

CHAPTER 8.

COMMUNITY LISTENING  
IN, WITH, AND AGAINST  
WHITENESS AT A PWI

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*In this chapter, a cross-disciplinary group of white women colleagues reflect on their experiences facilitating campus-based antiracist reading circles. They use community listening as a lens for looking both critically and compassionately at their efforts to hold themselves and their PWI accountable for addressing structural racism.*

**SETTING THE SCENE, MARY P. SHERIDAN**

In 2020, just prior to the world learning Breonna Taylor's name, I joined the Anne Braden Institute (ABI) as a Faculty Research Fellow, and later that year I was named Acting Assistant Director. As a resource for racial and social justice education and action within the University of Louisville (UofL), the ABI partners with the surrounding Louisville community on a broad range of initiatives (e.g., Civil Rights, LGBTQ History, Affordable Housing). The ABI also responds to longstanding calls for white people to educate ourselves and other whites about our complicity in white supremacy (cf. Lorde; Braden) through hosting Self-Guided Tours of Louisville's Civil Rights History and co-sponsoring Showing Up for Racial Justice organizing events.

As both a Fellow and an Acting Assistant Director, I drew upon my previous research into providing more equitable educational opportunities ("What Matters") and my knowledge of community-engaged infrastructure (Mathis et al.) to identify ways the Institute could provide opportunities for colleagues at our Predominantly White Institution (PWI) to hear and redress wide-spread, normed discriminatory practices, and in turn, facilitate larger structural changes at and beyond UofL. As a feminist scholar looking around our PWI, I noted with concern that it was frequently untenured women faculty who visibly participated in and often led unpaid antiracist labor, including the ABI reading circles that

each of the contributors to this chapter led; at a hierarchical, male-dominated Research 1 like UofL, such service is time-consuming and professionally risky.<sup>1</sup> Considering how I might support the people doing this antiracist work given my institutional positionality, I suggested to the women facilitating these reading circles that we write about our experiences to make this work institutionally rewarded. Although we come from different academic disciplines, campus roles, and ranks, we are all white women seeking to move our PWI in antiracist directions. By retrospectively reflecting upon<sup>2</sup>, and then collaboratively theorizing our antiracist practices, I thought we could bridge the gap between service and scholarship, and we could contribute a cross-disciplinary resource for others involved in similar projects.

To jump-start our thinking, I proposed community listening methodologies to guide us. To me, community listening is a practice of defamiliarization meant to expose majoritarian biases (including our own) and to foreground community knowledge. Consequently, I introduced the concept of community listening as an attempt to ethically engage in justice-oriented research by attending and attuning to community stories, stories that language our and others' experiences, most especially of marginalized people. Among community listening's growing research tradition (Concannon and Foster; Fishman and Rosenberg; García; Rowan and Cavallaro), the informing theories that I both draw upon and question are from disciplinary scholarship related to "listening," such as feminist rhetorical listening, queer rhetorical listening, and critical race methodologies, as well as disciplinary conversations about "community." Below, I more fully articulate my community listening framework that was then taken up in distinct, often transdisciplinary ways, as evident in each facilitator's reflection.

My deepest understandings of what I'm calling listening frameworks come from feminist rhetorical traditions which, like the other traditions I explore, embrace listening as a methodology for valuing the perspectives of excluded groups, often through speculative moves that attend to muted and/or ignored voices and to the power-laden logics that construct and challenge those absences (Royster).

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1 For more on the "gendered biases in the visibility and value of faculty service" (85), see Lisa K. Hanasono et al. I do not know why white women, often untenured, may be taking this risk, but I imagine several reasons, which may be shared by others at PWIs. One reason is that our colleagues of color are already spread too thin engaging in what Carmen Kynard calls "the hustle," or the constant, generally uncompensated microlabor of navigating universities, such as being on too many committees or educating white peers about individual and structural racism. Another reason is a shared conviction that institutional racism perpetrated by white people should be addressed by white people. A third reason, as told to me by people in this demographic, is their belief that if they didn't do this antiracist work, it would not happen.

2 I was struck by things I missed during the reading circles themselves, an example of what Schon might describe as the benefit of reflection on action as opposed to reflection in action.

Such listening helps people imagine other hearings, validate other voices, and critique normed practices of exclusion (Monberg; Powell). Often linked to Krista Ratcliffe<sup>3</sup>, feminist rhetorical listening focuses on stories to understand how people make sense of the world. That understanding includes many steps, such as being accountable for one's stories and the world these stories create, in part by standing under (and interrogating) the cultural logics that make a story meaningful in different ways for different people and groups. Despite important critiques about its unacknowledged white privilege<sup>4</sup>, Ratcliffe's feminist rhetorical listening has proven a foundational concept both to help people recognize dominant cultural logics and to hear alternatives.

As white women hoping to do antiracist work at a PWI, we, like Ratcliffe, encouraged the sharing of personal stories about experiences that many of us recognized in our daily lives. Such efforts helped us build rapport with one another while we prepared to stand under the cultural logic of the stories we shared in our reading circles, a move that included our attempts to be accountable for who is privileged and who is muted. Cultural logic is the often-invisible warrants that make sense of how our everyday operates, in this case how privilege becomes normed. Because this concept resonated across our disciplinary training, cultural logic became something we listened for and tried to excavate with others in the stories we heard. In this way, discussing cultural logics helped us connect seemingly disparate events, such as the way minoritized groups are silenced in a classroom, dismissed in a faculty exchange, and made to feel unwelcome in certain academic and city spaces.

