

Community Listening: Stories, Hauntings, Possibilities

Edited by Jenn Fishman, Romeo García, and Lauren Rosenberg

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We are our stories. We harvest our personal narratives from our cultural histories. We plant our futures in the soil of the micro, macro, and meso narratives we hear shouted and whispered about our situational limits and potentials. In Jenn Fishman, Romeo García, and Lauren Rosenberg's *Community Listening: Stories, Hauntings, Possibilities*, the editors and authors acknowledge the transformational power of equitable collective listening, or community listening, in human meaning/story making.

A definition of community listening that includes every facet explored by the contributors in this collection does not yet exist because the editors listened carefully to their authors' ideas and granted wide rhetorical spaces to explore how deep listening can create comprehensive transformation. This collection of ten chapters range from scholarship centering academic listening of Aryan Nations' texts to experiments in community listening to create bipartisan agreements; however, the unifying imbrication appears in the way authors entangle ways of "knowing individually and collectively, past and recent, and how those ways weave together and change through the listening practices" all to explore "what listening means and how it can be used and understood, now and in the future" (23).

While each chapter uses different lenses, different definitions and/or terms, and different results of community listening, each contributor agrees that community listening—in all its varieties—inevitably produces two more questions for every one answer unearthed. They also agree that open ears pry open the hearts and minds of the listeners and the people being truly heard. Each chapter concludes that listening is only a starting point; actions (or inactions) must follow, but those actions center on acknowledging that listening weaves together independence with dependence and interdependence.

The book is written for anyone who seeks meaning, not necessarily "disciplines of the university," but for anyone who has ears and wants to hear others to create relationships built on an ethos of care that includes curiosity, concern, and responsibility (4). Community organizers, activists, politicians, advocates for vulnerable populations, and any student of humanity will benefit from approaches using collective listening as a form of deeper understanding. This collection can gently push (or shove) readers out of their complacency to ponder what it could mean to listen with,

to, through, and as a community, then think/dream/act collectively with humane compassion.

Although written for anyone seeking a greater connection as a collective of humanity, the editors' preface is an academic survey of the literature that situates the collection as an organic result of decades of listening research. The introduction prepares the readers to listen carefully to scholars whose qualitative research might easily be dismissed and defunded in today's climate of screaming and smothering to erase conflicting stories. However, the depth of our humanity derives from the layers of our stories; the more voices the collective hears, the greater our capacity to create humanity-centered communities.

While academic listening studies have been around for decades, Fishman, García, and Rosenberg's review starts with a special issue of *Community Literacy Journal* inspired by the 2017 Conference on Community Writing and is "the first concerted effort to collect academic accounts of community listening" (5). Rather than solving all the mysteries found in the space of collective listening theory, the collection widens the abyss. The editors' introduction situates their collection in that abyss of the unknown. The collection offers an array of experiences and practices that could inspire readers to open their ears to the communities around and within them. To prepare their readers for the trip, the editors provide an array of definitions of listening, situate listening as an academic practice on par with reading, writing, and speaking, then flashback to listening studies that have planted seeds harvested from even earlier works.

To illustrate how so many ideas can be separate but can still create beauty, the editors use a metaphor of a starry night sky. They imagine each historical and current researcher as a star. Each star has its own light, width, gravity, and orbit, just like each contributor has their own take on what collective listening in their work looks like, means, and does. The introduction puts several rhetorical rock stars into constellations that shine light on the collection's authors. Each has their own scholarship, approach, and focus, but they all form pictures that create the constellation of listening studies. Krista Ratcliffe's work in rhetorical listening and eavesdropping shines light on Jacqueline Jones Royster's studies, which center on finding and listening to smothered voices. The editors contrast Ratcliffe and Royster with Linda Flower's work, which may not seem to center rhetorical listening, but is intensely collaborative, which tacitly requires intense listening. When the readers listen carefully to the texts of the stars in these academic constellations, they will see that the narrative that emerges is one that tells us there are more voices in human history than there are stars. Still, we are all needed to complete the sky.

The editors separate the collection into three parts. In Part 1: Hauntings and Possibilities, contributors explore how listening to "the absent presence of the past in the present" (13) can strip macro narratives back to reveal buried micro stories about victimized and villainized humans. Part 2: Stories of Sustaining Community introduces listening to community text—like art, music, and letters—as a synesthetic way to experience a listening that involves the ears, eyes, and heart, but touches to the bones., Part 3: Negotiating Self and Community, moves from listening as a passive or qua-

si-passive activity into a realm where listening is a form of action that validates the speaker's human experience.

