# Listening Across Difference: Mapping StoryCorps' Affective Archives

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation explores the affective potential of telling and listening to stories of racialized trauma and resistance in an equity-focused digital storytelling project. I investigate tensions that arise when testimonials of personal trauma related to racism are made public. On the one hand, media narratives encourage us to share personal struggles to connect across differences and digital technologies enable the wide dissemination of these stories disembodied from their tellers. On the other hand, storytellers must negotiate the intensely personal and embodied politics of (mis)appropriation, ownership, and control of their representation in order to be legible within dominant discourses. For digital storytelling to facilitate a radical listening that promotes equity, the needs of represented communities must be centered throughout processes of

production and dissemination. Mapping affective experiences between speakers/listeners highlights possibilities and barriers for cultivating a space where such centering is possible.

This dissertation adds to research in critical rhetoric by bringing a community-engaged approach that uses rhetorical field methods to study anti-racist rhetorics-in-action. As a fellow with the Center for Communication, Difference, and Equity (CCDE) at the University of Washington, I proposed and led the "Radical Listening" project in partnership with the digital storytelling non-profit StoryCorps. We recorded stories of racial discrimination and resistance from the larger Seattle area. After organizing the initial storytelling event, I conducted follow-up interviews, edited recorded conversations, helped organize listening events to bring conversations to wider publics, and created an online archive of the audio clips. While the online space allows stories to be shared with distant others, the in-person listening sessions enabled me and the CCDE to center processes of ethical listening, afforded storytellers the ability to contextualize their audio stories, and provided an embodied sense of community. Together, these opportunities enabled a collective praxis of radical listening. Radical listening highlights how the interpersonal and public dimensions of listening are enmeshed with systems of power. It explores the public significance of how processes of mediation impact the affective experience of listening. Through tracing the movement of personal narratives of racial suffering and resistance as they move through different spaces, online and off, this dissertation analyzes the relationality of listening, how we listen, and how this listening structures affective relations across difference. Ultimately, this project highlights the boundaries and possibilities of digital storytelling as a way to connect with others across difference. The boundaries remind us of the persistence of structures of marginality that limit democratic practices of storytelling in a digital age; the possibilities gesture to the power of minoritized voices to disrupt entrenched narratives.

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*For my Aji, my favorite storyteller*

# Introduction: Learning to Listen

This dissertation explores the affective potential of telling and listening to stories of racialized trauma and resistance in an equity-focused digital storytelling project. In the chapters that follow, I investigate tensions that arise when testimonials of personal trauma related to racism are made public. On the one hand, media narratives encourage us to share personal struggles to connect across differences, and digital technologies enable the wide dissemination of these stories disembodied from their tellers. On the other hand, storytellers must negotiate the intensely personal and embodied politics of (mis)appropriation, ownership, and control of their representation in order to be legible within dominant discourses. For digital storytelling to facilitate a radical listening that promotes equity, the needs of represented communities must be centered throughout processes of production and dissemination. Mapping affective experiences between speakers/listeners highlight possibilities and barriers for cultivating a space where such centering is possible.

This dissertation adds to research in critical rhetoric by bringing a community-engaged approach that uses rhetorical field methods to study anti-racist rhetorics-in-action. As a fellow with the Center for Communication, Difference, and Equity (CCDE) at the University of Washington, I proposed and led the "Radical Listening" project in partnership with the digital storytelling non-profit StoryCorps. We recorded stories of racial discrimination and resistance from the larger Seattle area. After organizing the initial storytelling event, I conducted follow-up interviews, edited recorded conversations, helped organize listening events to bring conversations to wider publics, and created an online archive of the audio clips. While the online space allows stories to be shared with distant others, the in-person listening sessions enabled me and the CCDE to center processes of ethical listening, afforded storytellers the ability to

contextualize their audio stories, and provided an embodied sense of community. Together, these opportunities enabled a collective praxis of radical listening, a concept I will theorize in greater detail throughout this dissertation. Radical listening highlights how the interpersonal and public dimensions of listening are enmeshed with systems of power. It explores the public significance of how processes of mediation impact the affective experience of listening.

Through tracing the movement of personal narratives of racial suffering and resistance as they move through different spaces, online and off, this dissertation analyzes the relationality of listening, how we listen, and how this listening structures affective relations across difference. It emphasizes the importance of moving outside analysis of texts as more or less stable and discrete entities to an understanding of how texts come to reside and move within affective ecologies. While dominant discourses center the public virtue of freedom of speech, what remains neglected is the critical need to cultivate a capacity for listening sensitive to systems of power. The chapters that follow this introduction trace the affordances/limitations of telling/listening to stories of racism/resistance as these stories move from the intimate space of the recording studio, to listening to these recordings at community events, to broadcasting these clips on the radio and sharing them on social media. This work adds to both cultural studies and new media studies by highlighting the boundaries and possibilities of digital storytelling as a way to listen to others across difference. The boundaries remind us of the persistence of structures of marginality that limit democratic practices of storytelling in a digital age; the possibilities gesture to the power of minoritized voices to disrupt entrenched narratives.

While scholars have explored the potential of more visual forms of new media, podcasts and other oral storytelling forms have been largely under theorized. Analyzing affective experiences of sound is critical to understanding how its material aspects can support or

undermine discursive tactics. With its vast archive of stories and popularity across media (radio, podcasts, apps), StoryCorps provides a useful case study to analyze various modes of producing and circulating audio narratives of racial discrimination and to examine how these stories operate within larger discursive structures surrounding difference. Whereas difference is often deemed a challenge to be overcome or a static component of identity to be acknowledged on a superficial level, drawing from Joseph (2017) this project centers a politics of difference rooted in the pursuit of equity; a politics in which "embracing a deviation from an assumed norm registers as an intrinsic and valued part of eradicating racialized disproportionality" (p. 3308). Listening across difference means moving beyond including more voices to expose the power differentials between them and to demand equity.

Throughout the Radical Listening digital storytelling project, I have sought to frame this not as "giving voice" to the marginalized, but rather as recognizing the centrality of marginalized voices when we are seeking to have conversations about racialized and gendered discrimination. The marginalized have voice; the problem is that they are not heard and recognized or that their recognition is predicated on being rendered legible by dominant forms of power. And yet, there are endless examples of instances when voices from the margins break through the boundaries of power, demanding to be heard through protests, stories, arts, and, at times, through non-cooperation and silences. This work is the culmination of a messy process of community engagement, collecting stories, highlighting messages, and creating spaces for gathering as a community to develop a praxis of radical listening. What began as an exploration into the workings of an online storytelling and story sharing platform, in this case StoryCorps, grew into a realization that my experience as a member of an anti-racist community could inform how we might use narratives of discrimination as tools to build counterpublic consciousness and fight

discrimination. This work, however, has also taught me the difficulties and tensions that arise through the process of doing community-engaged scholarship.

In the sections that follow, I first give background context on the Radical Listening project before turning to the messy origins of this work. I then outline my theorization of radical listening and situate this research within critical rhetoric and feminist affect studies. I discuss the significance of this dissertation as a project that simultaneously works to create and analyze a living, affective archive of stories of racism/resistance and then close with an overview of the chapters to come.

## Process of Enacting the Radical Listening Digital Storytelling Project

To better understand the context in which the Radical Listening digital storytelling project took place, it is helpful to get a better sense of the two facilitating organizations I worked with on this project: the Center for Communication, Difference, and Equity (CCDE) and StoryCorps. The CCDE is an anti-racist research and dialogue center housed in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington. The center's community engaged work has two main goals. First, we invite our students and community participants to interrupt, to take action that comes after interrogating our own internalized prejudices and biases. We must first identify the privileged positions in which we are situated, and then work to, if not change those privileges, then to leverage them to interrupt systems of oppression. Furthermore, we insist that the marginalized have voice, and it is the responsibility of the center to learn to listen without attempting to assimilate difference into a pretense of sameness.

I reached out to StoryCorps as a partner for this project because the organization offers recording, archival, and dissemination tools. StoryCorps has archived over 70,000 conversations at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in the United States. StoryCorps and

similar oral history inspired storytelling organizations claim significance in their ability to reshape the texture of public memory in order to center voices who have often been left out of traditional historical archives. In addition to their archival mission, StoryCorps is also a multiplatform project that has produced best-selling books, a podcast, animated short films, National Public Radio segments, and more recently the StoryCorps App that allows users to record, edit, and upload their own stories using their phones.

During the Radical Listening recording event, we hosted StoryCorps in Seattle from May 18–20, 2017. During the first two days, participants recorded stories at our local National Public Radio station located within walking distance from the University of Washington. The last day of recordings took place in the Communications building on campus. Participants recorded 40–50 minute conversations with one another discussing personal experiences of racism and strategies for resistance. Some chose to record stories with a friend or family member. Many preferred to speak with a stranger. As I greeted participants during the event, I shared my contact information with them and asked if they would be willing to meet with me after the event to discuss their motivations for signing up, their experience recording their stories, and how they wanted these stories to be used. Once a participant expressed interest, I set up a time and place that worked with their schedules and walked them through my consent form. I was able to follow up with 20 out of 30 participants. I created audio recordings of the follow-up interviews and provided participants with gift cards to thank them for taking the time to talk with me after the initial event. In our conversations, I asked them to walk me through the experience of telling their stories, who they imagined listening, and if they wanted to share their stories on the CCDE website and during the Radical Listening community events we would be hosting over the following academic year. I also asked them what parts of their conversations they would like me

to focus on in the editing process. Although participants would ideally have been able to edit their own podcasts, those I spoke with expressed that they had neither the time nor sound editing background to edit the clips themselves.

During the months following the original recording sessions, I helped create a website where participants and the public could access and share audio clips from their conversations. In collaboration with the CCDE and participants, I organized three community events we called "listening parties." Because centering participant knowledge is a grounding principle of this project, storytellers were invited to participate in an academic panel to discuss their experiences. In June of 2018, I traveled to Vancouver with the Director and Assistant Director of the CCDE and a group of participant storytellers to attend the Critical Ethnic Studies Association Conference. We collectively presented on a panel discussing the potential and limitations of digital storytelling to facilitate radical listening to stories of racism/resistance. Throughout the process of enacting this project, I continuously reflected through voice memos and fieldnotes on my role, as well as the role of the CCDE, in facilitating and shaping the meaning of the original conversations and the conditions of their reception. My reflections, along with a range of recordings and other artifacts I assembled from the project, act as primary texts of analysis grounding this dissertation. One theme that runs throughout this work explores the limits of collaboration and community engagement. In the next section, I address challenges encountered when I first started working on this project and how these challenges shaped my orientation to the project and its participants moving forward.

## "Failed" Collaborations

When I first proposed the idea of creating an anti-racist digital storytelling project to the Center for Communication, Difference and Equity, I had envisioned us collaborating with

communities in South Seattle to share stories of the impacts of gentrification. Although the rest of this dissertation will focus on the digital storytelling project that materialized, I want to spend a moment here at the start letting you know about the collaboration I had envisioned that never came to be. This "failed" collaboration speaks to the importance as a researcher of not just listening out for stories that resonate with one another and build into a song, but also the silences of those who, for one reason or another, refuse to participate.

As a Research Assistant for the Center for Communication, Difference and Equity, one of my larger goals at the inception of this project was to engage the youth of our then community partner, a branch of a larger youth community non-profit in South Seattle. This community partner serves a historically Black and immigrant neighborhood and is located close to subsidized housing that is fast gentrifying. According to an article in the *Seattle Times*, the percentage of homeownership for Black and Latino/a families in King County (Seattle, WA) has been cut nearly in half since the 1970s, with a precipitous drop since 2000. This is in contrast to the percentage of White and Asian American homeownership, which has remained roughly constant over the same period of time (Balk, 2017). Despite gentrification and shifting neighborhood demographics, our former community partner remains a gathering place and service provider to local Black youth.

Dr. Naheed Gina Aaftaab (hereafter referred to as Gina), the Assistant Director of the CCDE, and I sought to recruit youth participants by visiting the community partner, modeling the interview process with their coordinator, and staying in close communication with the teen coordinator. In a later follow-up interview with Gina, she told me, "I kind of had this ... like, the idealistic vision that we have such a good relationship with [community partner] down there that we could be like, that we could say, you know, 'Here's this event, and this is just a part of it,' and

people can go in and out, and there would be trust and understanding that that would actually work out" (Gina, Follow-up interview). After reaching out several times, however, none of the youth expressed interest in taking part in the project. When it looked like the teens were not enthusiastic, we personally invited the staff to participate, including the director. While we had a few committed parties, none of the staff ended up participating in the project.

From the beginning, our collaboration with our community partner was complicated by a high turnover of the staff in the organization. Additionally, we had come to them with this storytelling idea; they had not asked for it. As Gina later told me as we reflected on why we failed to spark interest in the project, "It felt as an imposition, it wasn't an opportunity. It wasn't something that they asked for, right? Like they didn't come to us and say, 'We would like to have a storytelling event,' or, 'We would like to have a digital blah blah event,' right? So that I think had an impact" (Gina, Follow-up interview). Although we had initially planned on hosting the recording event in South Seattle, when it became clear that neither the staff nor the youth were interested in signing up, we decided to move the location to the University campus to make the event more accessible to students and alumni.

We tapped into our network of alumni and communities of color in Seattle with whom we had collaborated on past events. Participants from all over the city, representing a wide range of ages and racial backgrounds, signed up to tell stories of racism/resistance. These individuals, however, mostly came from a similar socioeconomic background. In my follow-up discussion with Gina, we acknowledged that the people who eventually ended up participating were largely our people, people of color with connections to higher education, healthcare and the corporate world. While we have to contend with our marginalization within these places of (relative)

power, we are at the same time privileged in our access to the table, even if we are told we do not belong.

As I learned in my discussions with StoryCorps staff during the Radical Listening recording event several months later, StoryCorps has struggled with reaching out to communities beyond its typical middle/upper-middle class, NPR-listening audience. Two StoryCorps facilitators had flown out to Seattle from Brooklyn, New York to help us with the process of recording and archiving participant conversations. As we were setting up for the final day of recordings, one of the facilitators asked me about how I felt the recording event was going. It was early in the morning, and I was still a bit groggy. I fumbled out an answer about how it had been a fun collaboration. She assured me that she would also be happy to hear critical feedback about the process and the structure. After a pause, I admitted that although it was wonderful listening to and collaborating with the participants who signed up, I was disappointed we were unable to get anyone from our community partner to join the project. The facilitator let me know that StoryCorps similarly has been struggling with outreach efforts in New York City, where the organization is based. She told me that StoryCorps's structure and recruiting methods fail to resonate with many communities. There is a presumption among the StoryCorps leadership that communities will be excited to tell their stories. However, for the many people the facilitator reached out to, especially individuals from historically marginalized groups, NPR and StoryCorps are not a part of their daily lives. Given the long (and continuing) history of exploiting and appropriating stories from marginalized communities, many individuals are rightfully wary about recording their stories for unknown others.

As we continued to talk, we discussed how the structure of the community partnerships, such as flying facilitators out from Brooklyn for three days with pre-scheduled time slots for

interviews, limits who is willing and able to participate. Additionally, facilitators are required to collect a certain number of interviews, and these "deliverables" can get in the way of ensuring that community members feel comfortable and safe sharing their stories. The facilitator told me that she was working with other staff at the organization to change the outreach and structure of these partnerships. When I later discussed this with Gina (the Assistant Director of the CCDE), she agreed that the teens and staff at our then community partner were likely not enthusiastic about the project because "StoryCorps just did not have the same name recognition there as it did with others" (Gina, Follow-up interview). Additionally, we discussed how the strict StoryCorps structure in terms of having to confirm with participants pre-scheduled time slots months in advance made the project less approachable.

When engaging in community-based research, it is necessary to address not only the stories that are shared through partnerships that flourish, but also to attend to the silences of those who refuse to take part. Although the CCDE had successfully collaborated on various projects with staff and youth at our former community partner organization, our community partner had initiated those collaborations; the StoryCorps digital storytelling event was my idea– the idea of a middle-class graduate student who spends countless hours of my life listening to and creating radio and podcasts. I assumed that the forms of storytelling that engaged me would be shared by the youth and staff of our community partner and that they would see this form of storytelling as a tool to speak back to the gentrification happening in their communities.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak (1988) argues that to be the subaltern means to exist in a position where one's access to power is structurally blocked. If one is able to access a position where one's voice is audible, is listened to, by systems of power, one no longer inhabits the position of the subaltern. This does not mean that the subaltern is silent. Rather, Spivak

argues that there is no institutional framework from which their voices can make an impact. As Spivak (2010) notes in a later response to her essay, “My point was not to say that they couldn’t speak, but that, when someone did try to do something different, it could not be acknowledged because there was no institutional validation” (p. 228). Given this lack of institutional validation, Spivak traces tensions that arise in the act of translating (and thus transforming) subaltern voices in order for them to become audible within structures of power.

In later revisions of “Can the Subaltern Speak,” Spivak refocuses the target of analysis from the subaltern voice, to those who demand that the subaltern speak, including those who premise their allyship and support through giving voice to the subaltern, and premising liberation of the subaltern in their ability and willingness to speak. What I want to highlight here is the translation process in which the subaltern’s voice is supposedly made audible, and the risks of essentialism, appropriation, and mistranslations that can occur. Because there is no institutional space from which the subaltern can be heard, Cornell (2010) argues that as academics who seek equity, acknowledging “the failure of representation itself becomes a form of listening” (p. 101). The choice of remaining silent can be a fight in itself, an act that speaks volumes to those who are willing to listen to the silences. Within the context of attempting to recruit participants from our community partner into a storytelling project constructed with them in mind but largely without their input, our community partners chose not to tell their stories, and not to give us, the organizers who asked them to speak, the power to shape their stories at that moment.

Visweswaran (1994) argues that feminist ethnography has too often moved from the assumption of a shared alliance among marginalized peoples, an assumption that glosses over divergent interests and contested meanings. She argues that “the paired terms betrayal and innocence metonymically recall one another. Feminist innocence is betrayed by relations of

power; betrayal signals the loss of innocence" (p. 40). This loss of innocence is necessary in order to move from an understanding that communication is always embedded in relations of power and solidarity cannot be assumed but rather must be (continually) negotiated and worked towards. Relations of power are embedded in every interaction between people, organizations and institutions. The "failed" collaboration at the start of this project emphasizes the listening and trust that is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for the building of activist coalitions across difference and divides of power.

Spivak (2010) argues that as educators who seek uncoercive change toward a more equitable future, we need to engage in "the project of listening to subalterns, patiently and carefully" (p. 232). In order to work towards equity "*with* the subaltern," Cornell (2010) states that we need to listen deeply and engage in "transforming ourselves and not just demanding change of the other" (p. 110). This work can only be done by reframing the relationship between self and other, through the work of constantly "reenvisioning ourselves as other than those entitled to help" (p. 113). In my interactions with the storytellers who did choose to take part in the Radical Listening digital storytelling project, I attempted to more intentionally interrogate my positionality and how power was operating at each level of the project. In chapter one, I engage further with the tensions and possibilities of forming feminist, anti-racist alliances. In her oral history interviews with fellow lesbian members of the activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), Cvetkovich (2003) discusses how the "gaps and silences within the interviews and conflicts between them" were just as revealing as the histories they narrate (p. 204). She stresses that these silences and clashing narratives, far from diminishing the historical value of these recordings, are a vital "part of the archive of activism, particularly an archive that focuses on feelings" (p. 204). Throughout this dissertation, I trace not only moments of shared listening

and trust, but also the ruptures, gestures of ambivalence and silences that make up the affective archives of this storytelling project. In the next section, I begin to shape the contours of what I call radical listening, starting with the literature that informs it.

## Theorizing an Ethics of Listening

My theorization of radical listening is informed by scholars from multiple disciplines who have attempted to theorize listening that both attends to its interpersonal dimensions while moving beyond them to think through listening's political importance. These theories present listening as 1) intersubjective, 2) resisting certainties about both self and other, and 3) always in relation to power. I will briefly discuss these positions before outlining my theorization of radical listening, a concept I will continue to develop throughout this dissertation.

### Listening is Intersubjective

My research builds on a number of scholars across disciplines who have theorized listening as an inherently intersubjective process. Research from the field of communication on listening has tended to focus on interpersonal relationship building, where meaning is created intersubjectively within the dyadic relationship of speaker and listener, while decentering the broader discourses and systems of power within which these actors are embedded (Bodie et al., 2008). As Parks (2019) argues, however, meaning is not constructed solely in the space between speakers/listeners, but rather "is mutually influencing and influenced by them and the broader context in which they live" (p. 9). Meaning does not originate within any particular speaker/listener, but rather is drawn from larger discourses in which both speaker and listener are embedded. Therefore, it is important to theorize listening as both an interpersonal and public process, without a clear boundary separating the two. Lacey (2013) argues that a focus on listening shifts notions of the public from "a collective of sovereign individuals to a public

constituted intersubjectively" (p. 170). Reframing our understanding of the public as a web of shifting intersubjective connections as opposed to isolated nodes of individual subjects allows us to attune our ears to these connections and the responsibilities they ask of us.

Parks (2019) theorizes dialogic listening as "no self without the other." In this co-constructed space, Parks argues, "life is a call to participation and community" (p. 8). Phenomenologists, such as Buber (1923/1970), similarly emphasize the power and unpredictability of the meeting space between self and other. According to Buber, the self only comes into being through a dialogic engagement with other selves. This "between" relational space is teeming with possibility. By approaching the "between" with a spirit of vulnerability, we open the possibility for trust and community. In her theorization of the "in-between," Arendt (1958) argues that meaning and action do not emerge in individual acts of speaking and listening, but rather occur in the public world between self and other, in the "in-between," the web of human relations and material things that both "relates and separates" (p. 52). The interpersonal and the public, the material and discursive, are tightly interwoven. Understanding listening as both a public and intersubjective process highlights our collective obligations to each other.

Meaning morphs as it permeates different bodies, and through engagement with that plurality of meaning within a common space, the potential for action and new possible ways of being emerge. In such a process of meaning-making, Radcliffe (2005) notes, "a person is continually socialized into general cultural discourses while particularized as a subject" (p. 69). There is an eternal interplay between structure and agency: just as dominant discourses shape the subject, the subject also counters those discourses to enact change. Lipari (2014) uses the term interlistening to emphasize how all acts of listening confound boundaries between self/other, inside/outside, beginning/end. Interlistening highlights the "interdependency, interrelation,

intersubjectivity" embedded in every act of listening as well as the "alterity that is always already nested in our processes of communication" (p. 159). By attuning our ears to this alterity, and by acknowledging that what we are able to hear is only one part of a larger symphony, we make possible an ethical relationship with the other that recognizes the bonds that both connect and distance us from one another.

**Listening that Resists Certainties about Both Self and Other**

Nagar (2015) insists that rather than uncover the "essential or authentic experience of the subject," storytelling must be understood within historical and social context and within the power relations in which these stories are told and heard (p. 14). Facilitating a capacity for radical listening to the stories of different others necessitates acknowledging that difference is a process rather than a stable truth. As Joseph (2017) argues, "difference is always a word in flux, in the constant state of creation" (p. 3318). Too often, Joseph notes, dominant discourses of "diversity" and "multiculturalism" are used to describe essentialized identity categories absent considerations of power. When discourses of difference become reified as stable truth (as the "truth" of a shared female oppression that glosses over key differences between women for example), they lose their transformative potential. As Trinh (1989) argues, "As long as words of difference serve to legitimate a discourse instead of delaying its authority to infinity, they are, to borrow an image from Audre Lorde, 'noteworthy only as decorations'"[1] (p. 101).

Scott (1991) argues that difference is "relationally constituted" (p. 779). She argues that "the social [structures and processes that create categories of difference] and the personal [experiences of those differences] are imbricated in one another" and that we cannot understand

1 Here Trinh (1989) is referencing Audre Lorde's 1979 open letter to Mary Daly in which Lorde argues that Daly uses the experience of white women to stand in for the experience of all women while only superficially engaging with the experiences of women of color

or reach one without the other (p. 795). In her influential critique of "experience as evidence," she warns that when personal experience is treated as fact, as proof of difference, it obscures how difference operates, "how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world" (p. 777). Scott's critique specifically targets the discipline of history as its scholars sought to widen the lens of the archive to uncover marginalized histories by turning to oral history and experience as evidence. Through narrative storytelling of personal experiences that express struggle, desire and hope, new histories are made visible (pp. 778–779). Scott argues, however, that by taking experience as a stable and unproblematic given, "the project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself" (p. 778). Experience is embedded in situated space and time in relation to other bodies and systems, also situated in space and time. Experience, therefore, cannot be understood to be the foundation of truth and knowledge. Rather, an analysis of experience needs to engage with how that experience is generated in a specific place and time; how that experience is then understood as meaningful, categorized, archived, taken up, shared and circulated in different contexts; and how the meaning embedded in that experience then shifts and morphs throughout its life cycle. Rather than understand the stories and conversations shared during the Radical Listening project as documentation of difference, of the Black/Asian American/Native etc. experience, this project examines how experience operates, how it shapes and is shaped by, the various intertwined and morphing affective attachments coursing through this project.

### *The Ethical Imperative to Listen: Navigating Troubled Identifications*

Several scholars have stressed the role of listening in navigating troubled identifications. Drawing from Burke, Radcliffe (2005) argues that each individual "both shapes and is shaped by identification" (p. 58). Spaces of identification are a potential site for (constrained) personal

agency in that the individual "may transform him- or herself and/or others and/or cultural practices even as he or she is transformed by them" (p. 58). Although Burke's theory of identification is useful in thinking through the possibilities and constraints of personal agency, Radcliffe argues that it is limited because it "mystifies unfair ideological power plays" by emphasizing shared substance and commonalities over difference (p. 58). Lyon (2013) similarly argues that because of its focus on "transcendent unity," Burke's concept of identification ultimately "remains concerned with denying the presence of difference" (p. 63). Departing from Burke's focus on "identification-as-common-ground," Radcliffe (2005) argues that the potential of "rhetorical listening" exists by valuing difference as well as similarities in our conscious processes of identification and through centering how power operates within these identifications (p. 59).

Learning to become aware of our processes of identification, however, is difficult. Acknowledging our capacity to be changed through our interactions with others can be profoundly destabilizing. Within these interactions, Trinh (1989) details the persistent longing for a stable "logic of being" (p. 94). She writes, "I cannot help but loathe the threats of interruptions, disseminations, and suspensions... Thus, a clear origin will give me a connection back through time, and I shall, by all means, search for that genuine layer of myself to which I can always cling" (p. 94). Listening that allows for transformation, Lipari (2014) argues, is often resisted because it involves being open to "the disruption and at times renunciation of self" (p. 184). If change is to occur, such disruption is necessary. "Listening out," Lacey (2013) argues, requires courage in that it "entails the possibility of one's sense of self being challenged or changed in the process of the encounter" (p. 179). Processes of identification always involve a necessary negotiation with the ambivalence embedded in the encounter. As Trinh (1989) muses,

the boundary between “I and Not-I” bleeds, it “is not (cannot) always (be) as clear as we would like it to be” and thus “Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak” (p. 94).

The process of constructing counterpublics capable of enacting change toward a more equitable future involves complicated and fraught negotiations. It requires a form of listening that resists certainties of both self and other. Forming coalitions across difference, as Clarke (2015) argues, necessitates “the work of listening,” the difficult act of paying close attention to “what circulates, to what matters, to what connections are already being forged, to what threads are being forgotten” (p. 284). This labor of listening involves attuning our ears to “what apparently natural and normal alignments of things are coming apart" (Clarke, 2015, 284).

Transposing these arguments onto our Radical Listening project, I aim to break through the flat notion of difference as “fact;” instead, I view difference as a process rather than a product, as co-constructed among multiple participants in acts of speaking and listening. I argue that the experiences of pain or suffering told by storytellers are not direct evidence of facts that define or stand in for individual lives, nor are they reducible to a generalizable racialized trauma, but rather are part of a web (always in the process of becoming) constituted of complicated bodies/subjectivities in relation to power, privilege, and oppression.

**Listening that Centers Considerations of Power and Takes Action Towards Equity**

This work builds from a number of scholars who theorize the political importance of power-sensitive listening geared toward equity and action. Crenshaw (1991) stresses that as scholars, we must move past “challenging essentialism generally” to imagine a flexible group politics that simultaneously resists monolithic notions of identity while also centering action toward change (p. 1298). In attempting to enact this change, it is necessary to acknowledge that

power differentials will always impact processes of listening. Radcliffe (2005) theorizes "rhetorical listening" as moving from a place of openness grounded in recognition and accountability in contrast to dysfunctional silence and defensiveness. A stance of rhetorical listening does not allow the listener to side-step questions of power. She argues, however, that if we are attentive to how power and privilege shape our listening, "they may perhaps become more audible... and then perhaps more visible... and then perhaps more possible to negotiate-with perhaps, of course, being the operative term" (p. 66). Similarly, media scholar Tanja Dreher (2009, 2012) theorizes "political listening" as a process that ties the individual's voice to structures of inequality (2012, p. 162), and is "aimed at justice which sustains difference" (2009, p. 448). Political listening goes beyond attempting to understand the "other" to critically assessing one's positionality and complicity with systems of power.

Power-sensitive listening is essential to processes of coalition building, but does not guarantee solidarity. In her discussion of coalition strategies among various anti-coal plant organizations in Texas, Thatcher (2016) looks at breakthroughs and breakdowns in the formation of counterpublics between disparate groups with differing ideologies and levels of power and influence. She finds that listening and conscious, prolonged efforts on the part of powerful organizations to build trust with local communities are some of the most important strategies in building coalitions. Coalitions fall apart when the various groups are unable "to adequately strengthen the bonds of trust and mutual dependency required for close interactions with different others" (p. 129). Radcliffe (2005) argues that the process of rhetorical listening is fraught and does not guarantee solidarity. Rather, in engaging in such work, it must be understood that attempting to account for multiple discourses just as often creates dissonance as harmony: "hence, a person must choose to stick with the work that needs to be done in such a

place, realizing that such work may take patience, may require multiple hearings (pun intended), may not succeed, may even be misinterpreted" (p. 76). Rather than seek lasting common ground, in accordance with Ivie's (2008) theorization of democratic dissent, the Radical Listening project sought to foster a counterpublic space that would "somehow bridge divisive differences without eliding identities, that is, by means of partial and transitory transfigurations of underlying divisions" (p. 454).

The change sought through this project was not a predefined set of policy or personal goals, but rather a change that emerges through the process of engagement, through the openness to new possibilities brought forth through listening. As Lyon (2013) writes, "The calculus of means and ends is not simple, and if their full complexity is acknowledged, the distinctions between them may blur" (p. 36). Hall's (1985) work emphasizes that identities are shifting and layered and what we think of as "common sense" consists of heterogeneous fragments of dominant discourses. Hall argues that the work of articulation is to form linkages that may lead to new (fleeting) formations and possibilities for a different politics. Building on Hall's work, Clarke (2015) argues that the "embodied practice of articulation" involves the work of "forging new connections in the pursuit of building progressive alliances" (p. 285). Rather than theorize listening as a means to a particular end, to a predefined path to equity, the Radical Listening project attempted to facilitate a form of listening open to emergent possibilities. It necessitated an active care and responsibility to respond to the other and to the community through listening, through continued engagement. I hoped that the situated web of knowledge emerging from this engagement might be capable of subverting local systems of racism by mapping their conditions of creation and circulation within our community.

## Radical Listening

When developing the digital storytelling project and listening parties, the Center for Communication, Difference, and Equity and I chose to borrow the phrase "radical listening" from critical pedagogy scholarship to stress our embrace of radical politics. Building from the work of their mentor Joe Kincheloe, critical pedagogy scholars Winchell et al. (2016) argue for a radical listening in the classroom that understands difference as a tool for learning. Even (and perhaps especially) in contentious moments within teaching/learning spaces, radical listening provides a tool for teachers/students to listen to difference in a way that is "multidimensional and heterogeneous," in a way that makes transformation possible (p. 106). Forging this pedagogy can be difficult in that "difference is often a destabilizing force (at least initially)" (p. 105). Radical listening thus requires vulnerability in that it exposes "us as constantly in process" (p. 106). In further developing radical listening, I argue the word "radical" functions on three registers; it points towards political change that impacts fundamental structures; it resists certainties of both self and other, and lastly, it points to possibilities and futures yet to arrive, multiple futures that are not predetermined and decided within our current political structures. Rather than evidence of some universal truth, our project attempted to construct a partial, contingent, and unstable polyphonic counterpublic song composed of distinct yet interconnected stories. We hoped that such listening could begin to shift reified structures through the slow and difficult process of reinscribing new connections, new ways of being in the world.

### *Radical Listening and the Process of Forming Anti-Racist Feminist Alliances*

> In the forming and deforming of attachments: in the writing, conversations, the doing, the work, feminism moves, and is moved. It connects and is connected. More than anything, it is in the alignment of the 'we' with the 'I', the feminist subject with the feminist

> collective, an alignment which is imperfect and hence generative, that a new grammar of social existence may yet be possible. The 'we' of feminism is not its foundation; it is an effect of the impressions made by others who take the risk of inhabiting its name. (Ahmed, 2014, p. 188)

The goal of the Radical Listening storytelling project was not simply to assemble and disseminate stories of racialized trauma and resistance. The hope was to create spaces for community members to attune ourselves to the bonds between us, moving us toward a contingent collective "we" with the power to interrupt local structures of racism. In this process, I am not an impartial observer tracing the attachments formed through this project, but rather an active participant on multiple levels. Through my embodied actions organizing, participating, talking to participants about their experiences recording their stories, helping to edit the various stories, and organizing listening spaces where these stories could reach a wider public, this project attempts to bridge the divide between knowing and doing, between theory and practice. As Nagar (2015) critiques, there is a "problematic division between 'abstract thinking' and 'concrete doing'" (p. 2). A long genealogy of this critique exists, from Marx to Gramsci, to the Subaltern Studies Group and feminist studies, to the Friere influence in education.

Throughout this dissertation, I use rhetorical field methods that enable me to understand the rhetoric of the digital storytelling project from within, from experiencing its day to day development. Before turning to these methods, I first want to address how the alliances that these stories seek to construct must themselves be questioned (Nagar, 2015; Visweswaran 1994). In *Muddying the Waters*, Nagar (2015) explores the nuances of collaboration and co-authorship, the need for representation and recognition, and the fraught politics of appropriation, voyeurism, and exoticism. Nagar's work exemplifies the commitment to collaboration and co-authorship as a

way to subvert power when representing those marginalized by systems of power. To make this engagement possible, she cautions scholars to continuously ask ourselves "[w]ho are we writing for, how, and why? What does it mean to co-produce relevant knowledge across geographical, institutional, or cultural borders? How do we interrogate the structure of the academy and the constraints and values embedded therein, as well as our desire and ability (or lack thereof) to challenge and reshape those structures and values?" (p. 18). Within academia, success often necessitates performing intelligence and certainty while downplaying possible cracks and fissures in our work. The pressure to publish and produce clean narratives can obstruct the slow, confusing and difficult work of collaborating with community partners to co-produce knowledge.

Community-engaged work, then, creates an ethical imperative for reflexivity. Interrogations of the structures in which this work is embedded are political commitments. As my "failed collaboration" with the CCDE's former community partner illustrates, this research praxis can be messy and unsettling as scholars work through tensions that arise between the theoretical goals of research and how events play out on the ground. Nagar (2015) argues that embracing a praxis of "radical vulnerability" asks us to grapple with the complexities of working through solidarities, responsibilities and ethics while engaged in politically charged scholarship:

> [a] politics without guarantees, then, is rooted in a praxis of *radical vulnerability* that is committed to opening up spaces for negotiation by always returning us to the ethics of how and why one comes to a story and to its variable tellings and retellings. The telling of stories must continuously resist a desire to reveal the essential or authentic experience of the subject; instead, every act of storytelling must confront ways in which power circulates and constructs the relationalities within and across

> various social groups. This struggle happens as much through what is narrated as it does through the gaps and silences, and through that which remains obscured or unavailable within narrative. (p. 14, emphasis added)

Engaging in this act of "radical vulnerability" through my research means that I need to admit mistakes and oversights, rather than fall back on the authoritative voice that is often demanded of scholars. As Nagar notes, "This kind of vulnerability cannot rely on traditional notions of transparency and accountability in its logic because it is grounded in bonds emerging from multifaceted relationships and trust, in hopes and dreams, in affect" (p. 13). In the relationships that have formed in the process of doing research, with participants as well as with fellow organizers/scholars at the Center for Communication Difference and Equity, I have attempted to become "radically vulnerable" and to use that vulnerability to re-imagine collaborations. Hemmings (2012) argues that "politics can be characterised as that which moves us, rather than that which confirms us in what we already know" (p. 151). Part of that process is to move towards a kind of radical listening, where I ask myself and other listeners to be "radically vulnerable" to connections across difference that can lead to a politics of action and change.

I recognize that there are no unmediated forms of communication, because language, even in its simplest and direct form, exists within systems of power, and thus cannot present an unmediated truth. This recognition, however, does not make representation and communication insignificant; instead, this project takes this as a license to engage with and interrupt systems of power through fostering spaces to attend to and strengthen bonds between dispersed community members of color throughout Seattle. Creating the conditions of possibility where attachments may form into a "we" capable of action against injustice requires us to be attuned to how various factors such as power influence the quality of relationships within these attachments. In the next

section, I outline my methodological approaches. I first situate this project within a shift in critical rhetoric to expand the boundary of the rhetorical text before addressing my use of rhetorical field methods. I then turn to the literature on feminist affect studies that grounds this project.

## Methodological Approaches: Rhetorical Field Methods and Feminist Affect Studies

### Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation: Expanding the Notion of the Text

Drawing from work in critical rhetoric, this project resists dominant discourses that place meaning and action in the arena of the speaker and instead asserts the importance of centering the affective ecologies in which meaning morphs and moves. Bitzer (1968) and Vatz (1973), although presenting alternative theorizations of the rhetorical situation, both move from a premise of causal influences. Whether the situation compels the rhetor to speak or whether the speaker creates the situation through utterance, a causal relationship is implied. In opposition to Bitzer (1968) and Vatz (1973) whose notion of the rhetorical situation moves from the premise of a sovereign, rational subject, Biesecker (1999) argues that a rhetorical event "produces and reproduces the identities of subjects and constructs and reconstructs linkages between them" (p. 126). She asserts that critical rhetoric places process over essence and "resituates the rhetorical situation on a trajectory of becoming rather than being" (p. 127). Edbauer (now Rice) (2005) similarly argues that Vatz and Bitzer's theorizations of the rhetorical situation ignore the power of rhetoric to form new identifications and thus new publics. She emphasizes the need for a theorization of the rhetorical situation that does not identify its discrete components and their causal relations to one another, but rather accounts for the strange "amalgamations and transformations" that occur (p. 19). This understanding of rhetorical distribution as a webbed transfer places rhetoric "within its wider ecology" (p. 19). Through her study of the "Keep

Austin Weird" campaign, which through its life cycle generated morphing affective publics that both extended and subverted the original movement, Edbauer demonstrates "how publics are created through affective channels" (p. 21). Although the field of rhetoric has historically privileged the act of speaking, critical rhetoricians argue that meaning does not reside in any one speaker, but rather origins are always multitudinous. The rhetorical situation must thus be understood as composed of a complicated web of influence.

### *Move to Rhetorical Field Methods*

By privileging analysis of publicly influential, pre-existing texts, rhetoricians fail to address the rhetorical importance of ephemeral, everyday affects. In order to account for the interconnected "rhetorical ecologies" that tie situated experiences to wider public sentiments, many critical rhetoricians have called for methodological innovations (Edbauer, 2005, p. 9). Taking McKerrow's (1989) conception of critique as a performance to its logical end, rhetorical field methods envisions "rhetoric in terms of doing" (Middleton et al., 2015, p. 15). Quoting Conquergood, McKinnon et al. (2016) assert that the privileging of the written text is only possible through the lens of "middle class academics" whose livelihoods depend on reading and writing (p. 8). By expanding the notion of the text, rhetoricians can capture "embodied performances, and feeling/affect" that might otherwise be lost (p. 8). Rhetorical field methods enable rhetoricians to engage with communities "in situ" through "methods of observation, ethnographic interviews, and performance" (p. 4).

Additionally, rhetorical field methods may enable scholars to engage with marginalized discourses that are not fully accessible (if at all) through textual analysis. In order to better understand the affective potential of the process of crafting one's story of discrimination/resistance for an anti-racist digital storytelling project, I needed to move outside

analysis of the stories as products to investigate the situated conditions in which these stories were generated, archived, edited and shared. I use rhetorical field methods in this project to not only analyze rhetorics of anti-racist advocacy, but also to create spaces for anti-racist advocacy through digital storytelling. McKerrow (1989) envisions a critical rhetoric where veracity is decentered, while the influence of power is brought to the fore. Following McKerrow, the goal of this project is not perfection, but rather to center what has been marginalized, that which has gone unheard, and thereby expose the potential for social change.

**Enacting Rhetorical Fieldwork**. In enacting rhetorical fieldwork, the researcher must attend to the impacts of research on participants, the rhetorical agency of artifacts assembled through the research process, the rhetorical agency of the field site, and the enmeshed relationship between the researcher's own body and that which s/he is researching. In this section, I engage each of these aspects in turn.

Similar to the feminist praxis outlined above, a driving question in rhetorical fieldwork is how knowledge produced through the research process impacts communities and whose interests this knowledge ultimately serves. Through her fieldwork with activist groups in Puerto Rico, de Onís (2016) found "opportunities for conjoining rather than isolating activist and academic endeavors" (p. 104). Rather than researcher and researched, she stresses the term co-presence to emphasize "the importance of collaboration with the communities which we, the critics, conduct our studies" (p. 105). As activist researchers, de Onís asserts that "we should consider how to make our 'research useful' for the communities and groups we study" (p. 106). Although the researcher does not need to be in agreement with those being studied, s/he has an ethical obligation to consider the needs and integrity of communities represented throughout processes of conducting/analyzing/writing up scholarship. Throughout my engagement with this project, I

grappled with my position in relation to participant storytellers and how this research praxis might impact them, for better or worse. As Middleton et al. (2015) emphasize, researchers have a responsibility to participants, "who will continue to live in the worlds made by the texts we judge- and who may well suffer or gain from our judgements" (p. 15). I attempted to check in with those who shared their stories, to circle back to them and keep them actively involved at each stage of the project.

As a graduate student juggling multiple responsibilities and struggling to make deadlines, however, I worried about whether I was doing it "right"; whether I was doing enough work seeking out and attending to storyteller concerns and silences. Grabill et al. (2018) argue for the importance of listening to clashing voices that emerge through the process of fieldwork, voices assembled in unpredictable ways, ways that force us to reconsider our objectives: "Our rhetorical work must create the contexts and conditions in which we can encounter others who can and will worry us" (p. 210). In order to attend to the uncertainty and ambivalence inherent in research praxis, throughout this dissertation, I weave in my own stories from participating in the project, both attachments of joy that emerged as well as the uncomfortable disconnects that sometimes ended without clear resolution.