While less prevalent in my theorizing, my understanding of community listening was also informed by queer rhetorical listening. Taking a stance of critical generosity towards Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening<sup>5</sup>, Timothy Oleksiak states

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3 I relied most heavily on Ratcliffe's foundational work, which has deepened and evolved. For her more recent thinking, see her collaboratively authored book with Kyle Jensen, *Rhetorical Listening in Action: A Concept-Tactic Approach*, a book that came out after this chapter was drafted.

4 Two challenges to Ratcliffe's foundational work seem relevant to this article. The primary challenge is that Ratcliffe's eavesdropping can be "akin to colonial gazing" (García, 13) in that white people may believe they can step outside of their own power and privilege as they eavesdrop on, and think they understand, minoritized storytellers. This mis-identification was something facilitators discussed as a concern, and sought to counter. A second challenge is the danger of overemphasizing rhetorical listening in relation to white/Black examples (Jackson with deLaune). Because reading circle members were white, and because these reading circles emerged out of the white police killing of unarmed black people nationwide and especially in our city, the circles did privilege counterstories based in white/black relations. Even so, facilitators addressed intersectional issues, including from their own research specializations with other minoritized groups (e.g., LGBTQ histories of erasure and repression; violence against people from the Yakama nation).

5 See *Peitho's* special issue on queer listening, perhaps especially the introduction which offers more recent sources that more fully detail this concept.

that queer rhetorical listening uses the insights of queer theory to challenge the cisgender assumptions in Ratcliffe's early constructions ("Queer Rhetorical Listening"). Like feminist rhetorical listening, queer rhetorical listening examines unacknowledged legacies of privilege that may exclude minoritized voices and therefore compromise our ability to hear and, ultimately, create more just systems. In addition, queer rhetorical listening foregrounds (among other things) a more expansive intersectional frame, and a more extensive focus on the possibilities of utopic worldmaking. Invoking José Esteban Muñoz's concept of worldmaking, queer rhetorical listening calls on people to examine imagined pasts and to posit not-yet-realized futures as ways to inform our longing to create a better present (cf. Oleksiak, "A Queer Praxis"). Both imagining and longing function as catalysts for current action as people work to build those futures. That action calls us to attend to institutional power dynamics that, as Rachel Lewis describes, "underpin" how cultural logics shape interpersonal relationships (who is included and excluded), an idea ABI reading circle members took up (see below).

Queer rhetorical listening informed facilitators' reflections on the reading circles as well as how I thought about them: in both cases, we aimed to hear intersectional histories that shaped our present and to collectively imagine better, more antiracist futures within and beyond our institutional context. In our reading circles, Muñoz's idea of temporal cruising helped us listen for moments of possibilities for antiracist practices, as when a group member discussed the various forms of police interactions she witnessed based on where she lived. Her description of looking out her home's window to see a phalanx of police at what seemed a surprising spot prompted us to look more closely at Louisville's redlining histories and the institutions that supported this practice. Seeing the tight correlations between historic redlining areas and current policing practices exposed who has rights to what types of space and protection—an issue important for many groups, though in this case an issue that highlights how those working for an antiracist present must listen to the systematic, institutional legacies that anchor the present in place (see Carrie Mott's reflection) if we are to imagine a better future.

In addition to listening research, my understanding of community listening is informed by Critical Race Methodologies (CRM), specifically the concept of counterstory which exposes, denaturalizes, and challenges majoritarian stock stories that have erased or distorted the experiences of minoritized people. Like rhetorical listening, CRM privileges stories. As Carmen Kynard notes, we have plenty of evidence, data, and reporting on racism and its consequences. Instead of more data, Kynard, drawing on Black feminist traditions, calls for more radical stories to imagine alternatives committed to decolonization through action. Such stories emerge out of, validate, and make central the experiences and knowledges of people of color. This is similar to what Aja Y. Martinez calls

counterstories, which “are critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices” (3). As both methods and methodologies—the tools and the theoretical work of destabilizing and re-writing dominant narratives that warp or occlude minoritized groups’ ways of knowing and being—counterstories can take many forms, but they share two core tenants: “eliminating racism, sexism, and poverty, and empowering subordinated minority groups” through the telling of stories about their/participant lived experiences against the widely circulating majoritarian narratives (Martinez 17).

Despite the importance of CRM on my thinking, collectively our reading circles were not at the point of imagining and acting on stories that could radically overthrow university and city practices. Instead, our circles, which were almost exclusively white, were engaged in what might best be described as the “work before the work” (Rowan and Cavallaro), which might subsequently lead to such action. As part of this preparatory work, reading circle facilitators encouraged members to challenge majoritarian narratives by, for example, providing non-majoritarian news coverage about daily protests for Breonna Taylor or about hate groups’ activity on campus (see Cate Fosl’s reflection); or, by encouraging reading circle members to use their own stories to interrogate majoritarian takes on our city’s histories, present and possible futures in regard to housing and education. Such practices helped participants recognize the unacknowledged, intertwining, habituated practices that privilege whiteness and encouraged participants both to challenge dominant views and to imagine counterfactual possibilities, such as, what if black neighborhoods had not been decimated by the building of highways? Or, what might our city look like if people of color had not faced redlining?