In Part 1, authors listen to incarcerated people, read to hear differently abled voices, and struggle with a narrative about the ethics of excluding any voices in honest histories of racism. Their methods differ, but the authors' conclusions establish listening as a foundation for true inclusion.

Chapter 1, Sally F. Benson's "Getting Closer to Mass Incarceration: Proximate Listening as Community Activism," employs *proximate listening* as a practice for community listening that focuses on identifying how we listen, how we let others' stories unshape us, and how we report our listening. The haunting is the histories that adumbrate ugly societal truths that our eyes slide off of in privileged embarrassment. Benson's *proximate listening* in a prison community challenged her ideas of what listening means. Benson challenges readers to "dwell near enough, long enough, silent enough" not just to notice "our relational differences," but also "acknowledge our misunderstandings, and empty ourselves to make room for new ways of understanding" (43). Proximate listening asks listeners to pause their judgment and even their philanthropy and just hear—hear the hunger for validation, not solutions—a hearing that begins and ends with love.

In Chapter 2, "Crafting Crip Space Through Disabled Political Advocacy: #CriptTheVote as Community Listening," Ada Hubrig asks how disability advocacy is shaped by community listening, searches for a definition of other-abled community listening, and queries if disabled advocacies merely reaffirm disabilities as inherent flaws. Hubrig argues that disability activism means creating spaces for communities to hear the stories of differently abled people as they "push back against the dismissal of disabled activist methods" (59). Again, readers are faced with ghosts of assumptions that haunt the fringes of our narratives; these ghosts will terrify listeners less as #CriptTheVote gives them shape and substance in the ears of the community listeners with the hearts to truly hear.

Chapter 3 "Keeping Bad Company: Listening to Aryan Nations in the Archives" by Patty Wilde, Mitzi Ceballos, and Wyn Andrews Richards flips the script as a group of students who are haunted by the voices of vile racists attempt to negotiate the context in which offensive archival information and documents are circulated by the university to students and the local community. Their attempts taught the authors that listening in silence can be as effective—or as symbolic—as advocating for change. The haunting forced the authors to reconsider their own biases and abilities to listen to all voices, even those objectionable to their own experiences. While these scholars felt their venture failed, they are determined to vigilantly continue their work to build a community where productive conversations are possible.

Part 2: Stories of Sustaining Community centers listening to stories that "showcase community experiences" like public art, radio programs, and letters to and from incarcerated people (18). The contributors in Part 2 expand the definition of listening and thus illustrate the "multiplicity of listening relationships" (19). Listening becomes more than hearing; listening becomes a way of creating a space where people can see, feel, and hear stories in ways that create and reveal humanity in community.

In Chapter 4, “The Public Art of Listening: Relational Accountability and The Painted Desert Project,” Kyle Boggs takes the reader for a listening tour through the Navajo Nation via public art as the voice of the community. Boggs asks readers to listen to art whose living intent is to “serve as advocacy and community writing,” which then spotlights—and in some cases floodlights—community experience (94). Looking becomes a form of listening when the eyes take in the images without judgment, without supplanting their own stories, and with trust that creates a relationship between the community, the artist, and the seeing-listener. That relationship has the power to ignite “critical reflections about how we are constituted by colonial structures” and can result in “public engagement that invites stronger, more empathetic alliances across differences” (113) and thus sustain even imperiled communities.

Karen R. Tellez-Trujillo’s community-sustaining story, Chapter 5: “The DJ as Relational Listener and Creator of an Ethos of Community Listening,” explores relational listening as a form of community listening. Radio is a medium that weaves together listeners through the power of music. Music is the voice of the community; we listen with our bodies, hearts, as well as ears. Music creates community as people listen to the songs that become their own personal soundtracks, and as they hear in another’s voice the same longing that’s tucked in their souls. As Tellez-Trujillo reflects on the southwest Sunday afternoon oldies program and its deliberately relationally listening DJ, she posits that it is through listener participation that “the listener builds upon memories carried from the past, associated with music by layering new memories” and that music becomes a site of community/relational listening (130).

Prison’s most cruel form of punishment is the isolation that prisoners experience from their home communities. The incarcerated communities do not often sustain their members’ well-being. Prison literacy educators and researchers, Alexandra J. Cavallaro, Wendy Hinshaw, and Tobi Jacobi craft Chapter 6, “Listening In: Letter Writing and Rhetorical Resistance Behind Bars,” as a reflection on how *community-centered listening* in prisons validates the humanity of inmates. The authors of this chapter ask readers to peer in at a community and consider how that looking equates to listening. They also ask readers to step outside of their complacency and enter spaces that challenge their listening resilience by reaching out to communities who are isolated, marginalized, and demonized with a humble request to share their experiences, their stories, and their hearts.

