CHAPTER 1.

GETTING CLOSER TO MASS INCARCERATION: PROXIMATE LISTENING AS COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

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This chapter is about an author's attempt to listen and understand from a community as an educator in a men's maximum-security prison, an environment fraught with shifting power dynamics. The author explores where she stands in her own narrative about incarceration and education and engages personal reflection to explore concepts of proximity and interrogate ways of listening. As a result, she questions how to ethically produce scholarship based on others' narratives, particularly those of people inside prisons. Acknowledging that personal hauntings or histories distort or haunt the stories we tell ourselves about others, the author theorizes proximate listening as a praxis of listening toward others from a stance of both nearness and radical uncertainty.

"We tell ourselves stories to live."

– Joan Didion, *The White Album*

2009. WHEN LISTENING CALLS

In 2009, I work for the state of New Mexico's Income Support Division of Health and Human Services, screening applications for public assistance. I conduct intake interviews during the day while taking classes toward state teaching certification at night. Income Support operates in crisis mode, expressed by lines of people in the waiting room each morning. Paper files spill off shelves, along hallways, onto floors. Intergenerational files for families occupy entire shelves. Others' narratives unsettle my own, and the distance from where I sit behind the counter to a client's location can feel uncomfortably narrow. A woman my age, educated and never married, lost her business and lives in

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her car; an unforeseen health condition sets us apart. I learn that people coming out of prison need more resources than are available, and the lack of support positions them by default for imminent failure. These narratives haunt me, live inside of me. Some trigger a deep-seated fear of financial insecurity, and others call me closer. To help.

The calling pulls my attention toward the state penitentiary, a couple of miles down Highway 14 from Income Support. Upon release from prison, men walk along the highway to our office to stand in line. Interviews expand into stories. No driver's license. No job. Criminal record. No money. The mother of his child reported him for back child pay. He asks me to read the application to him. I type in information while having an internal dialogue: "Let me understand, sir. You just got out of prison. You cannot get a driver's license until you complete your parole. You need a job, but you cannot drive there. If you do get a job with your criminal record, your wages will be garnished, and you cannot keep the money." In my head, I emphasize, "And, you do not read." My supervisor praises my case narratives for their detailed clarity. I listen to people's stories.

Obstacles for individuals coming out of incarceration unfolded toward me during these interviews, telling a story of injustices and brokenness long before a conviction. Poverty, racism, drug abuse, limited access to education, lack of role models, violence, retaliation—the list expands into a minefield of social inequities and missteps leading to incarceration. The tasks for those released from prison create more obstacles. Not knowing how to read suggests a broken relationship with formal education and further narrows the scope of possibility by limiting job searches. At Income Support, listening to the men who left prison and who did not read required me to leave the comfort of my own narrative around literacy and lean in to listen toward a broader and uncomfortable narrative about incarceration.

In this chapter, I explore a type of community listening that demands responsibility from the listener. Rhetoric frequently concerns speaking and being heard on one's own terms. We less frequently look to listening as critical agency toward speech. By exploring concepts of proximity while interrogating ways of listening, I identify *proximate listening* as an active means of listening toward members of our communities from a stance of both nearness and radical uncertainty. Proximity engages ways of listening beyond what we tell ourselves we hear. Leaning toward understanding but not assuming understanding allows listeners to remain open to new, plural, or unattainable meanings. I argue that leaning toward understanding, and listening proximately, actively precedes hearing-as-understanding and requires our willingness to acknowledge the other and embrace that which we cannot know.

My interest in proximity as a listening concept starts with Bryan Stevenson. Stevenson, attorney and award-winning author of *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice*

and Redemption, begins his story with an admission. When tasked as a legal intern to visit an incarcerated man on death row, Stevenson admits he "wasn't prepared to meet a condemned man" (3). Stevenson writes about "proximity to the condemned" and "getting closer to mass incarceration," arguing that we, as a country, have allowed "fear, anger, and distance to shape the way we treat the most vulnerable among us" (14). Stevenson's proximity to the condemned brought him physically and purposefully closer to mass incarceration. The 1983 meeting changed Stevenson's life. He went on to establish the Equal Justice Initiative legal practice and has devoted his career to criminal justice reform. Stevenson shares his grandmother's advice with us—*get closer to what is most important to understand it*.