Within my uptake of community listening frameworks, I wrestle with at least two major limits of our experience, both of which I imagine might be concerns for others seeking to foster antiracist projects at PWIs. My first concern is about whose voices are absent. The most notable missing voices come from people of color. Given that reading group facilitators were white, as were, in the end, all group members, I am reminded of Romeo García’s caution: “Stories reflect the places and positionalities of storytellers, and so many academic stories are the stories white folks tell each other, stories that echo traditions of savior or progress narratives” (12). Standing under the “sticky” (Ahmed) cultural logics of white privilege, I am forced to reckon with this absence, to acknowledge how our whiteness, even if experienced differently (due to professional status, gender, sexuality, ability, economic security, etc.), is a defining characteristic of our reading circles. Another significant set of missing voices includes those from white participants who dropped out along the way. This group offered plausible reasons why they stopped coming: people were stretched too

thin; the meeting time conflicted with other job responsibilities that semester; some got COVID-19. Even so, I speculate that these stories are incomplete, and believe this incompleteness is connected to the emotional toll it takes to be open enough to listen in ways that don't recycle "white stories," which "have the potential for merely reproducing hegemonic belief rather than critiquing them" (Lundstrom, qtd in Kurtyka). These concerns highlight the balance we faced in simultaneously pushing and supporting colleagues to engage in antiracist work. At times, I wonder if people left because we called too quickly for participants to recognize and own our white privilege, as well as the cultural logics and institutional power dynamics that support this privilege (cf. Lewis); perhaps we needed more preparation to support reading group members in this process (see Shelley Thomas's reflection). At other times, I wonder if some people stayed because we didn't push hard enough. Did our fear that participants would leave if we too forcefully confronted their participation in racist policies and actions, what Robin J. DiAngelo would call "white fragility," prevent us from challenging the "white stories" of the participants who stayed (see Kelly Kinahan's reflection)? While there is no one right way to interact with reading group members, the many absent voices that haunt facilitators' reflections amplify the difficulty of supporting antiracist groups, perhaps especially in PWIs, who are attempting to do the antiracist work that community listening compels us to do.

The second limitation of our experiences as viewed through community listening frameworks addresses long-standing concerns about the term community.<sup>6</sup> I found the ABI reading circles, and to a lesser extent, the facilitator group, to be community-ish.<sup>7</sup> Unlike deeply rooted identifications that endure even when local conditions change, the reading circles emerged from a workplace sponsor that provided a temporary space to process the fault lines highlighted

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6 Beyond disciplinary concerns (cf. Bizzell; Prior), community literacy scholars from this sub-discipline's inception have questioned what community means, asking how to build reciprocal, community-based projects on university timelines and workloads (cf. Restaino and Cella) where students and faculty are prepared to listen to and engage with local communities (cf. Mathieu), in part by dislodging university privilege to hear community voices (cf. Flower). Such work challenges halcyon views of "community," noting instead the messy, tactical work—often at odds with university structures—needed to build what might be considered reciprocal, equitable communities.

7 Elsewhere I have written about what I consider a more nuanced term to get at these notions of community, what in that context I call "knot-working collaborations" or institutionally sponsored activities that gather or braid people together for a time, based on a set project. Following Yrjö Engeström, Ritva Engeström, and Tiia Vähäaho, I argue that these people come together with their own histories and agendas for a shared project. When the project is over, they disperse, bringing what they have learned to new groups ("Knot-Working Collaborations"). Given that this term is not prevalent in our field, I follow this collection's core term, community listening, but highlight this complication.

that fraught summer. This does not devalue these reading circles. Although this process felt important to participants' understandings of themselves, and although the circles had an intensity, even an intimacy at times, these circles were fleeting by design, a characteristic common for many community-ish groups. We gathered initially as ad hoc groups of people living through daily protests for racial justice that energized and polarized our city, sharing traumatic, ongoing moments of long overdue racial reckoning that turned our city and our university upside down. We identified as UofL faculty and staff, younger and older, with differing status and from different parts of campus and different parts of the city. Some of us marched regularly throughout the summer chanting Breonna Taylor's name, while some stayed home due to rising COVID-19 infection rates, the police presence, or any number of other reasons. With diverse goals and histories, we shared this time and place, bearing witness to extremes of militarized vehicles, boarded-up buildings, concrete barricades, police snipers on rooftops, and helicopter patrols alongside silent vigils, memorials with ever-expanding collections of candles, artwork, poems, and mementos; and balloon-filled birthday parties as well as communal prayer services. Polarization marked not just downtown's "Injustice Square" but conversations with friends and acquaintances, colleagues, and students. Seeking to make sense of this intensity, we supported each other and ourselves, as collectively and individually, we prepared to support UofL students, staff, and faculty reeling from the wounds that the summer protests exposed. We located ourselves within and outside of our workplace and, for a time, convened, as García might say, to imagine "friction" within the hegemonic flows of racist stories, including those in higher education. Then, we went our separate ways. This, to me, feels community-ish.