I position my research as not just mapping distributed agencies within the field, but also as agentive, as generating products capable of impacting (and being impacted by) attachments in the field. Although Grabill (2018) et al. use the word "termini" to describe materials assembled through research, a word which conjures end points, they stress that these products should be understood "as performances that are left as material manifestations of prior work that can be traced and as potential agents to follow to understand future action" (p. 202). They ask researchers to consider artifacts not as entities with stable meanings to be analyzed and dissected,

but rather to attend to the relationship between these "termini" and their contexts of production and dissemination, how they are assembled and come to be in the world, and how they subsequently impact and are impacted by their contexts of use. Throughout the process of planning, facilitating, participating in, and researching the initial Radical Listening recording event, for example, I assembled artifacts as evidence of the various affective attachments that formed in the making of this project. I had a small notebook during the event in which I jotted down notes. When there were periods of down time, I typed up more extensive observations on my computer. Although I was not present in the recording studio with participants, they all gave me permission to access (and later edit) their audio recordings. I also assembled audio from follow-up interviews I conducted with participants in the weeks following the event.

These "termini" to use Grabill et al.'s (2018) terminology, do not simply document what happened; rather, for me as a researcher/participant/activist, the process of creating these termini change(ed) what was(is) happening. During follow-up interviews with participant storytellers in the weeks and months after the original recording event, for example, I formed deeper attachments and built bonds of trust with participants as we met in their homes and workplaces throughout Seattle. I was also occasionally confronted with clashing expectations between my goals with the project and those of participants, necessitating that I change my orientation to the project moving forward. During these follow-ups, I asked if they wanted their interviews edited and played by the CCDE during the Radical Listening community events, and if so, what parts of their conversations they wanted to highlight. This, in turn, impacted the clips that I produced, and thus the affective landscape of the listening parties that occurred throughout the year following the recording event.

Additionally, the field is not simply static scenery surrounding the action. The materiality of the field acts and is acted upon. A number of rhetoricians have complicated traditional models that center the persuasive force of human agents while neglecting the agentive force of the material world. In her book *Still Life with Rhetoric*, Gries (2015) argues for a rhetorical model that conceives "reality to be collectively, materially, *and* semiotically constructed via a variety of actants" (p. 6). The importance of attending to the agentive force of the material field is clear in such examples as the hostile design of the Camden bench. Although the bench may appeal to an individual looking for a place to sit while waiting for the bus, the design of the bench makes laying down hugely uncomfortable and thereby deters homeless populations. The material field encourages certain types of action while hindering others.

Because my fieldwork enabled me to be present as an active participant during each stage of organizing and facilitating the Radical Listening recording event and subsequent listening parties, I was present for the less formal aspects of the project, such as greeting participants before their interviews and chatting with them informally after leaving the recording studio. This allowed me to witness and participate (to a certain extent) in the various connections formed between participant storytellers with each other, facilitators, and the facilitating organizations. For example, as I will describe in greater detail in chapter one, I gained a feel for how the material space of the NPR station shaped the affective landscape of the initial recording event on the first two days of recording by sitting in the studio break room, drinking coffee and chatting with the StoryCorps facilitators as reporters and guests moved in and out of the space. This simple act of being there enabled me to better understand the embodied possibilities and limitations of attachments formed in the field better than if I had only analyzed the recorded StoryCorps conversations after the fact.

In contrast to other qualitative methods in the field of communication, Middleton et al.'s (2015) conceptualization of Participatory Critical Rhetoric places the critic as an active and imminent agent of change. As opposed to traditional critical rhetorical scholarship, which seeks eventual change after the long process of publication, Participatory Critical Rhetoric seeks immanent change through researchers' work on the ground as activists as well as through the much longer process of publication. As Middleton et al. note, "this shifts the role of the critic from one of critical scholar to that of activist-scholar engaged in immanent and material ways with communities they research" (p. 12). They assert that critics' bodies are "critical, affective and risky" (p. xxiii). The body is critical in that it is through the body that the research is experienced, it is affective in that the critic, as another body in the event, both adds to and is impacted by the collective affect, and is risky in that the critic's involvement in a project will not always be positively received nor will it necessarily lead to positive change. Affect and embodiment are key components in accounting for the dynamic, webbed relations the rhetorical critic encounters in the field. In the next section, I outline how affect and embodiment have been theorized within feminist affect studies and how I situate this project within this body of literature.

**Feminist Affect Studies**

The "Radical Listening" digital storytelling project centers positionality and embodiment in relation to systems of power. Embodiment is a central concern in feminist theory. Keane (2005) traces how thinkers from disparate ideological standpoints came to believe that a "misapprehension of material things" leads us to "invert our values, imputing life to the lifeless and thereby losing ourselves" (p. 184). He challenges this mind/body dualism, and other "such ancient dichotomies as form and substance, essence and accident, matter and spirit" (p. 182). As

feminist theorists have long pointed out, these binary constructs have been historically gendered and racialized: mind/rationality is tied to whiteness/masculinity, while body/emotion is associated with the racialized and feminine other.

In critical studies, recent scholarship reexamines materiality's denigrated status. The so-called "ontological turn" seeks to move beyond the alleged limitations of linguistic models that privilege humanity and our words over the agentive force of the material world in which we are embedded. As Liljeström (2016) notes, "a whole range of intellectual questions can be thought as bypassed or lost if the focus is solely on the semantic and symbolic" (p. 18). New Materialism attempts to decenter human interests and define the world beyond representational systems and historicity. Yet by attempting to sidestep human history and culture, some of these lines of inquiry inadvertently and ironically reinforce problematic notions of the universal human subject that obscure issues of race and gender in relation to systems of power. As Hemmings (2012) notes, "my concern remains that work on the importance of ontology post 'the cultural turn' rather curiously instantiates the opposition it critiques" (p. 149). To give one example, in her discussion of "white aurality," Thompson (2017) raises questions about the displacement of race within the ontological turn in sound studies. New materialist analyses of sound art focus on how the genre's abstract materiality (in the form of minimalist drones and hums) has the potential to morph "the banality of the generic into the beauty of the general" (p. 278). Thompson argues, however, that by claiming certain productions of sound art reveal the true nature of "sound-itself," such analyses divorce these works from the lived sociality of their context of production (p. 270). This, in turn, assigns an unnamed "white aurality" with the status of universality. Thus in their attempt to move beyond sociality in their study of sound, new materialist sound critics inadvertently reinforce the hegemony of white aurality. By framing the "ontological turn" as a

drastic departure from past scholarship, new materialism also risks eliding the history of feminist literature on materiality, embodiment and affect which came before it.

Feminist affect studies share with new materialism an interest in thinking through the relationship between individuals and their wider environments, between human affect and matter. Feminist affect studies, however, centers on the contingent nature of affective resonances; these resonances must be understood as co-constitutive with history and culture. Rather than see the material and the discursive as separate, following Hemmings (2012), I see the power of affect "as a resource for understanding their mutual imbrication" (p. 149). This study moves from the premise that experiences of the material world differ based on both the physical composition of the individual experiencing body and the discursive regimes in which the body is socialized. The material and the discursive are interwoven. Embodiment exceeds the skin: bodies are permeable, embedded within cultures and interacting with other bodies, objects, buildings, and technologies that act upon the body even as the body acts upon them. Our sense of "self" is thus constantly (re)constructed through our interactions with our environments. Because our bodies are interwoven with the world around us, affect is always collective and relational. Bodies, however, are not all affected in the same way.

### *Differentiating Affect and Emotion*

One way various feminist theorists have distinguished between affect and emotion is to understand affect as the physiological counterpart to the psychological processing of emotions, with both affect and emotion describing different aspects of the same feeling (Liljeström, 2016, p. 23). Ahmed (2014) argues that although it can be helpful to differentiate between the physical sensation of rage (affect) and the feeling of being enraged (emotion), for example, these terms bleed into one another in practice. Additionally, she resists an understanding of emotions/affects

as emanating from within us or as imposed on us by larger ideological structures. Instead, she argues that emotions/affects are inherently relational. We as individuals do not "have" or "possess" them. Rather, they are generated through our interactions with the world. In her investigation into the "cultural politics of emotion," she traces "not only how bodies are 'pressed' upon by other bodies, but how these presses become impressions, feelings that are suffused with ideas and values" (p. 208). These impressions shape (and are shaped by) our daily existence in ways that often go unnoticed.

### *Everyday Affects: Blurring the Boundary Between Private and Public Trauma*

This project centers on the importance of understanding affect as part of everyday experiences and lived attachments. These everyday affects shape behavior, although in unpredictable and unwieldy ways. A central concern among feminist scholars of affect is the relationship between power and feeling and how meaning is circulated through affect. These scholars interrogate the role of feelings in working through the relations of personal pain to political struggle (Ahmed, 2014; Ahmed 2010; Cvetkovich, 2003; Hemmings, 2012; Probyn, 2005). Trauma, in particular, weaves together the personal and the political, the emotional and the social. As Cvetkovich (2003) argues, "As a name for experiences of socially situated political violence, trauma forges overt connections between politics and emotion" (p. 3). Although trauma is often thought of as emanating from a singular world-shattering event, trauma also builds through everyday, routinized affects. When bodies instinctively shift away from other bodies as they move through their daily existence, a kind of trauma can emerge and be reinforced with each body that moves away, that refuses to make eye contact, that crosses the street. When an individual riding on a bus to their job downtown recoils from another passenger they perceive as homeless, this act of affective repulsion does not exist in isolation, but exists as one resonance

within a louder gong of devaluation. As Cvetkovich (2003) notes, the traumas of racism are perpetuated through "everyday forms" that are both institutional and mundane, that often go unnoticed "except to those who are attuned to them," and that are built through the reverberations of "longer histories of racial trauma" (p. 6).

Affect is a key component in thinking through how racism becomes institutionalized through mundane daily routines. Trainor (2008) argues that rather than see racist discourse as "abstract political or identity-based calculations," she emphasizes such discourse as "affective and emotioned, rather than logical or rational" (p. 3). From her study of racism in the classroom, she found that racism among students was propelled by unexamined classroom rituals and the implied values they generated. These values, although not written into the syllabus, were nonetheless consequential in shaping students' feelings about race. She argues that the only hope for changing the way students perceive race is through moving beyond logical appeals against racism to consider "emotion in the context of persuasion" and thus get students to feel differently about race. Hemmings (2012) similarly argues that "in order to know differently we have to feel differently" (p. 150). This dissertation is part of an ongoing politically engaged project that seeks to trace the ephemeral and shifting affects that shape interactions between different bodies. These affective assemblages can work to reinforce or resist institutionalized patterns of devaluation.

### *Potential for Feminist Politics*

Affective resonances can work to legitimate and affirm structures of oppression (Ahmed, 2010; Gray, 2015). At the same time, affective resonances also have transformative potential. Liljeström (2016) argues that many feminist scholars have theorized the "transformative meaning of affective politics precisely in the gap between the ontological and the epistemological" (p. 30). Feminist standpoint theory, for example, can be understood as a "body

of inquiry into the relationship between the ontological, epistemological, and transformative" (p. 31). Drawing on feminist standpoint theory, Hemmings (2012) argues that marginalized individuals are not inherently more trustworthy than privileged ones, but rather that the conditions of relative inequality in which they live "mean they (have to) know dominant frames of legitimation in order to survive or thrive, and generate local knowledges for the same reason" (p. 155). Hemmings explains this by turning to the example of the situated standpoint of a domestic worker: whereas she knows both the intimacies of her own home as well as the home of her employer, the family whose home she tends does not know the intimacies of her homelife. Although each member of the family has their own situated knowledge, the domestic worker knows the wealth of knowledge she has gained from her work is not conferred with the same material and societal benefits as their knowledge. It is from the discrepancy between the knowledge the housekeeper has accrued and its relative (lack of) material/societal value that an affective dissonance might emerge, an embodied outrage, and from it perhaps a resistant mode. Hemmings argues that solidarity which sustains difference cannot emerge from an assumption of shared experience based on identity, but rather on a "desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds" (p. 158). The potential for a politics that promotes equity, Hemmings argues, should be rooted in an "affective solidarity" emerging not from shared identity, but rather from a shared affective dissonance.

Affect can act to (re)produce hegemonic, routinized meanings, but can also offer possibilities to repeat the routine with a difference, to feel the potential for a different way of being. Papacharissi (2016) argues that affect is "habitually rhythmic, via the connected assemblages of habituated interpretations and practices" (p. 311). These normalized patterns of emotioned response, however, are also "performatively evocative of would-be reactions" that

have the potential to form new, perhaps more equitable, grooves (p. 311). This dissertation maps how the meanings attached to mediated stories of racialized trauma are shaped by embodied, everyday rituals of listening and how these rituals generate structured affective responses to the content produced. In order to address racialized systems of devaluation, we must speak out against these systems. As Ahmed (2014) argues, "responding to pain depends on speaking about pain, and such speech acts are the condition for the formation of a 'we', made up of different stories of pain that cannot be reduced to a ground, identity or sameness" (p. 174). By analyzing the flow of affective interactions between storytellers, stories and listeners across media, I investigate how digital storytelling both impacts those sharing their narratives as well as shapes the way listeners feel about different others. I analyze the ways in which the emergence of these affective responses may (or may not) open spaces for solidarity across difference.

## Tracing StoryCorps's Affective Archives

The archive of over 70,000 StoryCorps recorded conversations is not a static repository of voices preserving localized histories, but rather this is a living, affective archive. The stories that comprise this archive shape and are shaped by affective interactions with storytellers, organizations and listeners. NPR and StoryCorps producers draw on this archive to create broadcast clips related to the news of the day. Community partners, like the CCDE, create their own storytelling projects, content and events from the recorded conversations. Storytellers, facilitating organizations, and listeners share these stories online, where they may be heard and shared by others. Cvetkovich (2003) argues that affect "serves as the foundation for the formation of public cultures" (p. 10). In her book *An Archive of Feelings,* she states that her work "is not only focused on texts as representations or narratives of trauma but also concerned with how cultural production that emerges around trauma enables new practices and publics" (p. 10).

In a similar vein, this project does not only seek to analyze the narratives of difference produced through StoryCorps conversations as texts, but also addresses how the practices of production and circulation of stories comprise wider archives that generate and are generated by affective publics. Like Cvetkovich's *Archive of Feelings*, stories told and heard through the Radical Listening Digital Storytelling project constitute "an affective public sphere in which emotional investments are entangled with political ones" (p. 195).

The individual chapters of this dissertation work to produce an affective archive as much as analyze one. In the process of writing this work, I have assembled a number of texts that act as traces of the affective experience of partaking in processes of recording, editing, sharing and listening to stories of racialized trauma and resistance. For the first three chapters, these assembled texts include my written field notes as well as audio recordings from: the initial Radical Listening recording event, my follow-up interviews with participants, the listening parties, and the Critical Ethnic Studies Association Conference panel. They also include listener reflections completed during the listening party events. In my last chapter, I analyze the archive of StoryCorps conversations beyond those recorded as part of the Radical Listening partnership with the CCDE. I trace the movement of StoryCorps stories that were broadcast nationally on public radio and shared on social media. In what follows, I outline the chapters that make up this dissertation.

**Chapter 1: Forming Anti-Racist Alliances: Attending to the Attachments that Bind Us**

In chapter one, I analyze the attachments that were formed, strengthened and strained between participants in the process of recording their situated experiences of racialized trauma within the context of the Radical Listening recording event. The material world both relates us to one another even as it consists of a plurality of distinct yet permeable bodies. Collaboration and

politics are made possible through sustained engagement and attunement to the complexity of the attachments that bind different bodies together within our collective space. The conversations participants shared with one another are not simply stories of innocent victims working through the pain of racism. Rather, they are complicated narratives in which pain, humor, feelings of complicity, feelings of resistance and hope, of rage and wounding ebb and flow and layer upon each other. In this chapter, I trace the affective potential in terms of opening spaces for wonder through radical listening between participants within the intimacy of the recording studio.

This chapter also traces the tensions and joys that emerged as part of my fieldwork during the initial recording event. Throughout my fieldwork, I attempted to center the voices of community members as co-participants in my research. Trauger and Fluri (2014) stress that in community-engaged research, participant knowledge needs to be centered. The researcher must work closely with participants to shape "what counts as legitimate knowledge" (p. 34). They note that this is often a difficult, messy process. At each stage, the researcher must continuously ask "knowledge for whom and for ultimately what purpose?" (p. 34). In chapter one, I trace my hopes and concerns with the project in relation to those of participants. Just as my fieldwork enabled me to advocate with participants for anti-racist change, I was also changed by the process of engaging in this work. By attending to the bonds that were formed, strengthened and strained between participant storytellers with each other, with the facilitating organizations, and with me as the researcher, I map the potentiality in attending to these attachments through radical listening, through a process that attends to resonance as well as difference and how relations of power influence these bonds.

## Chapter 2: Collective Listening to Mediated Sound–Cultivating a Praxis of Radical Listening

In chapter two, I explore the affective potential embedded in the embodied act of assembling together to listen to stories of racism/resistance by tracing the embodied experience of attending community events called "listening parties." During these events, storytellers played and discussed audio podcasts addressing their experiences of racism and resistance. I trace possibilities and barriers within these events for cultivating a radical feminist ethics of reception that centers difference, equity, and embodiment. Dreher (2012) argues that while media studies "routinely has explored the questions of voice and speaking" there has been considerably less attention paid to "the dynamics and politics of listening" (p. 159). In this chapter, I further develop my theorization of radical listening, which involves a praxis of tuning in to multiple voices in relation to each other and in relation to the self. It requires the listener to pay attention to the complexities of different voices, while also attending to the self and one's own performance in relation to the others. This process necessitates vulnerability without the guarantee of solidarity.

Within the space of the listening parties, meaning was co-constructed in the affectively charged spaces connecting the storytellers, edited podcasts from their stories, the audience, the physical environment, and the larger historical/economic/political contexts of the events. The storytellers' podcasts were doubly articulated as embodied soundwaves resonating through the bodies of the audience and as symbolic messages located within wider discourses of racialized trauma and resistance. The listening parties enabled a co-presence that attempted to remove listeners from habituated patterns of non-reflexive listening by encouraging them to engage in the rare activity of listening together to mediated sound. For digital storytelling to be an effective

critical tool, we need to not only provide the conditions for people to tell their stories, but also provide "a greater faculty for listening to others' stories" (Couldry, 2008, p. 54). By centering a praxis of radical listening in our project, we attempted to shift dominant discourses that place meaning and action in the arena of the speaker to our combined obligation to listen together in difference.

Rheingold (2008) stresses that "It isn't 'voice' if nobody seems to be listening" (p. 99). The goal of the Radical Listening project is not just the archiving of stories, but harnessing the affective potential in personal narratives to turn these stories into larger conversations about the power inequalities between individuals and groups and the greater political implications therein. Through cultivating a capacity for radical listening, we hoped to foster the difficult process of undermining institutionalized patterns of racialized devaluation in our community. The fostering of this capacity constructs an ethics of listening to mediated sound extending beyond the listening party walls.

**Chapter 3: Sharing Stories of Racism–The Limits of Listening and the Persistence of Hope**

The materiality of technologies and the cultures in which they are woven are mutually constitutive. As new technology emerges, whether it is writing, radio or the internet, these technologies provide pathways for social change, but existing cultures and systems of power constrain this change. In this chapter, I analyze how the affordances offered by new media technologies and digital storytelling provide marginalized groups with tools to resist injustice, while at the same time acknowledging the constraints of technology to transform long entrenched systems of oppression.

Whereas chapters two and four of this dissertation explore how the meaning of stories morph as they permeate the bodies of different listening audiences, in chapter three I focus on

what motivates storytellers to make public personal narratives of discrimination and resistance. For many of the storytellers who took part in this project, speaking out against racism is an act of resistance; it is work that needs to be done despite the risks to body and mind, despite often falling on ears unwilling to hear. At the same time, publicly discussing stories of racism comes with a cost. I argue that although personally political and politically personal stories can spur change toward equity, this is not a simple process nor causal relationship. Instead, a story's potentiality moves, is built upon or dissolves, through complex relationships with listeners increasingly mediated through technology.

This chapter analyzes the risks storytellers took and their hopes for change at each stage of the Radical Listening project: from archiving to recording to editing to sharing these stories online and on the airwaves. I center my narrative on three key stories, and four storytellers, who remained engaged throughout various forms of dissemination. In the process of archiving their stories, participants emphasized their hopes of documenting marginalized histories on the one hand against their concerns over privacy and safety on the other. In the act of recording stories of racism, storytellers emphasized engaging in a form of vulnerability that enabled them to reclaim power by reworking the narrative. In the process of working with me to edit their stories, storytellers discussed their fear that their stories would lose their complexity on the one hand while also emphasizing the opportunities afforded for enacting radical listening through editing on the other. Finally, in the process of sharing their stories online and through the airwaves, participants weighed the desire to make an impact on a wider public against the risks of public exposure and loss of control over their narratives.

## Chapter 4: Tracing the Affective Ecology of StoryCorps Stories Shared Online

In chapter four, I pivot away from our local StoryCorps partnership to analyze the affective ecology surrounding StoryCorps stories broadcast on National Public Radio. This affective ecology is composed of the non-linear, non-causal relationships between the wider social/political context and news programming in which these stories are embedded, the ethos of the organizations posting these stories on social media, and listener interactivity with these stories via the comment fields on social media posts. New media scholars have theorized the importance of affect in creating differentiated publics online. In her study of the platform Twitter, Papacharrissi (2016) argues that "the form of content streams or news streams generated is affective in nature… and these streams serve to discursively call into being public formations, that I refer to as affective publics. They serve as storytelling structures that sustain a modality of engagement that is primarily affective" (p. 310). In relation to chapter four, I analyze how the meaning and significance of StoryCorps stories morph as these segments travel the diverse affective networks generated through the interplay of stories, the platforms through which they are shared, and the audiences who engage with them. I trace the resonance that reverberates through this affective ecology to map its potential for building counterpublic spaces online as well as the risk this resonance carries of decontextualized connection that obscures power differentials and works to maintain the status quo. These public stories of personal experiences with discrimination can also act as a magnet for internet trolls intent on stigmatizing difference and ridiculing the perceived sentimentality of these narratives.

As a whole, this dissertation focuses on the embodied potential of recording, editing and sharing audio stories of racism/resistance as a tool to fight discrimination. I map the morphing affective resonance of these conversations from the original act of recording an intimate

conversation, to archiving these stories in the Library of Congress, to editing and sharing these stories online and on the radio. Drawing from literature on affect and materiality from rhetorical studies, new media studies and cultural studies, I analyze the potential and limitations of the diverse modalities of production and circulation to form affective ecologies that create barriers to and potential for radical listening.

# Chapter 1: Forming Anti-Racist Alliances–Attending to the Attachments that Bind Us

“What does that mean -- tame?"
"It is an act too often neglected," said the fox. "It means to establish ties."
"To establish ties?"
"Just that," said the fox. "To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world....”

— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

In de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* (1943), a prince leaves his home, a distant asteroid, and with it his only companion, a beloved rose. He travels to Earth only to find that his rose is seemingly not unique, but simply one of many roses in the universe. Although he is initially dismayed by this realization, through the help of a fox, the Prince comes to realize that it is not the essence of the rose that makes her significant. Rather, through the time spent in the company of the rose, he has formed a relationship with this flower that is quite unlike the relationship he has with any other entity in the universe. In the words of the fox, they have “tamed” each other. It is through this dynamic interaction, this give and take, that meaning and significance are created, not through a stable essence inherent in either the Prince or the rose. The fox tells the Prince, “You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.” The experiences we have with those around us, the attachments we form, can become routinized to the point where we forget the power coursing through these bonds and the responsibility they demand of us for each other. Through reorienting ourselves, our bodies, toward other bodies and

our bonds and responsibilities to one another, we may begin to cultivate a sense of wonder, to foster something surprising in the ordinary attachments that bind us to the world around us.

In this chapter, I examine how centering listening dyads between people of color through an anti-racist digital storytelling project opens up spaces to tend to existing attachments as well as form new ones. These attachments work to counter the taboos around speaking the traumas of racism; they create moments of wonder through radical listening. While these attachments can move us toward community and action to address issues of social justice, this is not a simple process nor causal relationship. In order to collectively work toward anti-racist change, we must listen not only to the stories which map onto our own, which confirm the self, but also the narratives which clash, the ineffable stories which may require us to tune our ears to a different frequency and make space for the voice of another. In this chapter, I discuss my experiences engaging in rhetorical fieldwork which provided me the opportunity to work with participants to attempt to enact change in our community, and to trace the affective bonds of joy, sorrow and ambivalence that emerged through these encounters. The Radical Listening digital storytelling project is not just about listening and being heard, but about the building of bonds, the construction of something new in the space between self and other and the opening of new potentialities. In my analysis, I outline the various ways these affective bonds formed between individuals, spaces, and organizations, as well as the potential in these bonds both for joint politics and alternatively, frustration and confusion.

This chapter investigates where, when, and with whom we talk about the often taboo and painful topic of racism. As such, some guiding questions include: How does the relationship between participant storytellers impact how they navigate their identities as people of color and their willingness/comfort sharing experiences of racism in front of the microphone? How does

the relationship between participant storytellers and the facilitating organizations (CCDE, StoryCorps) impact participant feelings of safety and value when sharing their narratives? How have I as the researcher shaped and been shaped by the affective bonds that formed in the field?

In this chapter, I analyze the different ways attachments between participant storytellers shaped and were shaped by the CCDE/StoryCorps digital storytelling project. The traditional StoryCorps model is built around the premise of making time to record a conversation with an intimate other (i.e. family members, close friends, etc.). In our conversations with StoryCorps, however, we in the CCDE pushed back against the necessity of the conversation partners having close relationships. Our team had a sense that there would be instances of participants wanting to talk about experiences of racism but with someone with whom they had some distance. Many community members who signed up for the project did indeed ask to be paired with someone they did not know, someone who was also a person of color with their own stories of fighting against racism. Many of the younger participants, on the other hand, felt more comfortable speaking with a friend. They also, however, wanted to keep these conversations separate from other intimate spaces, such as from family members and co-workers.

In the following sections, I first discuss the affective attachments that formed during the project between friends. I trace how engaging in this project enabled them to address racism in a way that felt different from previous conversations. I then turn to community partners who did not know each other before signing up to take part in the Radical Listening project. I address the difficulty of building trust within these new relationships as well as the bonds that formed between participants, bonds that continued beyond the walls of the recording studio.

### Creating Space and Making Time: Amplifying Attachments Between Friends

Although many historians are skeptical of the historical usefulness of the StoryCorps archives, they see potential in the project's social goals for strengthening meaningful bonds between people through listening. Oral historian Elizabeth Pozzi-Thanner argues that StoryCorps' main contribution is not primarily historical, but rather in encouraging a space in our fast-paced society where people commit to being truly present with one another. She states that the project "might encourage people to ask deeper questions about each other, to listen to each other more carefully, if only for an hour" (p. 104). Similarly, Abelmann et al. (2009) applaud StoryCorps for focusing on "the need to slow down and pay attention" (p. 258). Rather than refer to StoryCorps as an oral history project, the authors consider it to be a "highly ritualized performance that inserts the tellers into a larger public culture of affect and remembering" (p. 257). In this section, I look at the affective bonds that formed and the tensions that emerged in the space between friend listening dyads within the recording studio as they discussed memories of racism and resistance. I first address why some participants felt comfortable sharing their stories of racism with particular intimate spheres and not with others. I then turn to how the project opened spaces of wonder through providing the time and space for radical listening between friends. I end this section by discussing the agentive force of the microphone and recording space in shaping the meaning of these recordings.

This analysis centers on two friend pairs: Michael and Jermaine, and Izara and Mary. Their experiences recording their stories during the Radical Listening project illuminate both the potential and limitations of the project to make space to attend to and amplify existing attachments. Most of the participants who wanted to speak with a friend rather than an unknown community member tended to be relatively younger undergraduate and graduate students who

were drawn to the project because of their involvement with the CCDE and its various initiatives. They were more likely to feel comfortable talking about issues of racism openly and sharing them on social media. This is true of both Michael and Jermaine, and Izara and Mary. At the time of the event, Michael was a Black undergraduate student and Jermaine, a Black graduate student. Izara and Mary were both Black undergraduate students at the time of the recording. I had met Michael at various CCDE events before he signed up for the project, and Mary and Izara for the first time when they came in to record their conversation. Jermaine and I are friends and met through the CCDE.

The Radical Listening recording event took place at two different locations over three days. The first two days we recorded in a professional studio at the local NPR station, and the last day we recorded in a make-shift studio in a classroom in the Communications Building on the University of Washington campus. As I will discuss, these two spaces generated very different affective responses from participant storytellers. While some participants felt that recording in the professional studio gave them a sense that they were contributing to something important, others felt more comfortable recording in the less formal make-shift studio on the University campus.

Throughout this analysis, I weave in narratives drawn from my fieldnotes written during the three days of the Radical Listening recording event. These vignettes give a sense (from my situated perspective) of the affectively charged interactions that took place during the event. They illustrate both the entangled tensions and possibilities that emerge as part of rhetorical fieldwork and emphasize my positioning as an active relational node in the field. When organizing the Radical Listening storytelling event with the CCDE and StoryCorps, I was not expecting to record a conversation as a participant. Due to various circumstances that emerged

when planning and facilitating the event, however, I ended up participating in two. The personal vignettes which are interwoven into the analysis below narrate how my unanticipated participation as a storyteller came about and how these experiences in front of the mic informed my understanding of the project and my role within it.

**May 18th, 2017: First Day of Recordings**

*At the end of the first day of recordings, we received an email from Gunner, a man who had an interview scheduled with his wife for the following day. When he signed them up to take part in the project, he said they wanted to discuss the process of negotiating racial difference in their marriage; he is White, and his wife is Black and Latina. He said they also wanted to talk about the challenges they face trying to protect their three mixed-race children from discrimination. In his email sent the day before their scheduled recording, however, he informed us that they would not be participating after all. As he went on to explain, he never consulted with his wife before signing them up for the project. When he eventually told her, he was shocked that she was less than enthused by the prospect of discussing their personal life in front of a microphone. Gina, the Assistant Director of the CCDE, shook her head as she told me about the email. To us, it seemed baffling yet utterly predictable that this man had failed to tell his wife he signed them up to record a potentially painful conversation about race and then was surprised when she refused to take part in the project.*

**Close, But Not Too Close:**

**Why It's Sometimes Easier to Discuss Racism with Friends than Family**

This incident with Gunner speaks to something that surfaced in follow-up interviews with many of the participant storytellers of color: both the trust that is needed to feel comfortable sharing stories of racism, and the (seemingly) paradoxical desire to have a degree of distance from the listener when divulging these painful moments. A month and a half before the event, potential participants filled in an online form discussing why they wanted to take part in the project, what experiences they wanted to share, and who they wanted as their conversation partner. The online form also provided the option for the CCDE to choose a partner for them. Storytellers were much more likely to bring in a friend, or even ask to be paired with a stranger, than to record a conversation with a romantic partner or close family member. As I looked back through these online responses, it occurred to me that even for the few individuals who signed up with a family member, most of these interviews fell through. In my follow-up interview with one participant, she stressed that "sometimes these conversations, we need to have them with people that we don't know very well, that you're not gonna have dinner with every night" (Rahna, Follow-up interview). The desire to keep these conversations separate from the family dinner table definitely resonated for Izara and Mary.

During our follow-up interview a few weeks after the recording event, Izara told me "I don't feel comfortable talking about a lot of racist issues and stuff with them [her parents]" (Izara, Follow-up interview). She stressed that as immigrants from an older generation, her parents have a different frame of reference and do not understand race and racism the same way she does having grown up in the United States. She said she was not planning on sharing the recording with her family, and explained:

> I think that would just bring up stories from back home. My dad left during a war, so compared to a war, everything is literally nothing. You can't really compare it. Actually, I do sometimes have conversations with my dad because he's a taxi driver, so he was called like the N-word and things like that. So we'll have conversations about it, but he's just like 'You gotta ignore them.' Things like that. (Izara, Follow-up interview)

Izara expressed that she felt like her story would be better understood among the young, Black activist circles she was active in on campus. She said she planned to post the recording on the local Black Lives Matter social media pages, and told me "I'm really comfortable when I'm trying to spread the word" (Izara, Follow-up interview).

In a separate follow-up interview with Izara's conversation partner Mary, she similarly stated that she had no plans to share the recording with her family:

> I don't think my dad or my mom like- she'll listen to it because I'm her daughter and I'm in it- but I don't think she would like, you know, *really understand it* or, I mean, if I made her listen to it I wouldn't expect her to go into like a deep discussion with me about like, 'how did it feel?', or 'what was that experience like?'. I just, yeah it's not something like we connect with like that, *that's not stuff you would talk about with your parents*, I don't know why but yeah, it would just be different. (Mary, Follow-up interview)

Although Mary did not want her family to hear the interview, she emphasized that she is really proud of her conversation with Izara, and wants to share it with other friends, with people "who are close to me that would have experienced it too" (Mary, Follow-up interview).

The tension between wanting to share your story with certain circles while keeping it separate from other intimate spaces, especially family, is a theme that emerged in many of my follow-up interviews. It is a tension that I will return to in chapter three when discussing what

happens to the meaning of these stories when they are broadcast on the radio and shared online. There sometimes exists a double bind in our most intimate relationships with other people. The proximity of that intimate other to the site of trauma can paradoxically amplify the gap between self and other, between their pain and yours. As Ahmed (2014) opines, "There is a gulf that cannot be overcome by empathy, even by somebody in the story, connected by a bond of love; even by the daughter whose pain is also part of the story, whose pain throbs the story into its difficult life" (p. 37). For many of the participants who took part in this project, it felt safer sharing these stories with a friend, or even a previously unknown community member who was similarly working through experiences of racism, than with family members.

**May 19th, 2017: Second Day of Recordings**

*Once Gunner canceled, Gina and I went back and forth about what to do with the now open interview spot early the next day. Gina doubted we would find anyone else at such short notice. I told her I could bring in my friend Sylvia if no one else was available. Honestly, I felt a little awkward offering to fill the spot; I had already volunteered to record an interview with another participant who needed a partner. And I wasn't just worried about my voice being over-represented as a researcher and facilitator of the project. As mixed-race Asian American women, I also felt a gnawing uncertainty about how Sylvia and my stories would fit into the archive of participants discussing moments of racism and resistance. A wave of questions bombarded my brain. As individuals who are half White, where do we fit in this contested category of people of color? Given our relative privilege as racially ambiguous individuals who are often able to pass in hegemonic White spaces, should we be inserting our voices in this conversation? Can our*

*stories of navigating the liminal spaces between racial and cultural identities add anything? As the night wore on and it became clear that no one else would be able to fill the spot, I gave in and called Sylvia. She was excited by the prospect of taking part in the project.*

*Sylvia moved to the United States from Taiwan when she was in high school. We met over a decade ago in the dormitories at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and we both ended up becoming graduate students in Seattle. Because of the multiple ways our life circumstances have drawn us together over the years, Sylvia says our friendship is marked by strong Yuanfen, the Chinese concept for the binding force that brings together people/objects/events. Before asking her to record an interview with me for the Radical Listening project, we had already been recording a number of conversations for a podcast I was making about friendship and illness called "Sick Girl.'' The podcast chronicles how sickness upturned our lives and how the bonds of friendship enable(d) us to cope.*

*Although we were used to talking in the presence of a microphone, this interview felt more formal; whereas our past conversations took place in my apartment or Sylvia's houseboat, this one was happening in a professional studio. We carpooled on the morning of the recording. Sylvia's chronic illness was flaring up and she was unusually quiet. Gina and the StoryCorps facilitators greeted us in the lobby. Although I expected to have to cram into a small studio, the recording space was spacious with a large window on one end and plenty of natural light. I expected the room to be soundproof, but murmurs from a reporter on the phone outside seeped into the space. Sylvia and I sat at a small table facing one another. The conversation flowed easily, and the time seemed to*

*fly by. In the midst of this organic back and forth, however, a tension emerged. I realized that in our relationship we rarely discuss race directly. I found out for the first time how difficult it had been for my long-time friend to acclimate into American culture after moving here from Taiwan. When she was growing up in Taiwan, Sylvia always felt very Taiwanese, but people would assume she was a foreigner because she is half White. When she moved to the United States, however, she felt invisible and intimidated by her White peers at school. I think of Sylvia as a very social person and was surprised to hear that she spent her first several years in the United States feeling isolated and speaking as little as possible.*

*Later in the conversation, Sylvia mentioned that when we first met and she learned that I was half Indian, she thought I meant Native American until she met my family. When she mentioned how I don't look Indian at all, I felt a familiar pang in my chest. Throughout my life, people have pointed out in various ways how I visually stick out in my family. Each time feels like a strange and seemingly arbitrary dislocation from the people who are closest to me. Sylvia and I discussed this feeling of dislocation until the time ran out. Although the recording was over, it felt like we were just beginning to scratch the surface of our complicated relationship with our racial identities, of what it means to be White/Asian American/Mixed Race. We walked out of the studio together, signed the StoryCorps release forms, and were handed a diploma letting us know that our story would be archived at the Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.*

## Creating Spaces for Wonder in the Studio: Making Time to Attend to Our Attachments

Many younger participant storytellers chose to record a conversation with a friend, with a person who they knew had a similar background grappling with racism. In contrast to me and Sylvia, for most of these friend pairs, this conversation was not the first of its kind, but rather a more formal version of a discussion about racism that they had been tackling over the course of their friendship. Several factors shaped (and were shaped by) the affective attachments between friends in the recording studio such as 1) their prior engagement with the CCDE and 2) the time and space the project provided them to fully unpack experiences of racism/resistance.

### *1) Prior Engagement with the CCDE*

Most of the friend pairs I spoke with felt comfortable taking part in the project because they trusted the CCDE. Michael and Jermaine met each other and developed a friendship through collaborating on equity projects with the Center. They both grew up in South Seattle and Jermaine became a role model for Michael as one of the few Black graduate students on campus. Michael was applying for graduate programs at the time of the recording event, and Jermaine was a pillar of support navigating Michael through the application process. The CCDE in general was a key resource to both Michael and Jermaine; they stressed its importance as an organization providing spaces for Black students to build community. The Center acted as "connective tissue" tying them to the University setting, a place they felt was not built for them. Neither Michael nor Jermaine had heard about StoryCorps before the project but felt compelled to participate because of their faith in the CCDE and its anti-racist work. Mary and Izara also trusted the Center. Mary was actively engaged with the CCDE and considered Ralina, its Director, a mentor and role model. Izara had attended CCDE events before participating in the project and had heard a lot about the Center from Mary. These bonds of trust between the facilitating organization and

participants were crucial in their willingness to sign up for the project, share stories, and allow their recordings to be used by the organization. As I will discuss later, for participants who did not have a prior relationship with the Center, this trust had to be built during the course of the project, a process that did not always go smoothly.

***2) Taking the Time and Making the Space to Listen***

When talking to participants in their follow-up interviews, I noticed a contradiction in how they described their engagement with the project. It was ordinary, a single node in an ongoing conversation that was happening before and continued after the event. And yet, it was also distinct; it had a different structure of feeling than previous conversations with the same person on the same topic. Although friends had touched on these stories before, the interview space provided time and an incentive to delve deeper into these stories, hearing them in a fullness that contrasted with previous fragmented conversations within the hustle and bustle of daily life.

For Michael, the space to slow down with a friend and reflect on his experiences separated this conversation from others. Because of the relationship they had before recording, it was easy for Michael to open up to Jermaine in the studio. Jermaine played a pivotal role in guiding him through telling his story. When talking about experiences of dealing with racism, Michael realized that they usually come out in little snippets circumscribed to what is deemed relevant in the moment. It felt therapeutic for Michael to be able to carve out a space to unpack these experiences at length. For his part, Jermaine loved hearing the story of Michael's life "from start to finish" as he put it (Jermaine, Follow-up interview). Although he had heard "bits and pieces," sitting down with the time to listen intently, free from distractions, gave these stories a fullness that is a rare experience when juggling the responsibilities of daily life. Michael

described the space and time provided by the recording as “intimate” (Michael, Follow-up interview).

Mary thought the interview would be rigidly structured and mediated by either the CCDE or StoryCorps but was pleasantly surprised to find that "the format was a lot more open” (Mary, Follow-up interview). When she sat in the studio with Izara, she was relieved that “they kind of let us do our own thing and the conversation felt very natural” (Mary, Follow-up interview). Mary told me that she was not nervous during the recording but acknowledged that if she had been speaking with a stranger, it would have been stressful. When thinking back to that moment sitting across from Izara, however, she laughed as she described how easy it was: “I mean, I've never ever run out of things to say when talking to her” (Mary, Follow-up interview). Like my conversation with Sylvia, Mary did not feel the need to prepare questions or map out their discussion in advance.

Although it “felt very natural,” it also felt distinct from other conversations in their relationship (Mary, Follow-up interview). At the time of the event, Mary and Izara were the hosts of an early morning college radio show about life as poor college students. Although they were used to bantering back and forth in front of the mic, Mary told me that this experience felt different from their radio show: "It was, I don't know why, it just felt really like different and like very, it was like a relief to talk about it and it felt like we were doing something important” (Mary, Follow-up interview). When they initially signed up, Mary thought she would be the interviewer helping Izara discuss her experiences, but she ended up disclosing many of her own stories. She described the experiences as painful, but also productive and rewarding:

> I think it was really, for me the most surprising thing was–I think we were talking about colorism, or it was one of those topics that I was sharing a personal experience with–and

> it surprised me how talking about it kind of brought it up again. And it was really weird because I felt myself getting choked up a little bit because I was kind of retelling it. And that was what was surprising to me, I didn't expect to be as invested in it. I mean, I thought that I was just going to be telling a story and that would be it. But retelling it again kind of brought the whole feeling and experience back so that was really shocking. But it was also really rewarding... I didn't know I was going to feel that way, you think you've moved on and then it brings up more. (Mary, Follow-up interview)

Within this short excerpt, Mary expressed that the experience was “surprising” and “really shocking” four different times. Having spoken about racism before with this same friend, Mary had thought it would be pretty straightforward: “I was just going to be telling a story and that would be it” (Mary, Follow-up interview). She was sure she had “moved on.” And yet, in the space between Mary and Izara within the recording studio, something welled up from beneath the surface. When reflecting on her feelings about what transpired between them that day, Mary beamed: “The whole experience was really fun and was like, very relieving and great, it's like therapy" (Mary, Follow-up interview). Through the process of making time and space to discuss the traumas of racism and strategies for resistance, something new emerged in the space between old friends, amplifying existing bonds.

The tracing of incidents of racism with each other, their conditions of creation, the way they morph through the telling, opens space for wonder. Ahmed (2014) argues that the ordinary is that which is not felt at all. Through reorienting ourselves to see anew that which was once ordinary, “wonder works to transform the ordinary, which is already recognised, into the extraordinary” (p. 179). The conversations that friends recorded through this project were for the most part one piece in a continuing dialogue. By creating an intimate space to delve into

experiences of racism over a sustained period of time without distraction, however, the project afforded participants the space to reorient themselves to each other and to these past experiences of racism. It created a space for participants to attune themselves to that which had become ordinary, thus making possible something new.

