CHAPTER 4.

THE PUBLIC ART OF LISTENING: RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE PAINTED DESERT PROJECT

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Public art thrives when it reflects the community in which it is situated and engages its audience in meaningful dialogue. Public art serves as advocacy and community writing, translating community needs and struggles into visual mediums. The process of community listening, integral to public art, fosters relational accountability, building solidarity, and provoking action. Chip Thomas, also known as Jetsonorama, exemplifies relational accountability through his public art on the Navajo Nation. His work, characterized by large-scale photographs, captures everyday life and cultural elements of the community, fostering a dialogue between artist and audience. Thomas's process, described as an "evolving dialogue," emphasizes community listening and relationality, echoing Indigenous research paradigms articulated by Shawn Wilson. Thomas navigates cultural sensitivities by celebrating aspects of Diné culture recognized as beautiful by the community. Thomas's murals highlighted in this chapter address various themes, including sacred site protection, the legacy of resource extraction, and health solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic, amplifying community voices, connections, and concerns. His work invites viewers to engage in reflective dialogue, fostering deeper connections within and among communities. Community listening, as demonstrated by Thomas's art, encourages audiences to listen further and differently, triggering reflective processes within individuals and communities. This ongoing dialogue, rooted in relational accountability, challenges systemic structures and amplifies marginalized voices. Through public art and community writing, communities assert their identities, needs, and struggles, shaping public discourse and fostering collective action against the ongoing effects of colonialism.

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Public art thrives when a community can see themselves reflected in the work and the art itself assembles a listening audience. Independent newspapers, chapbooks, newsletters, broadsides, zines, and more remain crucial for their interventions into public discourse, their articulations of identity and sense of place, and their capacity to provoke public debate and challenge institutional dominance over the public sphere through radical and democratic action. Public art has also been established as a meaningful form of advocacy, a valid mode of community writing. It catalyzes a particular kind of community listening that is expressed uniquely through the mediums of art that reflect community, its values, goals, lived experiences, histories, and identities; it has the power to translate the community's needs and struggles as well as its joys. These characteristics, expressions, and orientations are made visible in public art that is engaged in community listening and, in turn, produces a viewer that becomes a listening audience. Whether the viewer engages or ignores the work's provocations, they nonetheless persist, perhaps long after they return home.

Public artists establish structures of accountability, where both positive and critical feedback is not only welcomed but necessary to cultivate public trust. Community listening as a practice/process is fundamental to how I understand the formation of accountability and relationality, and it is central to cultivating what Shawn Wilson calls "relational accountability," a means of building solidarity and provoking action that focuses on the process of *how* (99). When I think of relational accountability in public art, I'm recognizing how listening is communicated visually and what that reveals about the artist's process of representation and their relationships with the community. When public art appears in shared community spaces, when peoples or their cultures, practices, and histories are depicted/reflected in the work, it is the community that ultimately decides whether the work will continue to stand. This measure of community listening, foregrounded by accountability and relationality, is not something that can be achieved overnight. However, community listening practices and processes can also be meaningful in a particular moment. For example, recall "the people's mic," or the "community microphone," as it was also referred to, which became the signature form of amplification during the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011. The practice refers to a large group of people gathered around a speaker with no microphone. Each line shouted by the speaker is promptly repeated by the group, thus amplifying the message of the speaker to those in the back. As each listener moves back and forth between roles as listener and speaker, their relationship to each other extends from their shared participation and solidarity with the message.

Whether confrontational or invitational, varying degrees of critical self-reflection is an important effect of public art. Focusing on community listening

scholarship on community writing and public art has helped me find ways to recognize, contextualize, and process the ways we are implicated by our research and by those we interview, how we are situated in the topic, and it allows us to articulate difference in terms of consequence: what is at stake for those we engage with might be vastly different from what is at stake for us or to our readers. Public art, especially that which is unconventional and unexpected, may similarly provoke this kind of reflection. While scholarly work on visual rhetoric has long maintained that the production and rhetorical effect of images can certainly do the same persuasive work that written texts do (Foss et al.; Hill and Helmers), I also understand what visual texts like public art can do to produce forms of community listening that activate and engage the public in ways that are dynamic and meaningful. I understand this claim as synesthetic in nature, as community listening works across senses synergistically, producing new forms of engagement as it participates in complex sense-making processes that are folded into the work.

THE VIEW FROM THE ROAD

Around 2009, I noticed Chip Thomas's murals when driving up 89, the road that goes north from Flagstaff, Arizona, through the Navajo Nation. One, then a few months later, another installation would pop up somewhere else, breathing new life into a structure I had hardly noticed before. In the years that followed, they were everywhere: large-scale photographs, most of them black and white with splashes of accent color. I saw images of a woman herding sheep, a close-up of a man's face laughing, a toddler with eyes inquisitive and mischievous, children laughing hysterically, grazing sheep, a child's eyes gazing upward toward a big piece of raw coal, a woman on a swing smiling with her head upside down, a close up of hands, a man standing proudly next to stalks of corn (and lots more sheep!). Sometimes the work featured text, sometimes written on subject's faces and other times below, off to the side, or overlayed. At the time, I recognized how this text often worked in tandem with the image to convey meaning that would not otherwise be possible through either the image or the text alone (see Figure 4.1). Because of the contrast between the landscape, quiet and still, and the vibrancy of the images, I found myself compelled to pull over, to turn off my engine, and to listen. The images clearly had something to say, stories to tell and communicate about that place and the community it represented, they quite literally animate the landscape, making it talk, making it move.