Despite these limitations, community listening methodologies retrospectively proved helpful in this community-ish context for unpacking how our PWI both helps and hinders our ability to address individual and structural racism in our workplace. On the one hand, our academic sponsor brought us together, providing institutional space and tools for us to re-hear "the set of stories we tell ourselves, the stories that tell us, the stories others tell about us" (Rohrer 189, cited in García). Examining our stories about antiracist proclamations, faculty and staff reading circles, task force recommendations, and facially neutral but discriminatory policies, we came to better understand how the stickiness of white privilege is materially expressed in individual and institutional lives. On the other hand, these stories also make clear how academic structures play a large role in who and what have been excluded by keeping whiteness the norm and supporting white supremacy logics that erase and/or reframe other cultural logics (cf. Jackson with DeLaune). Community listening frameworks helped us attend to the jumble of competing institutional logics and the lived consequences of



these logics, and they challenged us to hold ourselves accountable for recalibrating our relationship with our institution, a PWI that simultaneously attempts to create spaces to eradicate racist practices within its ranks and continues deeply embedded racist practices (see reflections by Kelly Kinahan and Angela Storey).

The reading circles, I argue, used the community listening practices with uneven effectiveness to hear non-majoritarian cultural logics within individuals and institutions, cruise their histories, and imagine better futures, all with the goal of thinking about what actions participants could take now and in the future. Through retrospective, sustained reflection, facilitators used these methodologies to better understand their well-intentioned efforts to help reading circle members both think about conditions of knowing and to act on this knowledge as they engaged in antiracist action at and beyond our PWI. This fuller uptake of community listening frameworks reinforces the value of listening to our own stories, others' stories, and the hauntings these bring on individual, community, and institutional levels. Structured reflection helps us rethink experiences we had not anticipated or even fully understood at the time and offers cautions about how thoroughly unacknowledged white privilege infuses antiracist work in PWIs, as the following reflections make clear.

## REFLECTIONS

### **BUILDING ON A WHITE ANTIRACIST LEGACY, CATE FOSL**

I came to this project as ABI director and biographer of Anne Braden, a Louisville activist-journalist who was among the most dedicated white antiracists in U.S. history. Braden's emphasis over nearly six decades of activism was always on making visible the centrality of white supremacy in U.S. society and particularly on convincing whites of our responsibility to act against racism.

Like any biographer, I believe fiercely in the power of story as a way to connect, educate, and ideally move people to act. Even before I co-founded ABI in 2006, I often recounted Braden's powerful and unconventional life story as a counter-narrative—a way to prompt more whites to recognize our complicity in keeping racism alive and well (Fosl). Urging white listeners to undertake this early (or pre-) step toward accountability has proven far easier than getting people to act on those insights, however. The result is a two-pronged tension that, while not new in my experience of white antiracist educational work, ran all through the reading circle project discussed here. First, how can we speak to, support, and recruit more whites to take action for racial justice and not simply talk about it or listen to Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) speakers and then return to “business as usual”? Second, how can we invest in such work without, again, redirecting resources away from BIPOC initiatives and people?



Braden often said that to undo white supremacy, we don't need the support of all whites, but we do need more—what she called a critical mass. Amid the mid-2020 COVID-19/racism pandemics and our university's stated commitment to becoming an antiracist campus, working with the accelerating number of white faculty and staff confronting institutional racism seemed an obvious imperative for the ABI, if it were to remain true to its namesake.

The small-group virtual reading circles evolved in this context. Responding to Critical Race Theory's critiques of how institutional spaces reflect majoritarian views, Angela Storey and I heightened our accountability as white antiracist facilitators by planning the circles in consultation with leaders of the Black Faculty and Staff Association (BFSA). BFSA co-chairs endorsed the value of involving more whites in campus antiracist initiatives even as they emphasized that it was painful for BIPOC colleagues to have to constantly experience whites' verbal wranglings with our own racism. Consequently, our email invitation to the wider university community identified the circles as open to all but designed to “examine white supremacy and white privilege and provide a framework for taking action against them, both individually and institutionally.” It was no surprise when mostly whites responded.

One lesson in accountability to an antiracist agenda that emerged from the reading circles was a fuller acknowledgment of both the preparation and move to action that are needed in this work. As Gwen Aviles and others argue in an initial piece we read, antiracist reading is not sufficient as a tool of resistance, but it may be necessary as a corrective first step to the mis-education that most whites receive, which often carries with it in an unwillingness to betray or even recognize white privilege.

Had we five facilitators been aware of the methodologies of community listening, particularly Karen Rowan and Alexandra J. Cavallaro's ideas on the “work before the work” when we planned the circles, such knowledge would have provided a useful orienting framework. That concept is precisely what the circles amounted to. They provided spaces for predominantly white members to re-examine long-playing racial soundtracks, some for the first time, and they gave us new outlets through which we could act on that awareness. Thinking of the circles as a kind of groundwork helped me to clarify their purpose, and I introduced Rowan and Cavallaro's phrase to my group as soon as I heard it.

It was frustrating that our hoped-for collective action across circles did not materialize by the time we concluded the project after the fall term. Yet small victories matter, which is another lesson in accountability exemplified in Anne Braden's “keeping on keeping on” through half a century of unbroken activism. While the reading circles did require some limited resources, they did quick work, and within a relatively short time frame, they made a modest start at the

project of enlisting new white antiracists. When the Patriot Front, a violent white nationalist organization, descended on the campus in January 2021, several groups (including the ABI) successfully partnered to offer a workshop—aimed at white students, staff, and faculty—on how to respond, and many from the reading circles participated. Some reading group members also became active in forming a campus chapter of Louisville Showing Up for Justice (LSURJ).<sup>8</sup>

Had we persisted longer than several months—thereby devoting additional resources to them—the reading circles likely would have generated more substantive action. As it was, the circles motivated about 50 employees to educate ourselves more about racism, both personally and in the structures around us. As importantly, perhaps, the project prompted us five co-facilitators to remain accountable to one another and to the process through regular debriefings and a shared online document in which we each reflected on how each session went and shared insights and resources some of us had found useful in our respective sessions. In these ways, we five moved toward greater accountability through growing an inventory of antiracist resources for future use, affirmation of our respective commitments, and new forms of collective action beyond the circles.

