

Listening for Justice:  
Cultivating Listeners in North American  
Environmental Justice Literature

A dissertation submitted by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Tufts University

May 2017

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation responds to calls for speaking out for environmental justice with a question: Who is listening? Shifting this critical emphasis reveals that often there is not a lack of speaking out; there is a lack of listening.

Addressing that issue, *Listening for Justice* argues that literature's imaginative space encourages readers to analyze and resist the conventions that dictate how and to whom they listen. It breaks new ground by bringing several theoretical communities into conversation: Environmental Justice, Native American Studies, and Sound, Animal, and Plant Studies.

Building on the work of Native American thinkers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Linda Hogan, and Robin Wall Kimmerer as well as Sound Studies scholars such as acoustic ecologist Bernie Krause and sensory historian Mark Smith, I examine the relational nature of environmental soundscapes. Rather than noting that someone does not have a voice, this listening framework asks why a voice isn't listened to. The texts I discuss focus on pressing environmental issues such as animal ethics, environmental racism, water rights, surface mining, the legacy of slavery, and the theft and violation of Native lands and sacred sites. They emphasize that listening to forms of communication not usually considered meaningful, such as those of plants or industry, creates the potential for action by expanding what is deemed perceivable and enabling a response that fosters respectful, sustainable relationships.

In Chapters One and Two, I draw on animal and plant studies to consider the power dynamics of listening in Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984), Simon Ortiz's "Distance" (1999), Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* (1999), and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), arguing that these texts describe plants and animals as beings that must be listened to as our relations. In Chapters Three and Four, I filter Rob Nixon's conception of slow violence through Sound Studies to examine environmental justice, audibility, and memory in Ann Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007), M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008), and Rita Wong's *undercurrent* (2015). I conclude with an afterword on the importance of listening and environmental justice for developing a place-based humanities pedagogy.

## **Acknowledgements**

As tiny leaves burst out to soak in the spring sunshine, I write with deepest gratitude to all those who have sustained, inspired, listened to, and loved me throughout this project. Thank you to my committee members, Elizabeth Ammons, Modhumita Roy, Nathan Wolff, and James Engell, for your close reading and wise words. Thank you to Liz and Modhumita for sending me on a quest to find poetry about e-waste and then expressing your persistent support of my work as that search grew into this dissertation. Thank you to Liz for your tireless reading and deep mentorship in scholarship and teaching. My gratitude also goes to my mother, Jane Schneider, for her detail-oriented eye and her ever-abundant encouragement; to my dad, Dennis Price, for the stories that raised me and the poems that delight us all; and to my sister, Deanna Cortney, for believing in me always. And, to my wonderful grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, you are ever in my heart. Thank you to Hannah Lindner-Finlay, Emily Troll, Laura Keeler, Rebecca McGowan, the Davis family, and so many others who have kept me laughing and well-fed. Thank you to Arthur Davis for helping me remember to climb trees and sing under stars. Thanks to those who have danced, harmonized, and cooed over seedlings with me and to the plants, animals, and water that have nourished and delighted me. And, thank you to those I do not know to thank.

it is hard enough  
to breathe and walk in rhythm  
then comes a flower

-Dennis Price

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*You have to listen all the time.*

*If I know anything it's because of listening.*

*[...]*

*Listening to people, to wind, whatever is*

*murmuring,*

*has been an important part of how I perceive and*

*how I learn.*

—Simon Ortiz, Interview in *Survival This Way*

## INTRODUCTION

### **Who is Listening?**

*All my elders say that it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die. We survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings—to its language—and then inventing human words to retell its stories to our succeeding generations.*

-Jeanette C. Armstrong, “Land Speaking”

At the opening of the September 2014 United Nations Climate Summit, Marshall Islander poet and performance artist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner represented the voice of civil society. She framed the political and scientific discussion that would follow with this legend:

One of our most beloved legends features a canoe race between ten brothers. Their mother holding a heavy bundle begged each of her sons for a ride on their canoe. But, only the youngest listened and took his mother along for the ride, not knowing that his mother was carrying the first sail. With the sail, he won the race and

became chief. The moral of the story is to honor your mother and the challenges life brings. (Abrams)

In this story, as in many stories, to listen is to honor. Both in the legend and in an interview preceding the summit, Jetñil-Kijiner emphasized the desperate need for listeners. “We’re the ones who are getting affected,” she said, “but sometimes it’s very frustrating, because it feels like no one is listening” (Maclellan).