The work of Chip Thomas brings the concept of relational accountability into focus as a useful framework for community listening. In his own words, Chip Thomas, aka Jetsonorama, is an "artist, activist, and physician," a "visual

storyteller" (Bell).[1] He's an "intentional provocateur, putting work out that people might not expect to see in a particular space" (KQED Arts). I met Thomas and wrote about his art when I was a journalist in northern Arizona, where his work is primarily situated where he lives and works on the Navajo Nation. I found that Thomas' visual work not only constitutes community writing, but in a lot of ways it transcends what I was able to do as a journalist. This chapter analyzes the visual and material rhetoric of his murals to emphasize community listening, as both a process-oriented and relational practice, and something that shows up visually in the work, and is thus necessary to the process of relational accountability.

RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND LISTENING

In *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, Wilson articulates an Indigenous research framework assembled by traditional Indigenous practices that center relationality and relational accountability. One who is accountable to their relations recognizes the ways they are implicated in the consequences of the work. For Wilson, relational accountability refers to the process by which one becomes accountable to and respectful of all relationships, including relationships between individual people, human and nonhuman communities, ideas, and land. It's a process that should feel organic, less like a prescription and more like building a relationship. Accountability in this framework refers to the process by which one forges meaningful relationships and establishes trust through working together, collaborating, and learning from one another. The effect of becoming accountable to one's relations creates the conditions from which work that is wanted, needed, and celebrated by that community is imagined; it means one is open to criticism because they want to do right by that community, to find ways to connect on deeper levels, to forge stronger connections that provoke, inspire, and challenge. These practices and processes scaffold structures of accountability over time and are intimately connected to community listening.

I am invested in community listening that mobilizes public engagement against settler and white supremacist systems. What does it mean to be a settler on stolen Indigenous land? I am interested in new rhetorical approaches that find ways to articulate the landscapes in which we engage as the palimpsests of culture and history that they are. This requires modes of thinking that disrupt and complicate what we see as anything but simple physical spaces, but rather

1 "Jetsonorama" refers to his street artist name, associated with his work with "The Painted Desert Project" and other past and ongoing collaborations and installations.

an amalgamation of stories, competing histories, and contested spaces. The view from the road on the Navajo Nation, a view that is vast and made to feel empty, reflects colonial logics that sustain silences that are strategic and systemic. Thomas's work proves that a rusty old silo or abandoned building can be reclaimed and transformed into something that works against these silences. Listening, when it attends to culture and relationality, when nurtured by the kind of intention exemplified by the words of Shawn Wilson when he wrote— "I come to you with a good heart"—listening can indeed be translated into a language that is visual, responsive, and has the power to provoke action (7).

The work of Chip Thomas, and more specifically, the process through which he creates his work, which he described to me as an "evolving dialogue," applies the same responsible relational engagement that has been articulated through Indigenous research paradigms as articulated by Wilson. Relationships, for Wilson, are themselves an "ongoing process," within which "all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished" (xv). But Wilson also doesn't view us and our practices as "being *in* relationship" but writes that "we *are* the relationships that we hold and are a part of" (80). Community artists and writers literally embody the relationships reflected in their work as they recognize how they are implicated and intimately connected in ways that are unique to them. "I identify as a visual storyteller," says Thomas (New Mexico PBS).

Emphasizing Thomas' public art on the Navajo Nation as a form of visual storytelling, I agree with Rachel C. Jackson, who based on conversations with Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune, understands stories "as a kind of community listening" and "call us to consider the ways in which community writing occurs beyond the colonialist implications and limitations of printed text" (42). As an Indigenous scholar, Jackson is concerned with the ways that Western academic discourses impose a "rational order on otherwise organic ideas and spontaneous meanings," and I'm drawn to her understanding of community listening as a praxis that "invites us to listen without limitations" (40). For Jackson, storytelling "depends on community listeners for collaborative meaning making," asking listeners to "imagine possibilities," attend to "potential meanings" and "actions," and to examine the "relationships between the past and present situation, between peoples and places, between 'then and now' and 'us and them'" (40). While considering visual stories in the same light, I am drawn to Jackson's analysis of Kiowa storytelling in that it "invites us to listen differently, *with* a community rather than *to* a community or *for* a community" (42). Jackson's analysis of Kiowa storytelling not only challenges our understanding of community writing itself but mobilizes it toward Indigenous solidarity and resistance to settler colonialism. By focusing on the visual storytelling of public art, this chapter is invested not only in expanding our

understanding of what "counts" as community writing but mobilizes community writing to work against settler colonialism by using visual storytelling in ways that move "historical legacies into the present" (38). And when those legacies are thrust into the present, they demand to be listened to and reckoned with in the present.