The reading circle project underscores that in addition to sharing stories, our own or others', collectively and individually, whites need multiple recurring and ongoing stimuli and opportunities to motivate them (us) to act in the kind of numbers that will undermine the structures of white supremacy. This is especially true, perhaps, to strengthen accountability on a PWI, where the cultural logic of whiteness is too often an easy out.

## CONSIDERING OUR SPACES, CARRIE MOTT

Everyone experiences space in unique ways. We're all caught in the intersections of who we are and the contexts of our lived reality. I think about this a lot as a feminist geographer, especially in relation to the university. Faculty, staff, and students on any given campus all occupy different spheres of interaction, which are compounded by silos of departments, units, research clusters, and other institutional divisions. A major obstacle to becoming an antiracist university is the way that these spatial divisions become social divisions. When we occupy different physical (and virtual) spaces, our conversations are constrained by proximity. Before the coronavirus pandemic, which increased our remote interactions, most members of the "campus community" did not interact with one another onsite and so did not know how our campus was experienced by others. In the context of community listening, our reading circles offered a way to overcome

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8 LSURJ is a local chapter of a national organization dedicated to mobilizing white people to join in the struggle against racism.

some of these spatial divisions, in part because the circles brought together staff and faculty from various sectors of the university; in part because the meetings were handled virtually due to the pandemic.

The reading circle I facilitated consisted of faculty and staff from different areas of the university and averaged 4-5 members per session of 6 regular participants. Some knew each other prior to the first meeting, but most were meeting each other for the first time. Our group spanned a range of ages, from a participant who began working at UofL in the 1970s to a recent graduate in her early twenties. One participant was male and identified as white, otherwise we were predominantly a group of white women.<sup>9</sup> In addition, many participants were university staff, an important difference from most of the other reading circles. Taken together, our differences, including our different locations within the university, meant that we were able to talk about race and institutional racism in multifaceted ways. One participant, for example, had worked in UofL's Affirmative Action Office in the 1990s. She had insights into how that office functioned and the ways that the university addressed race during that period, a richer perspective than most people, who were more recent hires working in narrower academic siloes.

Our group met exclusively online throughout the fall semester of 2020. For some, it was the first time they'd had an intentional conversation with others about race, while others had more experience with the topics we would deal with. Beyond our group's meetings, protesters in Louisville continued to call for justice for Breonna Taylor after her murder by Louisville Metro Police officers in March 2020. While that was not the focal point of our meetings, we regularly talked about the feeling of needing to do something, including learning more about race and racism amid our larger local context. We also noted that ongoing protests, like our group, brought people together across spatial and social boundaries. The protests also presented a powerful counterstory, pushing against the dominant narratives of Louisville as a compassionate, progressive city. Through our reading group, we were able to discuss and learn from related counterstories that addressed race and racism.

In late September 2020, the Kentucky Attorney General announced that the grand jury investigation into Breonna Taylor's murder would not charge any of the responsible police officers directly, sparking fresh waves of protest actions around Louisville. Our reading group met a few days later. Our materials that week included Redlining Louisville, a digital story map that provides visualizations of census and other data sources and allows users to compare them to the redlining map of Louisville from the 1930s (Poe). Redlining Louisville is a

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9 Another participant was a Black woman who attended our first meeting, but then said she could not continue due to the additional time required for pandemic teaching that Fall semester.

visual counterstory about the history of racial segregation in Louisville. It shows the degree that racist histories of residential segregation laid the foundations for today's inequalities within the city. We looked at the map together, and I asked what things people found interesting and whether anyone took note of stories that countered the dominant narrative of Louisville's racial history. One participant was struck by where her neighborhood was on the redlining map, given recent police action to suppress protests in her area. Earlier that week, a significant mobilization of riot police had taken position near her house, and she'd watched as they prevented peaceful protesters from marching down the street. We wondered together who drew the line that determined where the police set up, stopping a protest march that had already covered a considerable distance throughout the city, and we talked to each other about how powerfully the racist legacies of the past shape our present.

During that same meeting, we discussed "The Problem We All Live With," an episode of *This American Life* about failed desegregation efforts in a St. Louis area school district (Hannah-Jones). St. Louis is only about 4 hours from Louisville, and we were able to draw strong connections between events there and within our own city. Both are situated on the cusp of the U.S. Midwest and the South, and both have long histories of segregation, racism, and police violence against Black people, including contentious desegregation battles in the 1970s. One group member shared that she had moved to Louisville as a young adult at that time and remembered the protests around integrating public schools. "The Problem We All Live With" was a springboard into conversation about the farther-reaching implications of this history, the ways that the same counterstories about Louisville's racial history have played out at a national scale.

