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Writing to Listen: Why I Write Across Prison Walls

Wendy Wolters Hinshaw

Abstract

This essay describes a prison-university writing exchange that culminated in the collection of audio and written essays “Why I Write” (<http://www.why-i-write.com>) and offers “writing to listen” as a strategy for communicating and listening across institutional and social boundaries. I argue that sound reveals the material conditions of speaking and writing; in our writing exchange, it reduced the anonymity at the heart of the project while also revealing the places and sounds that shape us as writers. I suggest that writing to listen also provides a framework for community listening that is inclusive of the many additional, intentional actions involved in making sure all participants in a partnership are being heard.

I write to become a better human being, to self-realize and actualize, to turn my table Technicolor and to paint the skies rubber. I've got some imagination, and with a little patience I can demonstrate the thoughts that led me to those cages.

—Casper, “Why I Write”

In her foundational essay, “When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own,” Jacqueline Jones Royster recommits composition researchers and teachers to the centrality of subject position as “everything,” and challenges us to theorize and practice cross-boundary understanding (29). For Royster, the struggle to communicate about and across difference is fundamentally a problem of listening:

How do we listen? How do we demonstrate that we honor and respect the person talking and what the 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? How do we really ‘talk back’ rather than talk also? The goal is not, ‘You talk, I talk.’ The goal is better practices so that we can exchange perspectives, negotiate meaning, and create understanding with the intent of being in a good position to cooperate, when, like now, cooperation is absolutely necessary. (38)

Royster’s call was a watershed for feminist theories of listening. Krista Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening and Cheryl Glenn’s theory of rhetorical silence both responded to Royster’s call, and have since become foundational concepts for feminist rhetorical theory, historiography, pedagogy, and praxis. Rhetorical silence and listening addressed a lacuna in contemporary rhetoric and composition studies in which

“reading and writing reign as the dominant tropes for interpretive invention,” and silence and listening are largely naturalized or overlooked, even in scholarship on speaking and voice (Ratcliffe 32). Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening, which she defines as “the performance of a person’s conscious choice to assume an open stance in relation to any person, text, or culture,” prioritizes communication and cross-cultural exchange over persuasion, and proposes conscious identifications and intentional listening as means for communicating across difference (Ratcliffe 26). By foregrounding strategies of understanding and accountability, and situating claims within cultural logics, rhetorical listening situates subjects as responsible for, and accountable to, themselves and others. Rhetorical listening calls our attention to the ways in which culturally constructed boundaries of difference shape our speaking and listening practices, and also provides strategies for engaging in cross-boundary communication, strategies which I will suggest can provide a model for cross-boundary community writing partnerships.

In Spring 2016, I led a class of undergraduate English majors at Florida Atlantic University in a writing exchange with a class of writers at a South Florida prison. Our partnership was facilitated by Exchange for Change, an organization that teaches writing in South Florida prisons and facilitates anonymous writing exchanges between prisons, universities, and high schools. The exchange culminated in a website of collected audio and written essays titled “Why I Write” (<http://www.why-i-write.com>) and provided a framework for a broader investigation into how we know what we know about incarceration in the United States: how we represent incarceration, how we learn to associate crime with punishment, and how mass incarceration became normalized.

In a class built around a dialogue between university students and writers in prison, writing took center stage, not just as the only means for communication between the two groups of students, but also as a site for analyzing how we form ourselves through writing. Through each of our exchanges and throughout the course, students on both sides of the razor wire thought about what writing meant to them, how writing shaped them, and how they used writing in their lives. Silence and listening had served as important tools in my analyses of prison art and writing in the past (Hinsaw “Identifying”), and they continued to provide my students and me with productive ways for thinking about the elements most immediately apparent to us—in texts we encounter or in our own writing—as well as the absences that we are left to listen into. As I began this exchange class, I knew that silence and listening were key rhetorical concepts that would shape our analyses and our writing, but it was only after the class had ended that I realized how much silence and listening shaped the ethics and practices of our writing exchange: Listening played a crucial part in our writing exchanges, not just as the receiving end of conversation, but as a practice for situating ourselves within our partnership and identifying the different social, cultural, and institutional contexts from which we entered it. The exchange worked to shift how--and whether--we identify ourselves within systems and conditions of criminal injustice. Our final audio project extended these re-identifications to a public audience, and it also broadened the written and sonic modes with which we composed. Together, our

writing exchange and its culminating audio project attempted to intervene in rhetorics and ideologies of incarceration. They also helped me better understand listening as a rhetorical strategy we can employ in response to mass incarceration, as well as a practice we can use to support our community partnerships.