For the majority of friends who signed up to take part in the project, conversations about race were interwoven into the fabric of their friendship. I want to acknowledge that this is in contrast to my conversation with Sylvia; sitting in the recording studio was one of the first times in our long friendship that we had a sustained conversation about race, and it has spurred several subsequent conversations about navigating our racial identities. Our privileged positions as women who, within certain contexts, are able to blend into White spaces likely informed the absence of direct conversations about race in my relationship with Sylvia. Whereas we could speak with confidence about the stigmas and challenges we faced as women living through and with debilitating illnesses, we felt less confident about what we could attribute to race/racism. When attempting to build bonds of solidarity between people of color, bonds that might move us toward a collective politics, we cannot take this category of "people of color" as an unproblematic given. We need to be attuned to how this group is constructed and how individuals are differentially positioned within it, attending not only to the experiences that resonate, but also attuning ourselves to the experiences that diverge. In the next section, I address how the knowledge that the conversation was being recorded, archived, and potentially edited and shared with future listeners changed how participants told their stories. I also discuss the impact of the bustle of the recording space in shaping the affective experience of recording these stories.

**Performing in Front of the Mic: The Agentive Force of the Microphone and Studio Space**

Knowledge that the conversation was being recorded and would be used beyond the studio walls gave participants' words a sense of gravitas that shaped what and how they shared their stories. The conversations were both "natural" and "organic" while also performed in a way that addressed not only the friend in front of them, but also a future listening audience. Neumark (2010) argues that recorded personal narratives are rich spaces to deconstruct the artificial boundary "between authentic identity/performed self, public/private, mediated/immediate" (p. 102). When listening back to my recording with Sylvia, for example, I noticed that the tone of the conversation was different than I remembered it being and from how I described it in my fieldnotes. In my memory, the conversation was natural and free flowing. When listening back, however, we sound oddly professional. Our voices are deeper and slower than normal. We carefully provide background context to stories that would not be necessary if we were only speaking with each other. It is clear that we are aware of the recorder and the future listening audience it represents. This is in sharp contrast to the raw audio from the podcast I was recording with Sylvia around the same time. In these recordings, which took place in our homes with no one else present and no time limits, our voices inhabit a higher register and swifter speed marked by an unselfconscious playfulness. The fact that the Radical Listening recording would exist as part of a larger StoryCorps archive housed at the Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, and the fact that the recording might be used in various ways by the CCDE, made this recording feel different; both more consequential and less open than it may have been otherwise.

Many participants told me how their awareness of the microphone and the wider context in which these stories would be archived and might be used impacted their choices of what and how to share. Participants did not want future listeners to misinterpret their tone or to take their

words out of context. As Tony, another participant who recorded a story with his friend Vivek, told me in our follow-up interview: "I definitely was very aware of my word choices, I think, in the sense of what I am saying will be archived. I don't want to say anything ... like, I don't want to curse too much" (Tony, Follow-up interview). He remembered the anxieties that bubbled to the surface when leaving the studio with Vivek: "It's funny, when we finished, we actually both turned to each other and kind of were like, did we say anything totally stupid and idiotic? Like I hope we didn't. So, I mean there's that kind of, you know, awareness of the permanence of it" (Tony, Follow-up interview). Izara similarly noted how although her conversation with Mary felt natural and unscripted, she was still aware of the ways in which the context of the recording changed how they conversed. Within the recording studio, she had recounted to Mary a story of how difficult it is for her as a Black woman to express her feelings without being labeled as "the angry Black woman." When she started telling this story, she realized "I have to be more in-depth and give like a background" (Izara, Follow-up interview). Additionally, she remembered how she regulated her diction and tone in the recording: "I had to really make sure I articulated my words and make sure that the listener was understanding so I was cautious of that" (Izara, Follow-up interview). While she felt comfortable being expressive with her rage when recounting this story to Mary in private, in front of the microphone she ironically felt she could not be as open with her anger. In order to ensure "that the listener was understanding" (a future listener of the recording), she felt the need to slow down, to provide explanatory commas, and to regulate her tone.

Although the potential for a future listening audience represented by the microphone limited some participants' ability to fully express themselves in that moment, to open themselves fully to their friend in a way that privacy allowed, this same potential imbued their recorded

words with a sense of significance and weight. When Mary discussed why her recording with Izara for this project felt distinct, she discussed the potential impact their stories might have on an imagined future listener: “I don't know, maybe we were just like super like conceited or something, but it felt like very important because I feel like maybe like ten years from now… or twenty years from now… I hope it's something that people can listen to and like connect to it… So, yeah, that's just the hope, that's the goal” (Mary, Follow-up interview). She imagined this future listener to be a young Black woman like herself and Izara, a listener whose experiences might resonate with theirs and who might find strength and community from listening to their words. Although Mary acknowledged the probability that such racism and sexism would likely persist in the decades to come, she maintained a sliver of hope that the young Black woman she imagined listening to their story in the future would live in a world so different from hers and Izara’s that this listener would not relate to their pain at all. Mary dreamt of a future where “a Black girl has never experienced that [discrimination]. That they are so foreign to the concept of like discrimination that they don't, they don't understand it” (Mary, Follow-up interview). The presence of the microphone allowed Mary to dream, to imagine her story as part of a wider history. It also allowed her to imagine a future in which the racialized violence that she and Izara have experienced is no longer the norm.

When I asked Mary if she planned to listen to the recording herself, I was surprised when she said no. Her embodied memory of the experience was so powerful that she said she did not want to tarnish it.

> And it felt so amazing, literally we left and we were so happy and excited because it just felt like we were talking about fresh ideas even though we have these conversations it just felt more in depth and it just felt different. It was like a different atmosphere. So that

> was a really good memory and I'm not trying to get in my insecurities like, oh my gosh, what does my voice sound like? Do I say "like" too much?... I don't want to listen to that and then ruin it… (Mary, Follow up interview)

For Mary, her memory of the embodied presence she felt in that moment, of the strength of her bond with Izara, could not really be captured by an audio recorder. Additionally, the prospect of listening to the material sound of her voice echoing back at her made her uncomfortable, made her feel that hearing imperfections in the facsimile would tarnish the experience. At the same time, it was partially the presence of the microphone and the future listening audience it represented that fueled a sense of the conversation's significance and potential. Although some of the stories told through the Radical Listening project had been shared before between friends, the implied future audience represented by the physical microphone allowed these stories to take on a new life.

### *The Affective Vitality of the Studio Space*

This aura of significance was also shaped by the recording space itself. I want to pause here to give you an idea of what I and other participants experienced as we entered the studio on the first two days of recordings. The NPR station is nestled between a boutique clothing store and a restaurant. Once you arrive at the entrance, a nondescript white door, you have to use a call box to be let into the building. The station is on the third floor and is marked by large glass doors. Although the studio sent us information on how to enter the space, the somewhat labyrinthine instructions caused a number of participants to arrive late to their scheduled recordings. When I arrived on the first day, I was met by the receptionist who ushered me into a lounge area with warm lighting, brick walls, and red couches with wood trim. Opposite the sitting area was a small kitchen with coffee and snacks. Live radio, which was being recorded in

a nearby studio, enveloped the lounge space from speakers overhead. The StoryCorps facilitators were already at the station when I arrived and were running around scanning documents and prepping for the first scheduled recording. You needed a special pass to travel from the lounge space to the restroom which was located on a separate floor. These protocols which regulated who could be where and when, both made the space feel intimidating, but also gave the scene an aura of importance and authority. Reporters and program hosts milled about the lounge, discussing story pitches, guests, and politics. As a snippet of Donald Trump's voice projected from the speakers, several individuals audibly groaned. At one point, a city official, a program host, and the President of the Urban League of Seattle came into the lounge gossiping about scandals surrounding the then Seattle Mayor Ed Murray. I met participant pairs at the reception area when they arrived and brought them to the lounge where a StoryCorps facilitator walked them through the recording processes and consent forms. I remember talking to two excited and nervous undergraduate students named Rae and Darrell. They had arrived early and were sitting on the red couches next to me, waiting for the interview before them to finish. Rae's face beamed as she discussed with Darrell what they wanted to cover in their interview and mused about what the recording space might look like.

As I noted before, the field is not simply the static environment surrounding the scene of action, but rather the field acts; it interweaves with other elements to construct rhetorical phenomena. Senda-Cook et. al (2016) argue that "the convergence of place, bodies, sounds, and ideas" co-construct a collective affect (p. 24). In our follow-up interviews, Michael and Jermaine both told me they were excited to record in a bustling studio where reporters, local politicians, and program hosts gossiped around mugs of coffee and clambered in and out of various recording studios. During the event, Michael remarked that he was surprised when he entered the

NPR studios for the recording. He had expected the event to take place in a less formal space on campus. Although the studio at first made him feel a little nervous, he said that it was "really cool" to record at the station and added that the StoryCorps staff were welcoming and the studio space made the recording event feel official and consequential (Michael, Follow-up interview). Another set of friends, Kathy and Yubi, also mentioned enjoying the process of coming to the station and having their stories recorded alongside the news of the day.

The structure of a place communicates particular meanings. As Senda-Cook et. al. (2016) argue, physical spaces are built to encourage certain practices. They engender particular rituals and forms of engagement, and thereby "reveal the normative role of places in policing the boundaries of rhetorical possibility" (p. 25). Whereas the layout of the building and protocols for entering and moving within the NPR station made the space feel imposing and official, the final recording session at the University engendered a different structure of feeling. The first two days of recordings took place on bustling weekdays at the studio. In contrast, the final recording day took place on a slow, sunny Saturday on campus in a make-shift studio in a classroom. As I will discuss in the next section, although this location allowed some participants, mostly students, to feel comfortable in a familiar environment, for others, the lack of formality of the classroom "studio" was a disappointment.

**Building Trust: Navigating the Unknown When Listening to Stories Between Strangers**

When we speak to people we do not know well, people with whom we have not yet formed bonds of trust, the imperative builds to listen out for differences as well as resonances. Ahmed (2014) writes that the labor of listening to each other, of attuning our ears to that which resonates as well as "learning to be surprised by all that one feels oneself to be against," is a necessary condition for a "we" to form, for an attachment to be made (p. 188). This "we" does

not have a singular origin, but rather is an intersubjective space in which "I am moved by the 'we', as the 'we' is an effect of those who move towards it" (p. 188). This "we" is not pure, is a complicated "we," is a "we" constantly in the process of becoming. Within the relationship that formed between participants who met for the first time through the Radical Listening project, these new connections were at once riskier, but also potentially more conducive for opening a space for radical listening. With a new person, you have to be more careful as you reach out for the bonds that connect you to one another. You are more conscious of navigating the unknown space separating you from them.

In this section, I first turn to my personal experience recording an interview with a previously unknown community partner. Hess (2016) argues that an important part of rhetorical fieldwork is documenting and learning from "the corporeal highs and lows of performing vernacular advocacy" (p. 100). While engaging with a stranger in this intimate setting was exciting, it also forced me to confront assumptions I held regarding why participants came to the project. Through the awkward and painful process of confronting disconnects between a participant's goals in the project and my own, I learned to adjust my framework to attempt to meet this participant's needs.

I then turn to the experiences of two pairs of storytellers who met each other through participating in the CCDE/StoryCorps digital storytelling project: Tammy and Jinho, and Gloria and Sophia. Tammy is an Asian American woman in her 40s who worked at the University and volunteered to record a conversation with Jinho, an Asian American nurse in her 30s. Tammy and Jinho met for the first time an hour before their interview to get acquainted and plan their conversation, and ultimately, formed a connection that lasted beyond their recording. While forming this connection, however, they had to navigate the misunderstandings and different

expectations and experiences of what it means to be an Asian American woman. Gloria is a Black poet and educator in her 70s. Her interview partner for the project was Sophia, a Black woman in her 20s who was working for the University at the time of the recording. Despite previously being strangers, Gloria felt more willing to speak and be heard in her conversation with Sophia than she had experienced in her decades of teaching primarily White college students. While emphasizing pride in her work as an educator, Gloria also told me that these intimate moments between women of color, spaces which enable vulnerability, are crucial in sustaining activist work. When navigating the complexities of a new relationship, these participants' experiences highlight the difficulty as well as the necessity of building bonds of trust in order to engage in difficult conversations around racism.

**May 20, 2017: Third Day of Recordings**

*It was a beautiful, sunny Saturday. For this final day of recordings, we had moved to the Communications Building and created a makeshift recording studio in a small, sunlit classroom on the second floor. As I arrived at the building, I rushed to prepare for my interview with Priya, a participant who asked that we pair her with someone for the project. Because we had an odd number of participants who needed partners, I volunteered to record a conversation with Priya. We had spoken over the phone the night before the recording to get acquainted and discuss our plans for the conversation. Priya worked as a nurse, and wanted to discuss the process of acknowledging and addressing her own implicit bias and complicity with racialized systems of discrimination in the healthcare system.*

*I could feel my stomach doing anxiety somersaults as I walked to the computer lab to print out the questions I had compiled for the interview. As I left the computer lab, I heard murmuring down the hall. My heart raced as I walked toward the voices. Two women, one older and one younger, were chatting with Gina, the Assistant Director of the CCDE, as I arrived in the recording space. One of the women introduced herself as Priya, and the other as Priya's mother. As it turns out, Priya's mom shares the same name as my mom and comes from the same part of Mumbai, India. Both Priya and her mom are nurses. As we talked, it struck me that Priya looked younger than I had pictured when speaking to her the night before. We sat down to discuss what we would cover in the conversation and to clarify the format of the interview. Priya's mother, who came to watch the process, was under the impression the interview would have a set structure, but I explained that it's meant to feel more like a conversation. Priya chuckled as she told her mom to think of it like an interview on the David Letterman Show, which I found amusing. They both seemed excited, but as we talked, they started to look a little confused. The description of the project from the online sign-up form mentioned the local NPR station as one of our partners. Priya thought that the story would definitely be broadcast and seemed a bit disappointed when she learned that we didn't know which, if any, of the stories would be broadcast on the radio.*

*As we sat down in the recording studio, I started out by asking Priya some life history questions about her youth and growing up in New Jersey. I had hoped these questions would help us connect and get to know each other a little better. Priya's answers, however, were short and to the point. I began to worry. At this pace, I would run out of questions after ten minutes. I tried to draw out specific examples from her*

*experiences, thinking at first that maybe she was nervous, but after a few questions it seemed more likely that she just did not want to talk about her childhood or family. I was hoping to compare our experiences as people of Indian heritage growing up in the US, but realized that this was not what Priya had in mind, and so I turned the conversation over to the experiences she had discussed when signing up for the project and that she had mentioned to me during our phone conversation. When talking about her work as a nurse and the importance of addressing implicit bias in the healthcare system, Priya's voice perked up and she began to give more in-depth answers. I found myself transitioning my tone to a more formal interview style to make Priya feel more comfortable, treating her as a healthcare expert providing listeners with practical information. As I transitioned my tone, Priya seemed to relax into the interview. She spoke clearly and confidently as she discussed the need for more culturally sensitive health policies and would mention illustrative examples from her work as a nurse. When she would bring up these examples, however, she did not discuss her personal feelings, but rather used them as brief instances to make larger points about how the healthcare system is failing marginalized populations.*

*After the interview ended and we were getting ready to leave the studio, Priya and her mom started comparing their experiences as nurses. They talked about the importance of the relationships between nurses and patients. As they engaged in an animated back and forth, I wondered how the interview would have been different if they had interviewed each other. Priya and I took a picture together and hugged. Outside of the recording space, we met Gina and the StoryCorps facilitators to go over the release forms. Priya and her mom asked again about the possibility of broadcast. The facilitators*

*carefully explained the main immediate uses of the recording (archiving stories, CCDE website, listening events) as opposed to the smaller chance of broadcast. Priya's movements indicated that she was disappointed, but she replied in a (perhaps forced?) upbeat tone that she hoped her story would help spur a much-needed conversation about implicit racial bias and inequities in health care.*

When listening back through this interview with Priya, I thought about how different this experience had been from my conversation with Sylvia. It was simultaneously more exciting and more nerve-racking. As we sat down, I had a nervous energy that I did not have with Sylvia. I had to listen more intently, because I could not draw on a long history of friendship and previous conversations to fuel the discussion. I also had to pay closer attention to Priya's vocal intonation and body language to make sure that I adjusted the conversation in a way that made her feel more comfortable. It struck me as ironic that I had recorded my interview with Sylvia in the NPR studios, and my interview with Priya on campus. Sylvia and I were used to recording interviews in the cramped spaces of her houseboat, so recording with professional audio equipment anywhere on dry land would have been a step up in formality. With Priya, however, who had been expecting a more formal interview in a space that mirrored the weight of her message, having to record in a public speaking classroom on campus was undoubtedly a letdown.

In my follow-up interview with Priya a few weeks after the initial recording, I was confronted with a disconnect between how I envisioned the goals of the project and Priya's expectations. Priya acknowledged that she had been a bit disappointed by the experience; she described it as "less than I expected" (Priya, Follow-up interview). Listening back to the recording from this follow-up interview was difficult. In the audio, I can hear my voice straining

to sound positive as I am confronted with the reality of Priya's disappointment. Unlike other follow-up interviews in which I sound confident and direct, in this one I seem to be fumbling around; my questions come out jumbled. Priya asks me to repeat them multiple times. She tells me she had not been interested in discussing how race personally impacted her life, but rather pursued the interview in order to raise awareness about a serious problem in her profession. As she explained to me, "We need to fix these problems on a systems level. Sharing these stories can hopefully lead to fixing our healthcare system" (Priya, Follow-up interview). For Priya, the interview was not about seeking an emotional release by connecting with community over personal experiences with racism, but instead about informing the public to fix a broken system: "The more information we share with each other, the smarter we get as a society where we can improve" (Priya, Follow-up interview). When I asked Priya if she would feel comfortable having an edited clip from the story shared at a community listening party, she answered yes enthusiastically. The prospect of the story being shared, at least at a community level, brought her hope that she might be able to contribute to a larger conversation about these issues.

Through his radio broadcast in collaboration with members of Cleveland's homeless population, Kerr (2006) learned to avoid "direct life history questions" (p. 487). When asked about their personal lives, interviewees "felt they had to provide a confessional" (p. 487). One of his collaborators, Levi Israel, told Kerr that he "would like to see a world where we do not have to probe the lives of the oppressed" (p. 487). Rather, Kerr advocates treating collaborators as experts, and starts interviews by asking interviewees what they believe to be the root causes of homelessness. I learned a similar lesson from my relationship with Priya. The encounter made me question the assumptions that brought me to this project. My assumption going into the interview was that she would want to address experiences of racism through a personal lens.

Through the processes of attending to the uncomfortable disconnect between her goals and mine, I attempted to adjust my approach during the next stage of the project to meet Priya's wishes. Although the initial recording had not been what she hoped, when editing the audio, I listened for instances in Priya's discussion of the healthcare system where her voice beamed with confidence and passion. I wanted to make sure that the edited recording reflected Priya's mission; it was crafted to spur a discussion about implicit bias in health care, not about Priya's life.

**Embracing Difference Through Radical Listening: Tammy and Jinho's Story**

Tammy and Jinho also worked to build trust and navigate the misunderstandings that arise when engaging in conversations about racism with a near stranger. Unlike my conversation with Priya, however, both Tammy and Jinho felt comfortable opening up about the reverberations of personal trauma related to racism. They sought to build a bond with one another through their conversation that might give them a toolkit for addressing racism going forward. Because they both identified as Asian American women, they had expected to enter the conversation with a similar frame of reference and similar experiences to draw from. This proved not to be the case. Instead of attempting to suppress the differences that arose in order to reestablish a singular understanding of Asian American womanhood, both Tammy and Jinho engaged with these differences in a spirit of curiosity and care. In our follow-up interview, Tammy emphasized the amount of trust it takes to engage in these kind of conversations and build coalitions: "It takes time to build a trusted space or a safe space where people feel like they can divulge their family backgrounds or share stories about things they saw or things that happened to them" (Tammy, Follow-up interview). Tammy expressed the challenges and advantages of doing this type of personal interview regarding racism with someone you don't know well. One challenge, she noted, was that she had assumed a shared experience going into

her interview with Jinho, but found that their stories were actually quite different: “I think one place where it was not as easy as it could have been was- and this is because we were strangers to each other- is that we didn't necessarily share the same opinions or experiences about Korean American culture or Asian American culture and if we did, we didn't express them in the same ways” (Tammy, Follow-up interview). At the same time that Tammy was working through the differences in their experiences, she was also acutely aware of the recorder: “So that part, as you're getting to know somebody through conversation is one thing, but when you're being recorded it's like, ‘Okay, you know, I just mentioned something with like a ‘Oh it's like this right?’ And then I'm realizing that she's not really agreeing so I'm like, ‘Okay, she doesn't have that shared experience...’ So it was sort of like being on a first date but being recorded” (Tammy, Follow-up interview). The recorder heightened Tammy’s attention to the dynamics of the conversation, to points when their melodies lined up and points when they diverged.

Despite often feeling like their experiences of discrimination did not match up, Tammy felt she learned a great deal from listening, and was moved by Jinho’s stories. In fact, having to navigate the differences in their experiences opened Jinho and Tammy up to understanding both self and other in new ways. Lipari (2014) argues that “there is a great strength in not understanding” in grappling with difference and uncertainty “to let understanding evolve” (p. 139). The points that resonated as being powerful to Tammy were different from the points that Jinho herself had seen as noteworthy. Tammy was moved by Jinho’s discussion of pushing forward in her career, despite the fact that she was usually the only woman of color in the room. As Tammy told me in our follow-up interview:

> So that part I think was striking to me and that's when I started to like cry at the end because I was like ‘Oh my God, I'm so proud of you for doing this.’ Like this is a big, it's

> a big deal and she was like, I could tell by the way she was looking at me that she did not think that it was a big deal. But I'm like, ‘No, this is like a really big deal’ because you have to get out ahead of the folks who are coming in behind you who are people of color and it's gonna be great when you are successful in your career and you can help others and they can see themselves in you as a person to be inspired by. (Tammy, Follow-up interview)

In our follow-up interview, Jinho also discussed how even though she and Tammy "hadn't experienced the same exact things,” she knew a connection had formed (Jinho, Follow-up interview). She felt fortunate for her time with Tammy, a fellow "trailblazer" in her field, and the opportunity to form a bond with a person she would probably otherwise never have met (Jinho, Follow-up interview). Jinho noted that because Tammy was calm and had a great sense of humor, and because they went out to coffee together before the interview, she didn’t feel too nervous during their recording. Unlike my interview with Priya which was almost entirely one-way, in Jinho's conversation with Tammy, they switched positions half-way through in terms of who was asking the bulk of the questions and who was describing their experiences. As Jinho emphasized: "I feel like I took something back. It wasn't just a therapy session, I also learned about Tammy's background and Tammy's experiences and I think they're completely valuable and I think she should share. That's one of the reasons why our conversation flowed so much more organically" (Jinho, Follow-up interview). Through listening deeply to each other's stories, to both the divergent and convergent points of resonance, they came to a better understanding of both self and other, an understanding grounded in a respect for the unknowable.

When people who share our salient identities behave in unfamiliar ways, in ways that intrude on our understanding of our own identities, there is often an impulse to draw lines, to

dismiss these would-be close others as aberrant. As Audre Lorde (1984) argues, “We have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing” (p. 115). Whereas the dominant culture teaches us to attempt to ignore or destroy difference, Lorde proclaims, “It is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences” (p. 115). Fraser (2000) similarly argues that by ignoring the struggles within all groups for authority, essentialist understandings of identity “impose a single, drastically simplified group-identity which denies the complexity of people’s lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations” (p. 112). Through taking the time and creating space for listening to the complexities of difference and navigating the unknown between self and other, Tammy and Jinho allowed for a bond to grow not grounded in the same experience of racialized/gendered violence, but rather from a mutual respect for each other’s own struggles and resilience.

**Finally Feeling Heard: Gloria and Sophia’s Story**

Gloria and Sophia also found in each other a person willing to listen in a way that they described as rare in the rush of daily life. Whereas Jinho and Tammy described navigating difference as a salient part of their recorded conversation, Gloria and Sophia emphasized the pleasant surprise at finding so many places of resonant experiences for two women almost half a century apart in age. Gloria invited me to her home for our follow-up interview. It was early summer, and we sat on her porch and sipped iced tea in the sun as we talked for nearly two hours. Sophia met with me in her office at work. Both women emphasized the importance of their chance encounter. When addressing racism in the Pacific Northwest, Gloria has grown accustomed to a defensive resistance. As Gloria told me on her porch, opening up to Sophia was different. She listened. In speaking to each other, and in their subsequent discussions with me,

both Gloria and Sophia were able to express their pain/anger in the face of racism in a way that is often not available to them within predominantly White spaces in “liberal” Seattle.

During our follow-up interview, Sophia described in detail the relationship she formed with Gloria over the course of the Radical Listening project. They met for coffee an hour before their interview on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Sophia remembers feeling a bit awkward at first. She was about to dive into the deep end of discussing racism with a woman she had only just met. As they sat down and started chatting, however, they quickly fell into a groove. "Oh, this is gonna be really great,” Sophia thought, as her anxiety transformed into anticipation (Sophia, Follow-up interview). Their interview took place in the makeshift recording studio on campus we constructed for the final day of recordings. At the time of their interview, Sophia was working at UW and Gloria had earned her PhD from the institution. Although their experiences at the University were separated by several decades, this ivory tower had largely retained its white hue along with its racism.

Although I was not in the room with them, in the recording from their interview, Gloria's voice is clear, confident, and textured with age. She declares, "I don't mind saying I'm ignorant about certain things, but there are just so many people that are ignorant about race and race relations." She gives an exasperated laugh as she continues, "And I think they don't want to know about race, they don't want to talk about race." She takes a deep breath before saying in words tinged with sorrow from a lifetime of experience: "It's too bad because all of us lose, it's just that some of us lose more than others.” Sophia chimes in, decrying the “covert” and “dismissive” form racism takes in the Pacific Northwest. The energy in their voices is palpable. The pace of their speech quickens as they build off each other’s words. Sophia vents her frustration: “Seattle is one of the most unapologetically White places I’ve ever been.” Gloria erupts in knowing

laughter as Sophia continues, “It’s like they don’t recognize it or think about it.” Gloria confides that she had always seen education as a “panacea,” as a way to escape the entrenched patterns of inequity. Her words are interspersed with ironic laughter as she proclaims, “But it was here, at the University, that I learned some of the *most* racist people, are the *most* educated people. And when they say ivory tower, they mean ivory tower [laughter].” Sophia affirms, “Yes, 100 percent!!”

I was sitting outside of the recording space as Gloria and Sophia emerged from their interview. They were energetic and overflowing with conversation. Gloria drew me into their discussion. She told me about the discrimination she had faced at the University of Washington and lamented that she has never been able to shake the pain from those experiences. She wondered whether the professors who caused the wounds were even aware of the pain they inflicted. Before walking out with Sophia, Gloria mused, “The axe soon forgets what the tree remembers” (Radical Listening recording event, fieldnotes).

When I entered Gloria’s house a week after the recording event, she treated me more like a friend coming over for tea than a researcher. As we settled in on her sun-soaked porch, Gloria mused that although she is used to telling stories, she is not used to people listening and understanding in the way Sophia had. This stirring conversation with a woman who listened so intently despite being a near stranger stuck with Gloria. She told me that her voice started to crack, and she really felt the loss when Sophia began to cry: “I didn't want her to cry but I knew she understood. We talked long enough for me to understand that some of the same problems -I know some people don't get this, but I say it anyway- The most discrimination I ever dealt with was at the University of Washington” (Gloria, Follow-up interview). Gloria was crestfallen, but

not surprised, to learn that the University of Washington is still not a space where Black women can feel a sense of belonging.

Sophia did not go into the interview expecting to cry. As she told me when we sat together in her office during our follow-up interview, she expected to be engaged, but professional. Sitting in the recording studio across from Gloria, however, she felt her emotions building to a breaking point: "I knew I wasn't expecting myself to cry. So, I got like 45 minutes in and I was like not crying, not crying, and then she said something that really struck home with me ... I can't actually remember what she said in that moment, but I remember how I felt, and just started crying. I was like, 'Oh my god, I didn't think I was going to do this.' It was definitely more emotional than I thought it was going to be" (Sophia, Follow-up interview).

Sophia emphasized to me how swept away she had been during the dialogue, "We, I think, were great conversationalists" (Sophia, Follow-up interview). Despite the fact that she saw her primary role as a facilitator supporting Gloria's words, within the process of listening she often found herself relating to Gloria's stories and affirming them with brief experiences that resonated: "She would bring up topics that I could relate to, so I would interject, or encourage her to speak more about that. It was very on topic about being Black women and comparing our experiences… she grew up in Louisiana, and I grew up in the Bay Area, which were very predominantly Black spaces. And then, coming to the Pacific Northwest, and living as a Black woman here" (Sophia, Follow-up interview).

Like Sophia, Gloria told me how important it was for her to have a partner who she felt understood her experience: "It is refreshing but especially when somebody else understands it and I guess that's what all of us want, to be understood. I think quite often, people of color

understand Whites in a way that most Whites don't understand and sadly never will. But I think if we could tell more stories, then perhaps they would understand" (Gloria, Follow-up interview).

Although she has spent a lifetime as a storyteller and educator, in the course of our long conversation, Gloria confided in me that she often grows weary of trying to draw people out of their proverbial caves: "I say often, I don't mind teaching the same thing. What I hate is repeatedly teaching the same thing to the same people. Every time I get a different person, I'm ready, I'll try it again, I'll do it again. But it's so often, we tell the same people" (Gloria, Follow-up interview). In the face of this refusal to listen, Gloria sometimes finds herself unwilling to continue speaking, at least for a time. I felt honored that Gloria opened her home and entrusted me with the responsibility to listen differently, as Sophia had in their interview. Fraser (1990) argues that separate deliberative spheres are necessary to ensure that subaltern publics can formulate strategies in spaces that allow an individual to “speak in one’s own voice,” to speak without bracing for what feels like the inevitable blank stare (p. 69). Within the recording studio, this project centered people of color dyads that opened space for a radical listening, not between individuals who shared the same experiences of racialized/gendered trauma, but rather between individuals who shared a similar language of exclusion.

Haraway (1988) points out that all knowledge is situated and contextualized, not just in terms of space and time, but also in grids and nodes of power, privilege, and oppression, and encourages us to accept that knowledge is incomplete and partial. The collecting of marginalized stories and histories, as if these stories are pieces of a puzzle that can represent a whole, inherently assumes that there is a whole, even if we do not yet know what that whole looks like. It is important to note that incomplete and partial are not the same as relative. As Haraway notes, “Relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally” (p. 584). In this

way, it is very much like ideologies of objectivity in that "both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective" (p. 584). She advocates that we privilege contestation and deconstruction while still engaging in a fight for our beliefs: "The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemologies" (p. 584). Through the process of bringing community members together to record stories of racism and resistance, the Radical Listening project hoped to create such a web of complicated and messy connections, of attachments that might work to construct partial and contingent knowledge.

## Conclusion

In his discussion of the staying power of *The Little Prince* over the decades, Adam Gopnik describes the wonder that emerges in the Prince as he becomes aware of the shifting bonds that tie him both to his rose and to the world around him. As Gopnik writes, "The world conspires to make us blind to its own workings; our real work is to see the world again" (Gopnik, 2014). The bonds that bind us to each other, however, exist within an unequal web of power and privilege. The Prince has mobility and can explore the universe, the rose is rooted to the asteroid. If the Prince grows weary of the rose, if those bonds fade to the back of his mind, the rose will be eaten by the sheep, a creature the Prince himself introduced to the asteroid, heightening the precariousness of the rose's existence. The intimate attachments that tie us are not innocent nor free from systems of power. Tending to these bonds, to our responsibilities to the worlds we inhabit, necessitates that we attune ourselves to these relations of power. The intention driving this project was to open spaces for radical listening between people of color, spaces to navigate the inherent risks and potentiality of speaking racial traumas. I hoped these spaces might enable

the ineffable power of these stories to resonate through speakers and listeners, and perhaps move us toward a collective politics of resistance.

# Chapter 2: Collective Listening to Mediated Sound–Cultivating a Praxis of Radical Listening

Listening to mediated sound is both personal and public; it acts as both sensory experience and as representational text. In the early days of radio, this interweaving of the sensory and the representational led to fears of passive audiences uncritically absorbing the sound from their loudspeakers. Efforts to transform listeners from passive consumers to active citizens have existed throughout the history of mediated sound, from the early days of radio to the podcasting boom. These efforts, however, have been rooted in fostering a rational and informed public without adequately addressing how power, identification and affect impact listening. This chapter maps a feminist counter-story to such a history. I narrate and critique our efforts to cultivate what I term radical listening, the effort to wrench listeners from habituated patterns of distracted disengagement. Through our equity-focused digital storytelling project and subsequent "listening parties" centering stories of racial trauma and resistance, we created a space to partake in the strange process of collective listening to mediated sound. Within these listening sessions, audio clips were doubly articulated as material soundwaves enveloping the listening bodies of audience members and as stories, as symbolic messages located within wider discourses of racialized trauma. This chapter traces the possibilities and barriers in cultivating a radical, feminist ethics of reception that centers difference, equity and embodiment.

Radical listening involves a praxis of tuning in to multiple voices in relation to each other and in relation to the self. Like performing one part of a polyphonic composition, it is challenging because it requires the listener to pay attention to the complexities of different voices, different musical parts, while also attending to the self, attending to one's own performance in relation to the other parts. This process is dependent on intersubjective listening

that is both labor intensive and risky, requires vulnerability without offering guarantees of solidarity.

This chapter takes my field notes from the listening parties, recorded audio from these events, conversations with the project's community storytellers, and written reflections on the experience of listening by audience members directly following the events as primary texts of analysis, discursively mapping the sites of power in the relations of storytellings and listenings. In the following sections, I first trace a brief history of group listening to mediated sound and discuss how our listening parties intersect and diverge from these past practices. I then map how a praxis of radical listening both shaped and was shaped by the listening party spaces.

My mapping of the listening parties is broken into three parts. In the first section, I trace the radical potential embedded in the embodied co-presence of the listening parties. The affective ecology of these events was shaped by the materiality of the event spaces, the listening exercises that began each event, the audio podcasts that were played, and the storyteller responses to their podcasts. All of these elements worked together to co-create a space for collectively thinking through the generative tensions of embodying a praxis of radical listening. In the second section of my analysis, I hone in on one aspect of this wider affective ecology to magnify the interactions between storytellers/listeners during the storyteller reflections, or "speak backs" as we called them. I discuss how the community storytellers performed an ethics of self for others through reflecting on their stories that helped listeners construct a toolkit of sorts for enacting radical listening, for engaging in a counterpublic contrapuntal song. In the third and final section, I address some of the challenges that constrain attempts to practice radical listening.

## Historicizing Efforts to Cultivate an Ethics of Public Listening

Dominant discourse surrounding the potential of the internet and digital technologies often emphasize opportunities for increased self-expression in contrast to increased opportunities for listening out to different others (Couldry, 2008; Dreher, 2012). As Lacey (2013) argues, the fetishizing of voice has created social interactions that amount to a "performance without an audience," a continual display of self that lacks political agency and the ability to enact change; in short, "a performance that need not be listened to by those in power" (p. 181). When listening is taken up in dominant discourses, the focus is too often on listening as a personal rather than a public act (Bodie et al., 2008). Throughout the history of mediated sound, however, there have been wide-scale attempts to cultivate active and ethical listening practices among various publics, including through instituting collective listening spaces (Cassirer, 1959–1960; Ohliger, 1969; Lacey, 2013; Sood et al., 2004). It is useful to trace a brief history of these collective listening groups here in order to contextualize the CCDE listening parties and how our attempts to foster a radical, feminist ethics of reception diverge from past practices.

A century before the advent of the internet brought with it the dual extremes of techno-utopian predictions of a revived public sphere of engaged and informed citizens on the one hand countered by fears of continual distraction on the other (Lundby, 2009; Papacharissi, 2002; Rheingold, 2008; Röhle, 2005), the introduction of radio brought with it a similar frenzy of hope and dread. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) under the leadership of John Reith saw radio's democratic potential in terms of educating the masses while also fearing passive audiences uncritically absorbing the sound from their loudspeakers. Without proper educational training in the act of critical listening, the BBC leadership worried that listeners would simply

absorb the sound as intertwined with their daily lives rather than remain at a discerning distance (Cassirer, 1959–1960; Lacey, 2013).

In order to counter these concerns, the BBC tried to promote listening groups to engage in discussion around the topics broadcast. Central to the mission of these group listening initiatives was to move the public from "listening-in" to "listening-out" (Lacey, 2013, p. 141). In order for the listener to be more than passive consumer, in order for radio to cultivate the listener as citizen, the institution needed to facilitate a faculty for "listening out to different ideas and different voices" (p. 141). In the United States, Herbert Hoover similarly saw the potential of service radio as a technology to foster an informed and engaged citizenry. 15,000 listening groups were established across the US to promote the exchange of ideas and to "inculcate an active civic disposition" (p. 143). In Canada, Farm Radio Forums in the 1940s connected radio broadcasters, adult educators and farm organizations in order to promote "thought and understanding among rural listeners that will widen their horizons as citizens and help them improve their conditions as farmers" (Cassirer, 1959–1960, p. 530). The perceived success of this Canadian model spurred various UNESCO projects to establish radio forums in South Asia and Africa in the 1950s and 1960s (Ohliger, 1969).

These efforts to cultivate engaged publics through listening groups have tended to occur within the confines of an idealized notion of the rational public sphere. Underlying these diverse collective listening projects is the belief that a more engaged and informed citizenry supports a healthier nation. Organizers of these listening groups in their various forms positioned these groups as a place where individuals can put aside differences to discuss broadcast information, weigh the facts and ultimately come to a rational consensus. These initiatives, however, often fail to consider how systems of power, identification and affect impact listening. As Fraser (1990)

notes regarding the formation of the bourgeois public sphere, it relied on "protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality" thus negating the possibility of rational discourse transcending the power differentials inscribed on various bodies (p. 63). Although the BBC listening groups from the late 1920s, for example, espoused the ideal of rational discussion among equals, the individuals who gathered to listen were differentially positioned within systems of power. Lacey (2013) quotes one upper class BBC listening group leader who wrote in 1929 that even though some of the men who participated in the forum came from "the docks, gas-works, saw mills and street-barrows," he was pleasantly surprised by their eagerness to engage, stating: "The effort to concentrate had apparently not been too much for them" (p. 142). This kind of patronizing language illustrates the inability to put aside power differentials within these listening spaces. Collective listening groups contain within them inherent contradictions and tensions between their perceived ideal form and how they have functioned within societies.

Furthermore, rhetoric from higher-ups at the BBC framed these listening groups within a paternalistic, top-down desire to educate the supposedly ignorant members of the working classes. Emphasis was placed on "self-improvement" through engaged listening in an effort to "make the populace more governable" (Lacey, 2013, p. 147). Members of the working classes did initially show up to take part in these listening groups. They "reported back positively," expressing their desire to listen and speak on important issues within and beyond their communities (p. 142). Over time, however, interest in these listening groups waned, partly because they did not move beyond discussion (Cassirer, 1959–1960).

These dynamics point to the contradictions inherent in these listening group initiatives. The BBC elites saw collective listening as a means to mold the public into a singular rational

entity, “to recreate the listening public in its own idealized image of a cultivated and engaged political body” (Lacey, 2013, p. 148). As Cassirer (1959–1960) notes, however, this idealized image contained within it a contradiction. The BBC listening groups promoted engaged discussion absent pathways to political action: “the only aim of group listening was discussion, which was seen as an end in itself rather than as a prelude to action” (p. 530). Like the BBC, Deutsche Welle (the national radio broadcasting in the Weimar Republic) promoted collective listening as top-down adult education efforts to cultivate an informed public (Lacey, 2013, p. 149). At the same time, however, workers created their own listening clubs from the bottom up, demanding structural change beyond their own “self-improvement.” As Lacey states, the idealized State image of an informed and rational public “contained within it a self-transformative potential” (p. 148). Members of the working classes did not simply engage in listening groups according to standards of rational dialogue that included bracketing their class identity. Rather, as seen in the Workers’ Radio Club (Arbeiterradiobund), members of the working classes used collective listening to organize activism around worker’s rights (p. 105, p. 150).

Although collective listening holds within it a counterpublic potential, this potential absent considerations of power and equity can be geared to oppressive ends. Fraser (1990) uses the term subaltern publics to describe “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67). Separate deliberative spheres are necessary, she argues, to ensure that subaltern publics can formulate strategies in spaces that allow for an individual to “speak in one’s own voice” (p. 69). Warner (2002), however, warns against positioning counterpublics as necessarily progressive, stating “there are

contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of all publics, tensions that are not captured by critiques of the dominant public's exclusions or ideological limitations" (p. 81). Indeed, Lacey (2013) and Ohliger (1969) describe how listening groups and "radio activists" played a role in the rise of Nazism. Early Nazi party organizing formed critical listening groups to monitor "Marxist cultural propaganda" and encouraged members to fight against mainstream broadcast programming. Once Nazism became the dominant political ideology, however, all listening groups were disbanded in favor of mass national propaganda. Critical collective listening was, evidently, no longer a desired skill. Indeed, as the extreme case study of the role of "radio activists" in propelling the rise of Nazism demonstrates, in order for the transformative potential of counterpublics to drive change toward a less oppressive future, it is not enough for listeners to be active and politically engaged.

While far from this extreme example, contemporary efforts at collective radio listening still often fail to attend to how systems of power and marginalization impact experiences of listening. Radio listening groups continue to be used, by UNESCO, governments, and NGOs, in adult education and development campaigns around the world (Sood et al., 2004). In contrast to the BBC listening groups, these radio forums tend to focus on imparting specific knowledge (e.g. family planning education) to a specific subset of the population (e.g. rural villages). Sood et al. (2004) argue that community listening groups improve the efficacy of mass mediated public health initiatives. Through their research with the Radio Communication Project (RCP) in Nepal, they argue that listening groups "are likely to be positively associated with family planning and reproductive health behavior" (p. 83). Dutta and Basnyat (2008), however, counter that these efforts, like the listening groups before them, take place within a paternalistic top-down structure. In contrast to Sood et al.'s optimism, Dutta and Basnyat argue that the RCP initiative

to promote family planning ultimately failed to take into account the cultural context and perspectives of community members involved in the project. In addition, they argue that the RCP and similar projects tend to advocate changing individual behaviors while ignoring "the critical structural issues that are faced by subaltern populations, such as resource acquisition, redistributive justice, and absence from policy platforms" (p. 451). From the widespread adoption of radio to the present, efforts to cultivate collective spaces for listening and discussing mediated sound have tended to occur within a top-down structure aimed at individual enlightenment in contrast to a bottom up movement aimed at structural change.

## Radical Listening: The Potential in our Contrapuntal Counterpublic Song

In contrast to past group listening campaigns aimed at cultivating an ethics of collective listening grounded in an idealized rationality or "engagement" devoid of political agency, the Radical Listening community events sought to center listening sensitive to positionality and embodiment in relation to systems of power, listening that we hoped would work to reconfigure patterns of racialized devaluation within our communities. Our aim with the CCDE listening parties was to co-construct and practice skills of radical listening. This was our explicit aim, one that we shared with the participants in recruitment and advertising materials for the sessions. This work involves collectively cultivating a mindfulness of both self and other. Our vision with the listening parties was to foster an ethics of listening centered on radical listening.

