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Creating Presence from Absence and Sound from Silence

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Provocations

Creating Presence from Absence and Sound from Silence

Romeo García

Abstract

This provocation centers on the question, ¿Dónde comenzamos? Working at the tension between community and academic listening, I argue that community listening departs from individualism and mere presence as the genesis for listening. Rather, it re-situates the individual within constellations of stories, genealogies, ghosts, and hauntings. It invites, in a Derridean way, a politics of responsibility and justice towards the past, present, and future. Specifically, this provocation dares its readers in writing and rhetorical studies to take community listening seriously; to find solace both with the inability to extract and foreclose upon all knowledges and the inaccessibility for some of community listening.

¿Dónde comenzamos? For Grandma, such a question was already a cultural expression in the form of responsibility and justice. For her, we could transpose ourselves into the terms of our own inquiries through stories. Stories reminded us of a responsibility to the memories and people of the past that situated our stories-so-far and that would reflect on the possibilities of new stories. As stories, cuentos and testimonios implicate with a sense of urgency to communicate, whether they implicate a “self” in polylog with past selves and present others or equip an audience with the power of not knowing or acting. How we listen no doubt tells us something about our ways of seeing, being, and doing. We are constituted differently, and yet, strung together by a universe of stories, stories-so-far, and the possibilities of new stories. In the Lower Rio Grande Valley, I was embedded within community listening. Like the corridos sung there, community listening calls us to stories of tragedy and hope and pushes us to both take up the traces left behind of the past and people and to work towards creating presence from absence and sound from silence. Community listening encourages listening for humanity in stories and memories in between cultures, times, and spaces. The two contiguous utterances, ¿dónde? and comenzamos, already call and push us to begin from absence and silence, or not-knowing and not-acting. For Grandma, stories, memories, and community listening were about preparing me for an inheritance to bear witness to, to interpret, and to orient towards; a call and push to create presence from absence and sound from silence in the name of justice.

Stories are a site of culture and rhetoric; they are/they become cultural-rhetoric practices. With the intention to invite and implicate, I begin with scattered memo-

ries, loose-leaf papers, and photos of my grandma. Victor Villanueva writes, “Memoria calls and pushes us” (19). “Un día serás doctor,” my Grandma would say. Though during my childhood I couldn’t fathom the possibility of such a future, Grandma would not be surprised that I earned a Ph.D. “Te lo dije.” Memory calls me to listen to traces of presence despite absence—re-memory. And in remembering, I’ve realized “te lo dije” was already a mark signed in the past enunciated in the present.

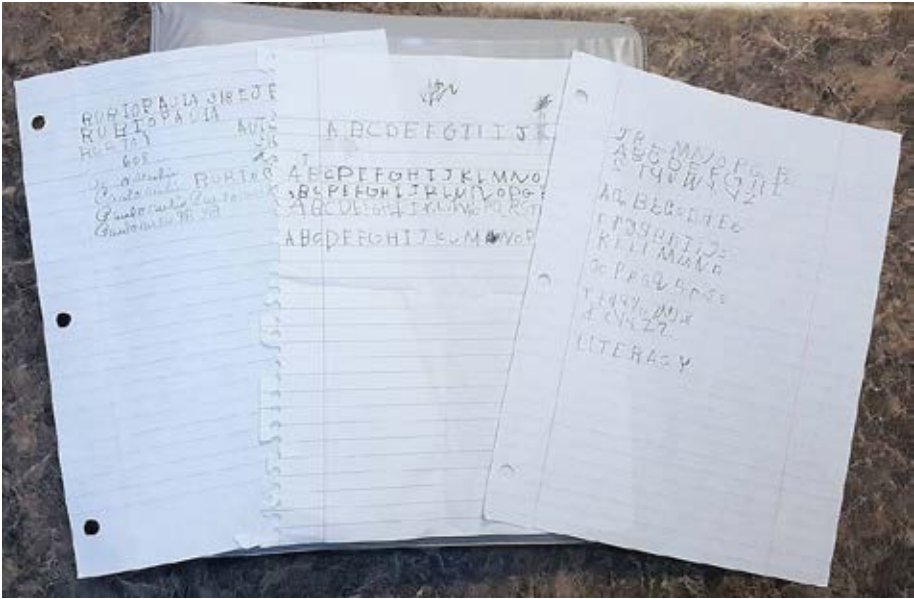


Figure 1. Grandma's Writing.