The last section, Part 3: Negotiating Self and Community, pushes readers towards intersections of community and self that are created through community listening. In these chapters, readers (1) hear how deep listening to stories creates community (2) even when (if not especially) those stories challenge the listener to sit with uncomfortable topics. The last chapter, “Daunting Community Listening: Designing and Implementing a Community Listening Framework and Accountability Group for Undergraduate Students,” is strategically situated as the final chapter because it builds on and synthesizes the ideas from the previous nine chapters to underscore how listening deeply is required to enter communities. Deep listening can strip us of our false and under-informed stories, and, if we let it, the discomfort of relearning can propel listeners to meaningful action.

Individuals' stories create community in Bailey M. Oliver-Blackburn, April Chatham-Carpenter, and Carol L. Thompson's Chapter 7: "Civic Community Listening: The Nexus of Storytelling and Listening Within Civic Communities." Only a person with their head buried deeply in the sand could be unaware of the divisive political climate the 21st century has gifted the human world. But the National Braver Angels have banded together to create local spaces for citizens to share their stories—and spaces to hear each other's stories in a practice of social community listening, which results in increased perspective taking and decreased vitriol; storytelling and listening become an invitation to be civically engaged in civility. The more participants in National Braver Angels' forums engage in *civic community listening*, by intentionally listening to each other's stories, the more people want to participate. The more people who participate, the more voices, stories, and perspectives are heard—and the more people start to understand each other.

In Chapter 8, Mary P. Sheridan, Cate Fosl, Kelly Kinahan, Carrie Mott, Angela Storey, and Shelley Thomas' "Community Listening In, With, and Against Whiteness at a PWI" frames a conversation about a university that has not fully addressed structural racism. All the authors are white women. They elected to implement methodologies of listening silently to the stories that uncovered "who is privileged and who is muted" (177). The women found that their work raised more questions than they answered. They found themselves pondering how white women can "foster spaces that destabilize whiteness while we call in and remain open to being called out?" (193). How can people with privilege listen to people to educate other people of privilege without co-opting others' stories? These authors raised hard questions and faced difficult situations, but have resolved to keep questioning, keep challenging themselves, and keep listening.

Building on the self-examinations and honest reflection of the previous chapter, Chapter 9, "On Being in It," by Katie W. Powell, is a narrative study of the murder of Dr. James Monroe, an enslaver, killed by his rebelling slaves. The reader listens to Powell's journey into history and her uncovering of the complex and violent history of a geographical region still haunted by unacknowledged stories. Through *storied community listening*—which Powell defines as looking for narratives that have been historically left out and/or covered up—listeners may find that those stories contradict each other. Competing stories do not have to result in increased controversy but could be "methods for employing counterstory" that could move toward reconciliation through an honest appraisal of differences (22).

The collection weaves together the whats and the whys. Then it ends with a powerful how-to in Chapter 10: "Daunting Community Listening: Designing and Implementing a Community Listening Framework and Accountability Group for Undergraduate Students" in which Keri Epps and Rowie Kirby-Straker with Basey Beiswenger, Zoe Chamberlain, Hannah Hill, Lauren Robertson, and Kaitlyn Taylor take on hard community listening and find that pain is not only a great teacher but also the greatest catalyst for internal and external change. The researchers name their methodology: *daunting community listening*, which acknowledges the discomfort and fear that honest listening engenders, especially in the sincerest listener. This final

chapter of the collection shares a narrative that centers voices commonly decentered in education and provides a detailed program that the university and community partner utilized to recenter listening as a form of relationship building. The readers of the collection will need to listen hard to this last chapter. Listening may seem like passive inaction, but the internal rearranging that authentic listening initiates will transform the teachable person.

The collection's strength is demonstrating that community listening is a powerful methodology that can inform academic research at a humane level. Because the authors are academics and educators, their texts ask readers to intentionally study, formally teach, and deliberately learn ethical community listening. These asks are made with compassion, and as an academic, I cheer them on. However, the world my students and I live in screams at them, shoves fabricated stories down their throats, and demands they align with one side of a socially constructed binary instead of seeking to understand the multiverse of humanity. The editors and authors have given readers intellectual starting points. As an educator, I am thrilled with the conversations. As a professor, I wonder if I can listen loudly enough to guide my students. As a human silenced by a screaming world, I often wonder if Siri is the only one listening to me.