The musical metaphor of counterpoint is helpful when thinking through both the potential and challenges involved in the act of radical listening. Counterpoint is the relationship between two or more musical lines or "voices" which occur simultaneously, independent in rhythm and contour yet working together within this polyphonic structure. Dreher (2009) argues that we need to move beyond tying notions of progress to the quantity of airtime given to diverse voices to

consider "the *quality of relationships* between speakers and listeners mediated by institutions" (p. 454, emphasis added). Radical listening involves a process of listening to multiple voices in relation to each other and in relation to the self. Like counterpoint, radical listening is challenging because it requires the listener to pay attention to the complexities of different voices, different musical parts, while also attending to the self, attending to one's own performance in relation to the other parts. Monophony, in contrast, occurs when all voices are singing the same tune. Fraser (1990) argues that one public sphere acts to absorb less powerful members into a "we" that speaks for them without listening to them. Within dominant public spheres, if minoritized voices are allowed to sing at all, we are often asked to sing the tune of the majority.

Even in spaces where diversity is supposedly valued, it is only allowed within a homophonic structure. Homophony includes a primary melody accompanied by supporting lines. Minoritized voices are assigned accompanying roles, supporting a diversity melody written ostensibly to include us yet not written by us. Emphasis is placed on a proliferation of different voices expected to support the primary melody without engaging the actual work of power-sensitive radical listening. As one listening party audience member wrote in their listener reflection, "I think people ask so many questions about racism and ways to improve experiences for students of color. However, a lot of their questions seem self-serving and an attempt to displace the work and effort of dismantling a system" (24/68). Multiple parts are allowed, in other words, as long as they accompany the main melody, as long as they adapt to hegemonic logics.

Counterpoint, by contrast, involves attending to polyphony or the working together of many voices with melodic and rhythmic independence.[2] As this same listener later wrote in their reflection, “Attending and listening to stories people have planned to tell for their own event seems like an important counterpoint” (24/68). This highlights the potential in the act of radical listening as counterpoint, in the act of tuning in to the relationship between multiple voices with the goal of equity between parts, where one melody does not drown out the rest. Our goal with the listening parties was not to create a unified melody of resistance to racism, but rather a contrapuntal counterpublic song composed of interdependent yet unique voices asserting their own rhythm and contour.

These songs of embodied experiences and how we, as listeners, engage with them, are fraught with relations of power that shape knowledge and understanding. Individuals from marginalized communities are often forced to listen closely to the melody of those in power so they can adjust their own tunes in order to survive. As Gloria, one community storyteller, told me when discussing the challenges she faced as a Black woman who earned her PhD at a very White institution: “I think quite often, people of color understand whites in a way that most whites don't understand and sadly never will” (Gloria, Follow-up interview). This act of unidirectional listening is exhausting. Listeners in positions of power and privilege whose melodies are typically centered thus need to be especially attuned to relations of power and how their melodies carry in relation to other voices. Within the space of the Listening Parties, Gloria and the other storytellers gave everyone in the room the opportunity to listen differently, to break patterns of unidirectional listening and open their ears to the contours of new melodies.

[2]Although polyphony is sometimes used in a broader sense to denote any non-monophonic musical texture, here I am referring to the more commonly used meaning of polyphony as multiple musical voices which, unlike homophony, are largely independent from one another.

Even for minoritized subjects, this listening out for a multiplicity of melodies is challenging. When stories of racialized oppression resonate with our own traumatic experiences, there exists a risk of hearing another's trauma as representative of one's own. Chun (1999) argues that a feminist "contract of listening" necessarily entails "a politics that understands acts of violence not as 'representative of' or 'substitutable for' each other, but by a politics that sees these acts as forceful because they recall other events, because they open the self to others. Such a contract of listening would allow for history" (p. 140). Powerful testimony resonates within us and moves us beyond our ability to comprehend that experience. The act of radical listening requires the acknowledgement of that gap, that incomprehensible space between the speaker's embodied experience and our own. As Chun writes, the listener "must constantly ask, 'what is being elided in my identifications with the speaker?' As well, the goal is not to cure either the listener or the speaker, but rather to respond and listen so that survival is possible" (p. 139). In other words, in order to collectively work toward anti-racist change, we must listen out not only for melodies which map onto our own, which confirm the self, but also melodies which clash, melodies which may require us to adjust our tune to make space for the melody of another.

While we hoped to cultivate a space where a counterpublic contrapuntal song could emerge through a practice of radical listening, we had no guarantees such an experiment would be successful. Indeed, even with the proper care, the song may disintegrate into a cacophony of noise. Listening to multiple voices is difficult, and always at risk of failing. This process, even with periodic lapses into cacophony, is necessary before any hope of change can exist. Asen (2002) argues that controversy can be productive in disrupting institutionalized patterns of communication. As a practice it "pushes and expands the available limits of communication" (p. 352). Collective imagining, he notes, is not stable, but rather controversy illuminates "imagining

as an active force" (p. 352). Moments of cacophony, where our sense making capacities fail us, are also moments teeming with possibility. When you immerse yourself in that noise you allow for the possibility (without guarantee) of hearing a new sonic landscape emerge. As Joseph (2017) notes, this requires a patient training in learning to appreciate difference: "to truly appreciate and eventually sing new music, the audience must first learn to listen to different melodies, which might, to new ears, sound dissonant" (p. 3307).

Within the CCDE listening parties, we attempted to construct a space for radical listening in which the resonance of the testimony would open the potential for listeners to construct a counterpublic contrapuntal song composed of distinct melodies and rhythms of trauma linked through shared racialized oppression. We hoped these stories would weave together, creating a song in which each melody was heard as unique, in which one could not be substituted for another. Clarke (2015) argues that only through a "commitment to doing the careful work of listening" can we work to build the "links and potential new alignments" that are necessary to imagine a more equitable future (p. 284). Identification is never complete, and publics are composed of subjects with provisional identities in contingent relations to one another. Radical listening is the process of attending reflexively to how processes of identification influence our interactions with others. Only through acknowledging that we will never be able to reach the fullness of the other can we start the process of crafting solidarity. In the following sections, I briefly address my use of rhetorical field methods and provide background on the structure of the listening party events before turning to my analysis of their potential for fostering radical listening.

## Rhetorical Field Methods

Throughout my analysis, I interweave elements from various artifacts produced through the listening party events including: my field notes; written reflections from audience members directly following the events; and excerpts from storyteller "speak backs" taken from audio recordings from the listening parties. We hosted three listening parties during the 2017–2018 academic year. I made audio field recordings of the events. Throughout the process of working with storytellers to edit their podcasts and helping to organize the listening parties, I jotted down field notes along the way documenting moments of frustration and joy. Because I was juggling multiple responsibilities, I was not able to take field notes during the events themselves. After the listening parties concluded and we finished cleaning up the space, I sat in front of my computer in my office and tried to document my memories of what had just transpired and my embodied reactions to it.

During the listening parties, we placed listener reflection sheets at the center of each table. These reflections contained a few guiding questions.[3] After the events concluded, we drew audience members' attention to these sheets, and gave them time (if they wanted) to anonymously write down any thoughts and reflections that emerged during the event. Sixty–four individuals turned in reflections. These reflections are not evidence of the audience response in and of themselves, but do provide valuable insight as traces, as incomplete and morphed shadows of the affective experience of listening. Juggling multiple roles during the various events was challenging. During the first event I was so focused on making sure everything ran smoothly that my role as a researcher faded to the back of my mind. In the hubbub of setting up

[3] Guiding questions can be found in Appendix 1

for the event, I failed to properly charge the recorder and the audio equipment stopped working after about fifteen minutes. In addition to the audio failing, I also did not print listener reflections for the first event. The only "texts" I have to draw on from the first listening party thus consist of my field notes leading up to and directly following the event. For the subsequent two listening sessions, I made sure to bring multiple audio recording devices and to print listener reflection sheets well in advance. With each listening party, I learned how to better juggle my multiple roles as a researcher, event organizer and project participant.

Rather than reinforcing the division between critic and object of study, rhetorical fieldwork "affords critics the opportunity to stand with, for, and among the people whose rhetoric we study" (Middleton et al., 2015, p. xiv). Within the space of the listening parties, the distinctions between storyteller/listener, facilitator/researcher, researcher/storyteller blurred. The storytellers were also listeners. The event facilitators also participated in the project and their stories were played during the events. I performed the roles of researcher, storyteller, listener, facilitator, sound editor, etc. Within my analysis, I tack back and forth between perspectives drawn from storytellers, audience members, and my own observations to highlight how individuals performed multiple roles within the space and to emphasize the ways in which processes of production and reception in both their material and symbolic forms are mutually constitutive. Rai (2016) argues that rhetoric is "emplaced, embodied, and embedded in the places and practices—indeed, in the very forms of being of everyday life" (p. 6). The "immanent enmeshments" that constitute a particular place in time and space are manifold, including, but not limited to, histories, technologies, affect, bodies, nonhuman objects, reverberations of fear and hope, workings of power, etc. (p. 6). Although it was impossible to attend to the multitude of enmeshments that comprised the listening party events, through the process of assembling and

mapping various traces from these sessions, this analysis attempts to understand how radical listening was enacted and co-constructed within these fleeting spaces.

The ephemerality of the events and the partiality of my perspective within them highlights, as McKinnon et al. (2016) note, "the power dynamics at play in what gets documented" when enacting rhetorical field methods (p. 30). With these power dynamics in mind, throughout processes of fieldwork, reflection, and writing, I attempted to enact a radical listening vis-à-vis the artifacts I assembled, listening to the various melodies and silences in relation to each other and to my own. Through this process, I hoped to "allow complicating, conflicting and otherwise messy elements of a community to emerge" (McKinnon et al., 2016, p. 16). As is true throughout this dissertation, I have changed the names of community storytellers in order to protect their privacy.

## Structure of the Radical Listening Parties

In collaboration with the CCDE leadership and participant storytellers, we designed three listening parties, where an audience of about 60 people would listen to 3–7 minute clips edited out of the longer (40+) minute interviews. We curated audio segments around participants' availability and desire to share their stories. We designed the listening parties to center storyteller voices while providing an opportunity for community members to practice radical listening. The audience for these events was composed of interested members of the public as well as participants in a community member-student class we teach called "Interrupting Privilege."[4]

We began the events by talking about the concept of radical listening, of what it means to hold someone else's story fully, and to listen without formulating a response. Radical listening,

[4] Interrupting Privilege (IP) is a class that reaches both inside and outside the university to teach accessible dialogue tools, trainings, and guided advocacy strategies. IP brings together students and community members from across the greater Seattle area for intergenerational conversations about race, racism and its intersections.

we stressed, means remaining open. It does not mean you are able to completely bracket yourself, your thoughts and your feelings. You still feel your feelings, you still have your thoughts. But as they appear, you acknowledge them without processing them in that moment, without interrupting the speaker (internally or externally) with your interpretation of their words, with your version of their song.

In order to cultivate this practice of radical listening, we started with an exercise from Whiteness scholar Peggy McIntosh's SEED Project called "Serial Testimony" (2015) that has become a mainstay of the Interrupting Privilege program. "Serial Testimony," asks speakers to respond to a prompt in small groups. Our prompt encouraged audience members to think about impactful experiences of listening within their own lives. We asked them "to conjure in your minds the person who you think is the best listener in your life… How do you know that they're listening deeply?" (LP2[5], Serial Testimony exercise). Spatially, we tried to break up demographic groups by asking alumni, community members and students to intermingle. Each group member had one minute to address the prompt. McIntosh calls this structure "the autocratic administration of time in the service of democratic distribution of time" in that it disrupts normalized hierarchies of speech and silence and provides everyone equal time to share their experiences (McIntosh, 2015). The goal is for group members to listen to the speaker while resisting the urge to respond verbally. In this way we hoped to prime audience members to fully listen to what is being said instead of simply formulating their response, as too often happens.

After the Serial Testimony exercise, we came back together as a group to think through the characteristics we value in a listener. The following is a summary of listening values that

[5] Throughout this dissertation, I use LP as an abbreviation for listening party, the number following LP denotes which listening party (LP1: Fall listening party, LP2: Winter listening party, LP 3: Spring listening party)

emerged through discussion with audience members over the course of the three listening parties:

- Listening is based in trust. Nonverbal cues can indicate whether or not it is safe for listeners/speakers to allow themselves to be vulnerable.
- Listening is demonstrated by recalling past conversations and building on what others have said.
- A good listener gives the speaker space to fully express themselves.
- A good listener does not immediately compare the other's experience to their own, but instead respects the uniqueness of the other's narrative.
- A good listener tries to minimize potential distractions so that they can give their full attention to the act of listening.

After the Serial Testimony exercise and group reflection, we began to play the clips, which were thematized. After each theme, the interview participants "spoke back" and contextualized their edited segments. We hoped these "speak backs" would enable the participants to have their voices extend from the truncated podcasts I had created. One storyteller told me following the first listening party that the event might have felt voyeuristic had we not provided a space for the participants to respond to their representations. For her, the "speak backs" ensured that the event was not meant to put storytellers on display, but rather give them the space to control in part how their stories would be heard. At the end of the evening, we asked the audience to reflect on their experience of listening in small groups. We then came back together as a large group to provide storytellers/audience members a chance to discuss points of resonance and tension that emerged over the course of the evening. In the following sections, I turn to my analysis of these listening party spaces. I start by addressing the affective potential in

terms of opening spaces for radical listening embedded in the act of assembling together to listen to mediated sonic stories of racism/resistance.

## The Radical Potential of Embodied Listening to Mediated Sound

In order to practice the sustained engagement and attunement necessary for radical listening, the listening parties were designed to enable an embodied co-presence that attempted to remove listeners from habituated patterns of non-reflexive listening by encouraging them to engage in the rare activity of listening together to mediated sound. Processes of identification are often routinized and unconscious. As Fuss (1995) argues, "Identification is an embarrassingly ordinary process" (p. 1). This utterly ordinary nature of identification can lead its potentially violent nature to go unheard. In her fieldwork researching the world music industry, for example, Kheshti (2012) argues that listeners of the genre often construct an "aural imaginary" in which "sound, the listener's body, escape, and affect double in on one another to construct an imaginary site of contact with other bodies" (p. 268). The empathy generated through such identifications can turn into a form of colonial fantasy, a desire to colonize the experience of the other. We structured the listening parties to hopefully avoid turning stories of racism into a consumable spectacle, into a way for audience members to feel virtuous through performing compassion without interrogating what is at stake. We designed the "Serial Testimony" exercises at the start of each listening event to attune listeners' ears to how embodied listening is shaped by difference and systems of power. Additionally, through engaging listeners in the strange experience of collective listening to mediated sound, the listening parties brought to the fore how habituated patterns of identification influence our listening and provided a toolkit for how we might attune our ears to hear differently.

During the listening parties, the reproduced sound event layered over the local acoustic space of the room, enmeshing the two and merging the experience for audience members. The material vibrations of the soundwaves interweave with their symbolic meaning. They reach out and resonate within the body and internal narrative of the listener. As Press and Livingstone (2008) note, audiences act as both "interpreters of media-as-text and users of media-as-object" (p. 181). The storytellers doubled as listeners both to the testimony of other participants as well as to the sound of their own recorded voices which resonated in the storytellers' ears rather than in their vocal cords. Lacey (2013) argues that listening to broadcast sound engenders particular forms of embodiment:

> Representation by definition invokes a dialectic of simultaneous non-presence and presence, but the reconstitution of the sound event in three-dimensional space disguises the dialectic more effectively as our bodies inhabit this acoustic space, this artificial reality. The artificial sound overlays the local sound and is experienced simultaneously. There is an enforced proximity to the sound event that lessens the possibility for distanciation or detachment. (p. 89)

By playing edited audio clips over the physical bodies of the storytellers who then spoke back to their representations, the structure of the events encouraged listeners to critically consider the dual nature of the sonic recordings, both as material vibrations and as symbolic representations enmeshed within wider cultural meanings. By having the embodied storytellers respond after their clips played, we hoped to honor the affective power of these stories of racism and resistance, while also (through the speak backs) addressing the necessarily incomplete and non-transparent nature of such crafted narratives.

The physical space of the listening parties enabled a contrapuntal song to emerge through the connections enacted between bodies in the performance of listening together. Although each listening body had a different perceptual experience of the event, the assembled performance of different bodies listening together constructed a polyphonic symphony of radical listening. Rather than a means to a particular end, we hoped the embodied listening required in the spaces of the listening parties would open the audience to emergent possibilities, to find spaces in their own lives to respond to the violence of racism.

Some scholars have critiqued locally based movements such as ours that look to co-presence as a way of fostering listening. Lacey (2013) pushes back against dominant discourses of nostalgia for an age of "authentic" communication free from mediation and argues that "we hear the virtues of embodied presence being sung in the name of radical inclusivity, while the very reliance on presence necessarily excludes absent others" (p. 191). Face-to-face interaction is not telepathy, is still mediated, and thereby inherently contains ambivalence and tension. While I agree with the need to critically deconstruct the supposed inclusivity and authenticity of face-to-face initiatives over their mass-mediated counterparts, I argue co-presence offers certain affordances just as it forecloses others.

Hosting our listening parties on the University of Washington campus on a weeknight limited who was able/willing to attend these events. In contrast to the listening parties, the CCDE's publicly accessible digital archive of audio podcasts from the Radical Listening project enables access to stories anytime and anywhere, allows listeners the ability to share the stories with others and to relisten multiple times. Although listening at home and/or through headphones can potentially provide a space for radical listening, this is not necessarily the case, especially when we are not primed to reflect on our processes of listening. We may feel less pressure to

listen all the way through. We may feel less inclined to open ourselves up to the story of an absent other whose experience seems to conflict with our own. In my follow-up interview with Mary, one of our community storytellers, she articulated the differences for her between listening to a podcast at home versus being in the same space as the storyteller:

> Podcasts feel very personal because, like, they're in your ear and you're listening to it… but it [being physically present with the storyteller] definitely feels more personal, like you can see their facial expressions, you can see how emotional they get. So, like, physically being there when someone is telling a story, I think is much more personal because they are like looking at you to like react too, so you have to be like completely invested in it as well. Versus on podcasts, like, I'm listening to it and I don't necessarily have to be completely engaged, I could be like writing or like doing something else, it's still great but I think being physically present is a little bit more personal. (Mary, Follow-up interview)

For Mary, both listening to podcasts and listening to someone tell their story in person are intimate experiences: podcasts are "in your ear," especially if you are using earbuds that are literally inserted into your ear. These stories move with you as you enact your daily routines. The key difference, according to Mary, is the level of attention required of each activity. Whereas there is no pressure to remain "completely engaged" when listening to podcasts, when the storyteller is in the same physical space as you, "you have to be like completely invested in it" (Mary, Follow-up interview). Within the space of the Radical Listening parties, we wanted to understand the potential of collecting together, as storytellers/listeners, to immerse ourselves in each other's voices/stories and hopefully co-construct a praxis of radical listening.

In the following section, I first discuss how the materiality of the event spaces shaped the affective experience of listening. I then turn to how discussions with the audience after the Serial Testimony exercise highlight how embodied performances of listening are not universal and need to be situated. Next, I address the affective impact of the "speak backs" for both storytellers and listeners before detailing how listening to stories of racism/resistance helped some audience members embrace embodied discomfort as a potentially transformative force. I end this section with a discussion of the somatic metaphors listeners used in describing their embodied experiences listening to stories of racism/resistance.

**How the Materiality of the Event Space Shaped the Process of Listening**

The materiality of the event spaces shaped the experience of listening. McKinnon et al. (2016) stress that "the field acts," it is not simply the backdrop for rhetorical actions (p. 24). Place is not static, but active; it interweaves with other elements to construct rhetorical phenomena. As McKinnon et al. (2016) emphasize, the field has a "dynamic, polysemous relationship with rhetorical actions" (p. 25). While the first listening party took place in a large room within the undergraduate library, the next two events took place in a reception center on campus called the Walker Ames Hall. The large classroom in the library gave the first event the feel of a lecture. The drab carpeting and gray walls are illuminated by fluorescent overhead lighting. During the event, several rows of gray tables faced a projector screen at the front of the room. Although this typical campus setting may have enabled student attendees to feel a sense of comfort and familiarity, it may also have alienated guests not affiliated with the University. After the first event, one community storyteller with no connection to the University told me she initially felt out of place entering the library full of undergraduates cramming for exams. She felt like an outsider in this space built for students.

The Walker Ames Hall in which the second two events took place, however, evokes a certain sense of gravitas that pulls you out of the standard campus climate. I remember the natural light pouring in through the giant windows overlooking the campus as I helped set up for the second two events. The room is open and has an ornate organ in the back. Big, bulbous lights that look like giant dangling grapes hang from the ceiling. Because the events took place in the evening, all of the events were catered, providing attendees with a light dinner and side dishes. Several listener reflections from the second two events noted how the food and physical space provided these events with a sense of excitement and community. One listener wrote, "Sharing food and conversations around the tables fosters openness, conversation, compassion, and empathy" (39/68). A reflection from a listener who identified as nine years old wrote "I loved the food and how the speaking happened" (40/68). Through providing food and drinks and by having listeners sit at round tables facing each other, these events created an embodied environment within the ornate reception hall that engendered both a sense of the event's importance as well as a sense of sharing and community.

**Embodied Listening: Attuning Our Ears to Differences in Performing and Interpreting Listening Acts**

In discussion with the audience following the Serial Testimony exercise at the start of each event, a tension emerged exposing potential disconnects between one's internal process of listening and how one's embodied performance of listening may be interpreted by others. This gap emphasizes the importance of culture and context in processes of performing and interpreting acts of listening. Some audience members stressed the importance of eye contact and physical presence, of paying attention to "what your arms are doing, what your body is doing, how you're looking, how you're acting, how that other listener is physically present across from

you, and the ways that they can either encourage the conversation or take you out of the conversation, depending on what they're doing" (LP2, Serial Testimony discussion). At the same time, however, members of the audience emphasized that the specific embodied actions that signal attentive listening are not the same across culture and context.

The context of the relationship changes expectations of a good listener. During the second listening party, for example, I sat at a table with a man whose face lit up as he described how his toddler was attuned to his every action. As he later related back to the whole room when we regrouped: "Even if I'm not talking to him, you know, he's constantly trying to imitate me" (LP2, Serial Testimony discussion). In the context of his relationship with his young child, embodied listening did not mean sitting still, nodding and making eye contact, but rather an attentive love demonstrated through acts of imitation. Differences in cultural norms, physical ability, gender, race etc. also impact performances of listening. Many audience members, for example, stressed how important eye contact is in performing attentive listening. Others pointed out that eye contact is not necessarily indicative of listening. There are, one speaker noted, cultural differences regarding when and with whom it is appropriate to make direct eye contact, and individuals with autism often find eye contact uncomfortable. While one audience member said good listeners regulate their embodied emotional reaction to what they hear, another pushed back, stating "I think that's really culturally specific. 'Cause, there are some cultures that are just much more emotive, right? And there are some cultures where it's more appropriate to kind of regulate your face and your countenance. And, that's what's valued. But, it's interesting to note that because you see how people are going to be reading each other, right?" (LP3, Serial Testimony discussion).

The Serial Testimony exercise illuminates how embodiment, misunderstanding and the negotiation of ambivalence are central to processes of listening. It demonstrates that perceptions of a "good listener" are not clear cut, are culturally dependent and shift depending on context. As Parks's (2018) research shows, how we perform listening is far from universal: "we learn how to appropriately embody listening in social contexts within our cultures" (pp. 215-216). Although "effective" listening is often described in terms of the accurate processing of messages (Proctor & Vu, 2006), Lipari (2014) argues that "misunderstanding is not only an inescapable aspect of communication, it is, moreover, both valuable and indispensable" (p. 8). When we acknowledge it, misunderstanding is useful because it reminds us that "perfection is impossible," that communication, even when face-to-face, is mediated through language, culture and history and it is therefore impossible to transparently understand the other (Lipari, 2014, p. 8). In this way, misunderstandings push us to interrogate that which we think we know; they make possible "ethical relation by inspiring (or frustrating) us to listen more closely to others, to inquire more deeply into their differences" (p. 8). By mapping out both shared listening values as well as tensions and differences in how those values are enacted within situated contexts, the Serial Testimony exercise and following discussion attempted to prime listeners to be attentive to their own processes of listening, and how these processes impact interactions across difference.

**"Speak Backs": The Value of Listening with the Embodied Storytellers**

Cvetkovich (2003) argues that minoritarian performances create affective counterpublics through the co-constitutive relationship between the minoritarian performer and the listening audience: "the theatrical experience is not just about what's on stage but also about who's in the audience creating community" (p. 9). The "speak back" portion of the listening parties, in which storytellers commented on and contextualized their podcasts, turned out to be pivotal both in

how the storytellers came to understand the significance of their own recordings and how audience members interpreted these stories. For some storytellers, the speak backs provided an opportunity to work through racialized pain in community with others. For listeners, pairing the recorded audio with the embodied storyteller "speak backs" provided them with tools to reflect on their own embodied processes of listening.

### *Embodied Storyteller Reactions to Listening to their Recorded Voices*

Hearing their own voices broadcast back at them was a strange experience for many of the storytellers. Many expressed an uncanny discomfort with listening to their physical voices. As one participant stated during her "speak back": "It's funny to listen to yourself in public" (LP2, Storyteller speak back). In their listener reflection,[6] another storyteller found it uncomfortable to "listen to my own voice" (60/68). Some expressed sadness in hearing themselves recount traumatic memories of experiencing racism. The pain of relistening to these stories was particularly clear during one of the "speak backs" with Beatriz, a participant storyteller who was the first immigrant, Latina, and lesbian woman to hold her elite position within the university. Below is an excerpt from her "speak back" during the event followed by my field notes written directly after the listening party:

> Last spring, and somehow it was painful for me, listening to me, in a way that it wasn't when I was talking. And so it's kind of funny when you radically listen to yourself. When you're talking, it's interactive, and so you're not always listening exactly to what you're saying. And so that was kind of ... I was surprised by my own reaction… (LP2, Storyteller speak back)

[6] Some storytellers also filled out listener reflections. Although these reflections are anonymous, the author of this reflection self-identified as a participant storyteller.

> After listening to the 'Finding My Voice/Fighting for my Place' clip, I handed the mic over to Beatriz assuming that as a major public figure within the university, she would of course feel comfortable riffing off of the clip and reflecting on the experience. Although she is speaking of deeply personal incidents in the clip, she sounds confident and poised, as though this is a piece of her history she has recounted before. Although personal, it has the feel of a polished speech. To my surprise, however, when Beatriz took the mic at the listening party, she seemed caught off guard. Her voice even began to waver, as if she might be holding back tears. There was a pause before she began to speak. She said she didn't know how to respond. I felt a tension. The first 'speak back' of the night and I had already made a participant feel uncomfortable. But then as she began to speak, she discussed how confident she had felt in the recording studio a year earlier, and how it was actually quite painful to listen back now and hear her own voice recounting those memories. (LP2, Fieldnotes)

Listening to yourself recount traumatic memories recorded a year earlier brings additional layers of emotional complexity to the self-reflexive process of radical listening. For Beatriz, she was able to distance herself emotionally to a certain degree in the original conversation in a way she was unable to do when listening to her recorded voice. Ironically perhaps, being physically distanced in terms of time and space from her own words enabled her to listen more closely to what she was actually saying, thus creating an emotional proximity to the memories that was muted in their original telling.

Even as they described the pain and/or discomfort of hearing their own stories, the listening parties also offered storytellers an opportunity to address racialized violence as part of a

community. In my follow-up interview with one participant storyteller named Elena after the initial recording event, when I asked her if she would like to take part in the listening parties, she answered enthusiastically. She discussed how potentially powerful it could be to listen to all of the stories together within a community space: "maybe it would help me like work through some of my own personal traumas of racism, or in a different way" (Elena, Follow-up interview). Cvetkovich (2003) argues for the political and affective potential of creating “a collective audience for trauma” rather than relegating “its representation to therapeutic contexts” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 4). By creating listening parties, we hoped to facilitate supportive counterpublic spaces to express experiences of racialized trauma rather than relegating these stories to the private sphere. One participant storyteller wrote that while “Listening to the painful memories in general was challenging,” it is nonetheless necessary that these stories “be heard within the frame of storytelling in community settings” (22/68). During her “speak back,” a community storyteller named Sofia emphasized both the embodied pain and necessity of this work:

> I don't talk about this interview. It was really ... it was a really hard interview for me. So I went and did it and I haven't spoken about it since. The only time I ever talk about it is during these events. And so, I think that when people of color don't want to talk about race, it's because of the scars and the trauma of racism and it can be difficult to bring up and discuss, even with other people of color. I think it's work that we have to do as people of color and it's work that white people have to do in order to try to move forward. (LP2, Storyteller speak back)

This act of working through the pain of racialized violence together with community, reverberated with listeners. One response to this story expressed that “it was difficult for me to

hear Sofia's comments after her clip. It was difficult but necessary because what she said resonates with me as a POC [Person of Color]. She made me accept my truth which at times is hard to hear. She said what I've been thinking for a long time, it was hard but worthwhile. I felt understood for once" (9/68). The courage/work of engaging in this act publicly constructs a performative ethics of self, or as José Esteban Muñoz (1999) describes it, "a working on the self for others" (p. 144). Through a personal processing of racialized trauma performed publicly, this act enables a collective reckoning with the impacts of racism geared toward creating new ways of being in the world. Later in this chapter, I will return to the impact of this act of working on self for others. For now, however, I want to emphasize the way in which the materiality of the recordings, the embodied presence of the storytellers, and the symbolic weight of their words worked together to facilitate a space for radical listening.

***Embodied Listener Reactions to Storyteller Speak Backs***

Having the speaker's body present while listening to the audio reminded listeners that there is a life behind the broadcast voices, and this may have nudged them to be more generous and open with their listening. As one storyteller exclaimed to me, "I think just tying that face to the story really gives people a wake-up call" (Izara, Follow-up interview). One audience member similarly noted in their reflection that "putting a face to a story and hearing from people who are in the same physical space is a great experience" (10/68). Another stated: "It's so powerful especially when the folks are in the room. It allows a human connection to be made–stories are how we connect to people and can come to a better understanding of the issue" (37/68). The edited clips were played before the storytellers were given the microphone to "speak back" to their stories. This means that the audience's gaze was not directed at anyone in particular during the clips. This made some listeners uncomfortable. As one person noted, it was "hard to stare at

nothing during the clips" (59/68). Others found the experience strange but powerful. One listener wrote that the experience was "different" than other events they had attended (54/68). When the audio started to play, they became momentarily confused as they looked around the room: "The clips almost sounded real–I thought the guest speakers were talking" (54/68). One listener wrote that the process of listening to edited clips offered a unique kind of embodiment that was "a great change from the typical form of presentation" (16/68). This material novelty in format encouraged the listener to "focus on the content and reflect on those words" (16/68). Multiple listeners noted that it was a peculiar and interesting process to listen to the storyteller's voices before being introduced to them and seeing what they looked like. They found it powerful to watch how people reacted to their own stories during the speak backs. Some remarked on the emotional impact of the materiality of the storytellers' voices, especially when recounting traumatic moments. One listener found it difficult to sit with "the pain in people's voices as they discussed their experiences" (6/68). Another noted that "hearing the voices crack before an emotional moment always elicits a response from me" (30/68). The material qualities of a voice in pain, a voice on the edge of functioning as it is "supposed" to, reverberates beyond the recording. The dual impact of hearing the storytellers' disembodied voices paired with subsequently seeing their embodied reaction during the speak backs caused listeners to critically reflect on their own embodied processes of listening.

One important tool some audience members gained from listening to the speak backs was establishing a mindful practice of self-reflexive listening as modeled through the community storytellers. One listener wrote that the events allowed them to "understand in a wider way my own process" (20/68). Understanding your own process of listening means being attuned to how your internal monologue shapes how you interpret the speaker's intent. Within the space of the

listening parties, the structure encouraged listeners to slow down "where we would normally gloss over our interactions" (41/68). Attempting to hold multiple independent melodies in your mind at once, however, is difficult. As one listener wrote, while they were listening to the stories "I found it most difficult to internalize my thoughts and begin to speak after" (24/68). Our brains are constantly reaching for points of identification, for how these stories fit within our own experiences and narrative of self. The listener wrote that although difficult, by centering the process of how one is listening, the event provided opportunities for learning and growth (24/68). Part of the process of radical listening involves continually working toward making space for different voices while acknowledging the inability to completely put aside your own interests to focus wholly on the intent of the speaker.

**Radical Listening Involves Working Through Discomfort**

Radical listening involves working through affective resonances that may be painful. It involves reframing discomfort from a feeling to be avoided to a potentially productive force. Dreher's (2009/2012) conception of political listening obliges the listener to sit with potential discomfort and to consider ways in which the listener can leverage their power to institute change. Dreher argues that "how we listen shapes the ways in which others can speak and be heard" (p. 448). She sees potential in participatory media not in finding a shared consensus that glosses over key differences, but rather in an (often turbulent) engagement that strives for collective action geared towards equity. This potential is palpable in the listener reflections. One listener felt "uncomfortable in a good way" working through the process of radical listening and engaging with "difficult conversations like this" (15/68). Another listener noted that although they have spent their professional life engaging in difficult dialogues around race and equity "it's

still always unsettling, but I have had to learn how to be ok with uncomfortability and I look at it as a growing experience" (58/68).

For some listeners, grappling with their Whiteness and feelings of guilt were central to these feelings of discomfort. One listener found "Acknowledging/ addressing White guilt" to be a difficult process and emphasized that they "Need more practice with this" (3/68). While learning to focus on action over guilt is challenging, the listener writes that the event redoubled their commitment to "stay[ing] involved" (3/68). Although the listening party exposed feelings of guilt, it also allowed them to "appreciate the courageous voices" of the storytellers (3/68). In response to one storyteller's recording discussing how her implicit biases had negatively impacted others, one listener acknowledged that they "felt guilt for ever doing the same" (32/68). At the same time, they also wrote that the event was valuable in helping them recognize their own privilege (32/68). Another listener found it difficult/uncomfortable to hear stories of discrimination, but they positioned this discomfort as necessary and productive. They wrote: "being someone who is White, I don't understand it and can only be an ally" (54/68). As a White person, they explain, they know they can never understand the experience of racialized discrimination, but they hope to make an impact "as an ally" and note that "It's important to make White folks uncomfortable and allow a safe space to talk about discrimination" (54/68).

**Somatic Metaphors for Listening in Audience Written Reflections: Responding to Pain without Displacing Difference**

Many of the listener reflections contained similar somatic metaphors to evoke their embodied reactions to the stories. LeMesurier (2014) argues that somatic metaphors engender "bodily memories quickly through connotations that draw on memories of embodied experience, memories that have formed through repetition and coalesced into a genre of action that is called

forth by the discursive label" (p. 365). On the one hand, listeners repeatedly used terms that convey a tender intimacy: the stories "resonated" within the listeners, they were "touching" and "vulnerable." On the other hand, many listeners repeatedly used terms that convey force: they wrote that the stories were both "painful" and "powerful." Several listeners stated the stories "hit me," and one listener went so far as to write that the "weight behind that [story] crushed me" (31/68). Here we see the dual embodied potential in these stories for intimacy, connection and community as well as awakening a racialized trauma experienced differentially and individually yet impacting everyone.

Listening to another's voice in pain leaves an impression, a weight, on one's own body, even as each listener experiences that impact differently. As Ahmed (2014) argues, "pain is involved in the production of uneven effects, in the sense that pain does not produce a homogeneous group of bodies who are together in their pain" (p. 31). Although empathy is often positioned as a form of healing, Ahmed warns that "to hear the other's pain as my pain" involves an erasure of the specific histories and structures that generated that particular wound, and thus such empathy "involves violence" (p. 35). When we listen, we become part of the story, we are implicated in it, moved by it, even though we cannot embody it in the same way as it is embodied within the storyteller. Through radical listening, our task then is to "learn to hear what is impossible," to respond to the other's pain, to be unsettled by it and the histories it uncovers, even as we accept that what we hear is not the whole, and the whole is not ours to have nor within our power to heal (p. 35).

Many listener reflections emphasized the importance of respecting the situated specificity of the narratives they were hearing. One listener discussed the importance of "Hearing truth on someone else's terms" (14/68), thus pointing to the centering of difference and the

acknowledgement of a multiplicity of truths. Another listener wrote “Everyone has a unique story, so it's interesting to hear similarities and differences with my own experience” (52/68). In her conception of “listening otherwise,” Lipari (2014) argues for a compassion that “takes us beyond the self and out into the groundlessness and ambiguity of the radical alterity of the other” (p. 184). Such listening does not seek to assimilate the other’s truth into that of the listeners, but rather to sit with the destabilizing “groundlessness” that comes from reaching beyond what is known to try to hear “truth on someone else’s terms” (Lipari, 2014, p. 184; (14/68). Through radical listening to stories of suffering and resistance, we may begin to retune our ears to hear differently and to adjust our melody to make room for another. Through this praxis, we may create an opening for a counterpublic contrapuntal song which moves us to collective politics.

## Radical Listening and Performing an Ethics of the Self

> Oppositional counterpublics are enabled by visions, ‘worldviews’ that reshape as they deconstruct reality. Such counterpublics are the aftermath of minoritarian performance. Such performances transport the performer and the spectator where transformation and politics are imaginable. (Muñoz, 1999, p. 196)

In the previous section, I focused on the somatic responses of both audiences and storytellers to the act of collectively listening to podcasts of racism/resistance. In this section, I shift the focus of my analysis to hone in on the storyteller “speak backs” and the potential embedded in minoritarian performance. Within these speak backs, the storytellers performed an ethics of self that made room for both storyteller and audience to collaboratively imagine new ways of being in the world. Muñoz (1999) argues that minoritarian performances of self highlight “the ways in which representations of and (simultaneously) by that self signal new spaces within the social” (p. 146). Rather than a unified set of instructions, the “speak backs” highlighted the

contradictions, differences and ambivalences within storyteller performances, enabling a collective processing of connections and differences in experiences and strategies for combating racism. By being vulnerable through listening to and reflecting on the complexities and ambiguities in their own stories of racial trauma and resistance, the storytellers' minoritarian performances of self allowed for "the possibility of counterpublics- communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 146). As one listener reflection noted, "It shows bravery of those who shared and allows everyone to connect with the stories that were being told in a large crowd" (21/68). This web of connections is enabled by the vulnerability/bravery of working through personal stories of trauma/resistance publicly in all their complexities and messiness. This is significant because through their "speak backs," storytellers provided listeners with a flexible model for interrupting racism and working through racial trauma. They provided narratives with the potential to weave together with those of audience members forming a contrapuntal counterpublic song. This song in turn acts as one section of a larger symphony of anti-racist activism which centers a politics of equity and difference.

In this section, I map the performance/reception of community storytellers as they enact an ethics of self through publicly negotiating their experiences of racialized trauma in relation to multiple layers of power and privilege. Through these "speak backs," storytellers modeled a self-reflexive process of listening that highlighted: 1) processes of identification are never complete and occur within systems of power and 2) that solidarity and collective action toward change is grounded in the slow process of sustained engagement, of continual listening and grappling with self in relation to other.

**Speak Backs from Beatriz and Elena: Navigating the Ambivalence and Tensions in One's Own Story**

The "speak backs" from both Beatriz and Elena resonated with many audience members and illustrate the power of publicly working through complexities and tensions in one's own narrative. As expressed in my field notes cited in the previous section, during Beatriz's "speak back," she did not perform according to my expectations of her as an elite public persona, as a figure of authority and power. Rather than a confident, tidy narrative of overcoming racism, sexism and homophobia to earn her elite position, her "speak back" expressed vulnerability, uncertainty and ongoing discomfort navigating systems of power. Muñoz (1999) notes that "To work on oneself is to veer away from models of the self that correlate with socially prescribed identity narratives" (p. 145). Beatriz openly engaged the contradictions of negotiating multiple marginalized identities while also wielding power. In spaces surrounded by Provosts and University Presidents who are mostly white and male she is isolated; they make sure to let her know "you don't really belong" (LP2, Storyteller speak back). At the same time, when she is helping steer the University as the person in power "everything else about you falls away. And you aren't any of these things [marginalized identities], you're the person in power" (LP2, Storyteller speak back). This bouncing back and forth, she notes, is a "jarring experience" (LP2, Storyteller speak back). The state of living in-between, of being privileged and powerful and yet never accepted among the privileged and powerful, produces a sense of isolation. One listener wrote that what resonated most for her during the event was hearing how others navigated the alienation of being the only one at the proverbial table: "I'm 1st Generation–Also first woman in a program who was told I wasn't meant to be there" (11/68). Many other listeners similarly

resonated with the isolation that comes from structural racism, from vying for a seat at the table within spaces that will never really hear you.

Although gaining power as a minoritized subject can destabilize identifications and generate feelings of alienation, it can also work to destabilize engrained power structures and point to future possibilities. Beatriz noted how important it was for her and other minoritized folks in White spaces to find each other and make room for others: "But it actually does make a bonding experience because you basically seek each other out" (LP2, Storyteller speak back). New community is formed not through a shared culture necessarily, but rather, as Ahmed (1999) writes, “through reaching across different spaces, through the very bodily gestures of reaching towards other bodies, who are already recognized only insofar as they seem out of place, as uncomfortable, or not quite comfortable, in this place” (p. 345). One listener was moved by Beatriz’s acknowledgement that although “the elite space would exclude you if you’re different” this exclusion can generate greater “bonding of minorities” within these spaces (15/68). By working through the contradictions and complexities of navigating systems of power as an intersectional marginalized subject, Beatriz enabled listeners to think through existing inequalities in addition to new possibilities.

Later in her “speak back,” Beatriz reflected on the ways experiences morph through processes of remembering. She admitted that as a child, she not only acted as a cultural broker for her parents as she discusses in her clip, but also felt embarrassed by them and felt a need to distance herself from their otherness:

> I very much remember, I feel incredibly guilty about it, being ashamed of my parents because of the way other people reacted to them. But not quite understanding exactly why. So you know, it's always hard to ... We construct our memories, we know that. But

> it's also hard at that age because when you don't have the language, you just have the feelings. (LP2, Storyteller speak back)

The pauses between phrases and gentle cracks in her voice as she said these words conveyed an internal struggle as she worked through her reaction publicly. Rather than perform a rehearsed story of her identity which constructed a coherent narrative from past to present, she allowed her voice to falter and her uncertainty to surface. This performance of self provided a space for listeners to think through the complexities and contradictions of processes of identification. The enmeshed feelings of love and shame Beatriz expressed feeling towards her parents (and her own racialized identity) as a child stuck with some listeners. One listener wrote that they found it painful when Beatriz "touched on her feeling of shame over her parents" (14/68). It is painful to work through your own internalized oppression, of how you may have distanced yourself from your own melody in order to sing the tune of the majority. And yet such self-reflexive work is necessary in order to move forward. The listener noted that storytelling allows a collective process of reflection with this "tough subject matter" (14/68).

In her "speak back" to her clip "The Limits of Citizenship," Elena also grappled with the contradictions of living in-between, of negotiating the privileges that come with US citizenship while at the same time grappling with the lived marginalization of being Chicana in US society. At the same time as it can be isolating to reside in the cracks between established identities, Elena notes that this liminal space is also powerful:

> you're not really from here or not from there. Being able to be part of an in-between space, I think it's very powerful. I've always seen it as like, wow White privilege power has really done things to me to make me feel not a part of a nation that has oppressed my

> ancestors... There's a long history of that. From different countries all across the world actually. So I don't know. Maybe being in-between is okay. (LP2, Storyteller speak back)

Here we see the contradictions: although citizenship allows for certain privileges, it does not interpellate you completely into the subject position of a US American. While living in-between established identity categories can dislocate you from community, it also speaks to a lived truth that resists structures which constantly work to contain and separate, structures that justify racism and oppression. As Elena states, "Maybe being in-between is okay" (LP2, Storyteller speak back).