*Listening for Justice* responds to calls for speaking out for environmental justice with a question: Who is listening? Shifting our critical emphasis in this way reveals that often there is not a lack of speaking out; there is a lack of listening. Addressing that issue, *Listening for Justice* argues that literature’s imaginative space encourages readers to analyze and resist the conventions that dictate how and to whom they listen. Rather than noting that someone does not *have* a voice, this listening framework asks why a voice isn’t *heard*. The literary texts I discuss focus on pressing environmental issues such as animal ethics, environmental racism, water rights, mountaintop removal mining, the legacy of slavery, and the theft and violation of Native lands and sacred sites. They emphasize that listening to voices, sounds, and other forms of communication not usually considered meaningful, such as those of plants or industrial work, creates the potential for action by expanding what is considered perceivable and enabling the possibility of a response that fosters respectful, sustainable relationships.

Although listening plays a prominent role in the stories of environmental justice authors, attention to the topic from literary scholars grounded in Western philosophy remains sparse. Therefore, this project roots its theoretical approach in the writings of many Indigenous writers and other people connected to oral traditions who do address ways of listening and emphasize the profound, immediate need for us to define ourselves as active listeners in addition to being activists with megaphones. Although both listening and speaking are necessary for promoting equity, this project responds to the disproportionate emphasis on speaking by promoting listening's role in resistance and healing. If eco-criticism moves us away from anthropocentric forms of criticism, then this dissertation makes a simultaneous gesture to move us away from speaker-centric criticism. In so doing, I do not mean to devalue speakers, but to begin balancing the communication scale in order to enable justice. For, as we see in the texts that follow, listening is particularly important as "a form of decentering that helps keep the individual from placing oneself at the center and all others at the margins" (Linda Hogan in Murphy 101). It is in sharing stories that we imagine, understand, and engage with change.

The stories we hear impact our actions. As environmental communication researchers at Yale Law School have determined, simply giving people more data will not change their opinion about climate change (Kahan et al.). Rather, people base their ideas on the values of their community, and effective attempts to shift the perception of a charged issue work from this understanding. Literature

provides a creative space to address environmental issues within the context of various communities and value systems. As Simon Ortiz states, “The storyteller participates in the story with those who are listening. In the same way, the listeners are taking part in the story” (*Men* 130). How we frame the information we hear matters.

In this project, I distinguish hearing from listening based on intention and attention. While *hearing* describes the physical experience of sound waves causing vibrations in the ear, *listening* indicates an intent to pay attention to an incoming sound (or its absence).<sup>1</sup> Discourse theorists note the degree to which the listener (or “interpreter”) may refuse to understand or act upon what she hears. Moreover, “the interpreter may retroactively influence the addressee through resistance, refusal, and redefinition” (Johansen 51). Listening enables collaborative communication that allows for changing understanding. The audience is not an inert object, prepared only to soak up the speaker’s knowledge, but an engaged participant in meaning-making. We need not be cognitive scientists to agree with John Stewart in *Bridges Not Walls* that “perception is selective, and what we choose to notice affects how we respond to both things and people” (198). Because how and to whom we listen are constructed and

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<sup>1</sup> In definition-based *Keywords in Sound*, Tom Rice defines listening at length, noting: “Unlike hearing, then, listening is understood to involve a deliberate channeling of attention toward a sound. It is not so much that listening is somehow separate from or opposed to hearing; indeed, the distinction between listening and hearing is often unclear, and the two are frequently equated or conflated” (Rice 99) “Listening” *Keywords in Sound* 99-111.

manipulated by social norms and power structures, this project analyzes various modes of listening and asks readers to think of listening as a series of choices that can be made to further environmental justice.

People have always paid attention to the environmental soundscape in order to survive. Ear buds and airplanes, however, make it ever more difficult to hear outside our mechanized society. The recent rise of academic sound studies, particularly in relation to environmental sounds, seems more a desperate call to stem the loss of attention to other-than-human sounds than an indication of a new burst of awareness. Scholars such as R. Murray Schafer and Bernie Krause deplore the destruction of environmental soundscapes due to industrial noise, especially that of ever-present aircraft.<sup>2</sup> Although sound studies has grown considerably since the initial proposal of this project, there remains a lack of investigation into the ways environmental listening is socially constructed and thus intersects with issues of race, class, and gender. As Novak and Sakakeeny acknowledge in their excellent introduction to *Keywords in Sound* (2015), “despite the interdisciplinary breadth of sound studies, the field as a whole has

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<sup>2</sup> See composer R. Murray Schafer’s field-defining *The Tuning of the World* (1977) and musician and naturalist Bernie Krause’s *The Great Animal Orchestra* (2013) for more on environmental soundscapes.

remained deeply committed to Western intellectual lineages and histories” (7).<sup>3</sup> Further, as is the case in many disciplines, the intersections of social issues and ecology are often under-analyzed. The field has tended to study race in the context of recorded sound, music, and urban settings and the environment in the context of nature recordings of wilderness locations with minimal human presence. Sound studies in literature have almost entirely dwelled on descriptions of music and voice. This project addresses the relationship of listening and environmental justice in literature and explores the political construction of who and what are deemed listenable in our biotic communities.