In the following essay I describe how “writing to listen” emerged in this community writing partnership, and I offer it as a strategy for communicating and listening across institutional and social boundaries. Building on Ratcliffe’s concept of “rhetorical listening,” I argue that sound and listening provide essential avenues for expression and learning, and I explore the relation between listening, writing, and learning created first through the students’ written exchanges and then through the public advocacy of their audio essays. Sound reveals the material conditions of speaking and writing; in our exchange it reduced the anonymity at the heart of the project while also revealing the places and sounds that shape us as writers. Sound’s materiality, the presence and vulnerability of voice, and the weight of silence each help us think further about the cross-boundary dialogues we engage in community writing partnerships.

The writing to listen strategies that we used in our exchange emerge from Exchange for Change’s methods as an organization, as well as a tradition of feminist rhetorical methods of strategic contemplation, critical listening, and social circulation, as theorized by Royster and Gesa Kirsch. Together they challenge researchers to “find innovative ways to engage and exchange” and to “listen more carefully to the voices (and texts) that they study, to critique our analytical assumptions and frames, to critique guiding questions reflectively and reflexively” (14). The importance of their call is particularly clear in the context of community writing. All community partnerships are practices in listening in that they situate partners as “responsible for and accountable to” themselves and each other, and they rely on communication to accomplish separate and shared purposes. Those partnerships involving writing can particularly make visible the challenge and necessity of listening across boundaries.

Our writing exchange wasn’t perfect, as no community partnership is, and in this essay I reflect on our successes as well as the missed opportunities that will shape my future practices. However, I also argue that writing to listen can be a strategy for shifting identifications and subjectivities formed by an ever-present prison industrial complex and the enduring faulty logic of crime and punishment “designed to maintain a racial caste system” (M. Alexander 3). Students in the exchange were asked to explore issues of social justice, mass incarceration, and inequity in the criminal justice system, and to consider how we think about and form identities in relation to these issues. By identifying each other as writers, they were also provided a means for forming and recognizing new identities. As our field continues to navigate difficulties in cross-boundary communication, I suggest that writing to listen helps teachers and practitioners of community writing tune to the material conditions of speaking and writing, and that it also provides a framework for thinking more broadly about community listening and the intentional actions involved in making sure all participants in a partnership are being heard.

Exchange for Change

I am a founding board member of Exchange for Change, which was formed in 2014 by journalist and author Kathie Klarreich. Exchange for Change provides writing programs inside South Florida prisons and transitional institutions, brings writing from the inside to public and community audiences, and facilitates writing exchanges between writers on the inside and students in university and high school classes. The organization's practices are informed by the history of prison education, particularly scholarship in prison writing, and the methods developed by our field for facilitating prison writing programs and prison-university partnerships. Programs such as the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program developed by Lori Pompa, the Prison Creative Arts Project developed by Buzz Alexander, and the Speak Out! program developed by Tobi Jacobi provide models for facilitating prison-university partnerships and prison writing programs.¹ For Exchange for Change, writing is a means for individual and social change. While the organization operates under no illusions and harbors no cultural myths about literacy itself as a change agent, they understand the power in telling and hearing a story as well as the particular importance of storytelling exchanges in the context of structural conditions that perpetuate misinformation about the criminal justice system, the experience of incarceration, and educational access in America. Angela Davis has argued that “[p]risons are constituted as ‘normal.’ It takes a lot of work to persuade people to think beyond the bars, and to be able to imagine a world without prisons and to struggle for the abolition of imprisonment as the dominant mode of punishment” (100). Exchange for Change (and I) believe that the work of decarceration requires collaboration across the razor wire: to undo the ideology of prisons we have to reimagine the people and communities shattered by the prison industrial complex, and we must unlearn the criminalization of race, poverty, mental illness, and substance abuse that have served to justify it. Exchange for Change provides creative and critical literacy opportunities for writers inside prison that counter the dearth of programs and resources otherwise available to them. It promotes writing by prisoners to outside audiences, breaking down stereotypes and public perceptions of people in prison through its classroom exchanges and public circulation of writing by people in prison, and working to undo the fictive links between “crime and punishment” that form the basis of our current carceral assumptions.