One listener wrote that Elena's clip resonated because they "Loved the idea of thinking that it's good to live in the 'in between' spaces" (14/68). Another listener who felt "caught in an in-between space myself" similarly expressed gratitude for Elena's clip in helping her reframe the in-between space as a site of possibility rather than isolation (31/68). By having the courage to be vulnerable and process the ambivalence embedded in their own stories publicly, the storytellers modeled a feminist ethics of reception. This radical listening to one's own story helped foster a collective process of working through the complexities of racialized trauma and resistance in relation to systems of power and privilege.

**Coalition Building Through Sustained Engagement**

Although categories of difference are unstable, are always in the process of becoming, there is an "ongoing necessity of group politics" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1296). The question of how to construct effective group politics without reinforcing categories of difference as fact is far from straightforward, and many of the storytellers' "speak backs" acknowledged the challenges of listening and building trust across divides of power and privilege. During her "speak back" Elena confided:

> There's this move to talk about privilege within even POC spaces and that's important for Chicanos, for new immigrants from Mexico, and even more of our indigenous brothers and sisters from Mexico. How do we get into these long term relationship-building together, so we can work through our stuff and have a movement that makes some changes real for us? It is really important. (LP2, Storyteller speak back)

As an activist, creating these coalitions across boundaries of power and privilege to fight racism was central for Elena. In her research on the United Nations sponsored World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), Falcón (2016) discusses the failure of some US activists to radically listen to the concerns of activists from the global South. As Falcón quotes one respondent saying, "'As feminists of color, many of us failed to be reflexive, opting, instead, to re-create hierarchy by not relinquishing our privilege vis-à-vis our sisters from the global South'" (p. 138). In order to form lasting transnational coalitions, Falcón argues activists had to negotiate positionality and power differentials within organizing spaces. By working through ambiguities and tensions in the process of community building publicly, Elena opened space for the listeners to interrogate similar challenges within their own circles. As one listener wrote, "There is discrimination even within POC spaces, so hearing these stories is relevant to everyone- not just the oppressors" (30/68). By interrogating her own privileges, Elena provided a model for self-reflexive listening that is a necessary first step in building anti-racist coalitions.

The clips for the last listening party centered on activism and the sustained engagement such work necessitates. Although the final listening party intentionally centered the labor and listening that goes into anti-racist activist organizing, these themes were present from the first listening session. During this event, one undergraduate storyteller named Rae discussed her frustration with people's fear to speak up when racist acts occur. Because of this silence, too

many marginalized people, she emphasized, see no path forward in spaces of power not built for them (higher education, workplaces, etc.). During her "speak back," she encouraged the audience not to leave the stories behind when they left the room, but rather bring these voices into their lives and their workplaces. Activism does not only happen within activist spaces, and Rae encouraged listeners to be brave and speak out against injustices using the tools and knowledge gained from spaces like the listening parties. In her "speak back" during the final listening party, one participant storyteller named Kathy discussed the importance of incorporating activism into your life, of "having each other's back" and "when there's an incident on the street or whatever, to be comfortable with what you stand for, what you want to stand for. And, then to find your center and be able to act it in the world" (LP3, Storyteller speak back). Tony and Vivek, two storytellers and longtime friends, discussed how the original digital storytelling event and subsequent listening parties changed the way they discuss and address issues of race and equity in their everyday lives. Recording stories of racialized trauma that they had never previously discussed with each other made it easier for them to expose and combat racism within their wider communities. As Vivek stated in a follow-up discussion with the audience:

> I think once we started that exercise as friends, we also included other people in our circle, beyond just the two of us… I think these things go out beyond just the way we talk as friends, we also take this out to our communities. I think that's one of the biggest benefits of doing this is that you learn to ask the questions that you didn't really feel comfortable asking before sometimes with people. (LP 3, Storyteller discussion with audience)

Hearing various stories of taking action inspired both storytellers and listeners to focus on how they were taking action within their own lives. One storyteller named Jinho, approached me after

the first listening party to express how important the event had been for her in collectively creating a toolkit to interrupt acts of racism. The experience, she told me, allowed her to find the courage to speak up. During her "speak back" at the first listening party, she discussed how impactful the listening session had been for her in providing her with an opportunity to listen to other people's experiences and learn from how they had dealt with acts of racism.

Similar enthusiasm for taking action against racism can be seen in listener reflections. One listener emphasized the importance of collectively listening and building strategies to resist racism: "It's important to share and listen to personal stories of discrimination so that we could learn from each other and apply what we learn to everyday life" (9/68). This collective knowledge, she continued, is important for action. Some listeners wrote that they were inspired to continue their existing activist work: "their stories reignited my fire to do what I'm working towards right now" (46/68). Some listeners emphasized the importance of sustained engagement, even when results are not immediately evident. The event, one listener wrote, was "powerful in addressing slow community level action" (44/68). Another reflection stated that the listening party "personalized" systemic issues of racism and allowed listeners to "recognize that they are not alone" (42/68). It facilitated a joint effort to develop strategies to "overcome discrimination" (42/68). Another listener stressed the value of the event in demonstrating the personal impacts of systemic oppression: "The personal stories of discrimination underscore the direct and immediate destructive impact of the racism at the larger institutional level" (62/68). By tying personal stories of racism/resistance to wider institutional systems of oppression, the stories instigated many listeners and storytellers to work towards countering patterns of racialized devaluation within their own communities.

In an essay on anti-racist digital storytelling workshops, Changfoot (2016) discusses her struggle grappling with how relatively small community-based initiatives can go about tackling systemic issues of racial oppression. On the one hand, through the process of creating her own digital story and through listening to the stories of others, she gained "an acknowledgement that what I had experienced was very real to me and that the experience was something that happened which would not occur in another world where anti-racism would be valued and practiced" (Changfoot, p. 72). She also notes however, that:

> any trace of accomplishment approaching self-congratulation became quickly revised by the ephemerality of the space as well as the density and magnitude of system change and intersubjective change required for the otherness recounted in the digital stories to be meaningfully addressed, let alone the accompanying economic transformation required. (Changfoot, p. 76)

As Changfoot, acknowledges, although anti-racist digital storytelling projects cannot in and of themselves lead to systemic change, when understood as one node in a larger web of social justice organizing, such projects provide the potential to collectively imagine new worlds, new ways of being accountable for each other, of working together, each from our own situated position, to resist racism. Although the ephemerality of the embodied space of the listening parties necessarily limited access, this ephemerality also enabled the co-creation of a praxis of radical listening, an embodied praxis that listeners hopefully took with them beyond the event walls. Co-constructing a space for radical listening is, however, a fragile endeavor. In the next section, I address moments in the listening parties when attempts to create a counter-public song lapsed into silence or cacophony.

## Challenges with Enacting Radical Listening: Disengaged (Non) Listening and Distracted Listening

In the process of mapping the embodied potentiality of the listening parties to foster an anti-racist counterpublic, it is important to highlight not only moments of resonance, but also moments of frustration, distraction, and disengagement. The intention to engage in radical listening is not always enough to overcome the multiple anxieties and distractions that one may encounter in any given listening event. The attempt to perform embodied listening for others can in itself become a distraction. Additionally, in order to engage in radical listening, one must enter the space out of one's own volition, and with a willingness to be open and vulnerable. This cannot be forced or coerced.

### Disengaged (non)Listening

One challenge we faced as facilitators trying to structure an environment conducive to radical listening was varying levels of engagement within the audience. A couple of undergraduate classes offered extra credit to students who attended the listening parties. During the winter listening party, I was working as a Teaching Assistant for one of these classes. While acknowledging that one's performance of listening does not transparently reflect their internal processes of listening, some students who attended the event for extra credit did appear to be more disengaged than audience members who were not receiving an external "reward" for coming. Several students positioned themselves in chairs around the edges of the room rather than at the tables in the center. Despite efforts placed on engaging the audience in co-constructing a space for radical listening, I saw several students pull out their phones and withdraw into their devices at various points during the event. Although the listener reflections were both optional and anonymous, I found it interesting that several students took a reflection

sheet, put their name on it, and wrote simply that they had attended the event in order to receive extra credit for a class. While the event seemed to create a self- reflexive embodied listening space for those who were self-motivated to attend, for some of the students who came to receive extra credit, our experiment in radical listening may have failed to spark engagement. Although it is impossible for me to know exactly how the event impacted them, the listening parties did not seem to pull some of them out of habituated patterns of distracted listening, but rather may have been just another box to check on the long list of lectures, assignments, etc. expected of them as university students.

**Distracted Listening**

Attempting to listen for a multiplicity of voices is challenging, especially when one is performing multiple roles. In her interviews with fellow lesbian activist organizers with ACT UP, Cvetkovich (2003) acknowledges how the labor of sustained active listening across interviews "was often exhausting, and I felt myself overwhelmed by all the voices in my head" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 167). The wider the soundscape you try to take in, the more difficult it is to give your attention over fully to any particular voice. In my multiple roles as event organizer, sound technician and researcher, I found myself pulled in different directions. The anxiety of being multiply positioned at times overwhelmed my efforts at radical listening. As I wrote in my fieldnotes:

> As the stories started playing, I felt a desire to look at the audience to gauge how they were reacting to what they were hearing. I could hear them laughing and gasping at various points in the stories. Having recently spent hours editing these clips, I've heard them a thousand times. I found it difficult to stay with these familiar voices when so much new was going on around me. I resisted the urge to stare into the audience. As a

> facilitator, I needed to model radical listening. I was so excited before the event, but negotiating all these different roles (sound technician, event organizer, researcher) became so stressful that I found it difficult to be present. I kept worrying that the sound levels were all wrong. One clip seemed too quiet, the next too loud. As I hustled to the back of the room to adjust the audio levels, I hoped my body didn't distract the listening audience. (LP2, Fieldnotes)

Having edited the stories, I was attuned to the audio clips as media objects and worried that imperfections in their physical quality as sound objects would distract other listeners from the significance of their meaning as representational texts. I worried that my body would become an additional distraction as I attempted to adjust the audio. Although the material qualities of the sound (pauses, cracks in the storyteller's voices, etc.) opened some listeners to self-reflexive embodied listening, for me as the sound editor, worrying about the sound's materiality at times inhibited me from tuning in to the meaning embedded within. This was further compounded by my conflicting responsibilities as 1) a researcher to tune into the audience's response to the clips and 2) as an event facilitator to model listening for others. Although radical listening involves an effort to slow down and focus attention on the voices of others, it is not possible to isolate the listening act completely from one's roles and responsibilities external to that act. Although becoming aware of how these "distractions" impact our relation to others is central to the process of radical listening, at times of increased stress, at times when radical listening might be most necessary, it is important to acknowledge that these distractions can overwhelm our ability to be present with others. Although radical listening involves moments of cacophony, the sustained commitment to listening despite (and in part because of) these moments is crucial to building ethical relations with others.

The listening parties held within them points of contradiction and tension as we attempted to construct an anti-racist counterpublic song. Listeners came to the events with varying levels of openness and practice engaging in processes of self-reflexive listening, and each with their own set of anxieties and distractions. Despite these difficulties, we hoped that the listening parties would provide a space to navigate the contradictions and tensions that arise in the process of listening, in the process of trying to interpret another's melody and how that melody sounds in relation to one's own. Middleton et. al (2015) emphasize in their discussion of Critical Participatory Rhetoric that while the critic engages "in a constant critique of power relations," she does so "looking toward a future yet unrealized" (p. 11). There will always be moments of cacophony as new melodies layer into the soundscape. If one is willing to engage and be vulnerable, the praxis of radical listening pushes the boundaries of what is heard, of what is known. It opens listeners to new worlds.

## Concluding Thoughts

This chapter uses the co-presence of the listening parties as a way to explore the complexities of mediation, both interpersonal and mass-mediated, and how processes of mediation impacted our collective efforts to cultivate a radical ethics of reception that centers difference and equity. Through these collective listening events, we hoped to wrench listeners from habituated patterns of distracted engagement and create a space to partake in the strange and somewhat awkward process of collective listening to mediated sound absent corresponding visual stimuli. Lacey (2013) notes that focused attention "is rare in an age of constant overlapping and overwhelming digital distraction" (p. 155). Attention is not easy. The act of giving attention has embedded within it a constant struggle. Its etymology includes the Latin prefix "ad" meaning toward and the word tension, meaning a stretched condition. Giving your

attention over to the experience, to the voices around you, involves a mindful stretching towards (yet never quite reaching) the other. This stretching involves both an intersubjective hopeful desire to connect, to be in community with others, as well as a tension, a stretching of oneself while struggling to stay balanced. Within this engaged struggle to pay attention, we find the possibilities of radical listening.

The way in which stories are mediated impacts how listeners interpret them, and the listening party events provided storytellers the ability to contextualize stories (speak backs) and provide a sense of embodied community (space, food, etc.) which I argue enabled a co-creation of a praxis of radical listening (however limited in scope). The cultivation of a capacity for radical listening, of being mindful of one's listening practices, of valuing difference in addition to connection, of recognizing the inability to ever completely reach the other, hopefully worked to construct practices of listening beyond the room to contexts both interpersonal and mass-mediated.

# Chapter 3: Sharing Stories of Racism–The Limits of Listening and the Persistence of Hope

> In 1998, I made a documentary about the last flophouse hotels on the Bowery in Manhattan… Later, I wrote a book on the men with the photographer Harvey Wang. I remember walking into a flophouse with an early version of the book and showing one of the guys his page. He stood there staring at it in silence, then he grabbed the book out of my hand and started running down the long, narrow hallway holding it over his head shouting, "I exist! I exist." In many ways, "I exist" became the clarion call for StoryCorps.
>
> -Dave Isay, TED2015

In March of 2015, Dave Isay, the founder of StoryCorps, gave a TED talk on the power of sharing and listening to personal narratives, especially for individuals whose voices too often go unheard. As Isay proclaims, "'I exist' became the clarion call for StoryCorps" (Isay, 2015). The phrase "clarion call" implies a call to action and a battle to be fought. As bodies, buildings, and communities continuously vanish from public consciousness, will digital storytelling projects like StoryCorps be able to bring their call for acknowledgement, for equity, to ears willing to hear? How do these voices transform in the effort to amplify them for the masses? What are the risks in terms of appropriating the pain of others, of erasing the specificity of their histories, in an effort to generate a sense of empathy with a wider public? After Isay's book was published, after the man screamed "I exist," after the long halls of the flophouse were replaced by new apartment buildings, what happened to those men, and what was the impact of recording

and sharing their stories? This chapter explores what is gained and what is lost when producing, editing and broadcasting intimate narratives of racial trauma and resistance. I address the motivations of storytellers and the risks they take in making public personal stories of racial discrimination.

I tackle the contradictions that reside in public testimonials of personal sufferings and our endeavors as storytellers and facilitators/listeners to control how these stories are heard by wider publics and the impact/value that they can have. On the one hand, we are dominated by media narratives that encourage us to share our personal struggles as a way to generate empathy between different others and to educate the larger public. New digital technologies enable the dissemination of this public good in new ways, highlighting the distances that stories can travel. On the other hand, the politics of who hears these stories and how they use them remain central to the possibilities of these stories doing some public good. These politics are intensely personal, as storytellers sharing traumatic experiences of racialized violence must contend with how their stories are taken up and (mis)used by different listening publics.

In this chapter, I explore what motivated storytellers of color to share, or refuse to share, personal narratives of discrimination with wider publics. I address the calculus storytellers made at each stage of engagement with this project: from recording, to archiving, to editing, and finally to sharing these stories online and over the airwaves. I trace how storytellers framed the significance of their personal stories of racism within wider discursive systems. They emphasized how the act of crafting and recording their narratives allowed them to reclaim power by reworking a past traumatic moment. While some storytellers hoped that these narrated memories would contribute to a larger archive of marginalized histories, others questioned how this archive might be used to further target their communities. Storytellers expressed

ambivalence about the editing of their longer conversations. While they mostly felt safe working with me to edit their voices into podcasts for use on the CCDE website and at the listening parties, several felt exposed and unheard by the editing practices of the local NPR station. Additionally, as these stories played on the radio and circulated online, storytellers contended with their inability to control how their narratives were being heard and by whom.

This chapter centers on the stories of four participant storytellers: Gloria, Melony, Matt and Tammy.[7] They have been enthusiastic participants throughout the lifecycle of this project, from the original recording and archival project with StoryCorps, to the listening parties, the broadcasting of their stories on local community and public radio stations, and reflecting on this engagement at the Critical Ethnic Studies Association (CESA) conference in Vancouver, Canada. In June of 2018, I traveled with Dr. Ralina Joseph, Dr. Naheed Gina Aaftaab[8] and these participants to attend the CESA Conference and facilitate a panel based on our project. It was a year after the initial recording event and a few months after the final listening party. Ours was one of the last panels of the day and the audience was small but engaged. After Ralina, Gina and I introduced the project and its origins, the participants each shared and discussed a short clip (30–60 seconds) either from their original recording or from their edited stories. Melony and Matt are a married couple and presented their story together.

I weave in the three stories these four participants shared during the CESA conference into my analysis. Although this chapter is structured around the narratives of these storytellers, I also draw from follow-up interviews with other participants whose experiences may reinforce or diverge from theirs. Within our discussions at CESA, the common thread throughout was the simultaneous and contradictory pull of publicly sharing stories of pain and suffering, and the

[7] I am using pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.
[8] The Director and Assistant Director of the CCDE

desire/need to control the way our stories are picked up and heard. Furthermore, as listeners and storytellers of racial trauma, we acknowledged that these scars exist, but they are not us; rather we speak about our pain and tell our stories in order to create new ways of being and relating in the world, even if we have no guarantees of social change.

In the following sections, I first provide an overview of the literature on the potential and limitations of digital storytelling that frames this work. I then tackle how processes of editing shape the affective relationship between storytellers, stories and listeners. I end by addressing how storytellers grappled with the precariousness of sharing their narratives. Their experiences speak to the challenges participants faced as they weighed the personal risks against their desire for public acknowledgement and action against racism.

## Digital Storytelling: The Politics of Representation

With its increased interactivity and lowered barriers to access, the internet and corresponding new media technologies have been hypothesized to offer a potential space to revive the Habermasian notion of the public sphere (Lundby, 2009; Papacharissi, 2002; Rheingold, 2008; Röhle, 2005). These theories often stress that the internet and new media technologies give citizens a platform that enables greater interactivity and self-expression (Jenkins, 2016; Rheingold, 2008). By destabilizing the traditional theoretical relationship between producers and consumers, the participatory culture of new media might offer hope for revitalizing democracy: “The fact that users can now work with the materials of broadcast media as a way of communicating expands the idea that media make possible a public sphere.” (Holmes, 2009, p. 687).

With the advent of emerging digital media technologies in the 1990s, a number of organizations and educational institutions created workshops, initiatives and campaigns to

educate the public on how “digital media tools could be used to empower personal storytelling” (Lambert, 2019). The “Digital Storytelling” movement that emerged from these campaigns focused on small-scale, low budget projects with the goal of empowering “everyday” people to create and share personal stories, usually in their own voice (Lundby, 2008, p. 2). Within new media studies, a central tension has emerged between the view of digital storytelling as a democratic, bottom-up space where historically marginalized communities can amplify their voice and push for equity and fears that digital storytelling will become co-opted as a space of corporate multiculturalism. The larger the target audience, the greater the incentive to minimize potential points of conflict and to foreground harmony and narrative closure. In this process, diversity is celebrated, but power differentials are obscured to appeal to the masses and make more money to sustain the platform. Traditional oral historians weave individual voices together with the wider social and historical contexts in which these voices are embedded. Many digital storytelling projects like StoryCorps and the StoryCenter, however, present floating snippets of life where the listener is not necessarily able to locate the individual narratives as part of a larger ecology of meaning situated in space, time and place.

There is also the question of whether the editing of digital stories related to discrimination may emphasize harmony and narrative closure in order to appeal to the widest possible audience, thus undermining the counterpublic potential of such stories to change perceptions of structural oppression. As Warner (2002) argues, in order for a text to have transformative power, it must construct a possible future soundscape that was before unheard. At the same time, it must relate to the lived experience of the individual members of the public in order to sustain their investment. Although a public in theory offers unlimited accessibility, it always circulates within preexisting discourses that self-select based on identification. Therefore,

the transformative power of publics to bring together a greater heterogeneity of interests is always circumscribed. Storytellers and organizations must negotiate the tension between reaching the widest possible audience (encompassing the most general public) and achieving resonance with certain identities. Because of this tension, Warner (2002) argues that in order for counterpublics to attain a degree of power in society, they must "adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse" and in doing so "cede the original hope of transforming, not just policy, but the space of public life itself" (p. 89).

In the internet age, Cindy Gao notes "the current virtualization of the racial aura aestheticizes difference but not the power that produces difference" (Gao, 2012). Although the representation of Asian Americans on YouTube, for example, has increased, because these videos must vie for attention within established hegemonic cultural logics, the videos that "make it big" are unlikely to be the videos that offer the most insightful critiques of the system. Gao is skeptical of utopian, democratizing claims about the internet and instead asserts that online spaces are just as subject to hegemonic structures of oppression as their offline counterparts. In their study of YouTube, Burgess and Green (2009) ask whether the website "enables encounters with cultural differences and the development of political listening across belief systems and identities" (p. 77). Although YouTube offers a space where "ordinary citizens" can generate content and engage in dialogue, Burgess and Green, like Gao, note that YouTube's "common culture" can also produce "dramatized stereotypes" (p. 79). As progressive counterpublics online seek to broaden their influence, they thus run the risk of reproducing the very logics they initially sought to undermine.

The proliferation of self-representation online is often interwoven with narratives of individualism and corporate branding strategies that re-inscribe offline power differentials and

thus fail to improve the material conditions of minoritized communities. Gray (2013) asserts that as activists and scholars push for an expansion of portrayals of marginalized groups in the media, what many fail to realize is the threat of the "proliferation and marketing of difference and diversity" within a neoliberal society (p.772). As Muñoz (1999) notes, the dominant culture often expects a minoritized subject to "perform his or her alterity as a consumable spectacle" (p. 182).

The commodification of groups based on constructed demographic identities has been well documented by scholars (Dávila, 2001; Gray, 2013; Muñoz, 1999). Dávila (2001) details the essentialist construction of Latino identity as a demographic group for marketing purposes: "heterogeneity is consistently downplayed or else subject to a range of 'knowledges' for its management and containment according to marketing needs and requirements" (p. 80). The shift from "social and historical critiques of racism" to ones which celebrate diversity obscures power differentials in order to market to a wide range of seemingly equal demographic groups (Gray, 2013, p.776). Critiquing the focus in critical discussions of media on the prevalence and complexity of representations of marginalized groups, Gray instead moves the discussion to whether these representations are actually fueling change and social justice activism in the public. Within the corporate structures of society, difference is celebrated as long as it is relegated to the personal, as long as it does not make claims to public action. As Gray (2013) notes, "As matters of public policy… these individual markers of difference as a basis of collective identification, attachment, and belonging have no place and discursively no position from which to be taken up" (p. 780). For Fraser (2000), what remains central to any hopes of a more equitable future is that the "politics of recognition does not stop at identity but seeks institutional remedies for institutionalized harms" (p. 116). Fraser notes that patterns of cultural devaluation and economic distribution "are interimbricated and interact causally with each other"

and can thus lead to "a vicious circle of subordination" (p. 118). Therefore, any critique of representation and recognition in society, both online and offline, must account for how systems of devaluation interact with oppressive economic structures and vice versa.

Several prominent new media scholars have argued that the participatory culture of the digital age offers hope for marginalized groups to resist dominant ideologies and push for social change (Jenkins et. al 2016, Rheingold 2008). At the same time, several critical scholars have questioned the ability of changes in technology to transform long entrenched corporate structures and hegemonic ideologies (Gao 2012, Gray 2015). And yet, the need and desire to tell these stories persists despite the risks. The storytellers who participated in our project were aware of the fraught politics of representation, the power of editing, and the tendentious context in which the clips would be heard; and yet they voluntarily sought to participate in the project. This is one of the reasons why we designed and implemented the "Listening Parties," where the participants and members of our community could gather for the sole purpose of listening to clips of the stories as a collective in a setting which centered participant voices and a praxis of radical listening. As noted in the previous chapter, the listening parties provided a context for the interview participants to speak back to their representation, or the representation of their stories, as well as to cultivate an ethics of radical listening among the audience.

In the following sections, I first tackle how processes of editing shape the affective relationship between stories and listeners. I then turn to the stories themselves and how storytellers grappled with both the precarity of sharing their narratives on the one hand as well as the potential embedded in the act of reworking a past experience of racialized trauma to envision new articulations for what the world might be.

**Editing Voices: Creating moments of solidarity or capitalizing on suffering?**

Popular digital storytelling projects like StoryCorps that feature voices from "ordinary" people argue, in the words of StoryCorps founder Dave Isay, that they are offering listeners "something authentic and pure" in a society where "it's hard to tell what's real and what's an advertisement" (Isay, 2015). Freund (2015), however, retorts that the confessional tone of much of digital storytelling is a symptom of "Generation Me" and an "epidemic of narcissism" that he claims are driven by "neoliberal hyper-individualism and its attendant social discourses of survival, therapy, and trauma" (p. 111–119). Rejecting the binary that positions audio digital stories as either unmediated and authentic or self-indulgent artifice, this project centers how these stories are taken up as meaningful in different discursive realms by both storytellers and listeners.

How does the edited form of digital oral stories impact the way listeners interpret the meaning and significance of these "conversations"? Abelmann et al. (2009) argue that in contrast to traditional oral histories that "reveal the tracks of the investigator," the editing of the 40-minute StoryCorps interviews for mass consumption leaves no trace of the editors (p. 257). Freund (2015) similarly voices concern that popular oral storytelling projects like StoryCorps present themselves as "direct access to authentic experience that speaks for itself and needs no expert interpretation" (p. 126). The ways in which StoryCorps segments are edited is invisible to the listener, giving the sense that these stories provide an open window into the life of another rather than a carefully molded segment. In our partnership between the CCDE and StoryCorps, StoryCorps producers offered to edit the recordings for $1000.00 per clip. We decided, however, that it made more sense to work with participants to edit clips ourselves in order to better center storyteller wishes. In this section, I start by looking at risks inherent in the process StoryCorps

producers use to edit participant clips. I then turn to how I negotiated the risks inherent in editing others' words as a story editor for the Radical Listening project.

StoryCorps producers are trained to draw out moments of emotional intensity to create immediate points of identification between the listener and the speaker. They edit for the aesthetic qualities of voice. StoryCorps producer Michael Garofalo stated that a great StoryCorps piece "Connects you to another person in an immediate, intimate way. You're just sitting with that person for a few minutes and it feels like they're speaking directly to you" (Garofalo, 2015). Although there is this appearance of transparency and authenticity, Garofalo notes that the average StoryCorps segment has 274 edits in a roughly two-and-a-half-minute product. Garofalo argues that in contrast to vision which is more linear, audio is both immersive and ambient, and thereby runs the risk of turning into background noise. Unlike a striking image which lends itself to virality online, Garofalo notes that audio storytelling is often "the overlooked sad little child… when was the last time you heard of an audio piece going viral?" (Garofalo, 2015). In order to increase reach online, Garofalo says audio segments must attempt to mimic photojournalism, creating a quick snapshot of life that requires little context and encourages the listener to form an immediate affective connection. Like the iconic Migrant Mother photograph, he states that in order to capture our attention, the story must cut through the noise. The image of the Migrant Mother hits us, Garofalo argues, despite the fact that we don't know them, "we don't see where they live, we don't see the conditions" (Garofalo, 2015). What is lost in this act of shearing voices from their situated context in order to connect with the largest possible audience?

In many ways, the risks of isolating a mediated moment of suffering from its history and situated context of production is apparent by analyzing the iconic Migrant Mother photograph itself. The photograph achieves the intimacy and affective potential which the StoryCorps editing

model seeks to mimic, but also highlights the problematic threat such mediation presents in terms of commercialization and exploitation of personal suffering. The portrait is both intensely intimate while simultaneously abstracting from the situated life of the subject. As Coles (1997) argues, Lange's careful editing and cropping of the photo "make it more accessible to her anticipated viewers" by separating out "sociological cues" in order to "make the particular universal" (p. 104). It presents a snapshot of Depression era poverty and despair as well as a call to action. All mediated stories create structured relations of feeling between the subjects of the stories and the public audience. As Hariman and Lucaites (2007) argue, the Migrant Mother photograph interpellates the viewer into the role of the absent father, the one with the ability to take action and provide.

While the photograph is often heralded for creating empathy for the poor and generating popular support for the New Deal, the real "migrant mother," Florence Thompson, is largely forgotten. Hariman and Lucaites note that photographer Dorothea Lange never wrote down Florence Thompson's name. According to Thompson, Lange told her she would not sell the photographs taken and promised Thompson she would receive a copy for her own use. Thompson said she never received any photographs, nor any compensation for the use of her image. She felt exploited (Estrin, 2018). Hariman and Lucaites (2007) lay out how this moment when a subject speaks back disrupts the supposed authenticity captured by the camera:

> Here, of course, we see what happens when the living, named subject of the photograph speaks back in a way that undermines the structure of feeling that the photograph has conventionally evoked. In the original photograph the viewer is invited to identify with and act upon the victimage and despair of an anonymous migrant mother as a duty of family and community… When she speaks back and demands compensation, the aura of

> the original–or at least the presumed authenticity of the original structure of feeling–is destroyed, and underneath is revealed a harsh (and corrupting) world of alienated labor and commercial exploitation. (p. 62)

As discussed in the previous chapter, in the context of listening to stories of racialized trauma and resistance, the fantasy of being able to reach the other through listening, of embodying their experience of trauma as one's own, is an appropriation of that wound. This appropriation through listening fetishizes the wound as a site of collective identity and thus universalizes the trauma and erases the specificity of that experience and the histories and structures that coalesced to construct it. As Ahmed (2014) reminds us, "Stories of pain can be 'shared' only when we assume they are not the same story, even if they are connected, and allow us to make connections" (p. 174). Stories of racialized pain are always at risk of being assimilated into neoliberal discourses. In the context of the Migrant Mother photograph, the image engenders an affective connection with the viewer that appropriates Florence Thompson's suffering as the nation's suffering.

It is telling that in the photograph, Thompson's race is erased while her gender and class identity are brought to the fore. As Coles (1997) notes, the series of photographs Lange took of Thompson "narrate a kind of white migrant life in the mid-1930s" (p. 104). Although the subject of the image is often read as a mother from the White working class, a subject "deserving" of national protection, Hariman and Lucaites (2007) point out that when Thompson spoke back to the use of her image decades later, she was positioned in the media as a "full-blooded Cherokee Indian" who was unable to see past her own greed to acknowledge "the significance of the image in U.S. public culture" (p. 62). There is thus a disconnect between the public feelings elicited by the iconic image and its embodied subject: whereas the "Migrant Mother" is perceived as emblematic of Depression-era White working class suffering, Florence Thompson, in her efforts

to speak back to her image, is racialized and alienated from the (White) American public. Through evoking the image of the Migrant Mother as the affective ideal of what a story can accomplish, StoryCorps producer Michael Garofalo inadvertently pointed to the dangers inherent in processes of editing and dissemination that center an immediate affective empathy.

As a sound editor for our digital storytelling project, I struggled to navigate the ways in which my editing of others' words into short segments might simplify the complexity of their narratives and obscure the structures and histories behind their words. Community-based research also involves taking hours of recorded interviews, field notes, photographs, etc. and distilling these artifacts into narratives. Even as I, as the researcher, attempt to listen carefully to and ground my narratives in the affective ecology of voices, spaces, histories etc. that construct the communities I work in/on, I am never simply mapping a pre-existing terrain but rather weaving between the artifacts I have assembled and my interpretations of them.

The process of sound editing, however, feels more personal, more dangerous. The recordings seem animated in a way that a transcript of recordings cannot convey. As Gunn (2011) notes, recorded speech may reveal "that the measured voice is actually plaintive, or that canned laughter is simply another way to shriek" (p. 25). Indeed, as much as StoryCorps producers may try to mimic photojournalism, sound engenders a different structure of feeling from listeners than a still image, a fact acknowledged by Garofalo himself. As Lacey (2013) argues, whereas acoustic environments are "by definition immersive, as sound surrounds and pervades the body," images are "two dimensional," are felt as fixed and distanced from one's own body (p. 45). Despite the development of increasingly sophisticated storytelling technologies, audio storytelling in the form of radio, podcasts, and audiobooks continues to be popular precisely because of its ambient nature, because these stories can accompany us as we

move through our lives and daily routines, creating a perceived intimate connection even in the absence of fully embodied intimate others. Hardy (1999/2006) notes that audio storytelling is marked by a "dynamic tension between intimacy and distance" (p. 401). Edited recordings play on the boundary between embodiment and disembodiment, between authenticity and performance. The intimacy of recorded voice makes splicing and rearranging the voice of another both intensely personal and potentially problematic.

Moments of suffering packaged and made public are inherently risky. This is true even when organizations seek to center storytellers throughout the process of editing and dissemination. In terms of our project, I edited the clips with assistance from two other graduate students. During follow-up interviews following the original CCDE/StoryCorps recording event, I asked participants how they wanted their stories edited, who they hoped would listen to these clips, and what they hoped listeners would take-away from the experience of listening. With this feedback in hand, I listened through the original 40+ minute conversations and took notes on salient sections that seemed to be in line with participant wishes. Drawing from these notes, I crafted 3–7 minute audio stories, with two other graduate students assisting with the audio editing on some pieces.

Ideally, these stories would have been edited by the participants themselves. The time commitment in terms of both learning the audio editing software and constructing the stories, however, was too much of a burden to place on participants. The CCDE and I wanted to make sure that the project was accessible and that storytellers would be able to participate throughout the life cycle of the project. Because storytellers were dispersed throughout the greater Seattle area and many were not directly affiliated with the University, it proved impractical to attempt to assemble everyone to workshop the stories. While I attempted to construct compelling narratives

through editing these stories that would retain the feel of the longer conversations, the dangers and responsibilities of editing someone else's narrative was always present.

As a sound editor, I yearn to believe that the clips I produce get to the core of the ideas expressed by the speaker. I also, however, know the importance of questioning the supposedly self-evident authenticity of these segments. I know how satisfying as well as inherently problematic the editing process can be. You take these long and winding dialogues, full of awkward silences, ums and ahs and circular reasoning, and turn them into clean narratives that you hope hits listeners in the chest. I tell myself that I am retaining the heart of the meaning communicated in the original recording, distilling it down to make its message more direct and resonant to listeners. As a critical scholar, however, I am aware that each cut I make may, at best, shear the recording of the nuance embedded in both sound and silence, and at worst shape the dialogue in ways that the speaker had not intended and would not approve of. This editing may allow listeners the illusion that the poignant vignette they hear gives them direct access to the experience of another rather than a highly edited and mediated narrative. On the other hand, most listeners would not sit through an entire 40-minute interview with all the "ums" and false starts attached. The listenability of a story obviously increases with professional editing, but the painful silences and awkward stumbles around difficult issues are also edited out. In order to mitigate the risks present in the process of editing another's words, we attempted to create bonds of trust and accountability between participant storytellers and the CCDE. Although I was worried about how my editing might negatively shape storyteller narratives, in my follow-up interviews with participants, some emphasized an aspect of editing that I found surprising. As I will discuss in greater detail later in my analysis, they highlighted the potential for a careful editor to enact radical listening.

## Sharing Stories of Racism with Wider Publics

The following analysis centers on storyteller experiences throughout processes of 1) archiving, 2) recording, 3) editing and 4) disseminating stories of racism and resistance. I first address the pull of the archival aspect of this project for many of the storytellers and their desire to preserve stories from marginalized communities. This desire was in tension with concerns over who owns the archive and how it might be used. I then discuss the recording process and the allure of storytelling as a means of reclaiming power for participants. I explore how processes of editing and disseminating these stories impacted storytellers' ability to feel heard. In this discussion, I address how rather than a clear distinction between "old" and "new" media, in the case of our project, stories broadcast on the radio were then more likely to be heard and shared online, the two media working together to increase reach rather than acting as separate distributive networks. While this increased reach heightens the potential impact of a story on a wider public, it also generates additional risks to the storyteller, especially when the radio station sharing the story does not allow participant input in processes of editing and broadcasting. I end this chapter by addressing why storytellers retain hope for anti-racist change, why they keep coming back to the microphone, despite their stories often falling on ears unwilling to hear. The three stories that our participants shared at the Critical Ethnic Studies Association conference are interwoven into the analysis below.

### The Archiving Process: Tensions over Preservation, Ownership and Use

> I was driven by the compulsion to document that is so frequently, I think, engendered by the ephemerality of queer communities and counterpublics; alongside the fierce conviction of how meaningful and palpable these alternative life worlds can be lies the fear that they will remain invisible or be lost. Oral history can capture something of the

> lived experience of participating in a counterpublic, offering, if nothing else, testimony to the fact that it existed. (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 166)

StoryCorps, and other similar digital storytelling projects, have a dual purpose of recording and disseminating personal stories, which makes them both archivists and media producers. As such, they and their participants get to imagine a current and future audience that can access these stories. And, maybe more importantly, the imagined audience is a "public" that the storytellers and the project's designers are serving. It is important to ask, then, who is that public, and whose interests are being served through the archival process? Processes of production and reception are mutually constitutive. What motivated many storytellers in this project was the potential impact their stories might have on an imagined future listener. Storytellers did not just want their stories preserved and forgotten, but rather hoped their stories would have an impact on how present and future generations would understand the impacts of racism. At the same time, many storytellers felt ambivalence around agreeing to archive their stories. They worried about their privacy and how their stories might be used against their families and communities. In what follows, I address the importance of preserving marginalized histories as a driving force for many participants. I then turn to fears either that no one would listen to the assembled archive, or that the archive data would be used to target vulnerable communities.

### *Preserving Marginalized Histories*

StoryCorps claims to be "America's oral history project" (StoryCorps, 2016). It professes to provide the public at large with the ability to make their mark on history by archiving personal stories in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. In my follow-up interviews with participants, many told me that they took part in the project because they wanted to preserve

stories of discrimination, to have them documented as part of the larger historical record. As Cvetkovich (2003) notes, oral history projects “can help create the public culture that turns what seems like idiosyncratic feeling into historical experience” (p. 166). This was especially important for Gloria, the Black woman educator, poet, and writer in her 70s whose story I discussed in chapter one and who presented with us at the CESA conference. The primary reason Gloria felt compelled to take part in the Radical Listening project was in order to preserve African American history. As she told me while sitting on her porch during our follow-up interview: "I am afraid that much history, American history from the perspective of African Americans, has not been told–it's not going to get told. As an English teacher… I'm really convinced that people need to tell their stories" (Gloria, Follow-up interview). Gloria wants these memories and injustices to be recorded, and ingrained within the wider public memory of the period. At the CESA conference, she shared, "My concern is the loss of stories. So I'm at a point where my greatest concern is to document this story" (Gloria, CESA Conference).

In our follow-up interview, Gloria’s interview partner Sophia also stressed the importance of recording stories and the relationship between individual experiences and larger historical narratives: "we can't have these big moments in history… without people doing it, and moving that action forward, and every experience is different. But, it kind of informs this whole one moment" (Sophia, Follow-up interview). Impacting the historical narrative was key in how both Gloria and Sophia viewed the value of the Radical Listening project. They saw these stories as a wellspring of knowledge about this moment in time for an imagined future audience, an audience unknown to them, but who they may nonetheless impact through their story. When discussing what drew her to the project, Jinho told me that her family encouraged her to sign up and were excited that experiences from their Korean American community would be represented

at the Library of Congress. In our follow-up interview, Michael told me he was particularly excited by the prospect of his story being archived at the National Museum of African American History and Culture at the Smithsonian, where stories from the African American community are archived by StoryCorps in addition to the Library of Congress.

Other participants felt a level of ambivalence about the archival aspect of the project. For Tammy, the thought of her stories of facing racism being archived at the Library of Congress generated dual feelings of anxiety and honor. Although she expressed concerns in the weeks following the interview that "my vulnerability is going to be recorded for anybody to access and listen to, [and] that feels like a crazy thing to do" (Tammy, Follow-up interview), she later discussed a simultaneous feeling that having her words housed at the Library of Congress gave them a weight and importance that validated her experience. For Tammy, the very thought that her words were being preserved was enough, regardless of whether or not anyone would listen: "okay so what I'm saying is important and it's important enough to be filed away and kept and whether or not it's listened to, maybe, maybe not, is less important than the fact that it was recorded and kept and noted" (Tammy, Follow-up interview). The archive of StoryCorps conversations at the Library of Congress thus offered some participants a symbolic weight affirming the value of their words.

***Sifting through Vast Digital Archives: Are People Really Listening?***

Van Doorn (2011) argues that the process of externalizing memories through writing, audio recordings, photographs, etc. transforms the meaning of memories. These private/personal moments become public/cultural objects. The scale with which these "mediated memories" can be archived and shared has dramatically changed in the digital age. The digital production and circulation of these "mediated memories" troubles the boundaries "between personal and cultural

recollection" (p. 542). At the same time, the sheer volume of content online can be overwhelming. Many participants in our project questioned how the voices comprising the living StoryCorps archive would be valued over time. What publics, if any, would hear these stories and what would be the quality of that relationship between storyteller and listener? As one participant named Rahna told me, "the problem, I feel like, with this kind of storytelling and digital media is that there is a shitload of it out there on the internet" (Rahna, Follow-up interview). At the CESA conference, Melony similarly stressed the tension of archiving in the digital age: although it is becoming increasingly cheap and easy to house large amounts of content online, much of this material will never be heard. Whereas oral storytelling traditions required individuals situated within the community to listen and remember these stories, digital archives allow stories to be "preserved" with the possibility that no one will ever listen to the content, or that the future listener will be completely removed from the context of the story's creation. Melony stressed the importance for her, not just of recording and preserving stories, but of ensuring that the archive as a cyborg of data and human experience continues to act in ways that honor the voices and communities embedded within: "Where is the value of, yes, it is data, but there is a person, there is a lifetime, there was intentionality behind those words and how do we honor that and how do we preserve that carefully?" (Melony, CESA Conference).

### *Who Owns the Archive? Tensions Over Control and Privacy*

In dialogue with the audience after our CESA presentation, one audience member asked us who owned the StoryCorps archive. He stressed the importance of addressing control of digital archives from marginalized communities and brought up an ongoing controversy over the possible destruction of indigenous testimony from Canada's National Research Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. Questioning the Canadian government's decisions, he asked "How can you

do that? Without even doing any of the underlying principles of engaging in community dialogue of asking 'what do you want to do with your relatives and our national history?'" (Audience member, CESA Conference). His comments spurred a discussion of the potential problems with archiving marginalized voices regarding who owns the content and ultimately has power over the future of the archive and individual stories within it.