The cultural construction of sound proves particularly noticeable in discussions of environmental listening. What the West has declared a mute object might be considered a listenable subject in Anishinaabe epistemology, for example. “The identification of auditory thresholds changes notably from one culture and one living entity to another. In Western culture, audition (or lack thereof) is associated mostly with humans and animals; but in some other cultures, entities such as stones, wind, and other types of nonhuman forms also

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<sup>3</sup> “Sound studies has often reinforced Western ideals of a normative subject, placed within a common context of hearing and listening. Presumptions of universality have also led scholars to treat sounds as stable objects that have predictable, often technologically determined, effects on a generalized perceptual consciousness, which might even be reduced to an entire ‘human condition.’ This bias is detectable in the work of sound studies’ de facto founder, R. Murray Schafer (1977), who did not explicitly recognize the constitutive differences that participate in the ‘soundscape’ as a multivalent field of sounds with divergent social identities, individual creativities and affordances, biodiversities and differing abilities” (Novak and Sakakeeny 7).

have the capacity to listen, to lose hearing, or to provoke silence,” writes anthropologist Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier (Novak 189). When Osage theologian and scholar George Tinker writes of the consciousness of trees and rocks, he notes that while these entities talk, “white people don’t listen” (105). Yet, he does not say that white people *can’t* listen. He further explains that white people “never *learned* to listen” (my emphasis, 105). Gautier and Tinker’s reminders that ways of listening are socially constructed and learned underscore the importance of questioning who benefits from certain ways of listening and why they exist as such.

Challenges to Western norms of the listenable are increasingly put forward by animal and plant scientists as well as sound scholars and indigenous thinkers. Intentionally avoiding the assumptions of communication latent in the Western philosophic tradition, *Listening for Justice* builds its theoretical groundworks primarily from the writings of indigenous thinkers and innovative plant and animal scientists who, from their various perspectives, challenge the habits of relating to our biotic communities normalized by philosophers such as Plato and Descartes.<sup>4</sup> Ecologists such as Carl Safina and Suzanne Simard remark on the gradual shift in biological sciences to reconsider research questions related to listening to plants and animals that were previously considered unworthy of

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<sup>4</sup> These philosophers are most commonly cited by plant and animal scholars respectively as providing lasting, despite being scientifically unfounded, distinctions between humans beings and other-than-human beings. For in depth discussion of this lineage see Matthew Hall’s *Plants as Persons* (2011) and Laurie Shannon’s *The Accommodated Animal* (2013).

study.<sup>5</sup> This shift in acceptable lines of questioning demonstrates how what we can imagine to be true impacts what we work to prove. The imaginative space of literature helps us to analyze the ways reality is built and enforced. In their collaborative work on plant philosophy, *Through Vegetal Being*, Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder write, “Listening to the uniqueness of another existence, and considering its irreducibility with respect to my own, is a way to overcome the dependence on a truth, a discourse, or a master presumed to know the whole” (50). *Listening for Justice* puts these ecological theorists and scientists into conversation with literary texts to discuss how an emphasis on listening can provide readings that operate outside of the master narrative and offer modes of relating to the world that foster equity and health for all beings in a biotic community.

To respond to environmental injustices, Western culture must learn to open its ears to voices other than its own. In her introduction to *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing notes that

Ever since the Enlightenment, Western philosophers have shown us a Nature that is grand and universal but also passive and

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<sup>5</sup> Carl Safina’s *Beyond Words* (2015), Suzanne Simard’s TED Talk “How Trees Talk to Each Other” (2016), and Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016) discuss at length the complex relationships and modes of communication amongst plant and animal species in ways that ask readers to reconsider the possibility of meaningful communication networks. They remind us that to imagine that species other than humans can communicate, feel, and remember is not anthropomorphizing; rather, it is a logical conclusion of the theory of evolution.

mechanical. Nature was a backdrop and resource for the moral intentionality of Man, which could tame and master Nature. It was left to fabulists, including non-Western and non-civilizational storytellers, to remind us of the lively activities of all beings, human and not human. (vii)

Stories encourage and teach us how to listen to, as Tsing says, “all beings, human and not human.” In some, listening is modeled by characters who illustrate the impact of listening (or not) in different ways. In others, listening is literally asked of the reader by the speaker. Because literature is a form many of us are taught how to attend to, it provides a medium for extending our beliefs regarding who have voices and how we understand stories. Its explicitly imaginative space allows readers to play with boundaries they would otherwise leave unquestioned and to hear the too-often muffled and muted voices that describe the spreading global atrocity of climate change and the stories of those most impacted by the toxic onslaught accompanying global warming. According to Toni Morrison, literature helps fill the cultural position of oral storytelling in many modern Western communities where orality has faded and listening is no longer a cultural expectation (“Rootedness”). However, the texts in *Listening for Justice* do not simply replace orality; they also teach readers to listen beyond their pages and find renewed vigor for listening to each other and the world.