This partnership was organized around three anonymous writing exchanges between undergraduate university students in a class focused on “Rhetorics of Incarceration,” and students in an advanced creative writing class offered by Exchange for Change at a close security men’s prison. The partnering prison class had its own facilitator, and both classes had assignments separate from their exchange. University students completed readings and assignments that weren’t given to the students in the prison, and students in the prison completed creative writing assignments related to their class. In this way, the writing exchange served as an avenue for consistent connection throughout the students’ separate and shared reading and writing assignments.

The two groups of students began from numerous places of obvious division: the first group consisted of mostly traditionally aged college students completing a

course as part of their undergraduate degree. The students were racially, ethnically, and economically diverse, but they shared many expectations: of passively receiving teacher-directed learning; of writing for assessment; of academic writing as analytical, critical, and largely depersonalized; and of university-community partnerships as primarily oriented toward service *to* the community rather than service or learning *from* the community. Roughly eighty miles away, the second group of students was also racially and ethnically diverse, but they were more diverse in age and more uniform in gender and in the actual blue uniforms they wear to class. They were also unified by their shared position in a prison-state economy that provides minimal access to vocational education and no access to higher education, while requiring inmates to work without pay and purchase basic goods from an over-priced commissary system with funds provided by friends and family on the outside. All students used pseudonyms in all of their writing as per the agreement Exchange for Change makes with the prisons and schools they partner with. No one's real names are ever revealed, and no one can communicate with their exchange partners after the class is over. This policy was created initially to allay concerns for protecting outside students, particularly high school students; however, the pseudonyms add to the rhetorical agency and privacy the inside writers have in their exchanges. Unlike a traditional Inside-Out program or other face-to-face prison-university partnership, the outside students have no more access to information about their partners than the inside students do. Neither can search for information about their partners on the internet or locate them after the exchange is over.

I regularly teach university classes that partner with classes in prison and attend classes and celebrations in prison, but I do not currently facilitate "inside" classes of my own. The partnering facilitator and I send our students' writing to each other electronically. Although our students never meet in person, the facilitator will typically meet my students through a class visit or video-call, and I typically visit the partnering class several times a semester. My dual positions in Exchange for Change and in my university classroom provide me with opportunities to examine my teaching, my organization, and our partnership from multiple angles. From these vantage points, I am able to see how listening helped students engage across deep social and institutional boundaries, and also how these and other practices align Exchange for Change with feminist rhetorical methods for "rescuing, recovering, or reinscribing" rhetors and rhetorical practices previously overlooked (Royster and Kirsch 14). I can see how the publication of "Why I Write" and other Exchange for Change writing projects similarly engage strategies of "social circulation" that Royster and Kirsch identify. I argue that our writing exchange demonstrates these feminist rhetorical methods in action and offers writing to listen as a feminist rhetorical practice for enacting rhetorical listening and community listening. In our exchange, writing to listen provided a means for noticing, visualizing identifications that had previously gone unnoticed, creating a stance of openness from which to listen to experiences and identifications arising from different standpoints, and examining the power differentials that shape them.

Why I Write

For their first assignment, students composed and exchanged a “Why I Write” essay through a three-step exchange with their writing partners. The assignment encouraged students to examine the role of writing and literacy in their lives, and to begin to develop writing identities and identifications that could supplant previous ways of knowing and foster new ones. “Outside” (university) students struggled at first to explain why they write. They struggled to see themselves as writers (“I’m not a creative writer” [Student A]), recalling the difficulty of owning their writing and finding purpose in it (“At first, I didn’t really have a reason to why I wrote, I just did it to fill requirements” [Student B]), and they discussed the challenge of expressing themselves through writing (“I hate writing. It’s stressful and time consuming. It keeps me up at odd hours with its incessant questions” [Student C]). They found common ground with writers on the “inside,” who also found solace, escape, comfort, and creative satisfaction (as well as frustration) through writing. Two inside writers claimed, “I write because it’s natural” (Student D) and “I write because I was in love with words before I even knew it” (Student E), and their outside partners connected with them over a shared early love of language and the faith in writing as a way to think through and express one’s ideas.

As students on both sides wrote, they revealed glimpses of themselves—fears, past struggles, changes they are wrestling with—and their exchange partners listened for common ground. Their desire to identify was strong, and students, particularly those on the outside, reached to establish lines of identification that would help get past the discomfort of distance (“I agree with the point you made that writing is a ‘healthy, creative outlet’”). And yet, writing also offered us a space for careful listening to how writing shapes us, similarly and differently. One outside student responded to their inside partner, “You said that school was never your top priority and so this is new to you. I never cared much about school until college so I can kind of relate to that” (Student G), and students in both classes discussed the different relationships they had to school, their experiences as students, and the different ways school has shaped their relationships to writing.