Prisons, by design, distance incarcerated individuals from people outside of prison, keeping those inside recessed beyond sight and behind layers of surveillance. As Stevenson argues, one must get closer to mass incarceration to understand it. Here, I explore ways of being proximate while situating listening as an active stance of being in relation to others in carceral spaces. I engage proximate listening as an intentional leaning toward understanding. I borrow *listening being* from communication theorist Lisbeth Lipari, who describes listening as an "ethical act" prior to understanding ("Listening" 348-49). Lipari introduces listening being as the dwelling place that "begins not from a speaking, but from the emptiness of awareness itself," or a transcendental place of both being and becoming (348). Listening is the empty inner silence we offer and receive when making space, which Lipari describes as "inside us where we are not" (349).

When we make space to be fully present, relinquishing our need to conclude or lay claim to meaning, we allow for new possibilities. In "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love," Jim Corder suggests that when we release the convictions of our own narratives, we may "lose our plot, and our convictions as well" (19). Only then can others' speech approach. Until I listened toward the men who came from the prison to Income Support, whose stories speak of impossibility, I did not spend my days wondering whether incarcerated people receive education in prison or what role literacy may have in relation to their incarceration. Corder would say that my narrative "was wanting all along" (19). The wanting is a lack, a missing-ness.

Our personal narratives, while we may not be intending, can brush up against those of others—strangers whom we unconsciously relegate to the sidelines of our main stories. For example, the tangle of problems around incarceration and literacy was not central to my own story until I leaned closer to engage members of my community previously absent from my narrative. Corder suggests that when "contending" narratives bump up against ours and ask us to leave the history and comfort of one narrative to enter the present and discomfort of

another, we have options. We can turn away from contending narratives, pretending to ignore them, or we can learn to change (19).

My concern in this chapter is with the teacher-researcher-author practicing community listening. In introducing a 2018 special issue of *Community Literacy Journal* (*CLJ*), Jenn Fishman and Lauren Rosenberg define community listening as a feminist rhetorical practice and intervention (2). Fishman and Rosenberg embed community listening in community literacy work (2), wherein the listener is “in a position of generous openness” (3). By maintaining a stance of generous openness, listeners sustain attention to identity dynamics and challenge their and others’ biases (3). Community listening, “an active, layered, intentional practice,” requires us to suspend judgment and notice what we do not always see or hear outside of our community interactions (1). Ascribing an element of risk to community listening, Fishman and Rosenberg argue that practitioners must be willing to change to ethically respond (1). Contributors to their issue of *CLJ* practice community listening in spaces of storytelling and memory (García; Jackson with DeLaune), in writing’s embodied meaning (Hinshaw), in performative vulnerability and disclosure in public spaces (Stone; Lohr and Lindenman), and through precursory research for community literacy partnerships (Rowan and Cavallaro). Community listening assumes “none of us is ever outside of our communities,” enabling us to “become better able to know each other, to find new levels of meaning, to challenge assumptions and biases as well as preconceptions” (Fishman and Rosenberg 3).

Other theorized forms of listening, such as rhetorical listening and hauntological listening, also bridge expanses between privilege and marginalization, across cultural differences, and through portals of time. For example, rhetorical listening has the potential for social justice by helping us hear that which we cannot see, allowing us to “invent, interpret, and ultimately judge differently” (Ratcliffe 203). Hauntological listening summons the dead to “walk amongst us—indeed, in us, as the living (un)dead,” opening us to alternative or plural histories as narratives of possibility (Ballif 145-46). These examples of listening suggest the borders delineating *us* from *them* are permeable, fluid, kairotic, and generative.

Proximate listening also creates possibility but is intentionally practiced as radical unknowing and relational leaning toward the other. When attempting to frame listening in terms of reciprocal outcomes, we assume cross-boundary understanding of both our and others’ experiences. When we listen to others, we silently tell ourselves what we hear. What is heard occurs when I take your words into me, into my narrative, making them mine (Lipari “Rhetoric’s” 237). What I hear is thus my narrative. As a unique form of community listening, however, proximate listening precedes and anticipates the “I hear you” moment

that implies we understand. Proximate means both being near and a rhetorical leaning toward that offers an inner emptiness, a blank slate, if you will, not unlike Fishman and Rosenberg's "generous openness." If we embrace listening toward others, we suspend our need to assign hierarchical meaning about others in our narratives. Listening toward others without appropriating meaning has invoked me to change, to position myself to advocate, or to move closer to do more proximate listening.