Some stories are hard to hear. For that reason, it is too often the silences of Rachel Carson’s songless spring that we must also listen for. Notably, Carson

uses a fictional introduction, her “Fable for Tomorrow,” to introduce readers to the possibility of “a spring without voices” (2), illustrating the degree to which auditory awareness is key for beginning to comprehend ecological issues. Derrick Jensen, a contemporary environmentalist, picks up on Carson’s rhetoric in his article, “Against Forgetting.” In it, he discusses our tendency to adopt a new normal, one that doesn’t expect a spring with voices. He writes, “It’s harder still to fight an injustice you do not perceive as an injustice but rather as just the way things are. How can you fight an injustice you never think about because it never occurs to you that things have ever been any different?” (13). Perception is central to this idea. Jensen exhorts his reader to pay attention: to listen and to remember. “I want you to listen to the (disappearing) frogs, to watch the (disappearing) fireflies. [...] If you do this, your baseline will stop declining, because you’ll have a record of what’s being lost” (13). There is not a lack of information; there is a lack of knowledge and attention.

Because of its flexibility in rendering time, space, and methods of communication, literature helps to create ways of paying attention. What do we not listen to because it speaks too slowly or too far away to be recognized as meaningful by many humans? Rob Nixon’s term “slow violence” describes environmental harm that happens so gradually that it is not coded as violence by the spectacle-entranced West and presents literature as a means of bringing slow violence into focus for those whose eyes normally glaze over it and whose ears

have grown deaf.<sup>6</sup> Of course, a shrinking aquifer is very noticeable to the nearby parched plants and toxic smog is viciously apparent to those breathing it day after day. Nixon analyzes the work of authors such as Derek Walcott who act as “highly motivated translators” (27) by sharing stories between those impacted by environmental injustices and those who don’t hear these violences because of the glare of immediate personal benefit. Many of the authors in *Listening for Justice* ask the reader to go a step further: they act as teachers more than translators. These authors call on readers to learn to listen for themselves. For, accepting the implied gap between Western culture and every other living being such that communication requires a translator ultimately perpetuates a destructive distance. It is not enough for writers to translate stories into forms those with privilege and power know how to hear. Those of us who have such privilege also need to expand to whom and how we listen.

Fiction and poetry enable this necessary expansion and connection.

Scholars such as Elizabeth Ammons, Kimberly Ruffin, Jeff Myers, and Joni Adamson use environmental justice literature to discuss the intersectionality of environmental justice and argue that “a fully ecocentric worldview places the human individual in a relationship of interconnection, involvement, and responsibility with all beings, human *and* nonhuman, making ecocentricity the

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<sup>6</sup> Although not explicitly wedded to a particular sense, Nixon’s project emphasizes visibility.

basis for both ecological sustainability and social justice” (Myers 10).<sup>7</sup> As we come to better understand the systems of power that create interconnected, cumulative harm, it becomes more apparent the degree to which environmental degradation and social inequity are linked.

Andrew Dobson’s 2014 political science text, *Listening for Democracy*, builds on the earlier work of Susan Bickford to show the importance of shifting expectations of democratic communication away from speakers. “The onus has always been on those who want to be heard to make their point in the face of generalized resistance to inclusion,” Dobson states. “Dialogical democracy aims to turn the tables on this resistance by installing a presumption in favour of ‘listening out for’ potential political voices” (35). *Listening for Justice* builds on this political argument to demonstrate that literary texts are essential for learning to ‘listen out’ because of their ability to expand readers’ understandings of who has a voice to be heard. Although Dobson extends his argument to ecological communities, his description of other-than-human beings as “mute nature” makes clear the need to further rework conceptions of the listenable. Writers such as Simon Ortiz and Louise Erdrich use poetry and prose to show that nature is not mute; many humans just aren’t listening. The conviction that those who do not speak Human are “mute” only perpetuates the destructive distance between humans and all other beings. Indeed, the storytellers of climate change are not just

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<sup>7</sup> See Elizabeth Ammons’ *Brave New Words* (2010), Kimberly Ruffin’s *Black on Earth* (2010), Jeff Myers’ *Converging Stories* (2005), and Joni Adamson’s *The Middle Place* (2001).

ecologists. They are also fireflies and wind, hot springs and goats. Discussing the legal challenges of recognizing the rights of other-than-human beings, Cormac Cullinan argues, “We must observe and listen carefully—‘listen’ in the sense of fully experiencing the richness of life and the universe around. In order to reconceptualize the role of our species and how we govern ourselves, we must set aside our prejudices, theories, and limiting views of what is possible” (128). Like many of the authors discussed in *Listening for Justice*, Cullinan emphasizes that working toward earth justice requires paying better attention to our biotic communities and challenging the West’s legal and philosophical system which presumes that only humans (and often only certain humans) deserve justice.