Our reading circle meetings bridged some of the usual spatial limitations of the university. While the pandemic disrupted and challenged our time together, the virtual meeting platform is also perhaps responsible for people participating who otherwise would not due to the spatial divisions and limitations of our campus. For staff working in the Human Resources building, for example, on the extreme edge of UofL's main campus, they would have to travel considerable distances to access the main library or other buildings where meetings and events are often scheduled. The listening space of the reading circle allowed us to come together as people interested in learning the counterstories that have emerged in the context of race history in the United States and to make connections to our own professional contexts at the university. Our range of locations and positions throughout the university meant that participants were able to listen to UofL community members outside of their own work environment, facilitating our ability to understand the different ways that institutional racism occurs throughout the university and our city.

**CAN WHITE SPACES BE ANTIRACIST?, KELLY KINAHAN**

One purpose of community listening is “to find ways to make relationships more productive and substantial with the goal of meaningful change” (Fishman and Rosenberg 3). At the end of five reading circle meetings, the predominant sentiments among the group I facilitated were gratitude for a space to connect over shared interests in antiracist work and joy at forming new personal relationships, particularly during a virtual semester where on-campus connections were limited. In other words, partially through our practice of community listening as a reading group, we came to build new relationships and identify each other as members of an on-campus community committed to antiracist work.

Yet, as I critically reflected on the overall group dynamic along with the challenges voiced by other facilitators, I considered whether my group, made up of white, female, mostly untenured faculty fits the engaged, antiracist infrastructure of my predominantly white institution. Or, I wondered, did my group, shaped by our homogeneity in race, gender, and institutional status, fall into a pattern of validating our own voices? Were we lulled into a groupthink pattern, sustained by our whiteness, and did that keep us at the surface of antiracist dialogue? As an urban planner who sees themselves as new to antiracist work, I questioned whether my facilitation struck the right balance in trying to call in other white people to antiracist work, while not allowing a retreat into the comforts of whiteness.

Exclusively white spaces raise several dilemmas, chief among them the re-centering of whiteness that elevates the challenges of allyship over the oppression of BIPOC. Rather than listening and tuning into what we had not heard, the pull of whiteness made it easy to slip into white cultural logics, including being stuck in a loop of guilt and paralysis, focusing on -isms other than race, and not sitting with the discomfort of our own complicity in racism. While the readings provided a baseline context of unexamined histories, I wondered if our group’s homogeneity meant we did not hear intersectional reflections and counterstories from our own members that could have deepened our connections to the readings and perhaps pushed us to explore the benefits we accrue from systems of white supremacy. The intersecting vulnerabilities and advantages of the group members’ predominant status (i.e., privileged by whiteness yet marginalized by being untenured, as well as by being women historically overburdened with faculty service) at times crowded out deeper antiracism discussions and reflected a retreat to the comforts of whiteness. Our conversations drifted to other structural challenges: researching and teaching without childcare during a pandemic, creating safe spaces for students traumatized by a summer of police violence, finding time to build relationships necessary for community-engaged research amid the pressure of the tenure clock. The goal of making meaningful change is central to a practice of

community listening, and reflecting on my facilitation, this framing could have been deployed to help recenter our conversations and tie together other structural oppressions that commonly intersect with antiracist work.

In a separate, unrelated campus reading group I participated in subsequently, we read Beverly Daniel Tatum's seminal *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Questions About Race*. That work exposed me to the concept of white identity development, which helped me understand some of the potential benefits of the racially homogenous ABI reading circles (Helms). Tatum's articulation of how "the social pressure from friends and acquaintances to collude, to not notice racism, can be quite powerful" (194) offered some insights on my earlier group dynamic. Because there are so many overwhelmingly white spaces that operate as colorblind or where racism is not considered, this necessitates the need for spaces that are explicitly, if imperfectly, antiracist. Even if the dialogue remains at a surface level, for instance relearning historical events through an antiracist lens, that discussion can still be an important part of the unlearning processes central to white identity development (Helms) and the meaning-making central to community listening. Tatum (203) also highlights Andrea Ayzavian's point that "'allies need allies,' others who will support their efforts to swim against the tide of cultural and institutional racism." This observation resonated with an aspect of the ABI group that I found extremely meaningful and reaffirming: candid reflections from colleagues, specifically other pre-tenured white women, about their own fears, mistakes, and anxieties, in doing antiracist work. In many cases, these reflections mirrored my own, made me feel less alone with my own shortcomings, and reinforced my commitment to continue antiracist work. This reflects an important value of engaging in community listening, which creates space for better knowing other community members and the initial relationship building between members where a community is newly forming or lacks formal organization (Fishman and Rosenberg 3). Beyond functioning as safe spaces for white allies, these spaces can also minimize harm for BIPOC by limiting exposure to the initial stages of white identity development, including processing white guilt and the discomfort of unpacking white privileges (cf. Jones; DiAngelo).

The dilemma of calling in other white people to antiracist work while resisting the sanctuary of whiteness is a constant tension in all white spaces. Overall, this reading group succeeded as a space for developing individual relationships and creating a shared space for relationship-building during an intense period where group members could explore antiracist ideas, and examine their complicity in racist university practices. Stepping into a facilitation role was important for my personal antiracist developmental process, and the experience strengthened my knowledge and resolve to continue doing antiracist work. Alongside

these accomplishments, my reflections keep returning to the messy complications I still want to work on. Notably, how to address the fact that even in spaces designed to be antiracist, whiteness works to pull the conversation away from racism, tuning out the dialogue and counterstories that hold us accountable both individually and as situated actors in larger institutional frameworks.