At Income Support, I had to lean in, suspend my inherited way of seeing things, and offer spacious listening toward others, whose stories are not mine, thus allowing for new meaning. When Lipari suggests we "listen persons to speech" ("Rhetoric's" 228), she assigns central agency to listening. Listening actively provides the object of speaking by offering a dwelling place for speech to sound or resonate. Through listening to the formerly incarcerated men's stories, I leaned toward understanding and made room. I changed. I started by volunteering for Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe, teaching one evening a week. From there, I made more changes. In this chapter, I offer narratives of listening and proximity to incarceration by engaging identities across several communities. I write as a scholar of rhetoric while situating myself as a former state government employee, community volunteer, public school instructor, and full-time prison staff educator. Importantly, I write as someone who has not been incarcerated.

LISTENING THAT RELOCATES

After six months of working at Income Support while working toward my teaching licenses at night, I accept a position as a Special Education instructor at an elementary school. My morning commute along Highway 14 takes me past grazing buffalo and just beyond the entrance to the state penitentiary. I can now trace the walk from the prison to Income Support made by the men I interviewed. At the school, more contending narratives confront me. Students' parents struggle with their own literacy, impacting their children's reading development through limited modeling. Some students have incarcerated family members. I watch students cycle through excited anticipation and depressed withdrawal around prison visits. For three years, I witness meltdowns during enforced state testing. I wonder if some students will follow the paths of their parents. I have not forgotten about the men from the penitentiary who asked me to read for them, and again, I turn toward the prison. I am listening for an opening, a way to enter this story as an actor by mapping the connections. The understory about literacy—the men from the prison, the students at the school, the women I taught as a literacy volunteer—animates my own story with people in my community not seen or heard in prior versions. I write a letter to the New Mexico Corrections Department asking about teaching possibilities.

Proximity, for Stevenson, means positioning oneself closer in relation to, confronting fear and prejudice of, and advocating for. Listening to stories of the near impossibility of post-incarceration success and witnessing the intergenerational pipeline from school to prison invoked me. I had to make room for new choices in my narrative, which meant finding literacy support, volunteering in that effort, teaching in my community, and eventually asking to teach at the penitentiary. Proximate listening unhinges our narratives about ourselves and others, creating the generous openness Fishman and Rosenberg encourage, thus moving us closer. Each decision moves me closer to prison.

LISTENING TO ATTUNE

Dynamics of power shape our relationships, and our us-and-them locations create relational tension. Proximity both narrows and amplifies distance. Proximate listening requires being proximate to otherness and with alterity, a stance Lipari describes as attunement ("Rhetorics" 234). We attune ourselves to the speech and otherness of the other as a strategy for remaining present without assuming, which Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch suggest enables a "broader view" (72). Royster and Kirsch's *critical imagination* engages reflexive listening to make room for "the possibility of seeing something not previously noticed or considered" by suspending assumptions (72). *Strategic contemplation* requires a stance of openness in our outward observations and in our inward meditations on how lived experience—embodied in ourselves, our research subjects, and surrounding contexts—shapes perspectives of both researcher and research subject (22). For example, Wendy Hinshaw describes listening to "tune to the material conditions of speaking and writing" in a prison writing exchange program ("Writing to Listen" 57). Undergraduate students exchange writing with incarcerated writers, exploring issues around incarceration and social justice. Participants then record themselves reading their own writing in their respective places of writing, juxtaposing privileged quiet with prison cacophony. Listening to participants reading in situ humanizes readers while emphasizing differences across privilege and oppression. Participants noticed previously unnoticed identifications and the power differentials that shaped them (59). Accordant with Lipari's listening to attune without assuming, Hinshaw's listening to recorded sounds of place actively situates listening in relation to difference yet closer in proximity.

As tools of inquiry, Lipari's attunement and Royster and Kirsch's critical imagination and strategic contemplation require us to put assumptions aside to listen responsibly to what may be possible. To listen *for*. Working closely with students who had incarcerated family members revealed prior absences within my narrative about incarceration and about my school's community. I had to continually

learn not to assume. Once we claim to hear, the history that haunts our narratives threatens possibilities by shaping meaning. Our responsibility, then, is to acknowledge our role as agents in mapping our findings—what we tell ourselves we see/hear and how we enfold others' narratives into our own stories.