We built on these skills of listening through writing as both classes read *A Question of Freedom* and *Bastards of the Reagan Era* by Reginald Dwayne Betts. Writers on both sides struggled with their identification with, as well as their division from, the experiences Betts recounts in his memoir of his incarceration. One inside student wrote, “for my fellow brothers in blue, Betts is just a harsh reminder that they won’t get out” (Student H). Others agreed, finding Betts’ memoir a painful and unnecessary reminder of their own experiences: “Maybe this stuff is interesting to someone who grew up in civilized communities, and who doesn’t have the scars from what the language in this literature talks about. Every page I turn opens another wound, and I’m expected to given [sic] an intellectual breakdown of it” (Student I). As students on the inside struggled to make meaning beyond their identification, students on the outside struggled to “relate.” Part of the outside class discussion became fixated on why Betts committed the crime (armed carjacking) that sent him to prison for almost a decade at the age of 16. In a society that makes crime and conviction exceedingly public but

keeps the experience of punishment largely secret, it is perhaps not surprising that some outside students demanded to know more about Betts' crime. They wanted to understand *why* Betts committed his crime and, even after reading his memoir, felt unsatisfied with his answer:

Its [sic] frustrating because [Betts] spends so much time in sharing with us about "himself", that it seems as if he's being dishonest in not sharing with us these earlier parts in the history of his crime. As a result of this the book remains decidedly un-relatable, offering up a unique experience that few and far between can connect with and understand. (Student J)

But the discomfort that comes from not knowing—or not feeling like one has been sufficiently informed—became an occasion for rhetorical listening. This student's inside partner wrote back, "It is easy to form an opinion without experience, or pretend to know or feel someone's guilt, shame and pain, which is what I believe you have done." He continued:

Betts gives an honest outlook when he writes, "I don't know" about committing his crime. And if you ask men in here why they did what they did, they will tell you the same... "I don't know." Some just feel like it was something they just had to do even though they didn't have to. I suppose some do it to be accepted, to earn their stripes, following footsteps leading to graveyards or prisons. For many young black and Latino males it's RIP either way, rest in peace or rest in prison. [...] You wanted him to be more open about certain events. I believe if it wasn't in his memoir, then it was none of our business. Nevertheless, he painted a vivid picture of how the justice and prison system operate. (Student K)

This was a crucial moment of disagreement and engagement between the two writers, one who insisted that Betts hadn't sufficiently explained why he committed his crime, and another who insisted on the limitations of this question. Ratcliffe argues that rhetorical listening "enables the kind of conscious navigation of identifications and non-identification that may make conscious identifications across difference possible"—the operative word, of course, being *may*:

Because non-identification is a place that assumes the existence of both commonalities and differences, it provides a place for listening rhetorically across both... This simultaneous focus on commonalities and differences challenges a rhetorical listener to be accountable for diverse points of views and to factor these views into her or his thinking—or to choose not to. (75)

The inside writer urged his exchange partner to listen for the myriad ways in which Betts answers and at the same time refuses to answer a question that we are taught to believe matters above all else: What did he do and why did he do it? Rhetorical listening didn't resolve the differences between the two students, but in this moment, rhetorical listening and writing to listen helped us preserve—rather than anxiously try to cover over or fix—positions of difference, and to examine how we ended up in these different positions.

Students in both classes eventually came back to Betts as a writer. They worked, as Betts has, to distinguish his success after prison from a “prison success story,” to find inspiration in his accomplishments while still acknowledging the barriers that he faced and was fortunate to be able to overcome. One outside student, when challenged by their inside partner to identify what in *A Question of Freedom* could be inspirational to someone already incarcerated, expressed hope that Betts’ writing and others like it will continue to inform and shift the perspectives of readers on the outside:

Betts is one of (hopefully) many authors building the bridge that closes the gap between prisons and the outside world. There are myths surrounding what happens behind the walls that surround you, and now the public has access to either break these myths or reinforce their validity. (Student L)