As part of this discussion, we addressed the release form process we had gone through in our partnership with StoryCorps. The StoryCorps facilitators who assisted with the recording/archiving of the Radical Listening project were very transparent. They were careful to ensure that participants were well-informed before signing the release forms giving StoryCorps legal control over their recordings. Participants had multiple options for sharing their stories. They could choose not to sign the release form, in which case StoryCorps would have given the participants a copy of the audio recording before deleting it from their database. Participants could also have chosen to release their story to be archived at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress while denying access to StoryCorps in terms of altering or distributing the original conversation. Lastly, participants could choose to sign the general release form which gives StoryCorps the right to edit the story, broadcast it on the radio, use it in the StoryCorps podcast and/or StoryCorps book collections, animations, and promotional materials. In the general release option, although participants are typically consulted if their story is chosen to be edited, StoryCorps has ultimate legal rights over the recording and how they choose to use it. Once the release form is signed, StoryCorps can use the recording "in a variety of ways without additional permission or notification" (StoryCorps, 2017). Despite the risks of losing control of how their stories might be used, all participants from the Radical Listening project ultimately chose to sign the general release form.

In my follow-up interview with Rahna, she stressed the importance of asking “who controls the voice?” especially when one’s words are easily “twisted and turned” (Rahna, Follow-up interview). She told me that even though she decided to sign the general release form in the hope that people would listen to her story, she was still worried: “You never know how things are appropriated" (Rahna, Follow-up interview). At a time of rising Islamophobia, Rahna was particularly concerned with how her recording might be used against her family:

> In all my activism, I've been very, very conscious of being recorded and being anonymous. Just because I want to keep my family out of it. 'Cause we've had issues. And then also, you know, right afterwards, they can put the name of your child or someone with the name of the recording. And I really hesitated with putting my daughter’s name with my recording. Like, we are going in at a time, if this is tagged as like, ‘Critique of citizenship by a Muslim immigrant,’ like, do I want my daughter's name to be tagged on this story in the Library of Congress? I don't remember if I actually did that, I think I did. But, yeah. I'm very conscious of this being a product. (Rahna, Follow-up interview)

Rahna told me that “what's more important than actual content is the curation” (Rahna, Follow-up interview). Although she had reservations about having her story archived with StoryCorps, she was excited by how the CCDE might curate the stories and use them to facilitate community dialogue. For many of the participants in the project, the archive of stories offered dual feelings of hope for documenting marginalized histories that might have an impact on history and fears that this archive would be forgotten or exploited and misused as a tool of oppression.

## The Recording Process: Storytelling as Resistance–Reworking Moments of Racialized Violence

### Story One: Melony and Matt

*It was a rainy Sunday afternoon in Vancouver. I met Melony and Matt and the other Radical Listening participants at the registration table before our presentation for the Critical Ethnic Studies Association Conference (CESA). Melony is a Black woman in her early thirties who works as a Dean of Students at a high school in Seattle. Matt is her husband and her interview partner for the project. He is White and grew up in the same area of the Midwest as Melony. During our presentation at CESA, Melony and Matt chose to share and discuss a segment of their edited clip which was played during the first listening party.*

*In the clip, Melony's voice is slow and measured, but with a building intensity as she recounts her experience as a child standing in front of an audience at her school, about to sing her solo as Snow White. Her voice gains speed as she describes her initial confusion when the audience starts laughing and murmuring. Her voice, strained with anxiety, recounts: "and I couldn't figure out what was going on, I couldn't figure out if it was someone behind me." She pauses as she recalls the realization setting in, that "aha" moment, when she is made aware that her fellow students are laughing at her. Her voice is low, is almost a whisper, as she remembers hearing someone say, "Snow Black, that doesn't make any sense." In a tone that is both soft but brimming with emotion, she recounts the shift in her understanding, not of her own self-perception, but rather "the difference between how I view myself and how I came to learn the world would view me." Matt's voice is low, his words emerge in a slow and steady procession as he asks, "if one*

> *of our children in the future encountered a similar experience as you did, is there anything else that you would want to say to them that you wish you would have heard?" His words are met with contemplative silence before Melony sighs, "Yeah, I don't know." Her tone changes, and she lets out a laugh as she continues, "I think I'd prep 'em ahead of time. You know, if it was in a Snow White dress, with dark skin, you know?" Matt prompts her to continue, "How would you prep them?" Melony struggles for a second to find the right words. In a voice that is both quiet and powerful, she directs her response to her imagined future child: "No matter what people say, who you are is a gift and what you offer to the world is a gift, and… and I want you to know that I celebrate that. And sometimes people might not always recognize that right off the bat, but who you are and what you have to contribute is wonderful and don't listen to anybody else who tells you otherwise. They're not here to build you up, so tune them out."*

What drew Melony and many other participants to the project was the potential to reclaim their narrative, to reframe these moments of racism through the shaping and performing of their stories. After Melony and Matt shared their clip during the CESA conference, Melony took the mic and expressed the power of reworking that moment of racialized trauma:

> Vulnerability can feel so raw and exposed, but in actuality it's a reclaiming of power in that you get to choose exactly what the narrative is going to be in a way that you didn't necessarily the first time. (Melony, CESA Conference)

Although sharing stories of racialized pain places the storyteller in a position of vulnerability, it also opens potential to rework the narrative, to examine the conditions that created the wound in order to subvert them and thereby to show listeners an alternative path to take.

Through disidentifying with the socially prescriptive template of Snow White, Melony's story makes possible an oppositional public where, in the words of Muñoz (1999), "a stigmatized identity is simultaneously decomposed and recomposed; where values and tastes are reordered and reweighed utilizing alternate criteria; where a degree of editing, deletion and supplementation is applied to an oppressive social script" (p. 196). The character of Snow White's very name reinforces Eurocentric beauty standards. In Melony's embodiment of Snow White, however, she reinforces a counterpublic call; her performance affirms that Black is Beautiful. In her story, Melony contrasts her self-image with that of the audience's:

> It doesn't matter to this group that I feel beautiful in this dress and it doesn't matter to them that I'm singing really well and that I've worked really hard and that I'm proud of what I'm doing. What mattered to them is what they could see, and that it didn't make sense.

Melony reframes that which is ridiculous in the story from the child onstage, the Black girl performing Snow White, to the absurdity of an audience who, so confined by conventional ways of seeing, could not hear the power and beauty of the performance before them.

In his reading of James Baldwin's novel *Just Above My Head*, Muñoz (1999) traces the relationship between ideology, the storyteller, and the story; between the singer and the song:

> The singer is the subject who stands inside–and, in the most important ways, outside–of fiction, ideology, 'the real.' He is not its author and never has been. He hears a call and we remember not only the 'hey you' of Althusser's ideology cop but also the little white girl in Fanon who cries out 'Look, a Negro.' But something also hears this singer who is not the author of the song. He is heard by something that is a shared impulse, a drive toward justice, retribution, emancipation–which permits him to disidentify with the song.

> He works on the song with fierce intensity and the utmost precision. This utmost precision is what is needed to rework that song, that story, that fiction, that master plot. It is needed to make a self–to disidentify despite the ear-splitting hostility that the song first proposed for the singer. Another vibe is cultivated. (p. 21)

Self and other are mutually constitutive. The singer reconfigures racist ideologies from the dominant culture and reimagines them–dreaming up a better past/future through song, through the act of storytelling. When Melony speaks to her imagined future daughter, and tells her "what you have to contribute is *wonderful*" she disidentifies with the "ear-splitting hostility" of the audience's laughter, of the supposed beauty of skin as white as snow, and cultivates a "new vibe," a new future where young Black girls are allowed to prosper (Melony, StoryCorps; Muñoz, p. 21).

The storytellers in our project engaged in a disidentifying practice by taking moments of racial violence inflicted upon them and reclaiming these moments, reworking them into a story that acknowledges the past while charting new pathways for the future. As Melony emphasized during the CESA conference:

> When I think about sharing my story and how I chose to share it, I think that's a huge part of me reclaiming my musicianship, my sense of self, my lessons learned, and the way I was able to self-affirm and share that out. I feel really proud of that. (Melony, CESA)

The knowledge that the interview was being recorded shaped what and how participants shared their stories. As I discussed in chapter one, the physical space of the recording studio spurred them to engage in a selective performance of self; like Melony, many participants told me they carefully chose how they framed their narratives, reworking past experiences of racialized trauma into narratives of resistance.

**The Editing Process: Editing as Collaboration Necessitating Radical Listening**

Within the recording studio, participants strategically disclosed stories of racialized trauma/resistance while simultaneously attempting to maintain a boundary between their private and public selves. Some participants perceived the editing process as an additional layer of protection maintaining this public/private boundary. This is especially true for participants who felt that they had not been able to adequately preserve this boundary in their original recordings. As discussed earlier, the process of editing someone else's story is inherently risky because it requires participants to trust the sound editor to craft narratives from the raw audio. Although there is a danger in placing editing power in someone else's hands, for participants like Tammy and Jinho, entrusting others to edit their story also opened new possibilities for reciprocity. Editors are given the opportunity to enact a radical listening through editing.

Tammy is an Asian American woman in her 40s whose story was introduced in chapter one. In my interview with Tammy in her office on the University campus shortly after the original recording, Tammy acknowledged the problematic nature of editing in that "you don't necessarily get the full story" (Tammy, Follow-up interview). When thinking about her own recording, however, she felt comforted by the idea that I would be editing her words. As a staff member helping organize the project, Tammy did not intend on participating herself, but volunteered when she heard Jinho was looking for a partner. She had thought her role would be primarily to help Jinho tell her story, but halfway through the recording, Jinho took on the role as interviewer. Tammy suddenly found herself disclosing experiences she had not been expecting to tackle in the interview. For her, CCDE editing offered a protective distance from the "painful" raw audio (Tammy, Follow-up interview).

While following up with participants, I had expected to hear storyteller concerns regarding the potentially exploitative nature of editing. I was surprised that some storytellers emphasized the ability of mindful editing in both honoring and protecting the storyteller. Good editing, Tammy explained, retains the core of the speaker's message. It requires that the editor listen carefully and is attuned to moments in which "people are telling their truth." Although editing transforms a story, rather than see this transformation as distortion, Tammy argues a careful editor is able to "catch" and draw out a "searing moment" (Tammy, follow-up interview). For Tammy, the ums and silences and incomplete thoughts residing in the raw audio tie the recording to the physical speaker in a way that feels exposing and overly personal. She was comforted by the thought that the audio would be excised of those embodied elements. Editing offered Tammy a comforting distance between the larger ideas expressed in the story and her private memories of trauma. Like Tammy, Jinho told me that she thinks editing is a vital process in packaging important stories in a way that gives them narrative shape and weight. "Props to the production and editors for doing all of this" she emphasized, "because I'm not sure if I would want to listen to myself and find something, but this is their talent. This is what they do" (Jinho, Follow-up interview). Embedded in the act of editing is the dual potential for exploitation on the one hand and collaborative creation on the other. For Tammy and Jinho, the collaborative process of recording their conversation and then working with me to shape that recording into a narrative clip enabled us to combine experience and knowledge in order to produce a story that simultaneously highlighted the impacts of racism while providing the storytellers a degree of control over how and what would be shared.

During and after the listening parties, a number of other participants shared with me that they also felt the CCDE handled their stories with care through the process of editing and sharing

their stories at listening parties. Several participants went on to work with local radio stations to broadcast their clips. Participants' ability to frame their story and maintain a boundary between their public and private lives began to crumble the farther removed the story was from the initial recording studio.

## The Dissemination Process: Dealing with Public Exposure and Loss of Control

### Story Two: Tammy and Jinho

*Tammy was excited to join us at the CESA conference, and drove from Seattle to Vancouver with me and Gina, the Assistant Director of the CCDE. As a new mother at the time, Jinho, Tammy's interview partner, was unable to attend the conference. After the first listening party, a local radio producer approached Tammy and Jinho as well as other storytellers to inquire about broadcasting their clips. Because they were proud of their story and had felt affirmed in their experience sharing it at the Radical Listening party event, Tammy and Jinho agreed to have their clip broadcast. Leading up to and during the conference, however, Tammy expressed her complicated and ambivalent emotions at having shared her story. In the clip, Tammy recounts how when growing up as a young Japanese American girl, she was often confronted by older white men who had lived during the second world war and was forced to defend herself against their accusations questioning her family's loyalty to the United States.*

*During the CESA presentation, rather than play a segment from the broadcast story, Tammy chose to share a few minutes taken from her longer, unedited conversation with Jinho. This segment highlights an aspect of Tammy's story that was not featured in her broadcast clip, but that speaks to a tension many participants described to me when deciding whether or not to share their stories of racism. The clip emphasizes that at times*

*the people whose reaction we fear most when sharing our stories of racialized trauma are those closest to us:*

*"The American Dream was white, and that was our dream…" Tammy states in a matter of fact tone. Her words are interrupted with a bout of rueful laughter before continuing, "Everything that was good was coming from a White person's perspective and I don't think, in fact I'm sure, that my family didn't see anything wrong with that because they wanted those same dreams for us as well." Tammy describes growing into adulthood and moving out of predominantly White spaces. Surrounded by a "more diverse crowd," she discusses how her understanding of her racial identity began to shift. Her voice brightens as she recounts the slow realization: "Oh, here are my people…" Tammy and Jinho break into laughter as Tammy continues in mock confusion: "where have you been!?" Her words then cascade downward as she reflects, "Then it was like, 'Oh no, wait, where have I been.'" She pauses, takes a breath, and contemplates: "I think in realizing actually who I was and who I was becoming, that was probably the first crucial step to being able to stand up for myself."*

### *Navigating the Negative Impacts of Context Collapse Online*

Although personal testimonials of racialized suffering are strategically performed, edited and disseminated to maintain a boundary between the personal and the public, as these stories reach larger audiences it becomes impossible to maintain control over who is listening. Digital storytelling, especially for minoritized communities, runs the risk of reaching "unintended and undesired audiences" (Couldry, 2008, p. 49). This point is critical in thinking about the limits of digital storytelling to facilitate radical listening: under what circumstances of circulation can marginalized communities feel empowered to expose their personal stories? Virtual

performances of self have real world consequences. As Marwick and boyd (2010) argue in their discussion of context collapse, technology increasingly disrupts our ability to keep audiences separate from one another. The ability for individuals to curate content for specific audiences "is complicated by increasingly mainstream social media technologies that collapse multiple contexts and bring together commonly distinct audiences" (Marwick and boyd, p. 115). Rather than working independently from the legacy media of broadcast radio, for the participants in our project, online spaces worked to amplify the spread of their broadcast pieces, which at times led their stories to be shared with unintended audiences. The fact that the local radio station did not allow participants to share their stories anonymously made it difficult for them to selectively circulate the broadcast clip. One way various participants wanted to control the public nature of their stories was to only have their first names shared, but the station refused, insisting on their policy to have both first and last names broadcast along with the story.

Several participants discussed the desire to keep their recordings separate from certain intimate spheres (family, co-workers), spheres where they felt their message would not be well received. Changfoot (2016) outlines the relationship in her own life between intimacy and racialized oppression. As a child, racialized slurs were directed at her, not from strangers on the street or online, but rather from her close friends: "The feeling of friendship was of us wrapped in a warm secure blanket. Then, the taunts aggressively ripped the covers off" (p.70). Although often discussed in terms of the struggle to keep personal content from catching the attention of trolls and others whose distance from the speaker may embolden them to weaponize personal stories to further hateful narratives, the more pressing concern for many of our participants was keeping their stories away from certain intimate others.

After playing her clip, for example, Tammy described to the CESA audience a mutually reinforcing cycle in which her clip was shared with an unintended intimate audience, causing her to feel a lack of control over her story. As I will discuss, when her family and workplace responded dismissively to her story, her fears and lack of agency were then reaffirmed. Like Tammy, several participants (although not all) confided in me during our follow-up interviews that they faced pressure from their own families, friends and/or co-workers to smooth over experiences of racism and keep these memories private.

**Stories Shared in the Workplace.** Although Tammy was fine with her friends listening to her broadcast clip, she had wanted to keep the story separate from her larger workplace: "My friends, I didn't have a problem with. My coworkers shared the clip because they're all a bunch of lefty, NPR listening folks, who were so proud of me and so excited that they shared it on their social media without asking me and sent the link out to my entire company without asking, that felt not great, *especially when nobody responded*." Tammy paused for a second before continuing, "First, it feels bad when it goes out, and then when no one says anything back, it's like, 'Oh right. This is why that sucks.'" (Tammy, CESA Conference). It "sucks" when you lose control of who hears your story of racialized oppression. It doubly "sucks" when your company is confronted with this story and decides the best response is silence. Like Tammy, Melony was frustrated when her story was shared within her workplace, especially because she did not feel the radio producer accurately framed her story: "[It] Just felt like another one of those things that I couldn't correct that was aired out to my co-workers. I didn't really tell anybody about it. Of course they find out anyway and want to talk to you about it" (Melony, CESA Conference). For Melony, although her clip elicited a response, it was a clip (as I will discuss later) that she felt did not reflect her story and that she did not want attached to her name.

**Stories Shared with Family Members.** Many participants also discussed the desire to keep their stories separate from their families. Melony and Matt worried about Matt's White parents listening to their story. As they contemplated the potential of his parents hearing the broadcast, Matt exclaimed, "goodness gracious, we have a lot of stories in our relationship that don't feel safe in our own family, at least for part of our family, right?" (Matt, CESA Conference). Sophia, for her part, was not bothered by the thought of strangers listening to her story. It was important for her, however, that "I can separate my identity from it" (Sophia, Follow-up interview). She did not want it shared with family and friends: "I felt like I was really vulnerable sharing with Gloria in that moment and I think it would be awkward for people that I know to hear those things that I said but not from me" (Sophia, Follow-up interview).

During the CESA conference, Tammy explained that when her family heard the broadcast, they refused to talk about it. She was met with "total radio silence" (Tammy, CESA Conference). Although she knew many of her family members had experienced similar acts of racism, they were not willing to acknowledge or discuss them. During the conference, Tammy broke into tears as she recounted their refusal to engage: "It's a weird, a very weird thing. I felt more comfortable and more heard and witnessed by knowing that this would live at the Library of Congress than having my family hear it. [Tammy starts crying at the end here] [Affirming from Gloria] Yes. Yes." (CESA Conference). Tammy's–and perhaps Gloria's as well by her affirmation–uncertainty about how audiences were taking up their stories, and their inability to keep their stories out of the ears of undesired audiences, undermined their sense of agency and empowerment. Although one might expect a family member, a mother, a sister, who had been present in those instances of racialized violence, who were themselves characters in the story, to affirm the experience, to respond to the pain, this is often not the case. As I discussed in chapter

one, when we are too close to the other's pain, it can be difficult to separate their trauma from our own and how we have learned to cope and survive. As Ahmed (2014) writes, "Pain is evoked as that which even our most intimate others cannot feel" (p. 39). At times, it is the very intimacy of having been there that allows our own pain to obscure the pain of those we love, to cause us to assume we know rather than listen to their voices.

***Broadcast Stories Amplified on Social Media***

The online space amplified participant concerns about the degree to which they could selectively share their broadcast clips. In my follow-up interviews with Tammy and Jinho, they both discussed the internal negotiations involved in sharing their recordings on social media. At the CESA conference, for example, Tammy explained that although she largely felt affirmed telling and sharing her story within the relatively controlled listening environment crafted by the CCDE, when this edited clip of an intimate moment from Tammy's past was broadcast and circulated on social media, Tammy's initial sense of empowerment turned into ambivalence. Tammy recounted her enthusiasm about promoting the digital storytelling project on her Facebook page: "So I posted the photo of us [Tammy and Jinho] … on Facebook and talked about the CCDE and the project and StoryCorps, I mean all things that I love and I think it was the post that has gotten the most likes that I've ever posted" (Tammy, Follow-up interview). Tammy's excitement quickly dissipated, however, as she realized that as a woman of color talking about racism, she was exposing herself to her entire Facebook network: "'And it was sort of like somebody cracked an egg and it just ran on the top of my head and it was just like the realization was just coming true like 'Oh shit'" (Tammy, Follow-up interview).

Although Jinho had been eager to share her stories of discrimination in the recording studio, when I interviewed her a few weeks later, she expressed concern about her story being

broadcast and shared online: "things can really get distorted and placed out of context so that worries me because we're in a digital generation" (Jinho, Follow-up interview). As a new mother who was pregnant at the time of the initial recording, Jinho expressed concern about the impacts of her digital footprint on her child. Both Tammy and Jinho had ambivalence toward their personal stories of discrimination existing online, a space marked by the dual potential of being heard on the one hand and being dismissed on the other. At the CESA conference, Melony's anxiety broadcasting her story resonated with Tammy and Jinho's:

> You know, part of conversation is looking someone in the eye, reading their body language, hearing their cues, hearing their response back, and some of that is lost the more removed it gets from that initial conversation and that felt very ... I don't know. I felt like I was giving something very personal and not knowing how they received it. (Melony, CESA Conference)

For these and other participants, the inability to protect their story from unintended audiences illustrates the precarity of entrusting others with vulnerable stories. As their stories traveled farther from the recording studio through radio and online spaces, participants contended with their inability to know how their stories were being taken up.

### *Broadcasting Stories on the Radio: Intercultural Understanding or Fetishizing the Voice of the "Other"*

Dreher (2009) discusses the dark side of listening as surveillance and/or voyeurism: "Listening, of course, plays a central role in surveillance and can operate as part of imperializing projects of knowledge production" (p. 448). Once accessible and collected, the speaker can lose control of the meaning and purpose of their story, and it can function as evidence for other purposes, especially when the story seeks to cross difference. Risks of mis/appropriation,

fetishization, decontextualization, and exoticization get stronger as stories move farther away from experience. As I have discussed, digital storytelling, in its attempt to democratize the act of telling, sharing, and listening, brings multiple layers of mediation to the story so that it can travel. These mediations, of course, are not innocent nor free of power and politics; and our participants were aware that their story would be altered and recontextualized.

In the case of Melony and Matt whose story opened this analysis, their experience working with a local radio station to broadcast their clip exposed the sonic centering of Whiteness within public radio. The ethical as well as stylistic norms cater to the predominantly White listening audience, leaving contributors of color to accept these terms or keep their stories off the airwaves.

We played Melony and Matt's clip for the first listening party. From the beginning, they were enthusiastic participants in the project. They were one of our first interviews and attended the first listening party where Melony contextualized their clip and shared additional experiences. This was one of the stories that a local radio producer wanted to broadcast on the public radio station after the clip had gone through additional editing. When Gina contacted Melony and Matt for permission to share the clip for broadcasting, Melony expressed some hesitation regarding how it would be edited, and whether she could remain anonymous because of her career as an educator. As mentioned before, we were informed that the station's policies did not allow for anonymous broadcasting and that participants would not be able to give feedback on the edited version. We were assured, however, that the broadcasting context or "framing" would be to have the clips aired away from interviews that might clash with the story's message.

Melony and Matt agreed to participate in the local broadcasting of their clip. While preparing for the CESA conference, Melony explained that having their story spliced, edited and broadcast widely, in a way that was out of their control, was "terrifying." She believes the telling of these stories are important, but the lack of control makes it very difficult:

> It was this twice removed thing and I remember asking, 'I would love to know or have an idea of what clip you're going to use. I'd love to give some more context.' Due to the nature of how radio works, [I] was told, no you can't. Either you're going to totally trust this process or we're not going to use it. I think, I'm proud of the story, so we said okay. (Melony, CESA Conference)

At the conference, Melony explained that her conversations with the producer at the local radio station had gone deeper. Upon the producer's request, she had recorded a modern, jazz version of the same Snow White song that she had sung as a child specifically to be played with her story. But when the clip was broadcast, it was accompanied with the original Disney version of the song:

> The person who was producing it had asked, cause I was talking about a Snow White song and I still perform, and so I perform that song from time to time ... She asked if I had a recording of myself singing it and I said, 'No, but I can make one.' So I spent time, went to a studio and recorded it. Clipped it down so she had the choice between my version of 'Someday My Prince Will Come,'–it's the song that I sing from Snow White– and she ended it with the one from the 1920s *'Some day'* [singing while mimicking the nasal voice of the original Disney version] and it was so weird! She could have just chosen nothing, but it was, like, the whitest. (Melony, CESA Conference)

Melony expressed frustration at the lack of control over the process, and the amount of stress and work devoted to the broadcast. The rest of us also felt frustrated and angered by the lack of cooperation from the radio station. The farther the distance from the telling of the story, the higher the risk that "there's not *intentionality in honoring* the storyteller and really listening carefully for this is the point you're trying to communicate. Even with editing, I think there's a way to do that. It felt like the further we got from the StoryCorps room, the less control I had over what happens" (Melony, CESA Conference). And yet, it was clear to Melony and to us that the story had value to the radio station given the amount of time and effort put into the broadcast by the producer. The value for the radio station, however, may not be the same as the value, or the "intentional honoring," that Melony as the storyteller has for her younger self to be finally listened to and heard. It is akin to the Marxist "fetishized" value that translates the subjective value held by Melony to an objective value transferable to and translatable by a particular public.

After an audience member at the CESA conference discussed the potentially fetishizing, voyeuristic nature of collecting stories from marginalized communities and how the stories can be "twist[ed to] center whiteness," Melony said "That resonates in my bones. I am super not trusting of my story, period. Because it does become like a trope or voyeurism or you know, I don't know how 'The Help' exists. That movie, that book. You know. Because your story can become so bastardized so quickly or like, configured or centered around someone else and whiteness specifically" (Melony, CESA Conference). Melony's story was mediated through a White radio producer at a station whose listenership is 85% White (KUOW, 2016). The ethical standards of the station regardless of context (no anonymous broadcasting, no input from contributors in terms of the editing and framing of stories, etc.) center the interests of the listenership in terms of transparency and objectivity while ignoring the impact of these decisions

on the lives of sources who volunteer their stories for broadcast. How personal stories of suffering are disseminated and by whom impacts how these stories are then taken up and understood as meaningful by listeners.

**Failures to Listen.** Radio has a long legacy of centering whiteness. Throughout its history, radio in the US has reflected and reproduced dominant racial ideologies (Stoever, 2016). Peake (2014) argues that studies of sound have too often "produced accounts of listening without bodies, abstractly defining listening as a generalizable practice amongst an implicitly assumed universal privileged subject" (p.79). Sterne (2012) argues that "hearing requires positionality" (p. 4). Listening occurs within gendered and raced bodies, and our positionality impacts how we understand the significance of the stories we hear.

As Melony stated in exasperation during the CESA conference, this differentiated listening can make it hard to really communicate across difference, "I was thinking, in between our conversation outside and here, frustrating conversations where you're talking to someone and they get hooked on the wrong detail and then they go that way and it's so maddening because you're like, 'no, that is not the point I'm trying to communicate to you. This is what I'm trying to communicate to you.'" (Melony, CESA Conference).

In my interview with Gloria, she discussed similar frustrations when presenting her work. For example, a reader once complained that Gloria "was always writing about race." Gloria went through her poetry collections and found that only 14% of her 250 poems centered on race. Gloria's work does not single-mindedly focus on race, race was all the reader could hear. While sitting together on Gloria's porch one sunny afternoon, she told me, "I address race because race addresses me. Not because I wake up saying, I am going to address race today. I'm just minding my own business and then [snaps her fingers] out of the blue, something happens or doesn't

happen, and then I find myself there again" (Gloria, Follow-up interview).The labor of communicating, counting, and justifying our work, is, of course, well known amongst women of color. When we decide to speak, we must constantly brace ourselves for being misheard or outright ignored within hegemonic white spaces.

Gloria remains concerned with how others are listening to her stories, and their capacity to understand and act. Although Gloria has spent a lifetime as an educator, sometimes she acknowledges that with certain audiences, she does not see the use in speaking:

> I choose not to speak because I don't get the sense that the audience is listening. I sometimes regroup, attempt to approach the matter differently. So much of what so many have experienced is beyond the understanding of others. I do not believe they choose not to understand, at least not always. But I do think, sometimes, the mind's eye is too small, the world of that mind is too small. (Gloria, CESA Conference)

It is important to point out here that the work of storytelling, especially in a way that can be disseminated, heard and valued by a larger public, is labor. For Melony it was going to the studio to record a modern version of "Some Day," and Gloria analyzed the content of her entire poetry collection for discussions of race. These labors are unpaid, but, more importantly, these are examples of racialized labor that Black women do to just prove their worth.

As discussed previously, there exists a tension between the hope of new media technologies to break down barriers to participation for marginalized populations and fears of the continued "concentration of resources, wealth, production, and distributive capacities in the hands of a few global players" (Gray, 2015, p. 1108). When thinking through the potential of digital storytelling as a tool for marginalized people to amplify their (our) voices, it is important to interrogate who ultimately has power to shape the narratives being told.

**Persisting Hope: Why Storytelling Still Matters**

**Story Three: Gloria and Sophia**

*Gloria and I shared a cozy Airbnb in Vancouver. Gloria had arrived in the city a day before me so that she could attend as many panels at the CESA conference as possible. She shared the highlights with me the night before as we prepared for our own panel. Gloria is a longtime resident of Seattle, and one of the first Black women to have received a Ph.D. in English at the University of Washington. She asked that we assign her a conversation partner and trusted our judgement. Sophia, a twenty-something African American woman who worked for the UW volunteered to record a StoryCorps conversation with Gloria. At the time of the CESA conference, Sophia had started graduate school in another state and was unable to travel to Vancouver. In their conversation, Gloria provides many insights into the span of racism across the US over time and has been keen to speak about the various forms of cultural and structural racisms that she has experienced. During our panel, Gloria chose a segment from her edited clip which had been played during the second listening party:*

*Gloria's voice, bursting from the speakers, is clear, confident and textured with age. She declares, "I don't mind saying I'm ignorant about certain things, but there are just so many people that are ignorant about race and race relations." She gives an exasperated laugh as she continues, "And I think they don't want to know about race, they don't want to talk about race." She takes a deep breath before saying in words tinged with sorrow from a lifetime of experience: "It's too bad because all of us lose, it's just that some of us lose more than others."*

**Returning to the mic: Why Storytellers Decide to Keep Speaking Up**

While critiques of appropriation, fetishization, and misrepresentation of marginalized voices are pervasive; what interests me is the persistence with which those in the margins want to tell their stories, and that they want their stories heard, and the nuanced ways in which they know and participate in systems that may not "honor" their stories. In other words, despite the shortcomings of listening, it is the potentiality of being heard that draws people to the mic, despite the reality that their voices often fall on ears unwilling to hear.

As an educator to predominantly white students, Gloria has spent a lifetime trying to make people listen and waiting for that lightbulb moment when their thinking may begin to shift. While talking to Gloria on her sun-soaked porch following the initial storytelling event, she repeatedly used a cave metaphor to discuss both why listening is so difficult and so necessary. She frames her work as drawing people out of their caves into the precarious openness that at once makes them vulnerable, but also allows them to see the broader landscape, to meet others brave enough to venture beyond the safety of what is known. Gloria is willing to take on the burden of educating, of leading others out of their proverbial caves, but is also well aware of the toll it takes. Although Gloria has felt the repeated pain of telling her stories into the void of indifference, she maintains hope that people will change, albeit at a slower pace than is needed:

> That's why I keep saying, 'We have to keep telling the stories. We never know who's going to get it right. Keep telling it.' Eventually we'll get to the tipping point. I hope it's soon. But we cannot just be silent. Not all of the time. We do have to take a break… We need to take a break or we will die early, but admit that everybody's not going to get it at the same time, you know. You never know who gets it when. (Gloria, CESA Conference)

Here, Gloria makes the case for continuing to speak in order to create breakthrough moments when the listener finally "gets it." When we choose to speak, and when we choose to remain silent is not straightforward, but rather is dependent on our reservoir of energy, on who we think may be listening and how they may take up our stories. As the pain and frustration of not being heard builds, we become more protective of our narratives, and less willing to take the emotional risk of speaking out. And yet, we cannot remain silent forever. As Ahmed (2014) writes:

> The telling is also about witnessing, which makes demands on others to hear, but which does not always get a just hearing. Responses to testimonies of injury can 'cover over' the injury, for example, by claiming it as 'our own' (appropriation). We should not conclude that testimonial forms of politics fail in such failures to hear, or in such refusals of recognition. Testimonies about the injustice of colonisation, slavery and racism are not only calls for recognition; they are also forms of recognition, in and of themselves. (p. 200)

Although we cannot guarantee that our words will receive a "just hearing," through the process of reworking moments of racialized trauma into stories of resistance, we invite the listener to hear differently, to act differently in the world, even if they don't "get it" in that moment (Ahmed, 2014, p. 200; Gloria, CESA Conference). The work of speaking this pain happens in the hopes of revealing its conditions of creation, thereby opening space for others to respond.

After the CESA conference, Gloria collaborated with a radio station to broadcast her story. Whereas Tammy and Melony had worked with the local NPR station, Gloria broadcast her story through a small community radio station which gave her more control over how the story would air. She had been volunteering at the station for several years and had collaborated with them on other projects. Additionally, the Director of the station is a woman of color who also

recorded a conversation with the Radical Listening project and was sensitive to the politics of representation. For Gloria, working closely with familiar staff and having the power to decide what and how material would be broadcast allowed her to feel comfortable and safe broadcasting her story. When sharing traumatic stories of racism, the time media organizations spend listening to storyteller concerns and bringing them into the editing/broadcasting process has an immense impact on their ability to feel safe and heard. In contrast to the NPR station, Gloria and the community radio station worked *together* to create conditions in which Gloria's words could travel on-air, and hopefully reach the ears of others in the community who feel compelled to listen, to venture out of their caves, to use Gloria's terminology.

### *Fighting Racism Through the Slow Work of Articulation*

Hall (1985) argues that although race has very real consequences in the formation of structures of power and oppression, there is no necessary correspondence between constructed racial categories and how these categories are positioned within systems of power. His theorization of articulation provides a means of understanding how dominant discourses around race, class, sexuality, etc. are continuously in the process of becoming through diverse elements that clump together and become partially fixed to create a meaningful discourse within a particular space and time. The only way we can understand how racialized patterns of devaluation have come into being is through analyzing the multiple economic and cultural nodes that assemble to construct a specific discursive structure around race.

The potential for social change exists through an understanding that there is "no necessary correspondence" between the diverse elements that come together to create a discursive formation (p. 94). As Hall (1985) states, "The principal theoretical reversal accomplished by 'no necessary correspondence' is that determinacy is transferred from the

genetic origins of class or other social forces in a structure to the effects or results of a practice" (p. 95). The term "Black," for example, gains meaning from its relation to other terms in the chain of signification, to how it operates "within different 'systems of differences and equivalences'" (p. 108). Articulations, therefore, are always contingent. Because there is no necessary correspondence between constructed racial categories and ingrained patterns of racialized devaluation, potential exists to resist racist discourses through the work of articulation–through the slow, difficult and ongoing practice of reinscribing new connections, new ways of being in the world. As Clarke (2015) argues, although dominant discourses become ingrained through repetition as commonsense, in actuality they are "heterogenous and fragmentary" (p. 281). Because identities are multiple and fluid, "the work of articulation is to build connections that lead towards a set of new configurations and possibilities" (p. 281). The ongoing contrapuntal song of the Radical Listening project creates a "field of possibility" in which relations of power are, to use Clarke's words, "inscribed, represented, refused and contested through articulatory practices" (2015, p. 280). Throughout processes of recording, archiving, editing, and disseminating stories of racism/resistance, this project at times worked to resist hegemonic discourses around race and at times, despite our best efforts, worked to reproduce them.

Within the space of the recording studio, rather than simply capture experiences of racism as audio files, the recorder acted upon participants. It represented a future listening audience that both imbued their words with symbolic weight as well as reminded them of their vulnerability and pain in that moment. The recorder represented the possibility to reclaim a moment of racialized violence and use it in the service of anti-racist activism, a public reworking of a past personal moment of suffering to chart a new pathway for the future. Although participants could

not control in full how radio producers, family and friends, co-workers and other listeners heard and used their narratives, in telling their stories they opened the possibility for others to listen differently. As Melony told us during the CESA conference, the choice to be vulnerable and share these traumatic moments generates dual possibilities of rejection/stasis and validation/change:

> Even as I listen to it, I can feel my childhood self grieving a little bit and knowing that I was making a willing choice to share that and relinquishing some control over what happened to that story was hard. But there's also, I think at the same time, this desperate need for voices to be heard and for people to be forced to listen and to sit with discomfort in a way that personalizes. (Melony, CESA Conference)

Taking this risk, choosing to be vulnerable, opens space for what Ahmed (2014) calls wonder. Wonder is a space in which "pain and anger come to life," energizing a desire to create an "affective opening," a space that "involves the radicalisation of our relation to the past" not as a private act, but rather through the "opening up of what is possible through working together" (p. 180–181).

## Concluding Thoughts

This chapter explores what storytellers risked in acts of recording, archiving, editing and sharing their personal stories of racism and resistance with the wider world. In so doing, it also investigated what new possibilities might emerge from the vulnerability that comes from telling and listening to these stories. In order to construct anti-racist spaces, we need to focus not only on who is speaking, but also the obligations of the listener. In my interview with Tammy, she emphasized the care that goes into listening to another's story, a radical listening that is necessary before change can take place:

> So to be the witness, to be the listener, to be the vessel that is containing or capturing that information, I think is almost like sacred. It's like, it's an honor to be considered worthy of hearing such a tender story, such a tender thing so I think there's a lot of care that has to go into accepting that information. Meaning like, the person who's listening almost has a job or an obligation to be careful with what they do with that information. (Tammy, Follow-up interview)

Although successful resistance against long entrenched racist discourses is by no means guaranteed through the acts of anti-racist storytelling and listening embedded in this project, through heeding the obligation to listen and engage, we work toward a yet unrealized anti-racist future.

# Chapter 4: Tracing the Affective Ecology of StoryCorps Stories Shared Online

*Izara: "Let's talk about the angry Black woman [stereotype]. You always say the person who created that was a genius..."*

*Mary: [Affirming] "Genius!"*

*Izara: "...Because it's really like… I feel like in situations where I'm being attacked or when someone's just being racist, I can't fully express my feelings because I don't want to look like an angry Black woman."*

*Mary: "Yeah, it's like a cycle..."*

*Izara: "Right, like how do I address this without looking like the angry Black woman?! [exasperated laugh]"*

This animated back and forth was the opening to Mary and Izara's audio clip that we played during the first Listening Party. In their edited story, the two young, Black women interrogate the "angry Black woman" stereotype and how it is and has been used to dismiss and silence their voices. Mary and Izara's was one of the pieces from our project that was broadcast on the local NPR station in Seattle. Listener interaction with their segment on social media illustrates the importance of these online spaces in shaping the affective meaning of broadcast stories. When the radio station shared a link to Mary and Izara's broadcast on their Facebook page, their headline for the segment generated pushback from listeners. The headline read: "How to point out racism without being the 'angry Black woman'" (KUOW Public Radio, 2017). The day it was posted, a listener who identifies as Afro-Latina responded: "This is a horrendous title for this interview. It takes away from what the young women are talking about... Did you let these women know their faces were going to be on top of this trash title? This is so wrong"

(KUOW Public Radio, 2017). This same listener continues in another post, “This title sounds more like a how-to on respectability for black women and addressing how we as black women must change if we are to address racism” (KUOW Public Radio, 2017). Another listener who appears to be a Black woman replies: “Agreed” (KUOW Public Radio, 2017).

Further down in the comments thread, a poster who appears to be a White woman writes that Mary and Izara are “overly concerned” with being labeled as “angry Black women” and that they need to “get over it” (KUOW Public Radio, 2017). Another listener replies to this comment, questioning the feasibility of simply “getting over” the stereotype. In a long post, she recounts how she was initially unsure of whether it was safe for her to speak up against “fetishism, xenophobia and racism” at her workplace. When she eventually decided to file a complaint, she was the one who lost her job. She ends her post by stating, “I completely understand the overwhelming trepidation by black women in Seattle when it comes to being seen as the angry black woman. Politely speaking up in Seattle as a black woman can get you fired” (KUOW Public Radio, 2017). These comments threads provide insight into how the meaning of audio broadcasts is negotiated through affective engagement with these stories online. They shed light on the potential of comment threads as counter-public spaces for marginalized communities to 1) resist problematic framing of stories by the organizations sharing them, 2) contest the meaning of the story with other listeners, and 3) share experiences of resonance and divergence from the broadcast story. Although these spaces have counterpublic potential, they can just as easily elide difference, or worse, foster affective alienation manifested in violent hate speech.

The meaning of texts changes through processes of circulation, and these changes impact (and are impacted by) how we listen and relate to voices marked by difference. In previous chapters, I mapped the affective impact of telling and listening to stories of racism/resistance

within our Seattle community. In this chapter, I pivot away from our local StoryCorps partnership to analyze the affective ecologies online surrounding nationally broadcast StoryCorps segments. Whereas Mary and Izara's clip generated a few different discussions on the locally circulated Facebook post, the comment threads on nationally broadcast StoryCorps stories contain a greater volume of responses from around the country and, to a lesser extent, around the globe. By pivoting to nationally broadcast segments, I am able to analyze what happens to these stories of discrimination when they are shared with a wide range of dispersed publics online, often with very different ideologies and frames of reference.

In this chapter, I look at how the relationship between audio stories, the media organizations sharing them, social media platforms, and wider social contexts interact to generate particular affective ecologies online. I analyze how StoryCorps segments broadcast on NPR's *Morning Edition* program spread on Facebook to form affective spaces that both shape and are shaped by interactions with listeners differentially situated within systems of power. This chapter does not seek to find causal relationships outlining specific impacts on listeners of elements of broadcast stories. Rather, this analysis moves from an understanding of comment sections as evidence of non-linear, rhizomatic patterns of emotioned response tied in messy ways to wider ideological systems. As Rai (2016) argues, "comment fields can transform private affects into public emotions" (p. 192). Public discourse comes from a situated worldview but is directed outward. Warner (2002) argues that the nonlinear transformations that occur as different individuals and communities process the meaning of texts "is an engine for (not necessarily progressive) social mutation" (p. 81). From mapping the mutually influencing interactions among StoryCorps stories, the wider news programing surrounding them, and listener interactions with them on social media, I found potential for counterpublic spaces. These spaces

provide members of minoritized communities a means to express feelings of resonance with the story told and share stories of their own, adding a polyvocal depth to the original narrative of difference. The potential, however, of these stories to promote listening across difference is limited. The digital space does not only provide opportunities for marginalized listeners to connect, but also enables trolls and other hostile parties to convene and attempt to assert hegemonic hierarchies that devalue marginalized voices.

In what follows, I first discuss the affective dispersals generated by StoryCorps segments broadcast on *Morning Edition* before outlining my process for analyzing these online affective ecologies. I then turn to a brief discussion of the fluidity of online spaces. Next, I outline how the particular logics of the organizations disseminating stories shape the affective ecology through which these stories move online. I end with an analysis mapping the affective ecologies of three StoryCorps pieces broadcast on NPR and shared on social media.

## Affective Dispersals

Affect is a useful tool when analyzing the movement and potential of personal narratives across digital spaces because it provides a means of conceptualizing the non-causal dispersal of emotioned energy that is both virtual and material, and that flows between individual and collective bodies. It is inherently relational and, although ephemeral, its resonance influences our behaviors and our politics. When listening to a stirring piece of music, for example, tears may begin to well in our eyes without us being able to pinpoint a logical connection between the sound and the response it elicits. While reading online responses to StoryCorps pieces and talking to listeners, people repeatedly allude to that heightened affective resonance, that welling of the eyes, when they hear the crack in the storyteller's voice or the hushed intensity marking a

shift in the narrative. I am interested in how this affective attunement morphs as these stories circulate online.