Listening is not only a matter of intention; it also takes time. In *Children, Citizenship, and Environment* (2012), Bronwyn Hayward points to the necessity of shifting our conception of time in tandem with revaluing listening: “to change our minds, let alone effect political transformation on a broader scale, we need to listen as well as talk. However, listening takes time, and for minority groups in particular, this process of explaining their world view to another, and trying to ensure that dominant groups listen, can be very draining on limited resources” (126). In a society that associates efficiency and speed with progress (e.g. time is money), the additional time needed to promote a listening-based culture is difficult to justify. In *undercurrent*, Rita Wong describes attending a community meeting where a one-hour listening session with indigenous elders filled the entire day because listening time was given to all who wished to share

(*undercurrent* 72). Rebalancing the roles of listening and speaking therefore not only requires a mental shift, but also a reconsideration of how we understand a “good use” of time.

Environmental justice poet Simon Ortiz warns us not to wait too long to start listening because listening is not the end point. In an interview with Joseph Bruchac, he explains that listening is not the way “to find any secrets or sudden enlightenment”; rather, it is the way to “understand how we are, who we are, what we know, what we’ll come to know” (216). We cannot think of speaking as the active part of communication and listening as the passive.<sup>8</sup> Listening for justice does not just mean working to listen beyond assumed narratives and voices; it also means connecting that listening with the world and acting on what we hear.

Although this dissertation focuses on the spatial and temporal microcosm of North American texts from the 20th and 21st century, the emphasis on listening it identifies in environmental justice texts extends beyond the borders I have drawn. Indeed, its theoretical interest in listening and listeners is not wedded to environmental justice literature; rather, I hope that this particular attention promotes a new level of attention to how listening figures in literature and biotic communities overall.

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<sup>8</sup> As a buzzword for therapists, “active listening” can mean “nonattached” listening or listening “with nothing else going on in your mind” (McCall 1). Conversely, the active or, ultimately, activist listening I describe acknowledges that we are simultaneously listeners and speakers and that we are profoundly involved in the discussion at hand.

Because what we imagine to be possible is inextricably linked to what stories we hear, Chapter One, “Listening to Our Animal Kin,” considers how Western patriarchal power structures rely on mishearing and not listening to maintain control. I show how the textual creation of spaces for listening to voices declared “mute” in the European philosophical tradition promotes environmental justice. In particular, this chapter considers the ways rethinking dominant cultural narratives can promote alternative modes of listening that position other-than-human animals as our kin rather than senseless automata. Incorporating insights from animal ethicists and behaviorists, I demonstrate how refusing to listen to other-than-human beings eliminates the need for response and argue that we therefore must expand how and to whom we listen. Reading Simon Ortiz’s short story “Distance” (1999) and Timothy Findley’s *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984), this first chapter considers two narratives dominated by powerful patriarchs whose violent acts are closely linked to their refusal to listen. Meanwhile, these narratives also rumble with alternative modes of communication in which listening enables justice throughout a community of human and other-than-human beings.

In “Distance,” Ortiz offers the possibility of reading the characters metaphorically by closely linking the goat George with his Mexican seller. However, when Ortiz concludes the story by having the young girl learn to listen to George rather than her domineering father, he asks us to expand our listening to include other-than-human animals for their own sake. In doing so, he undermines

the wisdom of Western authority which attempts to force everyone into one version of understanding. Animal scholar Laurie Shannon describes how Descartes discounted animals as global citizens with legitimate rights because they cannot testify that they have thoughts or a soul. Yet, as fellow philosopher Montaigne asks, “Why may [‘that defect which hindreth the communication betweene them and us’] not as well be in us, as in them?” As Shannon concludes, “Speaking only counts if it means speaking to us and in our language” (15). Whom we admit for a hearing deeply impacts our justice system. Although this issue is very obvious in the case of other-than-human animals, it bears on how we think about who is and isn’t heard in human communities as well. If we, like Descartes, assume that if we can’t understand or hear something, it doesn’t exist, how does that impact our perceived need for activism or change?