I can see Grandma at the mesa in her cocina, writing and reading in English and/or Spanish on loose-leaf papers, just as I can hear the recorder she used to practice listening to the English language. Memoria pushes me to listen in ways that create presence from the amalgam of absence and materials such as loose-leaf papers and photos. Grandma’s presence remains in the scribbles and erasures that culminate in that last word in her photos, LITERACY, while I embody her voice now as a literacy practitioner who has the opportunity to implicate others as she did me. The stories and memories of Grandma, from “X” as a signature to the word LITERACY, remain in an archive of feelings and memories that travels with me both physically and spiritually (Cvetkovich). It equips me with a language for understanding how I am the “Te lo dije” who emerged from stories of “no te dejes.”

As I think about the academic spaces I now occupy, I ponder what it would mean to re-center listening through storytelling and memory beyond the stories white folks tell in the academy. Community listening invites us to create presence from absence and sound from silence. How then might we embrace this, within a discipline that is overdetermined by a history that is both colonial and hierarchal, in ways that allow

us to listen to, provide room for, and speak and haunt back with the heterogeneity of specters (Derrida)? How might we enact community listening, within a field that will re-write itself as colonial, both to be answerable to (to respond and answer to) a call to responsibility, however ungraspable it might be, and a setting-to-work (Spivak)? These questions help me to define the parameters of community listening. Are we prepared in the academy though to listen in ways that depart from an extractive and foreclosing culture that has come to denominate responsibility and justice? Can we find solace both in acknowledging that not all knowledge can be archived and that community listening perhaps is inaccessible to some?

Creating Presence: A Praxis



Figure 2. Grandma's Holding Hands with My Tíos.

When I look at Figure 2—my tíos hand-in-hand with Grandma—I cannot help but think about how my subjectivity remains hand-in-hand with my family and home community. I think about Tío Chichi who, as he worked on cars, taught me about the capacious work involved in listening: listening without words. Before I left for college, Tío Nano argued that I needed to show them white folks I can open up a book, read it, and read myself into it as well: listening for specters that haunt. I think about the comadres who, on Wednesday afternoons during their weekly get-togethers for *plática* and prayer, told *cuentos* and *testimomios*: listening to remember and to speak

back; and I think about my home community, which despite its tragic historical and material conditions, remains hopeful for the possibilities of new stories: listening for the thinkable and possible. Then and now, community listening has reminded me of the importance of being—being with past selves, present others, and others not yet in existence (Derrida).

Whether in the sala or on our walks, Grandma would have me exercise listening when I got home after school. In one cuento she was a maid, y en el otro she was “illiterate.” No te dejes emerged within the stories she told in the form of an interruption of *así son las cosas*; this was her sense of urgency to communicate. “Abre tus oídos,” Grandma would say. Responsibility, then and now, meant listening to know and to learn. Through stories and memories, Grandma coalesced for me the words “no te dejes” and “*así no son las cosas*.” In her question, “¿Me estás escuchando?”—and in her interjection—“¡Entiendes!” she expounded for me her urgency for communicating: “Te digo esto para que sepas y aprendas.” Listening physically located and rhetorically situated a sense of urgency about what was at stake beyond the sala and our walks. What was at stake was accepting que *así son las cosas*. In pursuit of a platform for being heard and seen and affecting change, my Grandma implicated me into community listening so that I could know and learn how to be, see, and do in the world around me more responsibly and justly. This responsibility and justice recognized that the future remains indebted to the memories and people still denied presence and sound in the present.

By yoking listening and memory, community listening undertakes the difficult task of uniting the past, present, and future to and through stories of us and about us. Judy Rohrer writes, “We are the set of stories we tell ourselves, the stories that tell us, the stories others tell about us” (189). Undocumented literacies: I am the story of a grandma who came to the U.S. for a better life. Single-mother literacies: I am the story of a single mother who dropped out of high school and raised two kids. Prison literacies: I am the story of a father only known through pictures and letters who warned me not to be like him. Community literacies: I am the story of a people de los pueblitos del frontera, which, like the corridos about us, is set both in the context of a particular situación (a tragedy) and a vision of hope. We may come from and perform a history, time, and circumstance, pero pa’ los que saben, we are not contained by that position (Baldwin; Hall). Persisting to be heard and seen, we participate in the possibilities of new stories, for no stories are fixed. Pa’ los que saben, the possibility of new stories remains indebted to the heterogeneity of stories and memories of the people de los margenes.

