully multimodal as well as reflective of reciprocity among participants. In “The Story of Sound Off: A Community Writing/Community Listening Experiment,” she responds to a project that gave members of a university and its surrounding community a chance to better understand each other through writing. She asks, “How do we design opportunities for community listening that respect and interrogate boundaries while engaging community members in the hard work of listening to individual stories? How do we use community writing to facilitate such listening both in and of itself and as a part of organizing for community action?”

We have arranged the full-length articles to trace an arc from preparing for community writing as community listeners to enacting it in different contexts as community writing researchers and teachers. Thus, we open with “Toward a Model for Preparatory Community Listening” by Karen Rowan and Alexandra Cavallaro. Their concern is the work before the work or the inquiry that precedes project planning. To that end, they offer an “explicit method for an asset-based approach to community listening” that they developed to ensure academic-based community partners “act not in *response to* but *in light of* majoritarian deficit narratives.” Rachel Jackson is also concerned with responsible connection in communities that have been historically denigrated. In “Decolonizing Community Writing with Community Listening,” she draws our focus to story and narrative as critical literacy. Writing in dialogue with Kiowa elder Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune, Jackson argues, “In order to decolonize

community writing in this academic context, we must listen—as invited community members—to the story of Kiowa cultural literacy on Kiowa terms.”

The next two articles shift our focus from community settings to classrooms. Wendy Wolters Hinshaw invites us to listen to a different set of stories in “Writing to Listen: Why I Write Across Prison Walls.” In this piece, Hinshaw describes a course in which she asks students inside and outside of prison to exchange writing and audio essays. In doing so, she argues that “writing to listen helps teachers and practitioners of community writing tune to the material conditions of speaking and writing.” As a result, Hinshaw finds “[t]he challenges of listening are even more pronounced in the context of community writing partnerships, where writing not only brings us together but also oftentimes reveals differences.” Trusting others enough to listen across physical and cultural distances requires a great deal, including empathy. This is the particular challenge Justin Lohr and Heather Lindenman take up in “Challenging Audiences to Listen: Performance of Self-Disclosure in Community Writing Projects.” Echoing Rowan and Cavallaro, Lohr and Lindenman argue “that empathic listening is a crucial precursor to community listening.” They explain, “Listening empathically to individuals may serve as a portal to community listening, or to seeing others’ concerns as part of a collective experience and standing in solidarity with communities that both include and extend beyond one’s own.”

We look forward to the many ways *Community Literacy Journal* readers will respond to this issue, which we read as modeling the complex, messy work of authentic engagement with community writing. We admire how the authors of these articles take risks and demonstrate their willingness to experiment with what it means to do, embody, and enact community listening. They demand that readers as well as teachers and future researchers listen for the difficulty as well as the hopefulness of being in community.

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Author Bios

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Lauren Rosenberg is the author of *The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners*. Her research focuses on the writing practices of adult populations that are under-represented in composition studies and on feminist research ethics. She is an associate professor of Rhetoric and Professional Communication in the English department at New Mexico State University where she also directs the university writing program.