Timothy Findley’s novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage* uses a retelling of the biblical flood story to address the intersections of gender, speciesism, and the environment as they relate to one of Western ideology’s foundational allegories. Examining how networks of communication function in the novel, I argue that listening that resists hegemonic power structures is key not only for social justice, but also for deep ecological health. Findley contrasts Noah’s obsessive adherence to what he interprets as God’s signs with his routine dismissal of every other living being. In so doing, *Not Wanted* illustrates the vital ecofeminist struggle to recognize “that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology

that sanctions the oppression of nature” (Gaard 1). By orienting the novel around Mrs Noyes (Noah’s wife) and Mottyl (a mostly-blind cat), Findley asks readers to hear old tales again, listening for who has been drowned out. I claim that *Not Wanted* links the Western patriarchal cultural script with a distancing from the environment that Patrick Murphy describes as recognizing the environment as “some big outside that we go to” rather than as rooted in “interrelationship” and “recognition of the distinction between things-in-themselves and things-for-us” (Gaard and Murphy 5-6). In rewriting this foundational story of the West, Findley unmoors many Western assumptions about what is ‘good’ for the earth, its inhabitants, and their future, inciting readers to listen anew.

In the second chapter, “Listening to Landscapes,” I argue that Louise Erdrich and Gloria Naylor present listening to plants and elders in order to cultivate a sense of place that promotes healing and environmental justice. Their novels, *The Birchbark House* (1999) and *Mama Day* (1988) emphasize that this listening is not automatic and must be actively learned. Drawing on the writings of Potawatomi ethnobotanist Robin Wall Kimmerer and other plant scholars, I demonstrate how these texts ask readers to rethink assumptions about plants based in Western epistemology in order to consider them as community members rather than materials.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew Hall discusses the complex philosophic efforts to turn plants into materials, claiming that “it is not unreasonable to conclude that plants are backgrounded, rendered as passive and mute, in order to achieve human domination” (25).

Rather than learning *about* plants, the authors in this chapter ask what we can learn *from* them. Louise Erdrich's young Anishinaabe protagonist must learn to understand herself as part of her biotic community through listening to her elders, be they human, bear, or birch. Through Omakayas, Erdrich calls on readers to wonder how much they are not hearing other-than-human communication because it is not happening and how much because humans are not being quiet enough to hear beyond themselves. Put in conversation with Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Erdrich's novel reframes ways of listening to offer alternative ways of knowing. As storyteller Annette Simmons explains, "A story delivers a context so that your facts slide into new slots in your listeners' brains. If you don't give them a new story, they will simply slide new facts into old slots" (51). By offering a different story from the dominion over nature narrative of frontier novels such as *Little House in the Big Woods* to which it responds, *The Birchbark House* allows readers to listen in a way that promotes environmental justice for the entire biotic community.

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) addresses the awareness a speaker must have of his or her listener's willingness to listen and argues that listening is essential to individual, social, and environmental survival. The novel's preface frames it as a story that is heard: "Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own. But you done just heard about the legend of Sapphira Wade, though nobody here breathes her name" (Naylor 10). Building on the lineage of works such as Charles Chesnutt's conjure tales and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their*

*Eyes Were Watching God*, Naylor's novel asks that its readers accept truths beyond those dictated by white-dominated science and economics. Cast as a listener in the opening pages, the reader encounters the honed listening practice of Mama Day and the developing skills of her granddaughter Cocoa and grandson-in-law, George. A great deal of information exists in the world that we are not attending to, *Mama Day* tells us. As Cheryl Wall writes, "[the novel] emphasizes that anyone who can hear the sound of that culture can partake of its balm" (1451-2). Listening enables cultural and environmental healing. In order to make the decisions necessary to survive and to promote justice, we must listen.

But, especially as biotic communities are ravaged and relocated, such listening for environmental justice is not always intuitive. Chapters Three and Four filter Rob Nixon's vision-dominated conception of slow violence through sound studies to examine environmental justice and audibility, particularly portrayals of noise pollution and silence. I analyze how negative environmental impacts disproportionately harm marginalized communities.

Chapter Three reads Ann Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007) in conversation with other Appalachian texts such as Mark Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009) and Virginia Hamilton's *M.C. Higgins, The Great* (1974) to discuss the challenge of listening amidst the noise of perpetual mine blasts and company broadcasts. "Listen Here" examines the difficulty of sorting through many sounds and voices of a community and environment disrupted by exploitative industry. I show how hard truths can paralyze rather than motivate

and how hegemonic power structures work against learning that is rooted in a particular place. Listeners in Ann Pancake's novel *Strange as this Weather Has Been* must distinguish sounds that do or don't promote environmental justice and decide to act on what they hear. By shifting narrators, *Strange* illustrates how the same sounds of mountain top removal mining can be heard and responded to differently. The novel reiterates the importance of listening for knowing what is happening and posits that listening is a skill most or all have, yet is frequently forgotten or misdirected without continued practice and valuing. The novel considers how identity influences whether or not people listen and act, and it offers important depictions of the relationship among gender, land, and vitality in the face of capitalistic, mechanistic development. I argue that listening also provides an essential component of community activism because it acknowledges those already expressing their needs and enables community members to collaborate.