After introducing Thomas and demonstrating these relationships in his work generally, this chapter analyzes three of the themes his work addresses: the protection of sacred sites, the legacy of resource colonialism, and health solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of these works underscores the profound relationship between community listening, visual art, and meaningful public engagement. In representing Thomas in his own words, I rely primarily on film and print interviews and profiles; I also weave in moments from my own interviews with him when I was a journalist and more recently. The result is a personal reflection of his work over many years, which exemplifies my observations about community listening as a process built from long-term commitments. Thomas's murals further emphasize new ways that a community that is listened to can speak through the work, where the art—like all meaningful community writing—speaks *with* and not *for*. With this phrasing, I am recalling Linda Alcoff's discussion of the problems of speaking *for* and speaking *about* in her 1991 essay, "The Problem of Speaking for Others." As I analyze Thomas' visual stories, I am reminded of Alcoff's observation that "Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle" (15). While she calls for more research into practical ways to speak *with*, or at least "lessen the dangers" of speaking *for* or speaking *about*, this chapter constitutes one of the ways community listening, particularly through public art, can contribute to this larger discussion (24). By listening to Thomas and observing his work, I learned to be a different kind of listener who is more attuned to the multiple stories and converging relations a work can communicate. Thomas' visual storytelling reflects these commitments in ways that depict the intensive listening moments that he experienced so that others may experience them, too.

As a journalist, I learned to think of myself as a community listener as well. My responsibility as a storyteller necessarily relies on community listening, and the work produced through a deep community listening process is also better positioned to challenge systemic colonial structures. A storyteller who engages in community listening that is relational, that is focused on building long-term connections, that creates spaces where the community can speak to each other, community listening can clarify needs that can then be pursued as more stories that the community wants, will benefit them, and through which they can see themselves accurately represented.

JETSONORAMA AND THE PAINTED DESERT PROJECT

Thomas is a Black physician, photographer, public artist, and activist originally from North Carolina. While he has recently retired and moved to Flagstaff to concentrate on his art full time, he had lived and worked on the Navajo Nation in northern Arizona, practicing medicine since 1987. After finishing medical school in the mid-1980s, Thomas came out to Arizona to serve as a physician on the Navajo Nation through the National Health Service Corps, a program that connects physicians to places around the country with limited access to healthcare. Although he finished his obligation in 1991, he had fallen in love with the people, the culture, and the landscape of northern Arizona, and he decided to stay. Today, he continues to work on the reservation as both a physician and an artist. In the latter role, he is part of the Painted Desert Project, where he works with other artists to create works across the region. As many of the examples below will show, he often draws inspiration from his relationships with patients and co-workers, most of whom are Diné, who have shared stories with him about their lives, their struggles, and their joys.

Having grown up admiring the photojournalism of people like Eugene Smith and Gordon Parks, whose work regularly appeared in *Life* magazine and *Look* Magazine in the 1960s and 1970s, Thomas became a photographer. "I just loved turning the pages and looking at the images and seeing how people lived in other parts of the world," he said. "People who were being documented and photographed weren't necessarily famous people, but just everyday people; so I came away with a sense that everyone has a story to tell" (New Mexico PBS). He often asked people on the reservation if he could photograph them, and his work appeared in some regional exhibitions, but as a street artist himself, he always wanted to "go bigger," to create art "where the people in the work got to see themselves represented," to "create work that reminds people of the beauty they've shared with me over the last thirty years" (KQED Arts). Between the craft of his photography, his interest in street art, and the relationships he has cultivated with the Indigenous communities with which he lives and works, he asked, "Is there a way that I can bring that medium to a place that has never had it, and can I do it in a way that is respectful and appreciated by the people whom I am representing" (Bell)?

Thomas told me that he thinks of his process as an "evolving dialogue." What follows are three visual stories, examples of Thomas' work spanning nearly a decade from 2011 to 2020. I refer to them as visual stories, not only to animate Thomas' own identification as a "visual storyteller," but also to draw attention to the fact that each of these examples is the culmination of a process that begins with community listening—building meaningful relationships, community belonging, accountability, and trust, before responding visually and artistically in

a way that is public and provocative. Community listening is embedded in the work itself, through visual cues that reflect relationality: private moments captured through smiles, home settings, family intimacy, and daily practices—all of which typically reside outside of public view. This is community listening that is evidence of a healthy relationship, one built on trust cultivated over many years. That these private moments are displayed publicly and embraced by the community, as evidenced through the overwhelmingly positive feedback Thomas has received, is further evidence of community trust and relationality.