Romeo García asks scholars to first address their hauntings—the histories they inherit and the narratives they tell ("Haunt(ed/ing)" 239). We "bend and obey without question" as subjects of our hauntings (233). García cautions against peddling knowledge *of* the other as an act of responsibility *for* the other (234), another reminder that with listening comes responsibility. For example, García questions how white scholars, who can never sidestep privilege, practice community listening. They mine others' stories—"the kind of stories white academic 'scholars' tell themselves"—to take home and claim common ground within or "to traffic in the normative masquerading as gifts of responsibility" (240). I interpret García's claim as a one-way operation, in which well-meaning scholars take and carry what they hear, but their efforts do not necessarily reciprocate in kind. I understand this not as an accusation but as an invitation for scholars doing community literacy work to listen responsibly to respond ethically.

As listeners, we are responsible for the stories we tell. Can we assign meaning to others' experiences through our own narratives without making assumptions? When I suggest that identifying reciprocal outcomes assumes we understand others' experiences, I am questioning whether this is ethical or possible when listening in carceral spaces. Academic scholars doing community literacy work in prisons inevitably return to spaces of privilege with prison narratives in their own scholarship or through writings of incarcerated individuals. Curated prison narratives provide platforms for incarcerated voices and may help raise public awareness of prison while still functioning as scholarly currency. Incarcerated writers, whose narratives we escort out of prison and into scholarly spaces, remain behind. The tightrope between advocacy and "discursive imperialism" (Alcoff 17) becomes a "conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them'" (Minh-ha qtd. in Alcoff 6). We privilege ourselves, argues Linda Alcoff, when claiming expertise of others' situations or championing just causes and receiving praise (29). In attempting to understand, we often place meaning onto others' words and actions, translating listening into hearing. Proximate listening occurs before we translate. We offer space of unknowing and do not fill it with meaning.

2012. LISTENING AT THE SOUTH

In 2012, I accept a position teaching adult education at the Penitentiary of New Mexico (PNM). Every morning, I turn into the prison complex off Highway 14, stop at the checkpoint, and show my badge. The gate patrol officer pokes his head far

enough into the driver's side window to scan the backseat. "Hi there, young lady. Pop the trunk, please." He is young enough to be my son, yet he assumes the role of adult to mine as suspicious child. He slams the trunk hard. After a month, the taillight wire dislodges. I put a sign inside the trunk: "Please close the trunk gently. Thank you!" He slams it harder and motions me to drive on.

Open stretches of desert dirt delineate PNM. Everywhere I look, prairie dogs pop up from their mounds. Some consider prairie dogs well-deserved targets along their commute. At the end of the day, I weave my car through carcasses strewn along the two-mile drive exiting the prison complex. Coyotes, snakes, rabbits, hawks, and eagles also vie for dominance in the open landscape that separates the three facilities within the complex. The wildlife must negotiate territory and power like everyone else.

I am a foreigner in unfamiliar terrain. After completing forty hours of training, I have a three-inch stack of printed New Mexico Corrections Department policies, a gate key tag, and a radio. I am assigned to the maximum-security men's facility, or the "South." I do not know the paramilitary culture, the harsh physicality of the housing units, the deafening noise, the strong odors. Each feels like an assault. I take mental notes of the processes, the very exacting procedural way of moving through a maximum-security facility and in the dirty metal place of prison.

Proximate listening demands that we move closer, practice active silence, and listen with generous spaciousness.

I unlock and lock four consecutive outside gates on my walk toward the housing units. I announce into the intercom, "Education! Benson! K-pod!" K-pod is in Housing Unit Two. I hear only the piercing snap! of the entrance door electronically disengaging. The hallway door to K-pod roars open and immediately reverses direction, closing faster than I can write my name and time on the sign-in sheet. I lurch to get inside. "Woman in pod!" I call out. The housing roster on the wall tells me my student is upstairs on the far end. The echo chamber amplifies men's catcalling as I pass by cell doors. Facing a cell straight on affords me a view of an entire cell including the metal toilet immediately inside the door. I stand to the side and extend my arm to knock. "Education. Ms. Benson." A face appears at one side of the narrow window. I negotiate forms while carrying a bag over one shoulder and a clipboard in my other hand. I follow this routine for each new student on my roster. I learn subtle acknowledgments of respect. Never walk straight up to a cell door window. Slide papers through the air slot on the side of the door instead of on the dirty floor. Stand close to the air slot to hear or be heard. Stand back to see and be seen. Turn around and twist to one side to show your clipboard, making the yellow legal pad your whiteboard. This is my dance at the cell door.

An origami envelope on the end of a thread shoots past my foot toward another cell, where it can be reeled in. I step on the thread lightly, not wanting to break the "fishing line." I am supposed to report fishing, often used for inconspicuous exchanges of information or even weapons. I have eye contact with my student but say nothing.