In my final chapter, "Re-Sounding Silence," I argue that listening for environmental justice ultimately involves remembering ways of hearing voices in conversation with each other, rather than at the expense of one another. I begin with Rita Wong's water and environmental justice inspired poetry collection *undercurrent* (2015), arguing that Wong uses wordplay, juxtaposition, and quotations to illustrate the need to hear many voices in order to comprehend the complexity of environmental justice issues. As Catherine Bates, one of the few scholars who has published on her earlier "eco-indictment" collection *forage*

writes, “Wong’s foraging poetic insists upon recognizing the connections between the discourses, objects and ideologies she has found” (199). In particular, Wong considers how environmental communication functions as boundaries dissolve and the residues of current decisions accumulate in the future. To help (re)learn a sense of place-specific listening, Wong’s poetry asks readers to listen to the indigenous languages of a particular place in order to remember ourselves as part of a deeply-rooted, interconnected system.

The importance of memory for listening for justice becomes particularly apparent in the resonant silences of M. Nourbese Philip’s abstract poem *Zong!* (2011), which incites readers to listen to the multiple meanings and histories within each word of the archive. This cacophonous “anti-narrative” poem reshapes and re-sounds words from the 1783 legal decision *Gregson v. Gilbert* regarding the massacre on the slave ship *Zong*. Its poetics illustrate that present environmental justice cannot come without addressing past environmental injustices. As Laura Groening explains, “the world of history and the world of literature are simply not that easily separated, not because literature is more realistic than postmodernists allow but, rather, because of the extent to which history is shaped by and filtered through the human imagination” (156). Philip encourages an imaginative act of listening to silences for the echoes of voices. Reading *Zong!* through the filter of listening studies and environmental justice emphasizes the ways that the silences caused by environmental racism and

ecocide are born of the same power structures that would have society forget injustice and pass over enforced silences as simply the spaces between meaning.

*Zong!* and *undercurrent* complicate listening for environmental justice by listening backward and forward in time, reminding readers that environmental justice works on a timescale far beyond that of a single human life. As such, environmental justice requires not only hearing the current conversations, but also hearing the voices removed from the past and kept from the future. These silences are hardest to listen to, but most necessary to realize given their ability to show what has been and can be lost. In his introduction to *Listening to the Land*, Derrick Jensen asks, “How do we remember how to listen? Would we live differently if we listened to the voices of the species we are causing to go extinct?” (2). To hear what is missing, we must know to listen for its absence. This emphasis on memory is particularly important for addressing climate change, which depends on our attending to differences between the past and present.

In the Afterword, I share from my experiences as an educator and think about how we as writers, educators, and community members can promote environmental justice by learning and remembering to listen. Throughout the writing of this project, I have worked with college students, fellow instructors, and K-12 students to increase place-based learning and to help students and teachers learn to pay attention to their biotic community. I ask, how are the humanities furthering or hindering the promotion of environmental justice? In her beloved musing on environmental education, *A Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson

writes, “If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow” (56). The environmental humanities pedagogy I discuss seeks to enrich this soil and to challenge humanities educators to question what assumptions of listening, place, and environmental justice guide their practice. In reframing ourselves as listeners, we can begin to create communities in which everyone not only has a voice, but also feels heard.

CHAPTER ONE

**Listening to Our Animal Kin:  
Resisting Boundaries in Simon Ortiz’s “Distance”  
and Timothy Findley’s *Not Wanted on the Voyage***

*[Kinship] has to do with the realization that we are all beings on the same earth, and that we all need the same things to flourish. Water, for example. When I pay attention to how birds interact with water, or how mosses interact with water, or how lichens interact with water, I feel a kinship with them.*

-Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Two Ways of Knowing”

When asked to describe the traits of a character in Louise Erdrich’s novel *The Birchbark House*, two of my three second grade students chose an other-than-human animal, but then turned to me to check that this was admissible—can a bear count as a character? I reassured them that within the epistemology introduced by *The Birchbark House*, they had made an excellent choice. Erdrich’s novel adeptly introduces other-than-human animals as brothers and friends. Bears, crows, dogs, and chickadees are described as persons with distinct characters and

relationships within the community. Realizing that other-than-human animals are not simply pets or food is part of growing up. Young Omakayas, for example, must learn to accept that her friend Andeg is not a pet crow, but an independent being who lives his own life; his life includes her, but does not revolve around her. It is part of her process of developing as a character to accept this less egocentric understanding of the world.