This chapter maps how conversations recorded with StoryCorps and broadcast through NPR's *Morning Edition* elicit different structures of feeling, to borrow Raymond Williams's term, from listeners as these conversations move through online spaces (Williams, 1977). The 40-minute conversations may, but do not necessarily, generate a networked reaction where a moment of affective resonance in the story is distilled down and propelled through various social media channels, through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, creating emotioned patterns of response from users. Taking one example from a conversation between Ellie and Betty Dahmer, this affective charge began when Ellie and Betty sat down to record a conversation that touches on their experiences of civil rights activism in the 1960s. It continued as StoryCorps and NPR producers chose that conversation from thousands of others and edited out a three-minute poignant segment in which Betty and Ellie discuss the death of their family member who was murdered by the KKK. The story is recontextualized as it is embedded in a *Morning Edition* series commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. Day. The affective resonance spreads outwards as that segment is heard on NPR and shared by a thousand people on Facebook, who like it, love it, and tag it with a tear. It continues to spread as some users then link to the segment in online responses to recent white supremacist activities.

In her discussion of the formation of digital affective publics, Papacharissi (2014) argues that affective processes online "mix fact with opinion, and with emotion, in a manner that simulates the way that we politically react in our everyday lives" (p. 27). Online storytelling, she notes, involves the mixing and convergence of disparate content through links and shares and likes "to affectively represent subjectivities" (p. 27). Gray (2015) argues that this participatory

nature of digital media also makes visible the linkages between viral media texts and hegemonic racialized affects. He notes that "the invitation to like and share is not only about what things mean but also about how viewers feel about a given image, program, or story" (p. 1117). In this chapter, I look at the movement of StoryCorps experiences and how the format and materiality of the various modes of circulation invite different forms of affective interactivity. I analyze how this affective interactivity shapes and is shaped by wider discourses around race and racism.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, and as Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) notes, "The text is not a fixed text" (p. 190). Rather, its meaning moves, is co-created with readers/listeners in moments of resonance, joy, anger, and alienation that are shaped by the situated placement of the reader/listener in a particular time, space, and body. Rai (2016) states that the social impact of ordinary affects "shape, influence, and direct—albeit in a dynamic and often semi-conscious manner" (p. 173). Affective reactions are interwoven with processes of interpretation. As Liljeström (2016) argues, "interpretation is always a question of contagious affects and dynamic meetings between texts and readers" (p. 18). The affective meaning of a story is shaped by a plethora of factors including, but not limited to, the organization sharing the story, the materiality of the medium through which the story is shared, the placement of the story within the wider radio programing, the cultural context in which the story is shared, etc. Although audiences have long been active participants in constructing meaning from media texts, the internet allows dispersed individuals to connect with one another and build off of the affective resonances in these stories as a spark to generate ephemeral affective counterpublic pockets online.

## Process of Tracing the Affective Ecology of Comments Sections

> When rhetorical intensities have agentive forces that include the overdetermined and dynamic enmeshments of ideology, affect, public discourse, spaces, contested histories, and so on, how do you decide what to include in your study? (Rai, 2016, p. 183)

As I embarked on this project, this final chapter was the first one I started writing. This was before I had reached out to StoryCorps as a partner for the Radical Listening digital storytelling project that would form the basis of this dissertation. I had long been in the daily habit of listening to *Morning Edition* as I ate breakfast and prepared for the day ahead of me. As I started seriously considering what I would focus on in my dissertation, I knew I wanted to investigate how the digital age was changing the texture of public memory. I was specifically interested in how audio storytelling technologies like podcasting were being used by marginalized communities to record, circulate, and archive personally political moments. While listening to the weekly StoryCorps segments every Friday on *Morning Edition*, I started to attune my ears to how difference was operating within these short, personal broadcast narratives. I began researching the wider StoryCorps organization. As a multi-platform digital storytelling project specifically focused on reaching out to marginalized communities and bringing previously "unheard voices" to a wider public, I thought StoryCorps might provide an interesting entryway into both the potential and the dangers of recording and circulating stories from marginalized communities.

As I listened each Friday, I started looking up the broadcast stories online to see how other listeners were responding. I was surprised by both the richness and brutality of the online discussions associated with the StoryCorps segments. Within these spaces, I witnessed the ability

of online discussions to foster pockets of counterpublic potential as well as foster affective polarization. I noticed how voices were being racialized and given differential value and credibility by different listening communities. Rai (2016) notes that comments fields are often denounced for their "circulation of racist/sexist/classist/etc. discourses" and dismissed as "hyperbolic, pernicious, and ineffectual rhetorics" (p. 189). At the same time, however, Rai argues that comments fields provide rich spaces for rhetorical analysis. As a genre of civic engagement, the comments field "provides a space where individuals can do the rhetorical work of linking everyday occurrences, private encounters, and affective experiences to broader narratives already in circulation" (p. 189). As I read through the comments fields associated with StoryCorps broadcasts, I noticed how different individuals were taking up space, tying the mediated stories to their everyday lives and identities, and how these interactions were influenced by wider social contexts and the organizations posting the broadcasts.

Over the past several years, StoryCorps has attempted to track whether listener interaction with segments increases empathy for marginalized groups. While listening to stories on the StoryCorps website and viewing StoryCorps animated shorts on YouTube, I have frequently been prompted to fill out a series of multiple-choice questions gauging my response to the content. According to data from roughly 600 StoryCorps surveys collected from listeners online from May 2014–June 2015, 88% of respondents answered that they "strongly agree" that StoryCorps "makes them feel connected to people with different backgrounds," and 91% responded that StoryCorps gave them an "increased understanding of African Americans" (StoryCorps, 2017). Among other findings, listeners also reported a 94% "increased understanding of Latinos" (StoryCorps, 2017). In online surveys from 2018 conducted by StoryCorps, 96% of respondents reported "that their exposure to StoryCorps content helped them

better understand and/or empathize with people who are different from them" (StoryCorps, 2018). 88% of respondents in 2018 also reported an "increased understanding of issues faced by African Americans" (StoryCorps, 2018). Although statistics like these provide a certain degree of insight, they fail to interrogate the complicated affective entanglements that shape the experience of listening to another person's mediated story.

In contrast to the quantitative measuring of the social impact of StoryCorps stories through listener surveys, my analysis maps existing listener reception in the form of Facebook comments. Gries (2015) argues that rhetoric, particularly in environments that are increasingly digitally mediated, involves a complex assemblage of things intra-acting.[9] In this way, rhetoric "is more like an unfolding event—a distributed, material process of becomings" (p. 7). Rather than seeking causal relationships through my analysis, what interests me is the relationship between these comments and the larger discursive and material affective structures in which they are embedded. As such, deciding where to draw the boundaries around the texts I analyzed was incredibly difficult. Rai (2016) articulates this challenge beautifully:

> In seeking to comprehend both the rhetorical forces in circulation within a social space and the processes/things that enable this circulation, one can never capture the totality of every "thing" that matters. Here, we reach the methodological paradox of ecological and networked perspectives that seek to abandon container models of the rhetorical situation yet must ultimately redraw boundaries. (p. 183)

In my analysis, I map interactions between different material and discursive elements that go into creating the rhetorical situation that is the movement of StoryCorps stories online. It is impossible, however, to map every interaction to every story or even a tiny portion of the infinite

[9]Gries borrows the term intra-action from theorist Karen Barad. Intra-action positions agency as a dynamic play of forces rather than as a quality exercised by a human individual on the world.

connections that exist. Although I initially drew a wide boundary around my objects of analysis and tried to include listener reception on a number of different social media sites, I eventually found the task of qualitatively mapping reception to various stories across platforms while accounting for the specific logics of each social media site to be unmanageable. I decided to focus on posts made on Facebook because this is the platform that has both the greatest volume of responses as well as the greatest variety of types of responses, from long reply threads to "reactions" of hearts, tears and likes.

Compared with the StoryCorps listener surveys, my analysis of the movement of StoryCorps broadcasts provides a limited in scope but more nuanced reading of the interaction between listeners and edited stories. Rather than seek unidirectional and mono-causal answers (e.g., listening to StoryCorps causes X response from listeners), my analysis takes Facebook comments on StoryCorps and *Morning Edition* posts as evidence of the fragmented and fluid affective resonance of these stories shaped not only by the narrative structure of the stories, but also by the ethos and content moderation policies of the organizations sharing the content, the framing of the stories by NPR hosts, the juxtaposition of the stories within the wider ecology of *Morning Edition* news content, the materiality of the voices speaking, etc.

I chose to listen to segments that have been tagged as one of the several StoryCorps' initiatives that attempt to disrupt traditional historical archives by centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. StoryCorps has ten initiatives centering particular communities ranging from individuals suffering from memory loss to stories from individuals impacted by mass incarceration. The objective of these initiatives is to collect and feature voices from populations whose perspectives are often under-represented, both in traditional historical archives and in media narratives. At the time of recording, StoryCorps facilitators decide

whether a conversation fits within the parameters of one or more of these initiatives and participants can then agree to have their stories housed within these particular archives. I chose to analyze one story from each of the following initiative archives: the Griot initiative (archive of African American voices), the Historias initiative (archive of Latinx voices), and the StoryCorps OutLoud initiative (archive of LGBTQ voices). Whereas other initiative archives focus on specific lived experiences of memory loss, mass incarceration, serving in the military, etc., the three archives I chose to analyze center broader identity constructions surrounding standardized categories of difference that are and have historically been marginalized in the United States. Although I decided to trace one story from each archive, each speaker inhabits multiple identities and the social media response and affective ecology generated by these stories is not isolated to one aspect of difference (race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), but rather reflects intersectional forms of oppression faced by the various storytellers.

One of the relationships I was interested in investigating was how StoryCorps-edited narratives frame difference in relation to systems of power and how this framing is taken up by different interpretive communities. I ultimately chose to trace the affective ecology online of three stories based on differences in how the narrative structure of each of these stories deals with discrimination. The first story, which is archived as part of the Griot initiative, focuses on the storyteller's success overcoming adversity. The narrative framing obscures issues of systemic racism that become apparent when analyzing the larger context surrounding this story. The second segment I analyze, recorded through a partnership with StoryCorps and a social justice organization, is archived as part of the Historias Initiative. While this story follows the StoryCorps editing pattern of an individual overcoming an obstacle to reach eventual success, this narrative differs from the first in that it directly points to systemic discrimination as the

obstacle to be overcome. The last story, archived as part of both the Griot and StoryCorps OutLoud initiatives, breaks from the narrative format of the majority of StoryCorps clips. The narrative does not provide a linear path from struggle to success, but rather addresses throughout the persistent intersectional oppression, in addition to resilience and joy, of living as a Black genderqueer individual.

I am a member of the listening public consuming these stories on the radio as I start my Friday mornings. I am also a researcher analyzing the interactivity of other members of the listening public with these stories online. My analysis does not allow me to transport into the living rooms, cars and workplaces where these stories are consumed by other listeners. Instead, in tracing the affective ecology of these stories on social media, I am left to assemble fragmentary clues. As Grabill and Pigg (2012) note of online comments sections, "The actors are many, are not around often or very long, and typically engage via textual fragments" (p. 100). In drawing meaning from this affective ecology, I engage in a dance, a tacking back and forth between my situated interpretive listening practices to the story and the wider ideological structures in which it is embedded and the fragmentary assemblage of listening experiences that comprise the comments fields. Additionally, the ambiguity inherent in online spaces is highlighted by the difficulty of determining context when reading online responses. This creates an ecosystem ripe for polysemous interpretations, both from me as a critic and from other contributors to the comments thread. As Grabill and Pigg (2012) argue, analyzing comment sections is a particularly messy endeavor "because the interactions (as text) are persistent in time and space and non-linear in terms of when and how participants engage" (p. 99). This lack of certainty as a user/listener of the platform shapes the affective landscape of interactivity. It is to this fragmentary and uncertain nature of the online space and its implications for my project that

I turn to next before outlining how the logics of the organizations sharing stories shape the affective ecology in which these segments move online.

## Fluidity of Online Spaces

The online space is marked by ephemerality, fragmentation, and uncertainty. Hinck (2017) argues that rhetorical scholars need to develop new tools to account for the fluidity of public discourse in the digital age. She notes that, within the fluidity of these online spaces, processes of circulation and invention need to be understood as "horizontal, and networked without single speakers emerging at the forefront" (p. 100). Friedlander (2008) similarly argues that the diffused nature of internet narratives is produced through the work of multiple participants. He states, "In place of the dialectical conversation of author-reader we get ephemeral, networked, multimodal relationships" (p. 182). The networked nature of online spaces destabilizes traditional notions of authorship as a wide array of contributors co-construct an affective landscape.

This begs the question, what kinds of new articulations of difference and forms of resistance are afforded by these fluid digital spaces? The polyvocal narratives posted by marginalized subjects in some of the comments fields I analyzed resonate with what Haraway (1985/2016) and Sandoval (1999) call cyborg feminism. These comments are composed of a layering of different perspectives mapping affective connection as well as difference from the mediated narratives. These multiple voices work in concert with technology and with each other. They have the potential to form a kind of cyborg consciousness with the possibility (however fleeting) of creating shifting oppositional publics suited to the fluidity of a digital age. As Haraway (1985/2016) notes, cyborg consciousness reflects the fractured meaning of a postmodern era in which, in their search for equity, marginalized subjects cannot invoke pure

origins, innocence or singular identities. In the political struggle for equity, cyborg feminism resists singularity, "but rather lines of affinity occur through attraction, combination, and relation carved out of and in spite of difference" (Sandoval, 1999, p. 253). Although the fluidity of online spaces provides the potential for the formation of malleable, polyvocal counterpublics that are "wary of holism, but needy for connection," this potential is fleeting and fragile (Haraway, 1985/2016, p. 9). It can be suppressed (but not snuffed out completely) by a number of forces enmeshed within the online affective ecosystem, including competing counterpublics whose combined voices breed violence and affective alienation. Additionally, the online space is not a democratized free-for-all, but rather is shaped by corporate structures and mediating organizations.

## The Impacts of Disseminating Organizations

The archive of *Morning Edition* StoryCorps segments is housed on the NPR website and is broadcast as part of a two-hour long program that showcases a wide variety of news and commentary. The meaning and affective texture of these stories is shaped by not only the stories themselves, but also how these stories interact with the wider affective ecology of the *Morning Edition* programming in which these segments are embedded. StoryCorps and NPR staff choose conversations for broadcast from the StoryCorps "source" archive, often to correspond with current events. These conversations are edited down from 40 minutes to 3–5 minutes. Participants are told that their stories will be broadcast, they can approve the edited segment and then staff at NPR fact check the story.

Before turning to my analysis, I want to briefly address some important enmeshed factors related to the logics of organizations disseminating stories that shape the affective ecology in which StoryCorps stories circulate online. These factors include the ethos and content

moderation policies of the disseminating organizations and the mutability of online discussion threads.

**Ethos of the Organizations Disseminating Stories**

The ethos of the organization sharing the story as well as their content moderation policies impacts the way listeners interact with the story on social media. In an interview in 2015, StoryCorps founder Dave Isay mused that, in an age in which the internet seems overrun with trolls, the "guiding spirit and ethos" of StoryCorps which values listening over judgement has led to an unusually supportive online ecosystem. He stated that this listening ethos might be the reason "people treat it with such respect" (Isay, 2015). Analysis of listener interactivity with the StoryCorps social media pages show less vitriol and more positive resonance than interactivity with the story on the *Morning Edition* social media pages. The largely positive tone of comments on StoryCorps posts, however, is also undoubtedly impacted by the organization's content moderation policy. According to a StoryCorps representative:

> While we encourage and appreciate lively debate and discussion around the material we post on Facebook, StoryCorps will not tolerate incendiary comments on our page. This includes, but is not limited to, threatening posts, harassing words, bullying language, or comments that include expletives. While we do our best to monitor this page, we ask that members of the community who see any of the above please 'Flag' the comment immediately. (Personal correspondence, February 10, 2020)

*Morning Edition*, as part of a larger news organization, has a different ethos than that of StoryCorps as well as a different policy in regard to content moderation. In contrast to the ethos of listening with intent to understand rather than judge, *Morning Edition*'s stated mission from its "About" page is to "inform and challenge" (Morning Edition, 2020). It also claims to be the

most listened-to news radio program in the United States. In contrast to StoryCorps's content moderation policies, NPR does not actively moderate comments made on their Facebook posts. In a personal correspondence, the Supervising Community Manager at NPR told me, "we don't actively moderate comments due to limited resources and bandwidth. We rely on our community members to help us moderate by flagging them and/or alerting us via direct message" (M. Corcoran, Personal correspondence, March 10, 2020). By not actively moderating comments, abusive comments are allowed to remain unless flagged by another user. In addition to their differential content moderation policies, StoryCorps's organizational culture of open listening among a select audience that shares such values to a culture of "hard" news among a wide national audience may account for some of the differences in tone among commenters to the same story. In one response on a Facebook post of a StoryCorps segment on the *Morning Edition* page, for example, a listener who appears to be a White man writes, "Does NPR ever have real news anymore?" (NPR, 2014). These types of comments are relatively common. In contrast to the StoryCorps social media page which continually reinforces an ethos of valuing individual voices and experiences, the *Morning Edition* page is an antagonistic space where news stories, especially those that take on racial inequity either overtly or under the surface, are often fodder for angry backlash. While agonistic spaces productively engage difference, as Ivie (2008) notes, democracy is lost in those moments when such exchanges "degenerate into antagonistic relations of disaffection, cultural alienation, and political estrangement" (p. 545). Although there is less polarization within the StoryCorps Facebook comments sections, as I will elaborate on in my analysis, this does not necessarily mean that responses on the StoryCorps social media pages demonstrate greater potential for listening across difference.

**NPR Decides to Delete its Comments Sections: Attending to the Mutability of Online Discussions**

The social function and context of commenting changes as comments move away from news websites and onto social media, where social media users' posts are attached to and interwoven with their online personas. While the digital age may seem to decentralize authority, media organizations and social media platforms have the ability to completely restructure or demolish this affective landscape by, say, deleting the comments sections for an entire site. In 2016, NPR decided to do away with its comments sections. According to NPR Ombudsman Elizabeth Jensen, despite outcry from some listeners who saw these online spaces as vital forms of audience engagement, NPR lacked the ability to properly moderate the comments, which were increasingly dominated by a handful of voices and "tipping into incivility" (Jensen, 2017). In addition, Jensen notes that, before the comments sections vanished, the majority of listeners had already moved to social media platforms to discuss NPR stories. Public engagement with NPR exists within a greater online social ecology where Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites extend the life of the audio clips as well as place these clips in a new contextual environment. This shift in the commenting environment changes the structure of the responses and highlights the fragmented nature of online spaces.

In contrast to comments sections on the NPR website where posters were more or less anonymous, it is possible to see much more personal information on the people interacting with stories on Facebook and other social media sites. This is especially true because most people seem to have fairly open privacy settings. Ziegele and Quiring (2016) note that, in contrast to comments sections embedded on news organization websites, interactions with news stories on social media are impacted by a lack of anonymity paired with social pressure from the poster's

networked community: “the users are conscious that their posting will be visible to their primary network of colleagues, friends, and family members… In such situations, the user comments are likely to be strongly influenced by specific pressure to conform to the group” (p. 143). The affective ecology of comment sections is thereby shaped by the platforms on which these comments are shared.

## Analyzing the Affective Ecology of StoryCorps Broadcasts Online

In my mapping of the NPR/StoryCorps broadcasts below, I analyze how StoryCorps segments broadcast on NPR spread on social media sites to form particular affective ecologies that shape and are shaped by listener interaction with the segments. In tracing these affective ecologies, I first provide an analysis of the narrative structure of the story. I then turn to the wider social context in which this narrative is embedded, attending to the larger *Morning Edition* ecosystem and how difference operates throughout the various stories in the program as a whole. I then analyze comments made on the NPR website before these comments fields were removed by NPR in 2016. I end each section by tracing listener interaction on Facebook posts made on the StoryCorps, *Morning Edition* and NPR Facebook pages.

### Lillie and Burnell Cotlon’s Story: Reemerging from Ruin—Tales of “Success”

From my engagement as a listener/researcher tracing conversations chosen and edited by NPR and StoryCorps producers for national broadcast, I have found that these stories tend to be edited and presented in a way that overlooks systemic injustice and instead focuses on individual tales of success. In one StoryCorps segment taken from the Griot Initiative archive and broadcast on *Morning Edition*, Lillie Cotlon speaks with her son Burnell Cotlon about neighborhood recovery after hurricane Katrina. Gentle, folksy guitar strumming signals to the listener that it is time for the weekly StoryCorps segment. The thirty second introduction frames the listening

experience. *Morning Edition* host David Greene states that Burnell Cotlon saved money from "working at fast food restaurants and dollar stores" in order to buy a building to turn into a much-needed grocery store for his community (Greene, 2015). The rhythm and emphasis of Greene's speech is characteristic of the often-parodied public radio voice and stands in stark contrast to the voices of Lillie and Burnell Cotlon. Kumanyika (2015) notes that although there has been a push in public radio to interview voices of individuals from historically underrepresented communities, there has not been a similar push to diversify program hosts. The news ledes that frame StoryCorps *Morning Edition* segments often come from voices who are largely White and middle class. The contrast between the standardized speech patterns of hosts and the voices of the people being interviewed inadvertently reinforces a voyeurism of the featured communities. This is emphasized by the fact that the "overwhelming majority of its [NPR's] radio audience is in fact white" (Schumacher-Matos, 2012). In an interview with his friend and hip-hop artist A. D. Carson, Kumanyika (2015) asks his friend why Black communities are less likely to listen to public radio. Carson responds, "I hear middle-aged White dudes who sound like they just drank some really warm coffee… It sounds like the whole joint is recorded in the back of Barnes and Noble" (Kumanyika, 2015). As I have argued elsewhere in my research on sonic Whiteness, there is a long history in radio and podcasting of privileging white aural preferences as standard while undermining and/or exoticizing the stories of people of color (Brekke, 2020).

### *Narrative Framing*

The headline for the Cotlons' story on the NPR *Morning Edition* page reads "In New Orleans' Hardest-Hit Neighborhood, A Recovery—By Sheer Will" (Greene, 2015). Although the headline hints at the disproportionate impact of the storm on the Lower Ninth Ward, the systemic

racism and root causes for this disparity are not addressed in the edited segment. Instead, the story focuses on the unassailable power of the human spirit to work hard and overcome obstacles. The segment cuts from Greene's crisp introduction to Burnell's voice shaking with emotion as he remembers returning home after the storm to wreckage. The story pivots from Burnell and Lillie's dark memories of the years following Katrina to Burnell's resolution to turn things around for his community. Burnell proclaims, "I always was taught if there's a problem, somebody got to make a move" (Greene, 2015). Lillie admits her initial skepticism of Burnell's plan to build a grocery store from the rubble. Her voice is playful as she remembers the improbability of the venture: "I mean, it was trash and debris on the floor that you had to crawl over. And—how can he make anything out of this?" At the end of the segment, Burnell and Lillie laugh merrily as they discuss how the hard work eventually paid off. Burnell states "...It was all worth it. And if it takes me doing it by myself, I'm going to put one business at a time back into that Lower Ninth Ward cause it's home" (Greene, 2015). The voices of Burnell and Lillie Cotlon are marked by a sense of intimacy and affectionate banter. When Burnell discusses the Lower Ninth Ward, his voice beams with pride as well as a sense of concern. This short two-minute piece is open to polysemous interpretations. If you were from the community and knew of its history and context, you might read Burnell's decision, as improbable as its success was, as an act of defiance against a system that throughout the city's history had forsaken his community and its predominantly Black residents. As journalist Gary Rivlin who chronicled the long-term effects of Katrina notes, officials in charge of the recovery effort had written-off the Lower Ninth Ward as a lost cause (Rivlin, 2015). Rivlin notes that Louisiana's $10 billion recovery plan was "billed as the largest housing-recovery program in the country's history, favored the middle class over the working class, and white communities over black ones" (Rivlin, 2015). With this

contextual knowledge, Burnell's resolution to take matters into his own hands might be interpreted not as a tale of entrepreneurial individualism, but rather as a lack of faith in a system that continuously devalues Black communities. Without previous knowledge of the systemic devaluation of this community, however, the segment can easily be interpreted as hard work overcoming hardship rather than as an act of resistance.

***Wider Context of the Broadcast***

The distress and loss after Katrina are framed as primarily the product of the natural disaster, and there is no discussion of how race impacted which communities were the most harmed. The ways in which the system has failed this community vanish through the editing process. Without additional context, the ending impression based on the short two-minute segment alone is that with enough hard work, the human spirit can overcome adversity. Success is achieved not through systemic change, but through individual will power. On the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu stated: "We will hear and we will learn the beautiful truth that Katrina taught us all, we are all the same" (Bouie, 2015). This idea that the storm brought the community together and created a sense of unity resonated with many White Americans. This memory of the storm frames Katrina as the story of a horrible natural disaster whose trauma impacted everyone. While this is true, it omits the fact that certain segments of the population were hit much harder than others.

As Bouie (2015) writes in *Mother Jones*, "the disaster still haunts black political consciousness in ways that most white Americans have never been able to acknowledge" (Bouie, 2015). The history of systemic racism in the city, of poverty and segregation, ensured that the trauma would not impact all citizens equally, but rather, as Bouie (2015) makes clear, "poor and working-class blacks (including the elderly, and children) would largely shoulder the burden of

the storm" (Bouie, 2015). The gap in public memory of the storm between White and Black Americans was made evident in one Pew Research Center study: Whereas only 32% of White Americans expressed that Katrina highlighted the city's racial inequality, 71% of Black Americans "felt that the disaster revealed the persistence of racial inequality" (Pew Research Center, 2005). In the two-minute edited conversation between Burnell and Lillie Cotlon, listeners get the story of a man whose community was destroyed by the hands of fate and who had the courage and work ethic to rebuild. Without background knowledge of the community, systemic racial injustice is obscured in this story of heroic individualism.

The Cotlons' story is embedded in a greater listening ecology comprised of both the *Morning Edition* program from August 21, 2015 and a special series commemorating the 10th-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. "Hurricane Katrina: 10 Years of Recovery and Reflection" consists of various stories across NPR programs that ran from August 18–30, 2015. Just as racial inequities loom at the margins of the Cotlons' story without ever being confronted directly, race is ever present but rarely named in the Katrina series as a whole. According to a 2015 NPR audience profile, 86.62% of the NPR news audience is White, whereas only 4.7% is African American (NPR, 2015). The disproportionate percentage of White audience members may account for NPR's apparent reticence to confront structural racial inequity head on. The one story that centers government accountability to communities only interviews White families. Another segment in the series features author Ronnie Greene discussing his book *Shots on the Bridge*. Set amidst the post-hurricane chaos in New Orleans, Greene's book details the police violence and elaborate cover up of the shootings on Danziger Bridge. The fact that all of the unarmed victims were Black is absent from the segment. Neither Greene, who is White, nor reporter Audie Cornish, who is Black, ever mention race. This, to me, seems like quite the

omission. Given the prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the building outrage at police violence against Black communities at the time of the broadcast, the absence of race in this and other segments does not feel accidental.

A piece that played before the Cotlons' story on *Morning Edition* gives insight into why race disappeared from the discussion. In the story "How Black Reporters Report on Black Death," NPR journalist Gene Demby speaks frankly about his pain and frustration covering police shootings of unarmed Black men. He discusses how he and other Black journalists have considered resigning because of the pressure on them to remain "objective" when covering police violence. Demby states: "A lot of our conversations about newsroom objectivity and editorial objectivity start from the position that whiteness is neutral, that white people do not have racialized experiences and that white people do not bring a set of racialized assumptions into situations" (Demby, 2015). This story does center race and systemic injustice, and points to problems within NPR of forcing Black journalists to adhere to hegemonic White notions of objectivity and bracket their own experiences. This pressure to remain "objective" may account for why the framing and editing of so many of the segments featured in the hurricane Katrina remembrance series leave racial inequity unmentioned.

Looking at listener responses to the *Morning Edition* Facebook post for "How Black Reporters Report on Black Death" shows a tendency of comments to devolve into highly politicized vitriol when race is tied to systemic inequality. The segment is a prime example of a social media comments section that does more to incite anger and violence than promote dialogue. A typical response on this thread reads: "Blacks and liberals will always blame the white man for everything. Why take responsibility when you can just be a racist and say everything is the white man's fault?" (NPR Morning Edition, 2015). This comment elicits 14

responses, with a few people trying to refute this post, followed by racist comments from the original poster claiming that when Black people are shot by the police, it is their own fault.

### *Analyzing the Comments Section on the NPR Website*

Although the Cotlon segment is edited to elicit affective pull from listeners, this resonance rarely seems to lead to questioning of ideological systems. The resonance of the post-racial, neoliberal discourse present in the editing and framing of the Cotlon piece can be seen in the comments section for the Cotlon story on the NPR website, which was accessed before NPR moved their comments to social media platforms. One response under the name Sargon Bighorn illustrates the ignoring of racial power differentials that pervade the remarks: "I think Americans, White Black Blue Green need to read about men like Cotlon who get up and do the hard work" (Greene, 2015). IDK99 writes, "If the Ninth Ward is to ever flourish, it will be on the shoulders of men like you" (Greene, 2015). Another commenter under the name Mark P chimes in "capitalism at its best!" (Greene, 2015). The implication is that what keeps individuals from reaching the American dream is not systemic racial injustice, but rather a reticence to put in the effort. The focus on the effective functioning of capitalism is somewhat ironic given that Cotlon's small business is now being pushed out by The Dollar General, a chain store that provides residents with low-priced goods, but does not provide access to healthy fresh food options like those provided by Cotlon's independent grocery store (Jonssson, 2019). Only a very small minority of the 122 comments engages with the notion of systemic racial injustice. Although stories of racialized trauma are often relegated to the private sphere, as Changfoot (2016) argues:

> there are many experiences of emotion that are valuable to commodity exchange, legitimated, and considered desirable. These would include emotions of triumph over

> adversity, perseverance, tenacity, and courage that have culminated in already valued goals that resonate with dreams of the middle class, the corporate elite, or celebrities. (Changefoot, p. 68).

Although many of the commenters from the NPR page discuss feelings of emotional connection to the Cotlon family, these bonds are formed within a neoliberal discourse that suppresses acknowledgement of the systemic factors at play.

### *Tracing StoryCorps and Morning Edition's Facebook Comments Sections*

**StoryCorps Facebook Post.** The Cotlon segment was shared through both *Morning Edition* and StoryCorps' social media pages. StoryCorps posted the Cotlon piece on their Facebook page a day before the segment aired on *Morning Edition* on August 20, 2015. StoryCorps reposted the segment the following day on August 21, 2015. The first post has 467 likes, five comments and 69 shares. The second post has 397 likes, 13 comments and 73 shares. Commenters who appear to be White women dominate the StoryCorps responses and are unanimously positive. Commenters mention Colton's "hard work," "incredible drive," and "inspirational story" (StoryCorps, 2015). While these statements demonstrate resonance with Cotlon's story, the sole focus on his inspiring work ethic among users who appear to be mostly White women is problematic. One poster who appears to be a White woman writes, "I heard this story this morning and thought about what incredible drive it took for Burnell Cotlon to make this happen for his community. He is an awesome individual" (StoryCorps, 2015). Individual accomplishment is praised whereas the need for systemic change is left unmentioned. Without also mentioning systemic accountability and historic injustice, such sentiments risk feeding an affective ecosystem that fuels rather than questions neoliberal systems that perpetuate racial injustice.

**Morning Edition Facebook Post.** On August 21, 2015, the *Morning Edition* Facebook page posted Burnell and Lillie Cotlon's StoryCorps piece. The post was liked 366 times, commented on 22 times, and shared 54 times. This was before Facebook expanded the number of possible reactions to a post to include emoticons such as a heart and an angry face. For the mostly White male voices in the comments thread of this post, the content of the story seems to make less of an impression than the racialized voices of the storytellers. Several commenters who appear to be White men from their profiles responded on the *Morning Edition* post in a less positive tone than those who responded on the StoryCorps post's comments section as well as the posts made on the NPR website's comments section before it was removed. Reacting to the headline, which notes that the Cotlons are from one of New Orleans' "hardest hit neighborhoods," one commenter who appears to be a White man from New Orleans writes, "That's pure bullshit! Other areas were hit just as hard" (NPR Morning Edition, 2015). This sentiment follows the dominant narrative of the White community in New Orleans that viewed the natural disaster as impacting residents equally (Pew Research Center, 2005). Another commenter from Rhode Island who also appears to be a White man questions the logic of why the Cotlons decided to stay in their community at all. He writes, "Cut your losses, abandon the city to nature..." (NPR Morning Edition, 2015). Another poster, who appears to be a White man from Virginia, posts three times, not directly about the story, but rather about a petition to preserve Robert E. Lee statues in New Orleans.

Comments like these complicate my original assessment that the story, while effective in forming a connection between storyteller and listener, ultimately works to reaffirm neoliberal ideologies promoting a color-blind meritocracy myth. These posters do not appear moved by Burnell Cotlon's narrative of overcoming adversity through hard work. The digital space does

not provide users with disembodied information, but rather, as Van Doorn (2011) argues, online spaces "in-form and are in-formed by the volatile and intractable matter of gender, sexuality and embodiment" (p. 531). Although Van Doorn is primarily interested in performances of gender and sexuality online, digital content depicting the lives of racialized subjects is similarly interwoven with offline racialized affects. From social media response to the *Morning Edition* StoryCorps segment, broadcasting a decontextualized two-minute narrative to a national audience from a community that is read as impoverished and Black, especially a story that is largely framed to appeal to a White middle-class audience, seems unlikely to disrupt entrenched ideologies and may even fuel affective alienation between groups, rather than resolve it.

Another important trend on the *Morning Edition* page is that, while users who appear to be White dominate the comments sections, more passive forms of engagement such as reacting and sharing the post tend to be more diverse. An individual who appears to be a Black man, one of only two people of color who left a comment on the *Morning Edition* post, writes succinctly "#Neverforget" (NPR Morning Edition, 2015). This comment is liked by another individual who also appears to be a Black man. While the *Morning Edition* comments thread is dominated by the posts of largely middle-aged White men, more passive forms of engagement show participation from a greater diversity of individuals. Clicking through the profiles of the hundreds of people who liked the post, wide ranges of ages, genders, and racial backgrounds are represented.

The tone and demographics of existing commenters shape the trajectory of later conversations on the post. In their study analyzing why users both engage in and abstain from posting on comments threads, Ziegele and Quiring (2016) note that "the low quality of an initial discussion can indicate a low discussion value to the subsequent users and therefore discourage them from posting comments" (p. 139). In my own analysis of comments associated with

StoryCorps *Morning Edition* segments, I have found that more aggressive initial posts, such as those that engage in racial slurs and/or ad hominem attacks, tend to steer the conversation in a particular direction that dampens the variety of voices willing to add their perspective to that thread or reply chain. This is especially true the larger and less targeted the audience of the organization posting the story. Although aggressive voices can discourage other listeners from participating in active forms of interactivity such as commenting, these voices do not seem to dissuade more passive forms of engagement such as liking and sharing the post.

Papacharissi (2002) asserts that although the internet provides a public space where information and participation are more easily accessible, this space is often dominated by a few voices. Attacks online can be very aggressive and "intimidate participants from joining online discussions" (p. 16). In comments sections that include a great deal of racial animosity, people of color may choose other forms of interaction with stories. As Lacey (2013) argues, "even silence may register in the politics of listening as a marker of agency, a political strategy not to engage in a particular incarnation of the public sphere" (Lacey, p. 177). Given the hostility of the ecosystem dominated by White men, people of color who liked the post may have felt less comfortable adding their take to the comments thread. Looking through the profiles of individuals who liked but did not comment on the story reveals a greater variety of backgrounds than is apparent from the comments.

There is a clear gendered difference between engagement with the StoryCorps post and the *Morning Edition* post. The lack of male engagement with the StoryCorps post may have to do with the association of StoryCorps with the feminized practice of sharing emotional experiences. The fact that this personal narrative is featured on *Morning Edition*, a space otherwise devoted to news coverage, may account for some of the pushback to the segment on

the *Morning Edition* thread among the mostly White male posters, as opposed to its acceptance and affective resonance among the female commenters to the StoryCorps post.

As the affective ecology generated by the Cotlons' segment demonstrates, within the clean, edited narratives of StoryCorps pieces, marginalized voices often become assimilated into dominant narratives. And yet, the comments sections illustrate that this process of assimilation is not fully successful. On the one hand, the racialized voices of the storytellers sear through the narrative for some listeners, creating affective polarization rather than identification. On the other hand, the difference embedded in these same voices resonate within the ears of other listeners, creating the potential beginning of a counterpublic formation. StoryCorps mass broadcast clips, although edited and packaged in a way that tend to homogenize diverse experiences and elide difference, also have embedded within them the ability to reach marginalized subjects who are able to find the social potential in a not yet progressive project. In the next section, I turn to the possibilities comments sections offer for dispersed marginalized listeners to build off of one another's voices online, generating fluid and ephemeral counterpublic moments.

**The Hernandez Sisters' Story: Building a Counterpublic within the Fluidity of Online Environments**

In this section, I trace one interview recorded through a StoryCorps/Community non-profit partnership. This story was archived as part of the StoryCorps Historias initiative and broadcast on *Morning Edition*. In the segment, Linda Hernandez, now an older woman, recalls being turned away from a college entrance exam along with her sister because the school counselor felt that Latinas could not succeed in higher education. In the digital age, the mutually constitutive interactions between mediated stories from marginalized subjects and marginalized

listeners has the potential to form powerful polyvocal counterpublic pockets online. Despite editing of StoryCorps segments that tends to downplay difference in order to reach the widest possible audience, marginalized communities in the comments sections are resisting, in active and passive ways, essentialist representations of their communities. The multiple marginalized voices exist simultaneously within the comments section, creating fragmented and fluid yet powerful articulations of marginalized identities that resist singular narratives. They have the potential to form what Sandoval (1991) has termed differential oppositional consciousness, or as she describes it, a consciousness that "demands a new subjectivity, a political revision that denies any one ideology as the final answer, while instead positing a tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted" (p. 14). In contrast to the Cotlons' story, the Hernandez sisters' segment directly confronts systemic oppression. It engendered a counter-public reaction online grounded in a fluid differential oppositional consciousness.

At the same time as marginalized communities created supportive counter-public spaces within these comments sections, many posters who appear to be White women pushed back against the Hernandez sisters' story, arguing that the discrimination they faced has been experienced by all women and had nothing to do with them being Latina. These listeners failed to hear the intersections in the story between race and gender. Crenshaw (1991) states that "although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people," they are too often treated as mutually exclusive by larger feminist and anti-racist movements (p. 1242). Because of this failure to see the ways in which racist and sexist discourses intersect, Crenshaw proclaims that "both feminist and antiracist politics have, paradoxically, often helped to marginalize the issues of violence against women of color" (p. 1245). The specific needs facing women of color

are thus all too often obscured by movements that fail to see the heterogeneity and unequal power differentials within groups. Whereas several posters who appear to be White women refused to hear the intersections of racialized and gendered oppression, their comments did not go unchallenged. As I will discuss, several posters who appear to be Latinx pushed back against the erasure of the intersectional oppression experienced by the Hernandez sisters.

### *Community-Based Partnerships*

Oral historian Alexander Freund (2015) argues that although StoryCorps seeks to democratize the past through incorporating a wider range of voices, it ultimately follows an ideology of individualism in which systemic factors are obscured: "Absent from these stories are state, social, and cultural institutions" (p. 108). Freund's (2015) sweeping claims against StoryCorps, and all such storytelling platforms, as "informed by the values of a crass anti-state individualism" are overly simplistic and fail to recognize instances in which potential does exist (p. 124). He asserts that StoryCorps engages in a detrimental post-racial discourse in which all storytellers are presented as "Americans, and whether they are white or black, poor or rich, StoryCorps' underlying message is that the story would be the same" (p. 124). Although this post-racial discourse is indeed present in much of the StoryCorps promotional materials and is a trend in the editing of the broadcast stories, painting all of StoryCorps' work as promoting a corporate post-racial narrative ignores instances in which stories do create spaces for marginalized groups to convene and push for equity.

Many narratives produced in partnership with community-based organizations center systemic injustice. One such partnership is between StoryCorps and the organization Las Comadres Para Las Americas, whose mission is "Connecting and empowering Latinas everywhere through community building/networking, culture, learning, and technology" (Las

Comadres Para Las Americas, 2020). The Hernandez sisters' story was one of the recordings that came out of this partnership. According to the StoryCorps 2014 annual report, StoryCorps reserves 50% of their interview openings for community partners. In 2018, StoryCorps facilitated 233 community and non-profit recording partnerships (2014, StoryCorps; 2018, StoryCorps). Stories recorded in partnership with community organizations that are broadcast on *Morning Edition* are also edited into short 2–5 minute segments that mostly end with a sense of feel-good narrative closure.

Before I reached out to StoryCorps to partner with the CCDE on our digital storytelling project, I researched community partnerships StoryCorps had facilitated in the past and how the different organizations were now using the recorded stories. From analyzing different StoryCorps partnerships with social justice-oriented community organizations, I found that the resulting edited stories produced through these partnerships are more likely to directly focus on problems related to systemic injustice than edited stories produced from conversations recorded through corporate partnerships or StoryCorps booths.[10] Community organizations are not involved in editing the stories that are eventually chosen for national broadcast. Because these organizations are responsible for hosting the recording event and recruiting community members to take part, the topics covered in these conversations might be more likely to tie personal struggles of marginalized groups to wider systems of oppression, as is true for the Hernandez sisters' story.

[10] StoryCorps booths are publicly accessible recording studios located in public places around the country. Participants can sign up for a recording slot online. These locations move around the country to capture a diversity of voices.

### *Narrative Analysis*

The *Morning Edition* headline from March 1, 2013 reads: "Latina Sisters Aimed High, Defying Low Expectations" (Inskeep, 2013). A folksy strumming plays before host Steve Inskeep announces that it is time for StoryCorps. He describes the organization as collecting "this country's memories in sound" (Inskeep, 2013). Inskeep sets up this week's memory, describing how Hernandez grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska in the 1960s and went to a predominantly White high school. Hernandez, whose voice is soft and textured with age, reflects back on a moment of high school trauma: "And our high school counselor told us we didn't have to take the SAT test or the ACT test because we were Hispanic women, and all we would do is have babies. So we went home and we told our parents, and my mother went in the back room and cried" (Inskeep, 2013). Although systemic injustice is discussed directly, the narrative structure of the story places the burden of navigating around these systems of oppression on the oppressed communities. Hernandez discusses how her older brother angrily walked them back to the school and advocated for them to take the test. In the end, the sisters were able to succeed: "We both scored really high. My sister got a four-year scholarship to University of Nebraska, and then she got accepted into medical school, you know" (Inskeep, 2013). Through hard work, the sisters were eventually able to overcome the systems stacked against them. Although the narrative structure of the Hernandez sisters' story largely follows the StoryCorps editing model of individuals overcoming hardship through hard work, it also points to systemic oppression within the education system as the cause of the initial hardship.