I only acknowledge the envelope in a way that means stop. Respect me, and I will respect you.

Before our hauntings inform our arguments, proximate listening asks us to take a leap of faith toward understanding by *not* understanding. We loosen the discursive lens that haunts our search for meaning and allow radical uncertainty. Envelopes also carry instant coffee.

Soon, the fishing stops when I enter a pod. The catcalling stops when I pass cell doors. The shouting stops while I work with my student.

In some narratives, I am being tested; in others, respected. The cell door stands between me and my student. I leave at the end of the day. Words and behavior, according to my world, my narrative, hold different meanings in others' spaces. Proximate listening creates room to transcend us-them assumptions. Is my student also listening proximately? I only know that within a larger system of power, where most relationships express complicated hierarchical dynamics, we carve out space to be in relation to one another. I navigate the shared spaces and find my way into my work.

LISTENING AT THE CELL DOOR

Much of my teaching takes place when "pod walking," or entering housing unit pods and working with individual students at their cell doors. Our ongoing conversations occur in dynamic spaces between math problems, shared spaces in writing and feedback, or transitory spaces between exercise cages in the yard. A student asks if I read *Prison Legal News* (PLN), which he and others rely on for drafting legal documents (e.g., habeas corpus appeals). I subscribe and learn about some of the many legal issues incarcerated people face. Paul Wright, while serving time in Washington State, started PLN to provide incarcerated individuals information and resources related to prison labor, medical and mental health care in prison, juvenile justice, prison censorship, and more. Another student asks if I know about the hunger strikes at Pelican Bay and throughout California prisons. In 2013, 30,000 people incarcerated across California simultaneously stopped eating (Rideau A25). Like PLN, the hunger strikes respond to injustices and conditions in prisons.

My interest in understanding issues around incarceration leads me to journalism by people with direct experience such as Wilbert Rideau, former editor of the Louisiana prison newspaper, *The Angolite*, or John J. Lennon, a prison journalist incarcerated in New York. I seek out prison narratives in literature, memoirs, and blogs and listen for an opening. My search is pointed. I work with a volatile population entrenched in a social hierarchy of violence. I want to know how the writers risked walking away from prison's criminal ethic to work toward college degrees or

how they managed to get out and stay out of prison and why they write. Where, in the complex web of problems, can intervention best occur?

One of my students asks, "Ms. Benson, when you were a kid, you'd go to the kitchen on Saturday mornings and have breakfast with your family, right?" We're doing math at his cell door.

"Sometimes," I tell him. I don't tell him about my parents' constant yelling and fighting during meals and the subsequent eating problems I had.

"As a kid," he explains, "I'd go to the kitchen, and the table has scales and bags of dope on it. I'm told to run bags and bring back the money. I don't know any better. I'm eight."

I try to see his kitchen table through his child eyes, but I know I cannot. I think about students I had taught at the elementary school, who had ties to incarceration, wondering how many others elude me.

Same signs, add and keep,
Different signs, subtract.
Take the sign of the higher number, then you'll be exact!

I teach my student a song to remember rules for adding and subtracting negative numbers. He is the first student on my roster to earn a GED.

"I kept singing that song," he laughs.

I imagine him hunched over a tiny prison desk reading Kierkegaard. This is my narrative bumping up against his, threatening to get in my way of being an effective teacher. I erroneously attempt to save through education. My idealizing higher education feeds my story about this student with my own hauntings about education. In my imaginary story's trajectory, he will stay under the disciplinary radar, work toward college courses, and embrace philosophy. Unlike mandatory adult basic education, college in prison is a privilege that requires good behavior. My own narrative has historically but falsely aligned higher education with promises of success. To embrace my student's narrative, Corder argues I must first lose my own plot. I cannot know what is at stake for my student or what risk participatory education, and its required clear conduct, might pose for him, and I cannot write his story. The more layers of assumed meaning we peel away, the closer we stand in relation to one another.

As much as I want students to develop skills to succeed and self-advocate, I cannot assume to know their choices and limitations. Lack of formal education is one of many obstacles incarcerated individuals face inside and outside of prison. I question the lack of quality post-secondary education available at PNM. When individuals choose to enroll in prison college classes, behavior dynamics in housing units can change and even produce a ripple effect, potentially interrupting patterns in families or communities beyond the prison. Students ask why there is no "real" college program at PNM in lieu of the limited correspondence courses

offered. "It would give us something to do, keep us out of trouble," one tells me. Access to higher education in prison does not promise future employment outside of prison. Higher education and incarceration intersect with countless social inequities related to race, economics, class—a *wicked problem*, for which finding any one solution is nearly impossible.[1] Solving one problem requires solving many. I listen for openings to find a foothold for understanding.