Outside students looked to Betts and their exchange partners as guides to a world they would otherwise not know, and they built critiques of that world based on what they learned. One student commented, “With a system that, by default, values your number over your name, I can see how easily [sic] it would be to lose yourself to dreary and monotonous routine” (Student M). Inside students responded, translating the experience of incarceration to their outside partners, and showing how our deeply ingrained beliefs in “paying your debt to society” eventually punish families and communities:

They shame you and dehumanize you upon entering. Ship you hundreds of miles away from family. The price of collect calls and the process to be able to get a number approved is ridiculous. The canteen prices are outrageously inflated. I understand I messed up my life, I get it. But why is the family forced to be taxed on every corner. Burdens on top of burdens. I don’t come from a family of criminals, so why do they get treated as such? (Student K)

In this way writers on both sides of the exchange were asked to listen, learn from each other, and account for their beliefs and what they know. In his foundational essay on prison-university writing exchanges, Tom Kerr writes:

It is one thing to read an anthologized personal account of prison life or of experiences leading up to prison, yet quite another to be addressed by name and to have one’s own questions taken up thoughtfully by currently incarcerated people. It is the difference between disembodied, relatively risk-free ‘academic’ discourse, and embodied, personal dialogue that carries with it possibilities and risks connected to any human involvement. (67)

The continued dialogue produced through the exchange was meaningful for both sets of students, but it was particularly significant for outside students, who were given the opportunity to work through their beliefs about the criminal justice system as well as the responsibility to account for them. One outside student wrote, “[W]e get a certain kind of idea about prison life through media and movies, which is not completely true. I have come to realize that the violence depicted in the movies and media is true, but that people in that environment are left without the attention needed to

tell their story” (Student A). Through the exchange, students on both sides started to better understand their own beliefs, examine the sources and assumptions underlying those beliefs, and reach out to each other in an attempt to learn more.

Speaking to be heard

For their final project students revised their “Why I Write” essays into audio essays for public audiences. To prepare, students studied examples from “This I Believe,” a radio series hosted by Edward R. Murrow in the 1950s that was reprised on NPR from 2005 to 2014 and now continues as a weekly podcast. In both the original and more recent iterations, the series featured brief essays from cultural and political figures as well as everyday individuals about their core beliefs. The online collection contains essays from the entire history of the project as well as the ongoing podcast, offering a rich archive of brief, persuasive written and audio essays in which speakers describe a belief that is personal and significant to them. In this case, the essays provided my students with models for retooling their “Why I Write” essays into briefer, more focused statements about writing in their lives. As students read and listened to “This I Believe” essays, they analyzed genre conventions along with the different styles, tones, and approaches contributors adopted, and they gained ideas about how they, too, could address a public audience. Thus, revising their previous essays was a practice in recursivity in response to new, public audiences. Students reflected anew on their writing lives, explored writing’s promise or pushed back against its burden alongside other writers, and the unfamiliar task of the audio essay further unified them as a writing community.

Interacting through sound made students better listeners. Until this assignment, “writing to listen” had given us an ear to the material conditions that shape our writing practices but had left us listening without actual sound. The audio essays gave the students their first opportunity to hear each other’s voices. As Comstock and Hocks argue, “When students begin to hear their own voices and the voices of others in different ways and contexts, they develop a stronger, more embodied sense of the power of language, of literacy, and of communication in general.” Students in both classes reacted as voices aligned—or failed to align—with the voice they had previously experienced only on the page. Inside students were surprised when expectations of gender or age were dispelled by the voice of their exchange partner. Outside students heard writing come alive from those inside partners more comfortable with a microphone than a pen. And again, inside writers had an upper hand: several were dedicated spoken word poets and rappers, and confidently embraced the element of performance that the audio essay introduced. Outside and inside students alike were at first intimidated, and then inspired to explore new forms and styles.

Writers in both classes had already learned to tune their ears to the silences and disclosures revealed on the page; the audio essay introduced a new mode of listening that allowed students to become more aware of each other as audiences. Sound made our conversations less anonymous as the privilege of the written exchange made room for the sonic environments that had housed it. Listening to each other’s