This doesn't mean he has never faced pushback over the years, but ultimately being open to the nuance and situatedness of cultural identity is necessarily part of the listening process. "I started this project in 2009 without any guidance on how to pursue 'street art' on the Navajo Nation." So when he posted a photo of a peyote bud cupped in the hand of a friend he wanted to support who was studying to become a roadman in the Native American Church, what he didn't realize is that the roadside stand belonged to a born-again Christian. "That piece lasted 24 hours." Of course, "no community, tribe, race or culture is monolithic," he told me, and described how after that experience, he pasted images he considered "safe," such as representations of "Code Talkers, sheep, and elders," he said. "Over the course of several years and working with safe imagery people began to appreciate the work," empowering him to do more, accepting invitations to put work up in specific locations. Some tribal members fully embrace traditional Hopi and Diné spiritual practices, but there are also many Christians as well, and like any group of people, have different experiences, priorities, and values. He described to me some pieces he put up in response to the proposed tourist destination at the confluence of the Colorado River and the Little Colorado, a one-mile tram and supporting amenities sought by a wealthy developer from Scottsdale, AZ. While the project was largely unpopular as the site is sacred to the Diné, Hopi, and other regional tribes and was ultimately defeated (at least for now—the developer said he would be back), in a region plagued by unemployment rates that hover around 60%, some local tribal members were excited about the employment opportunities. In his art along the road in that region of Arizona, he "opted to represent the position of the traditionalists," and the work quickly got tagged, or painted over. "A lesson I learned," he said, "is that as long as I'm celebrating what the Diné recognize as beautiful about their culture, I'm good."

As a matter of affect, work produced through community listening, in turn, encourages an audience to listen further and listen differently, both to themselves and the those depicted.[2] Thomas' articulation of his work as an "evolving

2 By choosing *affect* here, I am signaling the theoretical framework known as affect theory that attempts to explain the relationships between nonlinguistic forces that shape people and culture.

dialogue" is also a useful way of thinking about community listening as a back-and-forth between listening and reflecting. When he is installing a piece, Thomas said that it is common for people to stop, and they talk about their reactions to it, how it made them feel, why they decided to stop. This indicates a strong and meaningful level of engagement that first requires listening to trigger a reflective process. And that process continues after that person has driven away, within and among their home communities.

Visual Story One. "What we do to the mountain we do to ourselves"

Figure 4.1. Panoramic photo of the entire installation in an alleyway in Flagstaff in 2011. Photo credit: John Running, 2011. Used with permission of the author, Chip Thomas

As a journalist in northern Arizona, I extensively covered a regional controversy over development on the San Francisco Peaks—a mountain held sacred in different ways by at least 13 Indigenous tribes[3] of the southwest—by the Arizona Snowbowl ski resort. Over the course of a decade, I learned how the Peaks, as they are referred to locally, are woven into creation stories, and they serve as a marker of one of the four directions, and they are the home of important deities. I learned that ceremonies are performed there, medicinal herbs and plants are gathered there, that there are shrines in undisclosed locations all over the mountain range. In 2002, resort shareholders sought to build a 13-mile pipeline from the city's wastewater treatment plant out of town, up the mountain, and into a reservoir where it would be pumped to make snow. Beyond the absurdity of committing water resources to a ski resort in the dry and drought-prone southwest or introducing contaminated water to a fragile alpine eco-system, the proposal was unacceptable to those who hold the Peaks sacred, who collect medicinal herbs and plants on the mountain, who gather for ceremonies there, who pray to the Kachina who

3 This includes the Navajo (Dinè), Hopi, Havasupai, Yavapai (Apache and Prescott), Hualapai, Tewa, White Mountain Apache, San Carlos Apache, Acoma, San Juan Southern Paiute, Zuni, and Fort McDowell Mojave.

inhabit this place and make snow.[4] In 2011, during a year of Indigenous-led non-violent direct actions, road blockades, and demonstrations against the City of Flagstaff and the US Forest Service's approval of reclaimed wastewater to make snow on the San Francisco Peaks, I wrote articles while Thomas worked with area activists, photographers and artists to create an installation that combined black and white photography with text drawn on subject's faces. While I was previously aware of Thomas' work, this was the first time I met him and encountered his work in the city in which I lived, centered on an issue I covered extensively.

The installation appeared in a public walkway in downtown Flagstaff at the height of this controversy, featuring several Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together, with writing scrawled across their faces that they each composed. John Running, a long-celebrated regional photographer, wrote, "Consider the San Francisco Peaks are Sacred to Natives and to Non-Natives," a message positioned in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, literally alongside. One man, Sam, wrote, "faces are sacred, faces are beautiful. We walk on the face of the Earth. The Mountain is a beautiful sacred place that needs to be protected. In beauty I walk." Another woman, Stephanie, connected the protection of the Peaks with global issues of concern, bridging the concern over contaminated snow with climate change and the poisoning of our global environment. She writes: "I am the change. Industrialization, pollution, and drought. Water, air, earth. Fake snow. CO2." This installation is a great example of the writing *with* community writing that is foregrounded by concerns and connections that the community wants and needs—messages they literally wrote themselves—that transcend the limitations of traditional "ink on paper." This is achieved by literally and figuratively having these messages attached to bodies, to identities, reflected in body language, expression, and emotion. Writing *with* and thinking through what that process looks like in different ways according to the needs of a community, is, therefore, integral to the practice of community listening.