LISTENING IN LIMINAL SPACES

Mr. C has a habit of showing up to his window without a shirt. He is covered in ink from the top of his shaved scalp, over his face in barbed-wire eyebrows, around his neck, on his chest and back, and down his arms. I ask him to put a shirt on.

"This is my house," he tells me.

"Yes, but this is our classroom," I say.

"Ms. Benson, if you can show me in policy where it says I have to wear a shirt to do education, I'll put a shirt on."

"Mr. C, I don't know if there is a policy that states that. I'm asking you to put a shirt on out of respect for me. You have stories written all over your body that distract me. This is school. I come to teach you math and writing." After that, Mr. C wears his shirt.

Asking Mr. C to wear a shirt because his tattoos distract me responds to his need for respect with my own need for respect. His tattoos tell a history of gang affiliation through symbolism and monikers. We both know the rule: I cannot inquire about his gang commitment, and he is not supposed to glorify it. Knowing specifics about students' involvement with security threat groups implies "undue familiarity," which can cost me my job. Like stepping on a fishing line gently but saying nothing, we negotiate our mutual need for respect and exchange a moment of respectfully not knowing.

After Mr. C and I are done with our "class" at his cell door, I face the pod exit with twelve sets of eyes behind me and in clear view of the cameras and observation deck. I wait. Pushing the button or calling the officer upstairs prolongs the wait. I do not give in. My waiting is one of many spaces of resistance. Never ring the buzzer to get out of a closed space—hallway, stairwell, pod, housing unit—unless you want to wait longer. Like the respect I attempt to show my students, there is an unspoken rule about respect toward officers and other brass. Know the rank. Respect is currency. There are no doorknobs. You depend on others to allow you access, to open and close doors, and to keep you safe.

1 See Rittel and Webber's "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning;" unlike scientific problems with identifiable solutions, planners deal with societal problems, which are interconnected to broader social systems, making them unsolvable "wicked" problems (159–60).

Socialized hierarchies of power map dynamic borders in prison spaces. While working together, my student and I approach from different sides of the cell door to create a shared space of respect. We collaborate to preserve our working dynamic, which is in constant flux under surveillance. When we finish, and I move down the stairs to exit, the dynamic changes. Once I leave, that same physical location becomes yet another space of power.

The exit door rolls open. "Thank you!" I call out.

Like Stevenson's call to get closer to understand, Corder also argues for movement toward understanding: "[W]e have *to see* each other, *to know* each other, *to be present to* each other, *to embrace* each other" (23). My repeated visits with students over time help me see and hear what I cannot see and hear. Lipari describes listening being as a "utopian vision of listening" we aspire toward, which transcends the scope of language ("Listening" 348). Acknowledging that we cannot know surpasses suspending judgment. Stevenson writes that working closely with individuals caught in a criminal justice system riddled with injustices, suffering, death, and cruel punishment shows him that brokenness is "the source of our common humanity" in our mutual search for comfort and meaning (289). When owning "our weaknesses, our deficits, our biases, our fears," we seek mercy and are thus more compelled to offer it (290). Proximate listening is an invitation and a generous offering, which begins with trust and time spent being near.

Listening co-constructs a practice in understanding who and what we stand in relation to in a holistic narrative. By listening others to speech, Lipari claims we avoid "assimilat[ing] them into what we already know (or think we know) about their point of view" (*Listening* 203). Drawing from Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of relationality, our just relation to others, Lipari intertwines ethics and dialogue or "dialogic ethics" ("Rhetoric's" 228). Listening is no longer a strategy of reception, nor one of epistemological production of what we tell ourselves we hear. Listening and speaking interconnect, each existing in relation to the other (241). The co-constitutive relationship recasts speaker-listener binaries as inseparable parts of a whole. Proximate listening extends this relational dynamic through a relocation toward the other in a communicative collaboration. We move closer.