### **CONFRONTING WHITENESS; STANDING UNDER CULTURAL LOGICS TO EXPLORE INTERNALIZED MESSAGES ABOUT WHITENESS, SHELLEY THOMAS**

As a white teacher educator, my philosophy of teaching draws from the work of Paulo Freire and his notion of praxis as an iterative process of critical reflection and action. Freire also holds that oppression dehumanizes the oppressor and the oppressed (1970/2018). These ideas ground my antiracist work and seem to provide a substantive foundation. However, my experiences facilitating an ABI reading circle directed me to expand on them once I asked: How can community listening inform white antiracist work? How can participants in community listening confront white resistance? Most specifically, how is praxis shaped in community listening spaces like mine when calling in (Ross) resistant white folk, particularly folk whose resistance is grounded in experiences and personal histories that parallel my own? For me, community listening raised many unresolved and complex emotions around my capacity for and efficacy with white antiracist action. Thus, I wondered how I should work through the haunting (García) of my own tensions and confusion without burdening BIPOC. Reflecting on my experience facilitating a reading circle, I wonder how these questions might enable me to think through and to sit with the cultural logics of whiteness as to be accountable and to move the work forward.

One member of my circle, S., was a woman a bit older than I am who described experiences like my own. She was a local; she grew up near the same Louisville neighborhood as my mother's family. The way she described her negative experiences with Black folk in the newly integrated school system of the 1970s reminded me of the stories my family members shared about their own experiences. Their stories were often peppered with statements of routine othering, like "they are taking over," accusations of Black folk intimidating white children, and assumptions of stereotypical personality traits such as laziness. In my family, such statements were often speckled with the N-word for good measure, and as I listened to S., I recognized how I grew up with—and remain under—the cultural logics of whiteness.

Problematic, racist exchanges between my white family members have played back in my mind from the time I was a child, and I continued to hear internalized messages as a young adult when I taught Black high school students



African and African American History. In this context, I finally learned substantive counterstories that challenged the cultural logics I had learned. Previously, as a teacher educator, I had worked with others like me: young white ciswomen from a similar geographical area, and I viewed the transition to high school teaching in a new context as an opportunity for me to walk away from the racism I learned. So, for a time after I changed professions, I actively suppressed my family memories and the cultural logics of whiteness they represented. This also meant I avoided confronting how whiteness shaped my beliefs and actions, and as a result, I ignored or, really, denied my racist past.

When S. joined the circle I facilitated, I discovered how listening to her stories meant also listening to my own. At first, when her descriptions of conversations from her past sounded familiar to me, I thought I could use the common points across our backgrounds to call her in around white antiracist work. I incorrectly and problematically reasoned that if I could “emerge” from a racist upbringing and become committed to antiracism, I was just the person to “lead” her to do so. In the reading group, she asked me direct questions about how to revise her teaching to be antiracist. In response, I sent her emails with resources and spoke directly to her about “how to” promote antiracism through her teaching.

Once she began to disengage, I felt less confident in my ability to call in and engage other white women around antiracist action. Eventually, S. dropped out of the circle, which made me further question my commitment to antiracist work and my role as a discussion facilitator. I viewed her participation as parallel to my past experiences. So, I saw her decision to leave the group as a reflection of my failure to call in a fellow white woman.

Now, with some time removed from the experience and after reflecting on it, I return to think about what I learned and how community listening informs my future actions. In particular, I think about how community listening and cultural logics allow for the simultaneous acknowledgment of my racist past and expand my commitment to confronting white antiracist resistance. García’s notion of “haunting” reminds me how important it is to continue interrogating the cultural logics of whiteness. Engaging in community listening while working with S. helped me recognize that, as white women, we both stand under the cultural logics of whiteness and that sitting with the long-suppressed discomfort of white racism is also a component of praxis.

## **QUESTIONING INSTITUTIONAL SPACES FOR ANTIRACIST WORK, ANGELA STOREY**

How do we forge specific sites of antiracist listening and acting within the university, while also attending to the structural constraints through which such

convergences take place? How do existing institutional spaces constrain the “we” of antiracist work? As a cultural anthropologist, I am interested in these questions as they push us to think across multiple scales—from the specifics of interactions to the institutional and cultural frameworks in which we act.

Conversations in the circle I facilitated had varied in tenor since they began in July 2020, and by autumn we’d settled into a reliable cadence. Our discussions made apparent that each person arrived with different expectations: some hoped to talk about individual behaviors, others sought structural analysis. Some wanted reflection, and others to act. Some were newer to antiracist work, and for others it had been part of their work in the world for decades. These distinctions allowed us to move between different registers of discussion but also caused frustration and may have influenced who dropped away. Four people, I believe all white women, had stopped attending by October, leaving the group at six individuals: one woman of color, one white man, and four white women; five were faculty (tenured, pre-tenure, and term); one was staff; and all had Ph.D.’s.