4 For examples of this coverage and writing, see Boggs, "The Material-Discursive Spaces of Outdoor Recreation: Rhetorical Exclusion and Settler Colonialism at the Arizona Snowbowl Ski Resort." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 11, no. 2 (June 8, 2017): 175–96. https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.18841; Boggs, "Anti-Snowbowl Direct Actions Intensify Alongside Construction." *The Noise: Arts & News*. September 2011. 10-11; "Arizona Testbowl: Denying Human Rights and Experimenting with the Ecological Integrity of the San Francisco Peaks," *The Sustainability Review*. February 28, 2010. https://www.thesustainabilityreview.org/articles/arizona-testbowl-denying-human-rights; "Storm Clouds Darken Over the San Francisco Peaks as the City Debates Water for Snowbowl," *The Noise: Arts & News*, September 2010: 10-11, 37; "Storm Clouds Darken Over the San Francisco Peaks as the City Debates Water for Snowbowl, Part 2," *The Noise: Arts & News*, October 2010: 10-11. For more context, also see Benally, Klee and R.T. Cody, dir. *The Snowbowl Effect*. 2005; Flagstaff, AZ: Indigenous Action Media.

Figure 4.2. Klee and Princess forehead to forehead wearing bandanas. Photo credit Chip Thomas, 2011.

One part of the larger installation featured Princess Benally and her partner, Klee Benally, a prominent Dinè activist and musician whose family has been instrumental in resisting development on the Peaks since the 1970s. In this photo, they are forehead to forehead. His eyes are closed while her hands cup the back of his head. A message is scrawled directly across their faces in thick black letters: "WHAT WE DO TO THE MOUNTAIN WE DO TO OURSELVES." The message is written across both of their faces as if it were one canvas. This choice visually connects Klee and Princess as they express this statement together. It is a powerful message that illustrates the idea of sacredness, skipping over any need to define it, and instead hones on affect and consequences, declaratively. It conveys a deep cultural and spiritual connection that cannot be denied or dismissed. Both Klee and Princess are wearing bandanas across their faces, which were often worn during the Indigenous-led direct actions and demonstrations against the resort, which were ongoing at the time of the installation—the bandanas signal this moment of quiet reflection during the resistance. Skiers, snowboarders, and others who support the resort's developments would often stand annoyed and confused at such demonstrations against ski infrastructure, asking, "why are you trying to ruin people's fun" ("The Material Discursive Spaces of Outdoor Recreation" 176)? Listeners of this image are asked to weigh their commitments to outdoor recreation against the cultural and spiritual survival of regional

Indigenous peoples who hold the mountain sacred in profound ways. Complimenting the actions happening in the streets, characterized by signs reading, "defend the sacred" and "no desecration for recreation," Thomas' work in this context deepens a kind of cognitive dissonance that is productive and provocative. The disconnect between recreation and desecration forces outdoor enthusiasts to reckon with the ways they are caught up in colonialism in the present, that one can help to sustain colonialism without a conscious commitment to it.

Visual Story Two: Hope + Trauma in a Poisoned Land

Figure 4.3. A black and white photo of Cyndy Begaye's hands holding a black and white family photo of her father working in a uranium mine on the Navajo Nation. Photo credit, Chip Thomas 2017.

In the fall of 2017, the Coconino Center for the Arts in Flagstaff, Arizona, invited installations that addressed the history of uranium mining on the Navajo Nation. During the period following World War II through the Cold War era, most of the uranium mined to create nuclear bombs came from the lands in and around the Navajo Nation, and the majority of the miners were Dinè people. Thomas came to know about this history through his patients, their families, and his coworkers. One of these co-workers and friends is Cyndy Begaye, whose father, Kee Roy John, died in 2001 from cancer that formed as a direct result of working in the uranium mines for decades. "He had good intentions to provide

for his family," Begaye told the filmmakers (KQED Arts). "He worked for close to 20 years in the mines not knowing the effects years on down the road that this would have on him and on us," she said. (KQED Arts). Because of his relationships with his community through his work as a physician, Thomas learned more about the history of uranium mining on the reservation. "As early as the 1950s," he said in a short video documentary, "scientists and public health workers knew of the dangers of radiation exposure," Thomas (quoted in KQED Arts). "Yet little was being done on the reservation to tell workers about these dangers and to protect them" (quoted KQED Arts). Those former minors who are still living come to his clinic every six months to get examined to get recertified for their required benefits from a settlement detailed in the 1990 Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. Thomas knew that he wanted to figure out a way to bring those stories to the show in Flagstaff (RECA).

Begaye had found an old picture of her father operating some machinery in a mine, and she worked with Thomas on the photo together, which captured the essence of love and loss that she felt, the tragedy of extractive resource colonialism[5] that still looms large in her community. Thomas took a black and white photo of Begaye holding this photograph, and around the edge of the photo, they added, in her writing, "Dad—working the Slick Rock Mine to provide for his family during the cold war. Early 1960s." Thomas added four neon green symbols of radiation floating around the scene to indicate the invisible exposure. Thomas worked closely with Begaye, whom he had known for over 16 years, to memorialize her father. Thomas teared up on camera, remembering the conversations they had about her dad, "It just really touched me, the history, the personal impact it had on this family, of someone I know closely" (KQED Arts).