### *Wider Context of the Broadcast*

The affective pull on listeners of the Hernandez sisters' story is impacted not only by the conditions in which their conversation was recorded and edited, but also by the wider news

landscape in which the story is embedded. The news of the day on March 1, 2013 provides a string of stories, which, as a whole, depict the country as being on the brink of change: changing norms regarding same-sex marriage, changing racial demographics, changing technology, etc.. The first story in the program, "Administration Asks Supreme Court To End California Gay-Marriage Ban," discusses the Obama Administration's evolving views on same-sex marriage: moving from a state-by-state approach to legalization to the position that marriage should be viewed as a constitutional right open to all same-sex couples in the nation. The next story in the program, "Why Republicans Are Out of Step with Young Voters," starts by discussing a push from within the Republican party to support same-sex marriage. The story then pivots to interviews with college students at Ohio State University who grew up in Republican households but are (at the time of the story) increasingly finding themselves out of step with Republican social policies, from same-sex marriage to immigration. The students interviewed argue that the GOP needs to become more racially inclusive and progressive on popular social issues if it wants to retain and attract young voters. Another section of the program discusses how the retirement of Pope Benedict XVI the day before ushered in a strange transition period for Catholics as the faithful await the eventual selection of a new Pope. Later in the program, host Mandalit Del Barco reports on the changing linguistic demographics in the United States. This is illustrated by Spanish-language Univision surpassing NBC in terms of audience ratings. These segments and others frame the Hernandez sisters' story within an affective landscape of change moving toward a more diverse and inclusive future. Within this wider framework, the discrimination the Hernandez sisters narrate in their story might have been perceived by the listening audience at the time as evidence of the nation's fraught past of discrimination in contrast to a presumed inevitable movement to a more equitable future.

Analysis of the comment threads associated with this story, however, illustrates that the segment resonated differently with different listening communities. While commenters who identify as Latinx largely point out that discrimination continues to impact their lives, many commenters who appear to be White either resist the idea that discrimination ever took place, or frame it as a past practice that no longer plagues our culture.

### *Analyzing the Comments Section on the NPR Website*

This story generated many comments on the NPR website from self-identified Latinas reflecting on similar painful memories. Although the narrative arc in this story follows the StoryCorps editing trend of centering the promise of the American dream through hard work, the responses in the NPR comments sections (accessed before their disappearance) complicate this narrative through a tapestry of voices discussing moments of resonance as well as divergence from the edited clip. Nearly all of the comments on the story of the Hernandez sisters engaged with a feeling of pain at being turned away from opportunities because of systemic prejudice. Most of the commenters are self-proclaimed Latina/Latinos who were moved by the story to respond with their own stories. These written statements expand on the experience of being Latina in the United States with discussions of intersectional oppression, creating a polyphonic ecology of voices within the comments section. One commenter under the name “br husker” stressed that many Latinas are burdened not only by oppressive expectations from hegemonic US cultural forces, but also from oppressive expectations within their own families because of their gender:

> I wept when I heard this story—my wounds were again opened. I was never able to follow my dreams of attending college and going into the medical field. Without family support or guidance from my counselors I lacked the knowledge and resources to

> accomplish my goals. Being a Latina, my mother said it was a waste of time, money and effort for me to get a college education… I can still hear my mother yelling at me when I would bring up college and leaving for the university. The guidance counselors at school only helped the white girls who were financially able to attend college and who already had the know how of how to get into college, a process of which my family had no experience… The sad part is that this is not my adopted country, I'm as American as the blond, white kids with whom I attended school. It's quite obvious that the color of my skin, lack of money, and surname make me non-American in some eyes. Somehow that all combined into making me a less intelligent being. Experiencing prejudice as a kid in school is sickening but being held back because of your gender by your own family and culture is just as sad. (Inskeep, 2013)

Br husker's post elicited more stories and discussion in the comments section about systemic prejudice against Latinas, from outside as well as within their own communities.

In her reflections on the process of writing *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa (2009) notes that she was surprised that the book was so well received among Chicanas. She explains, "I thought that Chicanas would not like it because I talk bad about my culture" (p. 191). Anzaldúa discusses the dual pressures she faced of racism from the dominant culture as well as gendered violence from within her community. The experiences Anzaldúa paints in her poems resonated with readers. She argues that authors co-create knowledge with readers and that "The text will move and reveal something new every time you read it" (p. 190). As I have noted before, this co-creation of meaning between the storyteller, organizations mediating that story, and listeners is especially apparent in online spaces. Before NPR removed all of their comments sections, the discussion under this story generated a counterpublic space where Latinx listeners drew on

elements from the story to engage each other in a discussion of shared and divergent experiences of discrimination. This story, made in partnership with a social justice-oriented community organization whose goal is to empower Latinas, illustrates the potential of StoryCorps narratives addressing intersectional oppression/resistance to create a counter-public space where individuals from marginalized groups can share experiences and find support. This space provides fragmented and fleeting yet potentially powerful polyphonic counterpublic resonances.

### *Tracing StoryCorps and Morning Edition's Facebook Comments Sections*

**Morning Edition Facebook Page.** While retaining aspects of the affirming affective ecology of the NPR comments thread, the social media posts are also riddled with intrusions into this counterpublic space. As the comments have moved to social media, they present a mixture of posters who appear to be Latinx as well as White individuals, some disputing Hernandez's claims of discrimination. On March 1, 2013, *Morning Edition* posted Linda Hernandez's segment on their Facebook page. Individuals and people of color make up a good portion of the comments thread and about half the posts are from women. It has 566 likes, 210 shares, and 68 comments.

Posts from the many self-identified Latina and Latino individuals are typically much longer than others. Rather than simply sharing their perspective of the Hernandez segment, they offer stories of their own that consist of differential treatment at jobs and low expectations from teachers and counselors as well as coping strategies. One poster who appears to be a Latino man, for example, states:

> That's why my 1st year in high [school] was remedial math and English, followed by ESL classes. I was a B+ student in Jr high with honors classes. Fortunately for me, my counselor was Hispanic and changed all my classes. Oh yea, they put me in shop as well.

> Ya know those stupid Mexicans are only good for labor. This was in 1979. (NPR Morning Edition, 2013)

Many posters note that the discrimination the Hernandez sisters discuss from their childhood is still very present. One commenter who identifies as Latina commented: “Oh and my job keeps all Hispanic/Latinos alike oppressed… They get away with this because they all stick together HR, and the director. It should be criminal in America to be treated this way...” (NPR Morning Edition, 2013). The post goes on to discuss the extent of inequitable and exploitative treatment she and other Hispanic people have experienced in the workplace. Sandoval (1999) discusses the exploited labor of people of color in the late 20th (which continues into the 21st) century: “These workers know the pain of the union of machine and bodily tissue, the robotic conditions, and in the late twentieth century, cyborg conditions under which the notion of human agency must take on new meanings” (p. 248). Connecting with one another online, sharing narratives and strategies for survival and resistance, responders construct a differential, oppositional consciousness made up of fragmented and fluid identities articulated under the label of Latinx.

Although the White men in this comments thread appear to be in the minority, these comments have venom and add their own shadows over the landscape of the digital environment. One man who appears to be White asks how many babies Hernandez ended up popping out. Another one spews, “I hope she feels lucky to be in Nebraska because Mexico sucks” (NPR Morning Edition, 2013). For some of the commenters who appear to be White men, their posts reinforce hegemonic oppressive stereotypes of Latinas. As Dávila (2001) argues, dominant representations of Latinas paint a “dual portrait of Latina women as virgin or whore” (p. 123). In this thread, however, these hateful comments are all followed by individuals pushing back. Although these comments call out abusive online behavior, the posters also often question their

own decision to engage in the first place. As one of these posters notes, “I know I shouldn’t respond to a troll…” (NPR Morning Edition, 2013). These refusals to accept abusive behavior, however, work to reclaim the ecosystem as a counterpublic space.

Posters who appear to be White women tend to affirm the experience of gendered discrimination described in the segment, while either omitting or denying the racialized discrimination. One commenter posts, “It’s not just Latinas. I’m Caucasian, and in the ‘70’s, a college professor told me that he didn’t think women needed to be in college because they were just going to have babies” (NPR Morning Edition, 2013). Another poster who also appears to be a White woman writes, “race is not as big a factor as gender bias is” (NPR Morning Edition, 2013). Several other comments by White women on the thread echo these sentiments. While many of these posters share stories of their own gendered discrimination, these comments, more often than not, either fail to engage with the intersectional forms of oppression discussed in the story or outright deny them. Some Latinx commenters push back against posters who argue that racial discrimination is no longer present in America, once again attempting to reclaim the space. A poster who appears to be a White woman writes:

> So what’s the outrage about?? One of my classmates (non hispanic) who was acing chem as a sophomore (was a typical junior class) was told the same thing by chem teacher when she asked for a recommendation to an intense science seminar... Why is race always the issue in these things??? (NPR Morning Edition, 2013)

To which an individual who appears to be Latino responds:

> The outrage that should be seen is that there are counselors who instead of encouraging women, continue to demean and discourage them. That Linda Hernandez is Latina and lives in a predominantly white state only adds to the situation. For people who have more

> than likely never faced discrimination of this sort say “What's the problem?”, I respond with “You are the problem.” You’re the problem by being dismissive to the issue of women and Latinas. The outrage should also be at the lack of professionalism among counselors. To dismiss the issue by asking why is it always about race is ridiculous because in some cases it is ‘just about race’. Not all of course, but many. Again, to see it only as an issue of race belittles the many other factors at play here. Fin. (NPR Morning Edition, 2013)

Both the initial post, asking why the story had to make it a race issue, and the response received several likes. Predictably perhaps, the first post was liked by people who appear to be White, while the second post was liked by individuals who appear to be people of color. Papacharissi (2014) argues that while responses to controversial topics online tend to strengthen in-group bonds, such topics tend to polarize “in-group and out-group affiliation” (p. 310). Although this comment thread provides an avenue for Latinx individuals to construct a polyvocal counterpublic space, these experiences do not seem to cross the divide to disrupt hegemonic ideological beliefs from White responders.

**StoryCorps Facebook Page.** While the StoryCorps posts have fewer responses compared to the same story posted by *Morning Edition*, the comments tend to be more supportive. There is also a clear gendered difference between engagement with the StoryCorps post versus the *Morning Edition* post: all of the commenters to the StoryCorps post appear to be women, the majority of whom appear to be White. StoryCorps posted this segment twice: once on March 1, 2013 and again on March 14, 2016. The first post received 76 likes, six comments and 38 shares. The second post received 211 likes, 16 hearts, five crying faces, and two shocked faces (Facebook introduced a wider range of reactions to content starting February 24, 2016).

Two commenters on the 2016 post identify themselves as women of color. One poster, who is a self-identified Mexican American woman, starts her post with an affirming "Yes!" before continuing to discuss a similar experience she had with her school's guidance counselor in the 1970s (StoryCorps, 2016). Whereas the StoryCorps clip from the Hernandez sisters presents them as having succeeded despite the racism they faced, this commenter discusses how the pressures of working multiple jobs, in addition to the lack of support from teachers and administrators, was ultimately too much to bear. Another poster who identifies as South Asian and Muslim writes, "I am sorry for your experience" and discusses how her daughter is struggling with differential treatment and racism in her school (StoryCorps, 2016). While both of these posts acknowledge the Hernandez sisters' experiences and how they resonate/diverge from their own, like with the *Morning Edition* comments thread, some of the posters who appear to be White women affirm the experience of gendered discrimination while resisting the notion that race played a role. One poster, for example, who appears to be a White woman writes: "Kids of all nationalities and social backgrounds are told things like this. This isn't just about race" (StoryCorps, 2016).

In contrast to the *Morning Edition* post, however, a greater portion of commenters on the StoryCorps post who appear to be White women do acknowledge the intersectional discrimination the Hernandez sisters faced in higher education as Latinas. One commenter who appears to be a White woman writes: "I'm sorry that racism was and still is so pervasive against our fellow countryman. We must all take a look at our own behavior, have conversations about race in our homes, schools and neighborhoods. It is our responsibility" (StoryCorps, 2016). Such comments on the StoryCorps post, a space that stresses an ethos of listening, open the possibility

that, although these short, decontextualized segments largely fail to foster a space for confronting difference, the potential still exists when systemic injustice is centered.

**Kiyan Williams's Story: Competing Counterpublic Pockets in the Comments Fields**

In this section, I trace one StoryCorps segment that was archived as part of the StoryCorps OutLoud and Griot initiatives. In this story, Black performance artist Kiyan Williams describes the difficulty of finding acceptance from their family and society as someone who does not fit within the gender binary. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I found that StoryCorps segments featuring individuals who faced multiple forms of oppression attracted the most vitriolic responses online. These stories, however, also seemed to attract the most nuanced comments and the greatest active participation from marginalized communities. They drew the greatest number of responses with long reply chains and lengthy posts that either spiraled into corrosive and hateful arguments or engaged in productive reflecting and sharing.

Van Doorn (2011) argues that the "lived social relations" of our various identities online "are renegotiated within, and made possible by, hybrid assemblages of embodied users, cultural discourses and new media technologies" (p. 535). These assemblages generate online manifestations of embodied race, gender, sexuality, etc. "that qualitatively differ from actualizations in physical space" while simultaneously "retaining an intimate relationship to one another" (p. 535). Similar to the comments sections associated with the Hernandez sisters' story, the gendered and racialized affects that emerged in the comments fields associated with Williams' story illustrate the power of online spaces to connect geographically dispersed marginalized peoples. Their comments work to create a polyvocal counterpublic space. At the same time, however, the internet also enables competing counterpublic discourses which affirm hate and violently reject difference.

By making the personal public, these stories act as a magnet not just for other marginalized people who feel an affective resonance with the story being told, but also for trolls intent on playing off of the raw emotions present in these spaces. Trolling necessitates an emotional distance and affective alienation. As Phillips (2015) argues in her ethnography of online trolls, the activity relies on "a gaping affective gap—one perfectly calibrated to the attraction to and extraction of lulz" (p. 35). Phillips defines "lulz" as "a pushback against any and all forms of attachment" (p. 25). These trolls, who Phillips argues are largely White, male and have a degree of economic privilege, act in ways that make overt forms of prejudice widely circulated in coded ways within mainstream discourses. Rather than position trolls as outside of hegemonic norms, Phillips argues that "trolls' racist behaviors reflect and are reflected by mainstream prejudice" (p. 95). Several posts made by individuals who appear to be posting in earnest convey sentiments similar to those of the trolls, but in more coded and socially acceptable ways, often in the guise of rational objectivity.

***Narrative Analysis***

Although StoryCorps segments usually play on Fridays, this story was aired on a Sunday as part of the program *Weekend Edition*, which follows the same format as *Morning Edition*. The *Weekend Edition* headline for the segment, which aired on December 7, 2014, runs, "Growing Up Gender-Nonconforming, Amid Scolding, Awkward Silences" (Martin, 2014a). Somber minor tones emanate from a guitar as the piece opens. Host Rachel Martin, in a soft public radio inflection, states that this week's StoryCorps segment comes from the OutLoud initiative celebrating voices from the LGBTQ community. Martin states that Williams "felt isolated and different from other kids" (Martin, 2014a). We are then dropped into the middle of an energetic conversation between Williams and their friend Darnell Moore. Williams paints a vivid picture

of a moment with their mother when Mary J. Blige starts playing on the radio. Williams remembers singing along excitedly and unselfconsciously when suddenly their mother yells repeatedly, “fix your hand, fix your hand!” (Martin, 2014a). Their mother states that only “girls and sissies hold their hands like that” (Martin, 2014a). Throughout Williams’s animated narration, Moore interjects with knowing laughter as Williams brings forth both the pain and absurd humor of these memories of gender policing from their past. The clip ends with a more recent memory of attending Williams’s cousin’s wedding. Williams discusses how their cousin was marrying into wealth. Because most of Williams’s other family members “are not high-school-educated, are black, poor,” many were selectively excluded from the wedding (Martin, 2014). The cousin, who had not seen Williams in a number of years but who knew they were studying at Stanford, invited Williams to the wedding. Although Williams muses that the cousin probably thought “they were getting the suit-and-tie-wearing cousin who goes to Stanford,” Williams showed up as “the pink-lipstick-with-fur-coat-wearing cousin who goes to Stanford” (Martin, 2014a). Most of the wedding guests avoided Williams and their immediate family. As Williams is left alone with their mother, they discuss a sense of solidarity through exclusion. The piece ends with uplifting jazz playing as Moore exclaims how inspired he is by his friend who has “found some way to learn to live authentically” (Martin, 2014a).

This clip follows the StoryCorps format of overcoming hardship that eventually ends in a sense of uplifting closure. The success achieved in this clip, however, is notably different from the success achieved in other stories. The focus is not on Williams defying the odds and establishing a viable business or getting accepted into medical school. Although Williams is a student at Stanford, it is not the prestigious school that defines their accomplishments, but rather their journey to be able to “live authentically” (Martin, 2014a). This clip also inhabits a greater

degree of ambiguity than the other clips. Although at the wedding Williams feels solidarity with their immediate family through a sense of shared exclusion, whether their family has now accepted them is less clear. Rather than move from a traumatic moment (e.g., hurricane Katrina for the Cotlons, education discrimination for the Hernandez sisters) to hard work and eventual happiness, Williams's story includes a rich mixture of joy and sorrow throughout. At the beginning, even as they are remembering the painful gender policing from their family, there is still humor and joy mixed with these memories. At the end as they discuss feeling solidarity with their family, this bond is formed through shared exclusion.

***Wider Context of the Broadcast***

At the time Williams's story was broadcast in early December of 2014, massive demonstrations were taking place in cities across the United States protesting a grand jury decision not to indict Officer Daniel Pantaleo for the death of Eric Garner. This decision came a week after a grand jury in Ferguson, Missouri, decided not to indict Officer Darren Wilson in the death of Michael Brown. Several of the stories in the larger *Weekend Edition* program surrounding Williams's segment focus on reactions to the shooting of unarmed Black men by police officers. In the first story, entitled "In Troubled Times, Does the 'Black Church' Still Matter?," host Michel Martin, who is Black, speaks with Black religious leaders in Washington DC about the future of the Black church and the role it should play in advocating for racial justice. Commenting on the grand jury decisions, religious officials tell Martin that the church has not done enough in recent years to fight systems of power. Martin plays a clip from Reverend Raphael Warnock, who states, "If you are a church that's never in good trouble with the powers, then you're probably in bed with the powers" (Martin, 2014). He emphasizes that the

church has to do more to "dismantle the American prison industrial complex, which is the new Jim Crow" (Martin, 2014).

Later in the program, a segment entitled "Police in Other Communities Are Consumed by Ferguson" discusses the trust gap between police officers around the country and Black communities. While most stories in the program run 3–5 minutes, this story is over 11 minutes long. Host Rachel Martin, who is White, interviews a number of police officers including the chairman of the National Black Police Association and three other street-level officers. While the police officers, both Black and White, argue that excessive violence against Black communities is not a systemic problem in police departments, they acknowledge that a gap of trust does exist. When Martin presses one of the officers, Deputy Chief Malik Aziz (who is Black), about who bears the responsibility for this gap in trust, Aziz emphasizes that communities are just as responsible as police. Using the example of Eric Garner, Aziz argues that his death was avoidable had he behaved differently: "Mr. Garner could have said hey, I don't want any trouble with you guys and he could've turned around, put his hands behind his back" (Martin, 2014b). Martin questions Aziz about whether his answer places all the burden on Black communities "to make sure that their behavior isn't provoking police, that it's somehow their fault" (Martin, 2014). Aziz reiterates that it is the duty of the public to understand the "dos and don'ts" in their interactions with police (Martin, 2014b). The *Weekend Edition* program also features a story about the ousting of Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu, the sole Democratic senator in the deep South. Landrieu was replaced by Republican Bill Cassidy, a vocal supporter of Blue Lives Matter, a countermovement to Black Lives Matter.

Williams's story is framed within an affective ecosystem highlighting racial tension and unpenalized state violence against Black bodies. The social media comments on Williams's

story, the story of an individual who is not only Black, but also gender nonconforming, illustrates both the extreme violence directed at marginalized bodies online as well as the potential for counterpublic resistance to emerge and fight to control these spaces.

### *Tracing StoryCorps, NPR and Weekend Edition's Facebook Comments Sections*

I analyzed Williams's segment after NPR had already removed their comments sections, so I do not have access to the comments that were made on that platform. Additionally, the story was not only shared on the StoryCorps and *Weekend Edition* Facebook pages, but also on NPR's main Facebook page. The wider reach of the general NPR page undoubtedly accounts in part for the large number and diversity of the comments made on these posts. Several trends appear when analyzing the social media response to this segment. The StoryCorps social media posts for Williams's story include fewer comments than those on the NPR page, are dominated by posters who appear to be women, and are largely positive. Response to Williams's segment on the NPR post illustrates the potential dangers of broadcasting personal stories to a mass audience. The quantity and intensity of the hate of some of the post reply threads is extensive and points to boiling national tensions at the intersections of both race and gender. Like the response to the Hernandez segment on the *Morning Edition* social media post, however, although violent voices appear, there is also considerable pushback to these voices and much of this pushback comes from people whose profiles and comments indicate that they themselves are genderqueer and/or people of color. This post also shows the ability of a commenting community to minimize the impact of hateful posts through collective response strategies that push these posts to the bottom of the comments chain.

**NPR and Weekend Edition Facebook Pages.** Whereas the NPR posts of Williams's story garnered a great deal of responses, the *Weekend Edition* post was much less populated. The

story was posted once on the *Weekend Edition* Facebook page when it aired on December 7, 2014 and received 124 likes, one comment, and 15 shares. The story was posted twice on the NPR page: once at the time it aired and again on January 1, 2018. The 2014 post received 4,500 likes, 149 comments, and 505 shares. The 2018 post received 2,100 reactions: 316 loves, 202 sad faces, 1,588 likes as well as 281 comments and 228 shares. The comments sections on the NPR posts are longer with more reply threads than most other StoryCorps segments posted on the *Morning Edition* and *Weekend Edition* Facebook pages. Many comments themselves elicited a great number of reactions (likes, loves etc.).

There is only one comment on the *Weekend Edition* post. The poster, who appears to be a White man, writes "Ah, more sexual identity babble" before discussing the "real news" stories the poster thinks NPR should be covering instead (NPR's Weekend Edition, 2014). The NPR page's Facebook posts, however, generated considerably more interactivity. The default setting for viewing comments on Facebook is that posts are organized by "most relevant." This setting shows user comments or reactions from their Facebook friends first followed by posts that have received the most likes and replies. You can manually go into the comments section and switch the view to "Newest," which displays all comments in reverse chronological order. In the case of Williams's story, commenters on the 2018 post used the strategy of refraining from digitally reacting to trolls in order to push their comments farther down the thread when viewed in the default setting. As I scroll down, the first post is a long thread about trolls and how to deal with them. Some users threaten to abandon Facebook as a platform because of their lack of willingness to moderate trolls: "If #Facebook allows this to continue I predict I won't be the only one leaving the platform" (NPR, 2018). Some posters discuss strategies to deal with trolls, such as "Don't comment on the trolls comments" (NPR, 2018). Several note that as a post receives

more reactions, it moves higher up on the comment thread. They suggest only reacting to non-hateful posts. This strategy seems to have worked because the top posts are, for the most part, vitriol-free. Because the initial post voicing concern about trolls received a substantial reaction from other users (119 likes, one wow face, and one love), it is at the top of the discussion thread.

As I scroll down, many of the comments seem both supportive and add to the conversation. This comment thread in general is more diverse in terms of genders, ages, and ethnicities of posters than those of the StoryCorps threads I analyzed. Some posters discuss having experienced their own forms of discrimination and express being physically moved by Williams's story. One poster who identifies as a queer man of color describes having to police his own performance of masculinity in order to ensure his safety: "I remember having to be self-conscious of my actions, my pronunciations, (Didn't help that I have a speech impediment) and not letting on that I fancied certain types of entertainment" (NPR, 2018). Several posters share stories of non-binary friends and family members who struggled with discrimination. Some of these individuals state that hearing Williams's journey made them reflect on their own behavior toward their friends/family and to reach out to affirm their love and support. Several of these stories garnered a significant number of reactions, especially loves and likes. One poster who claims to be a man from Italy discusses watching his cousin go through abuse because his cousin did not conform to Italian masculinity ideals. Although he had never really told his cousin he accepted him, after hearing the segment, he writes that the piece "gave me a fresh perspective from someone else and I am going to tell him how proud of him I am for having the courage to JUST BE HIMSELF right now!" (NPR, 2018). One commenter who identifies herself as a Black woman in her post proclaims, "May we all arrive at the time when we love and accept each other just as we are, no fixing... Because we are unique and NOT broken" (NPR, 2018). Other

individuals who identify as queer people of color discuss feeling inspired from hearing this piece on the radio. Pham (2017) argues that marginalized and geographically dispersed communities draw on the potential enabled by the internet and new media technologies "to enact social change, build cross-racial coalition, and to engage with identities that are united yet diverse" (p. 155). Within the comment sections, counterpublic pockets emerge where posters interact with the story and with each other, providing a supportive community to discuss the intersections of racialized and gendered violence and imagine a different way of being. As one poster writes, although hegemonic norms can make gender nonconforming people of color feel isolated and abnormal, the digital space makes clear "We are never alone. We are everywhere. We just have to look" (NPR, 2014).

The more critical comments are lower down on the thread and seem to take two forms: people who take issue with the content for religious reasons and who discuss the need for traditional gender roles, and trolls whose extreme statements seem to be looking to provoke a reaction. The "gender roles" commenters usually do not seem intent on angering as much as inserting their ideological standpoint. One long thread starts with this comment from a man who appears to be White: "Gender roles are positive. They don't have to be rigid and they can be flexible but they absolutely should exist. Some men are a little bit less ultra-macho and that's okay, but they all should act like men" (NPR, 2018). The reply thread under this post includes 25 comments, many of them lengthy attempts to put forth a case either deconstructing or supporting traditional gender roles. Facebook allows users to see whether a post has been edited, and if so, the user can click on the edited button and view all variations of the post. The posts under this "gender roles" discussion seem to have been crafted with effort, as evidenced by the fact that for many of the longer posts, the author went back into the conversation and edited the post several

times, changing the wording slightly but noticeably. Although these posts largely do not devolve into ad hominem attacks, they also do not really engage the other side—they mostly just speak past each other. Many people also seem to confuse gender with sexuality.

As you scroll further down, the hate really bubbles to the surface. One commenter states, "Its like they are only running stories like this for the comment frenzy to follow" (NPR, 2018). Many commenters in the thread violently label Williams's behavior as aberrant and abhorrent. One poster writes: "No one likes a limp fish, npr! Jeez! Quit promoting freaks, for 2 seconds. This aint Barnum and Bailey" (NPR, 2018). I will not recount the trajectory of the conversation that takes place in this reply chain, but I will state that it devolves into extreme misogyny, racism, and vitriol. As mentioned previously, the organization running the Facebook page has the ability to moderate comments made on their posts. According to personal correspondence with NPR, their content moderation policy relies on other listeners to flag abusive comments. This passive approach to content moderation is likely a reason why the comments field on Williams's story remains littered with abusive responses. Although trolls are often positioned as deviant actors, Phillips (2015) maps the overlap between troll tactics and mainstream discourses. She argues that troll discourses "unearth the biases, hypocrisies, and deep inconsistencies that compose mainstream culture" (p. 136). Indeed, the racist/homophobic discourses in the comments section are not isolated to posters who appear to be trolls.

Many of the comments, although they do not engage in the hyperbolic offensive language and memes used by the trolls, echo the same sentiments in more coded forms. One high up on the list illustrates how discrimination against non-binary people intersects with racism. A poster who appears to be an older white woman states, "I cannot be bothered with how this person wants to be identified. (Live your life!) What disturbs me most is the use of poor grammar. I

almost fainted when I read, 'Me and my mother…'" (NPR, 2018). While this poster is not outright hostile to Williams's gender identity, they also display a lack of engagement (they "cannot be bothered") with the discrimination Williams faces because of their gender expression. The grammar policing also points to racialized assumptions made by the poster. The tone of this comment displays the poster's affective alienation rather than connection with this story. This comment garnered a long reply thread. Many commenters who appear to be White push back against the statement, arguing that in an informal conversation with a friend, people rarely follow grammar rules. Other commenters, who largely appear to be people of color, point out the racist undertones in the original comment. One responder posts: "'Proper grammar' has always been the racist and classist means of dismissing people who prove themselves outsiders by the way they communicate" (NPR, 2018). Several people who replied on this chain appear to be Black women who post expressions of aggravation with the initial poster such as "How pedantic can one be?? (NPR, 2018). One individual writes, "Not everyone speaks in Standard American English. Those of us that code switch will change our grammar usage or dialect depending on our audience" (NPR, 2018). The 19 comments that follow the grammar comment overwhelmingly push back against the initial poster.

Within this NPR comments thread, I found a variegated affective landscape. While some reply chains seem warm and productive and supportive, others resonate with anger and hate. Within the online space, the way in which information is fragmented and ripped from its situated context of production can create polarization and misunderstanding, rather than engagement, across diverse groups (Gray, 2015; Lundby, 2009; Makagon & Gould, 2016; Papacharissi, 2002). As Gray (2015) notes in his discussion of the viral video of Antoine Dodson, when media

rip voices and bodies out of their situated context, the result can be affective alienation rather than connection between dispersed individuals and communities.

**StoryCorps Facebook Page.** The Facebook post of Williams's story on the StoryCorps page has a different affective texture than that of the *Weekend Edition* and NPR Facebook posts. StoryCorps posted the segment twice: once the day after it aired on December 8, 2014 and again on June 4, 2016. The first post received 104 likes, two comments, and 12 shares. The second post received 95 likes, 14 loves, seven comments, and 22 shares. In the few comments that exist on these posts, the tone is warm and supportive, and all are posted by individuals who appear to be women. They engage, however, in a post-racial discourse that ignores power differentials with statements like "we're all just human beings" and "we are all more alike than different" (StoryCorps, 2016). At the same time, however, another commenter stresses, "We never know what pains others deal with, or their joys" (StoryCorps, 2016). This shows that although these posts can quickly slip into discourse that celebrates humanity without acknowledging the power differentials between groups, there is also some acknowledgment that we must be cautious of claiming to understand another's experience.

### *Competing Counterpublics and Hopes (or Lack thereof) for Solidarity and Change*

> Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference. (Wojnarowicz, 1991, p. 121)

The Facebook comments sections associated with Kiyan Williams's story illustrate both the potential and limitations of the internet as a space where geographically dispersed marginalized peoples can connect to create contingent and fluid counterpublic spaces. Like the above quote from David Wojnarowicz, Williams's story acted as a "public disclosure of a private reality" that allowed others who had experienced similar acts of violence to connect, share, and

resist within the space of the comment sections. Livingstone (2004) argues that while some theorists complain the term "public" is too loosely ascribed, too narrow a definition may reserve public activity to the arena of elites and overlook modes of resistance enacted by minoritized groups. The artificial division of "private" and "public" interests illustrates important power differentials in which certain groups are able to label topics as deserving of legitimate public concern and others as better relegated to the private realm. This tension over what is worthy of public discussion emerges again and again in the comments sections. When one poster who appears to be a White man bemoans the fact that NPR is covering silly human-interest stories instead of the news, another poster who self-identifies as a Black woman responds: "Just because it makes you uncomfortable doesn't mean it's a discussion not worth having. This is why racism, and homosexuality, gender norms, etc. are so hard to discuss because at the slightest bit of discomfort people want to shut down the conversation" (NPR, 2018). The original poster then responds:

> You are all soooo triggerable. Jesus. I was simply pointing out that the only reason for these stories being run by what were formerly news organizations is the fact that in a social media dominated climate requiring very little intellect for participation… these stories are only run because real news is uninteresting to most people. (NPR, 2018)

The poster then goes on several long diatribes about liberal media and "pointless pc liberal echochamber topics" (NPR, 2018). Several commenters push back, asserting the public significance of personal narratives that confront stereotypes. A couple of comments argue that the original poster should interrogate why he feels threatened by this one personal story embedded in a larger program of more "traditional" news stories. As with most of these online exchanges, posters do not seem to persuade one another to change their viewpoint. Theorists

often dismiss the public value of comments sections because the affectively charged forms of engagement generated in these spaces are thought to hinder rational dialogue and persuasion (Rai, 2016). As Rai (2016) argues, however, the aggregated public sentiments on display in comments fields have an impact, even if that impact does not necessarily reside in "persuasion of others through rational debate" (p. 192).

What might the public value of comments sections be, if not to facilitate dialogue and persuasion? Cvetkovich (2003) argues that by speaking and demonstrating openly about the trauma of the AIDS epidemic, activists blurred the boundaries "between mourning and militancy, between affect and activism" (p. 163). In so doing, these activists worked to create an "intimate public sphere," a space to build "collective cultural practices that can acknowledge and showcase" feelings of loss and thereby resist the shame and silence surrounding AIDS (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 163). Muñoz (1999) similarly argues that minoritarian performances of self have the potential for counterpublic world-building by resisting hegemonic discourses that "relegate queerness, and other minoritarian histories and philosophies of the self, to a forced exile in the private sphere" (p. 176). Discussing the work of artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres that is at once political and intimately personal, Muñoz stresses the significance of "a specifically queer life, made public" (p. 176). Williams's story acted as a magnet within the comments sections, where queer listeners of color and other marginalized peoples could connect and make public personal experiences that hegemonic discourses have long relegated to the private sphere.

Although digital spaces provide marginalized listeners with tools to connect and resist simplistic and/or hateful narratives, the internet also provides "many tools to make it horrible via bullying, trolling, and all and out discursive disregard of folks' identity positions" (Pham, 2017, p. 163). Warner (2002) argues that a counterpublic is defined by a sense of subordinate status

that transgresses received modes of decorum. He does not see counterpublics as inherently progressive. Within the competing counterpublics that emerge in the comments fields associated with Williams's story, a narrative that weaves together several layers of difference, the affective ecology is complicated and ambivalent, containing pockets of differential oppositional consciousness, to borrow Sandoval's (1991) term, as well as competing voices violently attempting to affirm hegemonic hierarchies of public value.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed how the digital age has changed the way listeners are engaging with and sharing audio stories. The meaning of broadcast audio morphs as these narratives move through various distribution channels to reach the ears of listeners. This meaning is in turn shaped by the positionality of each embodied listener and how they engage with the segment on and offline. In my analysis, I traced the affective ecology formed in the fluid interactions between StoryCorps-edited narratives, disseminating organizations, the placement of these stories within the wider *Morning Edition* radio programming, and listener responses to these stories on various Facebook comments fields. In mapping the charged ecologies through which StoryCorps segments move, I did not seek linear, causal relationships, but rather an understanding of how the meaning of these stories shapes and is shaped by the channels through which they are shared and the listeners who engage with them. My analysis of interactivity with these stories illustrates the potential for digital spaces to connect dispersed marginalized listeners and enable them to form ephemeral and fluid counterpublic discourses. These stories, however, also generate affective responses that have the potential to both elide difference and cultivate hate.

# Concluding Reflections

The urgent need to radically listen to those on the margins is clear, perhaps now more than ever. As I reflect on the Radical Listening digital storytelling project that has continued in various forms over the years since the initial collaboration with StoryCorps, I can't help but understand the project within the frame of this current moment. As I'm writing these words in the spring of 2020, people all over the world are sheltering in place attempting to protect their bodies and communities from COVID-19, the virus that is ravaging the world. Despite the initial rhetoric from politicians, celebrities and media pundits proclaiming the virus to be "the great equalizer," in reality Black and brown communities have been hardest hit. Like the destruction after hurricane Katrina, although dominant media narratives tend to frame natural disasters and pandemics as jointly shared tragedies, such framing ignores how these events exacerbate existing inequalities. As of April 2020, for example, Black individuals made up 81% of COVID-19 deaths in Milwaukee county, Wisconsin despite the fact that the county's population is only 26% Black (Johnson & Buford, 2020). This fall, I'll be starting my academic career as an Assistant Professor at a university near Milwaukee. The city is one of the most racially segregated metropolitan areas in the country, a fact that has become abundantly apparent in my current search for housing.

The pandemic has exposed the persisting racial inequities and systemic racial violence embedded in the fabric of this nation. People with the privilege of having been able to tune out such inequities in the past seem to finally be hearing the discord. The murder of George Floyd by a White police officer in the midst of this pandemic has propelled countless people across the country into the streets; they're risking their lives to force those in power to reckon with the disease of systemic racism that has been festering in the body of this nation since its birth.

The individuals risking their bodily health in the midst of a pandemic to assemble on the streets and demand change are bravely providing all those hearing their calls an invitation to radically listen. Radical listening is inherently destabilizing. It opens the self up to risk, but this risk provides the necessary basis for transformation. The current radical calls to action by protestors threaten those in positions of power who fear the instability and discomfort that comes with change. No matter how hard those with power and privilege try to isolate themselves from the injustices surrounding them, even (and perhaps especially) in this time of physical social distancing and increased screen time, the "receipts" of injustice and societal malaise continue to accumulate and will eventually breach their gilded gates.

The labor of systematically documenting and exposing injustices is known in Black online culture as the practice of "showing receipts," something Brock (2020) documents in Black Twitter as providing Black resistance that "situat[es] historical[ly] transgressive behavior… to be commented upon and 'read' as evidence in the moment" (p. 21). The multiple stories of racism and resistance recorded through the Radical Listening digital storytelling project and shared online created a polyvocal archive of "receipts" that draw from past experiences of injustice to imagine a better future in the present. As discussed throughout this dissertation, the storytellers who took part in the project willingly risked making public personal stories of racism and resistance. They spoke in the hopes that recording and disseminating these stories might pave the way for an anti-racist future.

The participant storytellers stressed the importance of recording their conversations and producing "receipts" to counter hegemonic post-racial discourses. Digital technologies offer people of color new pathways to collect and brandish our receipts, exposing experiences of systemic racism. At the same time, the vastness of the digital archive and the voices participating

in it have at times made it easy for those in power to refuse to engage. As the receipts pile up in the form of viral videos of violence against Black bodies, accountability cannot so easily be ignored. And yet, as this dissertation has illustrated, showing receipts as a form of resistance is both exhausting and can feel never-ending.

Thus, we need spaces of respite, spaces of community care, and spaces where we can speak our stories and be heard. In this dissertation, I have demonstrated one such space: digital storytelling shared between people of color. These conversations are often difficult, requiring radical listening and valuing of difference even among people of color. At the same time, they allow storytellers respite from the continual labor of having to produce receipts in hegemonic White spaces–to meticulously document acts of racism in order to be believed. My analysis has centered on participants' narratives of their experiences, their embodied hopes and frustrations, as they worked to share their stories with each other, and in the process produce receipts for wider audiences. Through analyzing listener reflections at listening parties as well as listener responses on social media, I have also looked at how these receipts are taken up by listening audiences. I have compared the affordances and limitations of the embodied process of listening to stories of racism/resistance in physical community with others as well as the virtual communities that form around these stories online. The intimate form of these narratives shared between people of color coupled with their online publication as part of a larger archive highlights the potential of the interweaving of these narratives to create a reservoir of "receipts" with the goal of undermining ingrained narratives of racial devaluation in our community.

Before the pandemic, those in positions of power and privilege had endless distractions to engage their attention and allow them to ignore the gaping inequalities in their communities. Although these distractions have not disappeared, locked in our houses, with conferences and

vacations cancelled, it becomes more difficult to ignore the accumulating receipts of racial injustice in this moment: from the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on Black and brown communities, to the continuing abuses of police and the criminal justice system against Black and brown bodies. Radical listening can help us begin the risky process of building a better future that doesn't reserve safety and comfort for the chosen few.

**Mourning our Collective Space: Reimagining our Community on the Screen**

After the Radical Listening project with StoryCorps, I have continued working with the CCDE and community partners on various anti-racist digital storytelling projects. This year, the CCDE and I are collaborating with the Northwest African American Museum (NAAM) for the Interrupting Privilege project, which is bringing together Black students and community members to discuss anti-Black racism and strategies for resistance. Last fall, we recorded conversations for the project with Black high school and college students. Currently, we are conducting virtual recording sessions with Black community members reflecting on the racial unrest in the nation and their fears and dreams for the future. As Interrupting Privilege has moved online, we've had to cultivate a new feeling of being together, to mourn and reimagine our collective space. Although it is difficult to construct trusting spaces for radical listening completely online, the current pandemic has forced us to probe the boundaries of what is possible.

In early December, in the times before we feared breathing the same air, I remember sitting in our small recording studio on campus with an undergraduate researcher and two passionate high school students who are long-time friends. The recording space seemed to vibrate with energy as they animatedly began comparing their experiences as young, Black women in Seattle. Although these conversations typically last 40-50 minutes, that day in the

studio over an hour and a half flew by. That was the last face-to-face conversation I helped record. Now that we've entered the age of social distancing, it's hard to imagine squeezing four people into a small, soundproof studio with its air-tight seal ever again. A few months after we recorded that last dialogue, we played an audio clip from the conversation at the Northwest African American Museum (NAAM). The room buzzed as Black students and community members first listened to the wisdom of these young women's words, and then lovingly engaged, challenged and affirmed their perspectives. That was the last time we shared the communal space of NAAM before our world shut down. Although many are now assembling in the streets to fight for racial justice, because of preexisting conditions that place me at a higher risk of catching the virus, I have made the difficult choice to stay home. I've attempted to find ways to work toward anti-racist change from my computer instead of on the streets.

I'm currently helping to record and edit conversations on Zoom between our Interrupting Privilege community members. As we've moved these intimate recordings online, in addition to the lack of body language, smell and touch that shape the contours of physical conversations, we've also had to deal with occasional glitches. We strive to maintain our connection while also groaning in frustration, "Are you still there? Or are you frozen?" When we are all sitting in the same room, leaning toward each other, we listen not only to what the speaker is saying, but also the position and movement of their body in relation to ours. The vibrant and chaotic energy of being in physical community with others simply does not translate to The Brady Bunch boxes on the screen.

But these are not ordinary times. Although our experiences of isolation, fear and grief are all different, they remind us of our continued need for community. On a recent Zoom recording session between two middle-aged Black community participants in the Interrupting Privilege

project, the barrier of the screen seemed to disappear as the two men discussed the life-shattering pain of watching George Floyd's murder. Another facilitator from the CCDE, a Black woman, was also virtually present during the recording. During this conversation, her hands were clasped in front of her mouth as her eyes filled with tears. Although the conversation was painful, it did not end in hopelessness, but rather in resilience and pride. At the end of the conversation, the two men expressed pride in each other, and in Seattle's Black community. Despite having to navigate this new technological terrain, despite having to move from a soundproof studio to a clothes-filled closet, I am grateful for the opportunity to continue to practice radical listening by engaging with these stories and being a part of this community. As I look at the array of faces alternatively yawning and laughing from the intimacy of their bedrooms, living rooms and makeshift workspaces across the city, I am comforted that my face is one of many facing the uncertainty of what lies ahead, separately but together, and still in community.

# Appendix 1

## Listening Party Reflection

How did you hear about the StoryCorps/ CCDE Listening Party? What motivated you to attend?

How would you summarize your experience listening to the recorded clips and following discussion?

Were there any clips that especially resonated with you? Why?

Were there any points in the night that were difficult or uncomfortable for you as a listener? Why?

What value do you find (if any) in sharing and listening to personal stories of racism/resistance within a community space?

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