surroundings and examining our own, students in both classes built “sonic literacies,” defined by Comstock and Hocks as “a critical process of listening to and creating embodied knowledge, of understanding our soundscapes as cultural artifacts, of achieving resonance with particular audiences.” However, our sonic literacies were also limited by our focus on the voice of the speaker/author. In creating our audio essays, I guided the students in traditional recording principles that sought to minimize background noise. Of course, outside students could exercise greater control over where and how they made their recordings, and so the presence of background noise became an immediate identifier of inside versus outside essays. Outside students recorded their essays on their phones, or occasionally used an audio recorder they checked out from me, and they were able to choose the time and place of their recordings to minimize other contributing sounds. In contrast, inside students took turns recording in a storage closet during my class visits. Their voices bounced against the cement and tile, and they could not escape sounds of the restroom on the adjoining wall, the voices of students entering and leaving the classroom, or the voices of the corrections officers who entered for repeated inmate counts. Back in the university class, we used minimal audio editing to further quiet backgrounds and amplify speakers. In hindsight, it became clear to me that our privileging of voice over background allowed outside students to neutralize their composing environments in ways that were unavailable to their inside partners, and in doing so, made the materiality of these sites harder to hear.

The audio essays amplified all of the students’ voices, including voices otherwise kept behind cement walls, and so any effort—such as minimizing background noise—to make those voices clearer serves a larger goal of making incarcerated voices heard. And yet, removing background noise also mutes the conditions of incarceration, and, as Jonathan Alexander argues, “elides the specificity of embodied experiences and somatic contexts—contexts through and out of which particular sounds and voices are made, heard, and understood” (78). Such edits risk privileging identity and voice as prior to—rather than produced within—specific contexts of speaking and listening. Although our focus on speaking left us with loud, clear statements about writing and how it connected the students in the two classes, it also interfered with our ability to fully share our sonic environments. Comstock and Hocks argue that “listening is an art, a conscious process of observing and defining sound. And like the art of writing, it is affected by one’s place in, and knowledge of, a particular sonic environment as much as one’s previous experience with sonic forms.” In other words, the sounds of a place and space orient us, teach us and help us connect; removing these sounds makes hearing easier but listening harder. The next time I do this kind of exchange, I’ll encourage students to approach noise more rhetorically, and to think about what both fore- and background noise communicates to an audience. This doesn’t resolve the different choices and access available to the two classes, but it does replace a presumed goal of quieting background noise with a question: What of background noise and our desire to minimize it? How do such decisions about sound help us define a subject in contrast to their surroundings, and how do such choices mute/erase the conditions surrounding that subject?

Across production differences, both inside and outside students developed their final audio essays with increased awareness of voice, sound, and audience, all familiar focal points in multimodal writing instruction. As Comstock and Hocks note, audio composing in particular invites students to demonstrate “a closer attentiveness [than traditional composing] to how [their] words and sentence structures resonate with their own voices and their chosen audiences, and as a result, produce better texts with more awareness of the emotional impact of tone and style.” As students composed and revised their audio essays, they shared feedback and suggestions across our two classrooms. Even though outside students had more opportunity for re-recording and editing, they collaborated with inside students in shaping the sound and content of the final essays. I took responsibility for editing the inside students’ audio essays, a missed opportunity for further collaboration and responsibility for outside students that I will better plan next time. However, in reading and hearing each other’s essays, the students were able to give and receive feedback, revise, start over, and understand more clearly the iterative process of composing in multiple modes for diverse audiences.

As students reflected on the roles of writing in their lives, including their motives for writing as well as the social and institutional conditions that shape how they write, they also invoked rhetorical silences, the counterpart to rhetorical listening, to negotiate with the audiences and conditions for listening that their essays would encounter. So, for example, when Loner (published on the website) writes that, “The answer, why I write, would expose a lot about me, and honestly, I’m not ready to stand naked for all to see,” his writing enacts a refusal to write, a strategic silence within conditions that persistently ask prisoners to relinquish all privacy, to account for and prove their worth and humanity from within a context designed to negate it. The rhetorical situatedness that frames Loner’s articulated silence also creates a context for listening to Naomi Black (also on the website), who writes “To be honest, when this essay was first introduced to this class, I was annoyed to even think about why I write. Writing has always been my escape, my way to release my pent up thoughts. Needless to say, thinking about why I write wasn’t something I was keen on doing.” Here, Black uses the opportunity to write about not wanting to write, another kind of silence. We can also see these silences as engaging Royster and Kirsch’s feminist rhetorical practice of strategic contemplation, which involves deliberately creating space to engage in dialogue and exchange with our rhetorical subjects, even if only imaginatively, in order to understand their words, their visions, their priorities, as well as recognizing and learning to listen to silences. As rhetorical and analytical practices, these strategic contemplations offer Loner and Black (among others) a space for considering how writing enables risk, encourages trust, and recenters their identities along with their humanity. In other words, they show how writing reveals us, and through writing we cover, uncover, and recover.