The impact of uranium mining on Navajo people and the landscape continues to be immense. Despite President Joe Biden's establishment of Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument, which protects the area surrounding the Grand Canyon from future uranium mining—which includes large swaths of the Navajo Nation—it doesn't include clean-ups of previously established mines. At large, there are 524 abandoned uranium mines on the Navajo Nation today that continue to poison aquifers and affect remote communities in profound ways (EPA). Like radiation, itself invisible—a kind of present absence—community grief and resilience are not visible from the road.

5 While this chapter doesn't focus specifically on "extractive colonialism," otherwise known as "resource colonialism," as a framing concept and thus I will not be returning to it, this terminology refers to the past and present colonial framework in which corporate and governmental control over sovereign indigenous lands persists for the purpose of extracting resources, often at the expense of community human and environmental health. See Gómez-Barris 2017 for more of an expanded analysis.

Yet Thomas' work of community listening portrays all this and more for passersby to see and grapple with, a powerful intervention for those who support nuclear energy but have not had to reckon with its legacy. For Thomas, I've observed that his work begins with listening intensively with people he encounters in the community, then he represents those listening experiences in his art. The image in this story captures one of these moments of intensive listening, a moment in which Thomas was shown a personal family photograph. Thomas is able to recreate this intimate moment in a way that transposes his perspective as a physician and friend to a public audience, inviting them to contend with what he understood and felt in that moment.

Visual Story Three. ". . . creating an environment of wellness in the community."

Figure 4.4. A black and white photo on a roadside stand on the Navajo Nation in Black Mesa. Photo credit, Chip Thomas 2020.

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Navajo Nation particularly hard. There was a moment in the summer of 2020, when adjusted for population, the Navajo Nation had the highest rate of infection and death in the United States. The reasons why the reservation was hit particularly hard are varied and complex. When I was a journalist, I learned that much of the Navajo Nation lacks basic amenities, with close to a third of the population live without electricity or running water. Furthermore, nearly half of the population lives

below the poverty line, and healthy fruits and vegetables are not easy to come by locally in the region which is marked as a "food desert."[6] All of this means that "shelter-in-place" is simply not a realistic option. Social distancing is also harder given the increased likelihood that multiple generations might be housed together. Further, Indigenous peoples are more likely to be disproportionately affected by health conditions such as diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases, and other diseases of the heart and the liver. Once COVID-19 entered the community, it spread quickly, and the results were devastating.

Outside of the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Thomas' role as a community physician means that the types of photos he typically works with often prioritize mental and physical wellness and he has recognized the impact his art has in lifting people up. "In my medical practice," says Thomas, "when I see people, I am attempting to create an environment of wellness within the individual, and in the community with the pictures, I'm putting up reflecting to the community the beauty they've shared with me, I'm attempting to create an environment of wellness in the community" (Bell). By reflecting back to them their strength in the face of so much adversity, Thomas attempts to depict visually the listening process he has spent decades cultivating. "Living here, seeing how many people realize they haven't been treated fairly, but they still live in a way that honors creation and the earth—that example keeps me grounded, and I feel really fortunate to have found this means of expression through art" (KQED Arts). These are the commitments Thomas has brought to his art in the framework of the pandemic, attentive to the context of culture and health, demonstrating the ways listening as a physician and as an artist are complimentary.

While promoting the health guidelines recommended by the Centers for Disease Control, he does so in a way that is attentive to culture and his personal knowledge of the community in which he engages—this is a community physician communicating through the language of art. Throughout the pandemic, particularly during the summer of 2020, Thomas worked with local families to push back against the dominant narrative, reinforced in the media, that life on the reservation was bleak and hopeless. A child wearing a face mask made from a bag of Blue Bird flour, the preferred brand for many Diné fry bread recipes, therefore functions rhetorically as a symbol of belonging. The cultural symbol unifies while the child and the baby bunnies communicate hope for a healthy future. Another Diné man named Ryan, is masked-up next to the Center for Disease Control's recommendations for mask wearing, hand washing, social distancing, etc.

6 The poverty line is marked by the Federal Poverty Threshold, which is $12,760 for individuals and $26,200 for a family of four (2020 Poverty Guidelines).

Figure 4.5. A black and white photo of a man named Ryan masked up beside health protocols. Photo credit, Chip Thomas 2020.

The two together tell a story of resilience and shared experience during unprecedented times. Diné people are invited to see themselves in the ways they have shown to Thomas, a process based on decades of intensive listening, reflecting back dignity, strength, and resilience. To triangulate the images above and below within the context of community listening, Thomas is both an artist and a physician who understands the unique challenges posed by the pandemic to Diné communities, one who has listened intensively to a community invested in keeping each other safe, and who carefully depicts those moments of listening in a way that is culturally responsive. It is a visual expression of concern and safety characterized by rhetorical choices curated toward a specific audience. For passersby, the work represents a moment of listening, animating the idea that the pandemic is culturally distinct in this space, that the communities there face a unique set of challenges, and those who enter should leave their own assumptions about the severity of the pandemic at home.