LISTENING ACROSS THE FLOOD

"This isn't a good time, Ms. Benson. Can you come another time?" Mr. F's voice comes from the back of his cell. They had moved him to the super max. I don't ask why. "Can I drop off some things for you to read?" I wait, standing to the side of his window. I have worked with Mr. F for a year in the college-readiness "bridge program." He enthusiastically participates in education, has a GED, and tells me he wants to take college correspondence courses. I hear sloshing, and he appears. "I had

to do it," he says. He has intentionally flooded his cell. When they find out, they will eliminate his eligibility for participatory education, which requires a year of clear conduct. We face one another in silence. I see his tears.

Our exchange still haunts me, reminding me of what I cannot know and, therefore, cannot judge. Facing my student, my disappointment was clear. Again, my narrative interferes. I assumed Mr. F irresponsibly lost another chance at the very thing that could offer him more choices. He took the lower road. That is the explanation I told myself that made sense in my narrative about my student and about education. Yet, I cannot know. If I could retract this moment, I would relive it differently. Lipari argues that misunderstanding, both inescapable and valuable, is an ethical practice. Despite the agency language affords us, some aspects of our existence as humans are "ineffable," and our ethical response is "to listen more closely to others, to inquire more deeply into their differences, and to question our own already well-formed understandings of the world" (*Listening* 8). Proximate listening humbles us, demanding we actively practice generous spaciousness toward others, not despite misunderstanding but because of it.

Rather than assume my student's motivations and react as I did, standing at my student's cell door and not knowing offers space for possibility. I cannot know whether my student flooded his cell in solidarity or in fear, whether his transfer to the super max was protective or punitive, if my standing in front of his cell was ruining some plan, or what his tears meant. I can only lean toward understanding, unyoked from conclusions. If given another chance, this is the mercy I could offer and what I would hope for myself. Corder argues that we are all "fictionmakers/historians," authoring ourselves into our own narratives, seeing "only what our eyes will let us see at a given moment" (16). He motions us to relinquish what we imagine of others and "pursue the reality of things only partially knowable" (28). As García suggests, "not all knowledge can be archived" ("Creating" 9) but embracing others' truths creates a rhetorical movement toward. If I speculate about my student, I reappropriate his actions into my story, which is a story about me. Hosting the other by making space "where we are not" (Lipari "Listening" 350), we let go of our ideas about the other and about who we are to stay present (351). If listening and speaking become inseparable features of a whole, listening becomes a communicative practice to stand in relation to the other in a holistic narrative rather than as separate from the other.

LISTENING TO THAT WHICH I CANNOT HEAR

While navigating prison spaces and my duties, I listen to the world outside of myself and to my inner world. The world outside requires me to work under policy mandates, in harsh conditions, and within a hierarchy of power among participants. This

world operates through surveillance and documentation. The inner world requires my constant alertness to listen through senses and intuition to stay present in a place of shifting dynamics that has high stakes, sometimes of life or death. This world exists in liminal spaces of nascent and evanescent moments constantly under revision.

I carry trauma from my years at the prison. Memory replays fleeting exchanges, yet ascribing words to them dilutes the experience. A student tells me how he ended someone's life. His admittance bursts forth unsolicited. He is up for parole in two years, and he asks me how he could ever live a "normal" life, describing prison as "one hundred percent violent." What surprises me in this moment is that, rather than feel sorry for him or disappointed as I did with Mr. F, I feel only love. The "inner emptiness" Lipari ascribes to listening being (355) best characterizes how my student's words pass through me without fastening onto hooks of judgment. I continue to carry this spacious love, reminding me of its possibility.

We practice proximate listening to actively listen and follow the threads, the snippets that lead us into spaces where people comingle, invite, confide, and share. Like Lipari's listening being, Stevenson's proximity claims, "you see things you can't otherwise see; you hear things you can't otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us" (290). We follow and listen where people create space rather than resistance. This same generosity we offer in return. Soften the borders and listen without attempting to fill the space with certain meaning. We lean toward others responsibly, as they may choose to lean toward us as a result, and that asks something of us. When I embrace my student's admission, I do not understand him as an isolated act. I recognize a complex individual grappling with being human—like me.

COMMUNITY LISTENING IN PRISON

So that others can gain a better understanding of incarceration, outside academics doing community literacy work in prisons share writing by incarcerated individuals (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2). Wendy Hinshaw's *Exchange for Change* prison writing program and Tobi Jacobi's *SpeakOut!* writing workshops in jails bring outside and inside writers together. Hinshaw and Jacobi point to prison writing's power to leverage public understanding, arguing that "writing by and with people in prison—has always been a primary agent in changing public perceptions and inspiring writing and movements for change on the outside on behalf of prisoners" (2). This type of listening through community writing aims to bring us closer to one another's stories.