I was raised to believe that stories, memories, and community listening allow us to connect with others beyond the physicality of presence. Even in death, there is the presence and sound of memories and others. Perhaps this is an example of what Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch mean by being open to meaningful possibilities (critical imagination), dialogues, and exchanges with people absent from our lives (strategic contemplation). Perhaps this kind of community listening is a means of making sense-and-meaning of, or in, in collaboration with those who use language with intention (social circulation). And here, once more, intention is evoked in the

context of listening for humanity in the stories and memories in-between cultures, times, and spaces. Beyond the purview of physical absence, working from traces of memories, I allow myself to reconnect the unrelenting precarity of spiritual affect upon my sense of orientation and practices of interpretation and engagement. Part of this practice is learning to be present with voices and memories (Fischer 44) and learning that there is no meaningful sense of my “self” in the absence of stories, memories, listening, and a politics of re-membling. This is what community listening is about.



Figure 3. The Old House.

My talks and walks with grandma were never unintentional. Grandma would take me to the old neighborhood and point to the house where she raised the family. I could see my family in the colonias, and I could hear Grandma teaching them, too, how to listen, to know, and to learn. Part of the rhetorical education she was inculcating me in was teaching me how to listen to and see more than the crumble of brick that lay on the ground. It was alright that I felt vulnerable, so long as I felt an obligation towards responsibility. Vulnerability stems from learning to know and finding solace in not being able to know, while responsibility involves acting on what can and cannot be understood. Community listening is dangerous, for it reaffirms both an inheritance and a principle of responsibility (O’Reilly). What was at stake for Grandma then was getting me to realize, and then actualize, that I could be that: “Te lo dije.” De memoria y en memoria, I suggest that listening and memory together are part of a

living and active process that connects me to a community, to a people, and to a place with a shared stake in being heard and seen for deliberative and expressive reasons: at the cusp of the possibilities of new stories. Community listening is dangerous, for it seeks, like the corridos sung in the LRGV, to hold all accountable and to carry on in the name of justice.

The Tension Between

The year 2018 marks ten years since my grandma passed. What I've tried to evidence here is how she was a rhetorical agent who sought to implicate me in a rhetoric of responsibility and justice through community listening. She pushed me to begin from a place of deliberative listening (to know and learn) so as to question as she did—*así no son las cosas*—and she called me to perform from a critical ethos—*no te dejes*—so as to see the possibilities of and for new stories. Grandma called and pushed me toward community listening. Today, I am reminded of the last chapter in *The House on Mango Street*. Esperanza, the narrator, says, “They will not know I have gone away to come back” (110). I continue to come back to the LRGV, physically and spiritually, because this is where my work is at. Esperanza continues, “I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much.” I write down my community's stories and memories to provide space for, to give back speech to, and to haunt back with specters. This is in the hope that I can bring some relief to their aches. However, I am quickly reminded, too, that perhaps the academy is not the space to do this work. While the field says it “listens,” it does so in ways that create absences and silences. Too often I have found a tension between community and academic listening. A call to responsibility and justice remains.

Krista Ratcliffe is correct: rhetorical listening is important. She describes it as a “trope for interpretive invention...as a code of cross-cultural conduct” (10). Ironically, the “unearned privilege and power” she critiques throughout her book, though, are reinforced by the idea that “[l]istening is rarely theorized or taught” (18). Ratcliffe's claim is itself a set of stories the field tells itself, stories about its history of listening, researching, and teaching. It is not the whole story. Stories reflect the places and positionalities of storytellers, and so many academic stories are the stories white folks tell each other, stories that echo traditions of savior or progress narratives. When Ratcliffe writes that we “need to introduce students” to rhetorical listening, she is retelling one kind of story (132). She is confirming a haunting. Ratcliffe is unable to escape her own privilege and power because positionality matters. We cannot simply stand outside “our own knowing,” as she suggests (105), nor simply eavesdrop on others. In this context of rhetorical listening we must wonder by whom is listening rarely theorized, and how might eavesdropping be in the service of Western teleology?