Community Listening

The 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. In “Toward a Rhetoric of Self-Representation,” Ellen Cushman invokes rhetorical listening as imperative for cross-cultural understanding and extends it to community research. She distinguishes between self-identification as a legal status, and self-representation as demonstrating commitment and kinship with the community. For Cushman, a rhetoric of self-representation is first and foremost concerned with Native scholars navigating identity politics, identity proof, and ethics in working and identifying with Native communities. However, Cushman is also responding to “Royster’s call for ethical action and social responsibility” (Cushman 357). She helps us think more broadly about how we form our identities in relation to the communities we identify with, work in, and partner with; how we make our practices of identity formation explicit to ourselves and others; and how we hold ourselves responsible to the identities we self-represent. As Cushman incorporates rhetorical listening into her theory, it’s worth noting that she is utilizing Ratcliffe’s conceptualization from her original essay, in which she defines rhetorical listening as “proceeding from a *responsibility* logic” (“Rhetorical Listening” 204). In her later book, Ratcliffe changes this phrase to an *accountability* logic, explaining in the notes that “after thinking about the resonances of *responsibility*, I decided to shift the term here because, in popular usage, *responsibility* resonates a little too closely to guilt and blame” (*Rhetorical Listening* 191). Cushman, however, emphasizes responsibility in thinking about community relationships and reciprocity, arguing that proceeding from within a “*responsibility* logic” supports “an ethic of reciprocity between scholars and their communities” (327). Ratcliffe’s shift to accountability shows how feelings of guilt and blame can risk shutting down communication in cross-boundary discourse, even as Cushman’s use of responsibility reminds us that reciprocity in community partnerships is established by building trust and being responsible to the community’s needs and concerns. Certainly, both formulations help us think further about the applications of rhetorical listening, but Cushman’s emphasis on responsibility makes explicit the element of trust in community listening. Her emphasis also helps us think about how university partners can listen to better hear the needs of community partners, while members of community organizations can listen to better discern the needs of their own constituents in forming such partnerships.

Community listening practices in our exchange arose from students’ multiple sites of responsibility—to each other, to their classes, and to our connecting organization. Students were accountable to their writing exchange partners and responsible for responding to the writing shared with them. Both sets of students respected the privacy of our class, agreeing to share their writing with other members of the class but not with peers outside. Students also learned the needs of Exchange for Change as an organization, and the extent to which their ability to serve their students and continue their programs depends on maintaining a good standing with the Department of Corrections. Exchange for Change facilitators and inside students know this well: all program materials are subject to approval, student writing and reading materials can be

reviewed or confiscated, the facilitator can be denied admission to the prison at any time and without warning. Writing programs like Exchange for Change are a privilege granted by the Department of Corrections, and they can be taken away at any time. Students on the outside learned from their exchanges as well as readings and class discussions how arbitrarily privileges and punishments are granted in prison. Students learned how their own actions--such as inclusion of contraband information in their responses, or otherwise not following Exchange for Change's policies--could jeopardize our partnership and even the Exchange for Change program as a whole.

Community listening also means recognizing our limitations, the barriers to listening created by each of our subject positions. As Eli Goldblatt observes in conversation with his community partners Manuel Portillo and Mark Lyons, "[O]ne problematic element of university/community partnerships is that participants can too easily assume they understand one another" (60). Assuming understanding ultimately derives from a failure to identify our own subject positions and results in concomitant denial of difference. Eliding difference in the service of common ground can facilitate communication temporarily, but sustained and meaningful understanding depends on intentional listening and conscious identifications. Our exchange was built around an examination of difference, with goals similar to those of Lori Pompa's Inside-Out project, from which Exchange for Change draws inspiration and practices: a "deeply transformative experience" in which "[a]ssumptions are debunked... worldviews are shattered... and participants begin to look at themselves, their lives, and the world in whole new ways" (132). In other words, the goal was for students to break down "assumed understandings" and previous ways of knowing, and to build conscious identifications with their exchange partners and with broader critiques of the criminal justice system. These are the beginning moves of building solidarity between the two classes, though admittedly the feelings of identification and solidarity created in outside students were sometimes limited. One outside student wrote in their final exchange letter:

For me it's the sad state of our country, and eventually it works its way out of my mind and I forget about those injustices occurring minutely. But for you and others on your side of the fence, reading Betts' story isn't something so easily forgotten, because it's a reminder of a place that you're constantly striving to forget. It's a reminder of the injustices plaguing lives all around you, and it's a reminder of how bad things need to be changed. (Student J)

This student shows an increased understanding of the position and experiences of people in prison, but unfortunately also locates the problem there, with those "on your side of the fence." The solution sounds just as far off, as the student shows a growing awareness of "how bad things need to be changed" but demonstrates little recognition of their own responsibility to participate in such change. At the same time, the student does seem aware of their privilege, which allows them to "forget about those injustices occurring minutely."