". . . ART CHALLENGES THE WAY WE PERCEIVE THE ORDINARY" [7]

Figure 4.6. Rose Hurley with her great grandson. This is a black and white photograph of the work on a roadside stand on the Navajo Nation. Photo credit, Chip Thomas 2018.

In his 2017 analysis of graffiti writing, Charles Lesh calls for broader understandings of community publishing that "include a wider range of texts, rhetorical strategies, and communities" that have been "historically unrecognizable" to the disciplinary mainstream (64). While unconventional, even illegal, forms of community publishing like graffiti writing may have been historically dismissed by scholars, they have nonetheless functioned as "an inventive rhetorical-material process by which networks are produced, sustained, or challenged by the specific genres of writing that move through them" (70). In other words, despite the lack of attention by scholars and its status as mostly illegal, graffiti writers and street artists have been doing the rhetorical work of community publishing anyway, work that has constituted place-based belongings in ways that are meaningful, unexpected, and at times, confrontational in the sense that "encountering public art is not entirely elective. . . . we go to private art, but public art is

7 Quote in context: "I like to think that art challenges the way we perceive the ordinary" (New Mexico PBS).

come upon" (Hein 55). Thomas' work is certainly "come upon" in this way, and it coheres to Lesh's articulation of street art as a form of rhetoric that depends as much on discourse as it does the physical, material world. But there is a relationship between Thomas' rhetorical-material work that engages audiences in community listening.

Thomas's photographs often adorn small structures positioned within a sea of red desert and blue sky, a landscape that is otherwise quiet and vast. Thomas revises these quiet places, creating small interruptions that invite audiences to listen in new ways—curated by Thomas and the culture and community in which he engages. In a landscape that is riddled with colonial myths and misconceptions, the photographs disrupt and demand to be listened to. They radiate a dignity of being, an honesty, a vulnerability that invites an empathetic response, and they resonate with a powerful sense of shared humanity and relationality.

This is achieved by depicting people and their relationships as they are, yet appearing in unexpected places, where the image and the landscape cohere and necessarily constitute one another. The image above, which depicts Rose Hurley with her great-grandson, seems like a simple family picture, but against the backdrop of open high desert, the photo works against the colonial logic that would prefer passersby not see or recognize the experience, the presence, and the dignity of Dinè people. Further, the candid image itself, which represents not a photo shoot event where everyone might be dressed up and smiling for the occasion, but rather, a regular, everyday occurrence communicates to me that the photographer is a trusted friend with whom the son and his great grandmother are sitting comfortably and at home.

The art itself also produces a kind of reciprocity in that the work is for those white settler visitors like me who pass by, but it is also embraced as a gift to the communities depicted as well. This speaks to the affective possibilities of rhetoric, which is to say that the art is produced through years of ongoing listening interactions between the artist and the community, but the art also potentially affects those who see it, like me, from outside of the community. For passersby, the cultural connection to the landscape is brought into focus, potentially harmful myths are challenged, and a greater sense of accountability is activated. For those who live there and are accustomed to viewing Thomas' work displayed in the landscape, "his murals reflect back our everyday life; I know that he gets it, he understands it" (KQED Arts). Not everyone who passes by will see it operating in this way, however. While the rhetoric of the mural against the backdrop of the desert does intervene, interrupt, and provoke, the work itself constitutes a mere invitation for engagement, not the promise of it.

". . . SHARE THEIR STORY IN A WAY THAT HONORS THEM"[8]

Thomas elaborated on how other aspects of his life, his career as a community physician and his activism, are connected to his identity as a storyteller. "In medicine, you know, we start with a history, and we hear people's stories; as a photographer and an activist, I'm attempting to tell stories as well" (*Outside Magazine*). As a physician Thomas describes his careful attention to his patients, and over time has begun to unravel the ways that medical history is woven into the cultural history of the patients and communities he serves, a colonial history that continues to structure the present.[9]

As a function of settler colonialism in this context, historically, the view from the road—where Thomas' art often appears—has rhetorically silenced Indigenous peoples. While the occasional billboard might advertise an attraction, those images often rely on and sustain settler colonial logics through Indigenous caricatures, such as the case with a casino or a trading post, for example. One of the challenges Thomas confronts in his work is how to represent voice, or how to visually reclaim voices from the settler colonial structures that prevent them from being heard on their own terms. To do so, he must work in and with the absences and silences produced by settler colonialism. The public art produced by Thomas exemplifies community listening as described by Romeo García, that it "pushes us to both take up the traces left behind of the past and people and work toward creating presence from absence and sound from silence" (7). Thomas' work answers the absences and silences with images of Indigenous peoples in the present on their own terms. Those images demand viewers reject false caricatures of Indigenous peoples trapped in a mythic past. Krista Ratcliffe discusses the ways in which James Phelan and Andrea Lunsford theorize listening as relating to "voices speaking or not speaking within written texts" (18).