It matters how we listen. Ratcliffe is correct, “resistance is slippery” (137). There is already a tendency within our field to characterize minoritized and racialized communities as communities/sites of resistance simply in terms of resistance. When minoritized and racialized communities are seen through this lens, their rhetoric is oversimplified and cast as reactionary. It is concerning to observe the embodiment of

resistance as the new white privilege. Although Ratcliffe is working to critique whiteness, there is a performative whiteness at play in her arguments about the “need to introduce students” to rhetorical listening and eavesdropping: “a rhetorical tactic of purposely positioning oneself on the edge of one’s own knowing so as to overhear and learn from others” (105). Rhetorical eavesdropping is a simulacrum of whiteness, a “tactical,” but not ethical practice, akin to colonial gazing. The way Ratcliffe discusses rhetorical listening empowers white people to believe they can stand outside their positionality or identification within a dominant white culture. Community listening reminds us that while everyone is marked by gender and race, lived experience matters and informs both the “why” and “how” we enact cultural-rhetorics practices as community listening.

The tension between community and academic listening can often be observed within our classrooms. I remember a time when I was enrolled in a course in which the professor enacted a type of rhetorical listening that denied me a space from which to speak or to be heard. I state to the professor: “Professor, I am not sure I can agree with all you are saying.” The professor responds: “Do you mean to say Anzaldúa is wrong?” The problem with rhetorical listening as described by Ratcliffe, especially in the context of eavesdropping, is that it leaves the “other” on the other side of an already asymmetrical relationship. The professor felt that because they had read a book on the LRGV (*Borderlands/La Frontera*), they were an authority on all things border. The professor needed to represent me according to what their listening taught them, and the only way I could be “heard” was if I spoke in and on their terms. Then and now, academic or rhetorical listening is characteristically reflective of a colonial unconsciousness. Community listening, rather, encourages a type of responsibility and justice that does not function from the “right to speak” for (Alcoff) or to eavesdrop upon the subject, but rather from an understanding that students, while already shaped by language, are also shapers of language, discourse, and modalities of agency.

Some things are beyond the reaches of interpretation and certainty. How, then, shall we enact a politics of memory, one that does not fetishize “another” or recontextualize “another” beyond or above particularities and specificities? I believe the answer resides in stories, community listening, and the possibilities of new stories. It has occurred to me since entering writing and rhetorical studies that so much of what is at stake and lost in the desire to listen, identify, and recenter rhetorical praxis is a deeper and more robust understanding of how and why people such as my grandma use and practice listening or rhetoric. It wasn’t to produce antagonistic frameworks or to frame our people simply as reactionary. Community listening was about an inheritance, a reaffirmation of a debt, and imagining the possibilities of new stories in and with others.

My sense is that the greatest need for research and teaching is in taking community listening seriously. Might it be more productive to approach listening via the definition of friction as that which gets in the way of “smooth” hegemonic flows (Tsing 6)? In this way, we listen for an intersubjective place and body in the field of mediating relations. In this way, the interplay of stories-so-far (Massey) and possibilities of new stories (Rohrer) implicates us and demands that we renew our relationships

with one another in more humane ways. Friction plays out in the memories we don't want to remember, in the stories that propose "we are listening" or "you are being heard," and in those claims that "we didn't know." Friction, as Anna Tsing notes, is like the "fly in the elephant's nose" (6). Think of my Spanish, of community listening, throughout this conversation, as the fly in the ears of white folks. Consider this story told here as a reminder of a foundation of listening where it is not yet.

¿Dónde comenzamos? If, "One never inherits without coming to terms with some specter, and therefore with more than one specter" (Derrida 24), might we begin by acknowledging that we are all woven and entangled in constellations of stories, genealogies, ghosts, and hauntings? If all stories have "structural underpinnings and material consequences" (Rohrer 189), might we begin by telling other stories? What stories, then, will continue to be told, who will continue to tell them, and what kind of politics of memory and listening will be enacted? The possibilities of new stories reside in those questions that have yet to be answered.

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Romeo García is Assistant Professor in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric Studies at the University of Utah. His research emerges from work with local Mexican American, Latino, and Hispanic students in Texas and Utah. It considers how constructions of difference in the field impact our understanding of the literacy practices of students in our classrooms and the rhetorical communities in which they live. Romeo has authored "On the Cusp of Invisibility" and "Unmaking Gringo-Centers," co-edited *The Best of the Independent Rhetoric and Composition Journal Series*, and is co-editor of a forthcoming collection in the Studies in Writing and Rhetoric Series entitled, *Rhetorics Elsewhere and Otherwise: Contested Modernities, Decolonial Visions*.