While community-engaged prison writing strives to raise public awareness about prison, outsiders commingling with insiders to share writing acts involves risk, including increased surveillance. Incarcerated writers may be asked to

participate or write in ways that make them vulnerable in other prison spaces, where they cannot share their reflections or commingle. Manifestations of prison, such as writing, artifacts, or reports, are shaped by layers of surveillance in terms of what is produced and why and for whom it is produced. García rightfully argues that scholars seeking to understand through community listening in prison are listening to those who cannot be seen or speak on their own terms ("Haunt(ed/ing)" 234). This is a partial listening. When we listen in prison spaces, what we hear may be highly curated and is informed by our limited access both materially and in our understanding as outside scholars.

Under surveillance by peers and academic institutions, however, scholars are expected to report their research findings. This is the dilemma. How we present our findings raises questions, particularly in how we measure success or reciprocal outcomes of our work. We must "interrogate the bearing of our location" on what we claim (Alcoff 25) and carefully consider whose experiences we report back. García asks if we can listen without attempting to extract knowledge-as-responsibility and "find solace" in accepting that we cannot necessarily conclude understanding ("Creating" 9). Can we ethically understand the impact of our work on anyone but ourselves? Even that becomes a curated story, and when we curate others' words and actions, we move dangerously close to authoring *our* stories about *them*. We carry something of the other back to our spaces to make it seen, but we carry only parts of a moving whole, some of which is beyond our reach.

We can investigate different ways of reporting. For example, do we ethically leverage public understanding of prison or garner support for prison reform by choosing narratives of only the incarcerated? Prisons host a network of individuals, all of whom shape narratives of incarceration. Community-engaged scholarship about prison, however, rarely includes narratives of individuals who spend countless hours inside prisons—prison staff educators, corrections officers, administrators—all members of prison communities who too easily fall into categories of them. Their absence from scholarship about prison, or generalized assumptions about these individuals, compromises prison narratives.

Community listening as proximate listening with more inclusive representation of prison communities opens up a broader site for inquiry. Many prison staff come from the same communities as their wards. Trauma in prison impacts individuals on both sides of the cell door in close proximity to one another.[2] Changing entrenched cycles of oppression begins with healing, which begins with healing ourselves. Stevenson claims that our own brokenness feeds our capacity for compassion (289). As Lipari argues, by setting our assumptions aside,

2 For example, Kelsey Kauffman (*Prison Officers and Their World*) and Ted Conover (*New Jack: Guarding Sing Sing*) describe trauma experienced by corrections officers.

providing space where we are not, we stay present and open to new meaning. When we foreground listening rather than speaking as a central concept of our rhetorical inquiry, listening toward understanding actively invokes the other. When we listen toward one another, we create community. We become.

THE HEARD

Community listening seeks to center community voices. By engaging a broader prison community, we can expand on the ways we listen persons to speech. Rather than focus on our in/ability to speak for, why not question how we listen in relation to? García states that "[s]ome things are beyond the reaches of interpretation and certainty" ("Creating" 13) and asks us to create new stories and reminds us that the future is indebted to "people still denied presence and sound in the present" (10). Academic scholars practicing community listening in prison can lean toward understanding others' narratives of incarceration and share them without reappropriating them. Our leaning toward the other is ongoing, situating our own identities as works in progress. Thus, we overwrite old stories we carry in our narratives with new ones, and those stories are about us. The new possibilities are in our own thinking.

Proximate listening asks us to dwell near enough, long enough, silent enough to notice our relational differences, acknowledge our misunderstandings, and empty ourselves to make room for new ways of understanding. Proximate listening changes us. In this chapter, I have offered a pedagogy of critical listening that continues to reshape my stories and my mis/understanding. Rather than bridge, proximate listening respectfully acknowledges expanses between privilege and marginalization, across cultural differences, and through portals of time. By learning to recognize the expanses, we address our hauntings (García), hear that which we cannot see (Ratcliffe), find new levels of meaning and challenge our assumptions (Fishman and Rosenberg), and open ourselves to plural histories as narratives of possibility (Ballif).

Rather than listening to understand as a practice toward solving presumed problems, we might consider listening to interrogate the process of seeking to understand. We can move closer and lean in to listen without presuming solutions. Proximate listening, valuable for its own sake, engages unknowing spaciousness, uncertainty, and possibility for change and begins from a place of love. As a scholar, I still search for ways to communicate that.

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