This relation between listening and speaking/not speaking is useful for this analysis as it positions listening within a similar framework of inclusion/exclusion that Thomas' public art addresses. Thomas proves that public art has the potential to disrupt this silence, that listening is a means of reclaiming the voices of Indigenous peoples living under the spatial, material, and cultural conditions of settler colonialism in the every day. Thomas' visual storytelling challenges the terms of those conditions by placing Indigenous peoples in those spaces on their own terms, unexpectedly, and in ways that demand to be seen. In the same way

8 Quote in context: "It's really a matter of developing a relationship, a trusting relationship with people such that you cannot only hear their story, but you can present their story, and share their story in a way that honors them" (New Mexico PBS).

9 Here I am recalling Wolfe's (2006) observation that settler colonialism is a structure, not an event, as well as a multitude of Indigenous scholars who discuss the simple and complex ways that the structures of colonialism operate in simple and complex ways in the present.

that a rhetorically "loud" billboard wants to be heard, the struggles, joys, and everyday experiences of Indigenous peoples portrayed in Thomas's work also demand to be heard. Through this work as a storyteller, Thomas has recognized how his own role as an artist and physician on the reservation is an identity that is bound up in the lives of the community in which he lives, loves, and works.

As I gesture toward this chapter's conclusion, I return to some of my initial observations about the synesthetic qualities of public art, and how this analysis of Thomas' work maps out new pathways toward understanding the broader possibilities of a community listening praxis. Public art is a "hybrid" of material and discursive elements that cut across "a variety of polarities," allowing it to transcend boundaries of perception, specific sensory receptors, or mediums (Hein 50). While it is certainly true, as Hinshaw observes, that "the sounds of a place and space orient us, teach us and help us connect," the emphasis on sound obscures the multitude of ways cultural and community knowledge can be transmitted and received, how places and spaces themselves can orient, teach, and connect us in a myriad of ways that don't rely on the ability of our ears (Hinshaw 64). Our understanding of what counts and what doesn't count as community listening need not be limited to one way of perceiving the world. "Public art compels both artists and public to refine communicative skills" (Hein 55). To describe the communicative process as a simple back-and-forth between speaker and listener obscures other ways we can be present as we listen to and show up for each other, how we acknowledge our understanding/misunderstanding, how we process and communicate cultural knowledge. When it is rooted in building trust, reflecting a relational process that establishes structures of accountability, community listening becomes a mode of perceiving, reflecting, and responding that is personal and situational.

A community that is heard is a community that is first listened to; I have demonstrated some of the ways evidence of listening shows up in Thomas' work. To be a responsible and effective storyteller, to tell stories that demand to be heard, yet are not one's own, the process of listening necessarily precedes that story. Thomas lingers on this notion of process and community listening. "It's really a matter of developing a relationship, a trusting relationship with people such that you can not only hear their story, but you can present their story, and share their story in a way that honors them" (New Mexico PBS). His observation echoes Wilson's assertion that "the relationship with something (a person, object, or idea) is more important than the thing itself" (73). The art of Thomas, while aesthetically stunning, is itself a reflection of a relationship, and a move toward cultivating other relationships, and, therefore, more stories. Without the relationship, the art loses its meaning and productive power, therefore, relationality takes precedence over the "thing itself" (7). "It's all about the process of

creating with good intention and with love," Thomas told PBS, which I understand as another way of articulating Wilson's idea of relational accountability (New Mexico PBS). Deep, intensive listening is necessarily part of this process and as community writers, work like Thomas' models the forms of trust and compassion we want to cultivate.

Community listening not only foregrounds the process of meaningful artistic creation, but it is also productive in that it engages audiences in new ways. This chapter helps to establish that community listening can take on visual forms, as a process seen, and therefore not limited to a verbal (e.g., heard, read) phenomenon. Being heard—a statement that implies a level of fulfillment and effectiveness—is not just a result of listening, but how one listens. Community listening as a visual engagement invites others to interpret those images in the context of their own lives, inviting many forms of listening that are situational, personal, and generative. I agree with García's observation that "how we listen no doubt tells us something about our ways of seeing, being, and doing. We are constituted differently, and yet, strung together by a universe of stories, stories-so-far, and the possibilities of new stories" (7). When we listen, as passersby viewing an art installation in an unexpected place, we bring ourselves to that process—our culture, history, identity—and positionality here matters. The public art of community listening provokes critical reflections about how we are constituted differently by colonial structures. The result is public engagement that invites stronger, more empathetic alliances across differences.

It is important to note that not all public art is inherently successful in the ways I describe it in this chapter; it is my hope that through my analysis of Thomas' work, I have sketched out some of the ways that community listeners might gauge the effectiveness of public art in their own communities. When looking at public art elsewhere, Thomas' work has taught me to simultaneously listen as well. I listen for the voices that want to be heard, the competing histories that appear as stories. I listen for that which reveals something about the relationships between the artist, those depicted, and the landscapes in which the work is situated. I listen for the questions the work asks of me, and I try to answer them. And the moment I start doing that, by engaging in the public art of listening and the back-and-forth exchange it elicits, I recognize the work's productive power, its potential to alter perceptions, shake up realities, provoke responses, deepen commitments, and change minds.

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