Tom Kerr cautions that his "students' views [of incarceration and the US criminal justice system] were not magically transformed by inmates' letters," but still "their

expressed feelings and attitudes toward prisoners changed significantly upon hearing their human voices” (74). Many students attested to this kind of experience in their final exchange letters: “After reading everyone’s reflections I believe even more in the good this class creates. The reflections brought tears to my eyes on numerous accounts. I would go as far to say that even if this class doesn’t bring mass recognition to prisons and prisoners it at least can touch some lives as it has mine” (Student G). Others reflected on the impact:

What has this class done for me? It has made me more empathetic, it has made me think outside of myself, and it has made me consider how lucky some of us really are. We’re all human here, and we all have something unique to say, no matter how cliché that sounds. Everyone has a flame inside of them. It’s just the world makes some people burn brighter than others. I’ve been given many do-overs, second chances and close calls, which I can only attribute to a serious degree of luck. The change that is needed in this country has to be immense. Instead of branding people “criminals,” “felons,” and “dangerous,” we need to look at why people do the things that they do. Jail should be a place for actual rehabilitation, a place of love and consideration. If we just lock people up with no forward solution in mind, hate is going to breed hate. The opposite of that is love for your fellow man. Lifting people up, instead of shooting them down, is a lot harder. (Student M)

Other students reflected on how the class shaped their understanding of themselves as writers, considered the possibilities for change sparked by their own increased awareness of inequity in the criminal justice system, and even became involved in opportunities for action introduced to them during the class (i.e., transcribing for the American Prison Writing Archive, becoming involved in prison activist organizations, volunteering with Exchange for Change).

Even though not all of my students’ identifications were transformed through their participation in the exchange, their collaborative “Why I Write” collection forwards Exchange for Change’s mission of making writing by people in prison public, and creating public dialogue about incarceration that includes the voices of incarcerated people. As Royster and Kirsch have shown, the social circulations of feminist work have great influence on its rhetorical reception and ideological potential. As part of this feminist work, prison writing must be circulated among and across individual, institutional, and public contexts in order to fully engage writers (and readers) in public conversations about incarceration. I suggest that the affordances of sound, listening, and writing must all contribute to such circulation, and I offer writing to listen as both rhetorical strategy and community practice to facilitate such work.

As an organization, Exchange for Change is primarily engaged with public and community audiences, as well as audiences and stakeholders within the criminal justice system, and thus, it is actively involved in the struggle for “cross-boundary discourse” to which Royster called our attention. Exchange for Change is teaching us how to listen not only through its exchanges but also by making at least some of them public, and their exhibits and publications make it possible for us to listen to incarcerated writers from whom we otherwise would not hear.

The “Why I Write” website collection of essays shifts our most habitual question about crime—why did they do it?—and replaces it with a question about writing. The well-known prompt taps into public discourses about writing, in particular NCTE’s use of the same prompt to “recognize and celebrate” writing. In this way, the collection joins the missions of social justice and public writing, doing so with a question that grounds identity in writing. On the “Why I Write” website, the only words present are the words of the writers. The collection combines equal numbers of inside and outside pieces, and the writers are identified through their pseudonyms, making it harder to tell, at least initially, which side of the razor wire the pieces originate from. This visualization also represents the goals of the exchange class: joining two classes through the process of exchange, integrating the students through writing and dialogue in the hopes of creating conversations and learning that are only possible through this kind of partnership. By foregrounding listening as a means for identification and understanding, this collection and other Exchange for Change exhibits build community through listening, through teaching public audiences “who can speak, who must remain silent, who listens, and what those listeners can do” (Glenn 9).

Note

1. For further discussion of Exchange for Change program history and the methods and practices that inform it see Hinshaw and Klarreich; Rogers et al; Hinshaw and Jacobi.

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