That month, we met once to read three pieces, including a chapter from activist and academic Loretta Ross, who gave the annual Braden Lecture later that year. Ross’s work argues that instead of “calling out,” we should employ a process of “calling in” that holds individuals and groups accountable for their exclusionary actions and statements and also seeks to repair relationships and reincorporate them into movements (Ross, Baker). In our meeting, we spoke about how each reading emphasized the power of relationships to make change: relationships between peers, between people and new information, and between those Ross identifies as engaged in the work of calling in. As we pondered the role of higher education in making change, alongside the need to do the relational work of activism, we spoke about how calling-in requires a space or collectivity to be called in to. We began to ask: who are the “we” of a calling-in process within academia? This is a question perhaps especially important at a PWI and one that, for me, made clear that our work was as much about listening to each other’s experiences and perceptions as members of the same community as it was about listening to stories of UofL as an institution that shaped and housed many of our shared experiences. Someone presented a situation from a faculty assembly in which they felt a racist micro-aggression had taken place, and we discussed how we could have enacted a “calling in.” Another person described how they tried to make space in meetings for voices they felt were being marginalized. Although the examples were useful because they brought the group’s conversation into the spaces that we inhabited for work daily, they also felt like forcing square pegs into round holes: the institutional sites didn’t seem to encourage or accept the kind of work that we wanted to introduce into them. The only spaces that seemed ready to accept antiracism work were those created just for that purpose,

while other sites were governed by strong norms of interaction that favored narrow topical goals over broader process or change. They were also shaped by white cultural logics that sidelined and silenced work that would challenge racialized norms and hierarchies within them (Ratcliffe).

Questions of the “we” of academic antiracism work and of the possibilities for antiracist spaces on campus animated the remainder of our October conversations and poured over to the next month. The discussion prompted me to think about what is missing within academia. The circles did not necessarily fill that absence, but they pushed me to see and question it in myriad ways. For example, through the process of crafting a foundation for our interactions, including developing rapport and feelings of mutual trust, the group combined the difficult work of managing the abstract and the concrete, work that prompted me to ask: How do people think and act against racism, and how do we think and act against racism? Where are the opportunities for listening to messages more resoundingly about ourselves as staff, faculty, and community members, and to hear them in relation to our positions within a large PWI? How do we take existing institutional spaces and groups and shift them to become spaces for the kinds of antiracist work that is so sorely needed? How, in other words, do we push back against the hegemonic white cultural logics of a PWI? How do we escape the “stickiness” (Ahmed) of their attempts to be colorblind and “polite” and thus avoid reproducing inequalities and silences?

Our practice of community listening was one in which we attended to each other’s experiences and their complexities. Through that process, we became more attuned to the structural contours of the institution that shaped us and which offered openings (or not) through which to act and engage. If we are to respond to calls for real change within institutions, we can take an approach like community listening that uses a sustained, systematic examination of personal and institutional stories to acknowledge who is and is not welcome in academic spaces and, subsequently, to re-craft spaces that encourage the “we” of antiracist action.

## **LOOKING FORWARD, MARY P. SHERIDAN**

Nationwide, 2020 ushered in a spate of university antiracist initiatives that sought to respond to the racial reckonings sweeping across the country (Bartlett). And yet, good intentions are no assurance of good actions. Instead, informed reflection is one among many important steps for evaluating these actions since such reflection helps people understand individual and collective experiences that had previously been opaque.

As white women committed to moving our PWI in antiracist directions, we believe community listening frameworks, applied retrospectively, have

strengthened our reflections in ways that will shape our future antiracist work, perhaps most notably by helping us attend to how thoroughly whiteness is baked in, in ways we had normed and therefore not fully appreciated. By introducing stories from minoritized groups and listening for hauntings in majoritarian stories, we attuned to who is valued and who is discounted in individual, collective, and institutionally habituated ways. Such practices called us to engage in varying practices of accountability, which proved tricky in many reading circles since such moves challenge us to face the occlusions of what we and others know and to own our active complicity in oppressive systems.

These reflections raise questions for us, and likely for other white facilitators of antiracist groups in PWIs, about how to educate ourselves and other whites about our complicity in white supremacy: How hard do we push and how fully do we support differentially invested white colleagues (and ourselves)? How do we foster spaces that destabilize whiteness while we call in and remain open to being called out? How do we simultaneously labor within institutional structures and challenge the logics of such structures that shape the tacitly accepted ways people and practices operate? How do we prepare ourselves for the emotional toll these measures take? While community listening proved helpful in our retrospective analysis, wrestling with these questions before embarking on antiracist work may help others address the stickiness of white privilege in their local contexts from the outset of their projects.

In addition to the above generative questions, we offer two takeaways that may inform how others engage with antiracist actions at their PWIs. One is that community listening is not a thing, an accomplishment, checklist, or inoculation that makes us certified listeners. We are never finished. Rather, such listening-with-accountability is a disposition, a way of (re)orienting to the world. Like antiracist projects broadly, community listening calls us continually to commit to listen for and amplify voices typically excluded. While this idea is not new, it nonetheless feels important to reiterate since it is disheartening when projects end, especially when there is so much more to do, as the above reflections argue. This takeaway, then, is to acknowledge we are always doing the work before the next project's work, and there is much work to do.

A second takeaway is that community listening frameworks can help us hear the diverse cultural logics that are operating simultaneously, sometimes leading, sometimes interanimating, sometimes silencing. This simultaneity happens not just in our institutions or ad hoc groups, but also within ourselves. When deeply embedded logics surface, they can throw us into turmoil, but even when we don't recognize them, they are still operating. We address the emotional toll antiracist work takes not to shirk our responsibilities or pat ourselves on the back, but rather to prepare ourselves and others for taking on this labor, and for

carrying it on. Being open to unpacking and being accountable for these multiple internalized logics is challenging, but as white women attempting to move our PWI in an antiracist direction, we believe sharing our stories, our questions, and our takeaways may help others do similar work in their local setting.

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