For much of my life, listening to animals was something done only by children and cat ladies. It was a mode of interacting with the world that most people grew out of, and rightly so, society implied. In this epistemology, listening to animals is necessarily anthropomorphizing, and anthropomorphism is decried as childish or egocentric. One of the main markers of literature aimed at adults is the disappearance of other-than-human animals as significant characters. Those that do make it out of the children's section are often thinly masked emissaries of a political position or human psyche, such as the totalitarian pigs in Orwell's *Animal Farm* or the repulsive bug in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. These other-than-human animals emphasize a distance from or negation of humanity. Those rare animals that do inhabit adult literature as themselves rather than as symbols often have significance only for their loyalty or companionship to a human, representing a hierarchical relationship in which animals such as dogs or horses are only important because of their devotion to humans (the play *War Horse*, for example). These stories often represent other-than-human animals as sympathetic, but they do not portray them as listenable.

Yet, in declaring any animal that communicates or has complex feelings as being human-like, we make an egocentric division of human and animal as having no common traits or behaviors. One animal studies scholar, Amy Ratelle, describes how she watched Western education work to quash the “interspecies affection and identification” that she saw in her home by denying “subjecthood to animals” and configuring “relationship[s] situated in love and mutual respect as delusional or wishful thinking” as her children ‘progressed’ in school (1). For indeed, our understandings of how humans relate to other animals are taught, not intrinsically known. By accentuating the distinctions between humans and other-than-human animals, we can more easily justify a society which depends on the abusive treatment of many animals and the refusal to listen to any outcry as communicating legitimate suffering. The more we emphasize our distance, the easier it is to condone not listening.

Making other-than-human animals into subjects can indicate a broader understanding of the relationship between humans and other animals. Native writers and thinkers regularly remind us that humans are not separate from our biotic communities. We are animals and animals are people. In her introduction to *All Our Relations*, Winona LaDuke reminds readers that,

Native American teachings describe the relations all around—  
animals, fish, trees, and rocks—as our brothers, sisters, uncles, and  
grandpas. Our relations to each other, our prayers whispered across  
generations to our relatives, are what bind our cultures together.

The protection, teachings, and gifts of our relatives have for generations preserved our families. These relations are honored in ceremony, song, story, and life that keep relations close—to buffalo, sturgeon, salmon, turtles, bears, wolves, and panthers. These are our older relatives—the ones who came before and taught us how to live. (2)

LaDuke writes of the profound connection between all members of a community and the need for understanding this connection. By thinking of animals as our *older* brothers and sisters, we remember that they have much to teach us about how to live and how to promote behaviors and thinking that further environmental justice for the entire biotic community. As we become separated from other animals, either because of their growing scarcity or our cultural distancing, it becomes increasingly difficult for us to build the relationships we need to heal the earth and our communities. As LaDuke and the authors discussed in this chapter make very clear, this denial of kinship is both delusional and deadly.

The realization of kinship, as writers such as LaDuke and Linda Hogan share with us, does not come from scientific observation, with its emphasis on objectivity, evidence, and classification. In *Dwellings*, Hogan describes herself as once “an outsider” to the world: “I only watched,” she explains. “I never learned the sunflower’s golden language or the tongues of its citizens. I had a small understanding, nothing more than a shallow observation of the flower, insects, and birds” (157). But, as Hogan continues her narrative, she describes the process

of moving beyond watching in order to listen to the world. “I heard a beat,” she remembers, “something like a drum or heart coming from the ground and trees and wind. That underground current stirred a kind of knowing inside me, a kinship and longing, a dream barely remembered that disappeared back to the body” (158). Now, as she continues her walk, she is “listening to a deeper way” (159). Although she continues to attend to the world with all of her senses, listening proves essential to her development of a sense of biotic relationship.

Throughout *Listening for Justice*, we follow the transition of characters, authors, and texts that shift from the predominantly visualist mode of attending to the world taught by the patriarchal Western system to an alternative epistemology that emphasizes communion and listening. In the epic poem *Omeros*, Derek Walcott’s figure Ma Kilman literally takes off the church hat and wig that mark her adherence to Catholicism and a racist social structure in order to listen anew to her world and find new modes of healing.

[...] Carefully, she set both aside

on the coiled green follicles of moss in the dark  
wood. Her hair sprung free as the moss. Ants scurried  
through the wiry curls, barring, then passing each other  
the same message with scribbling fingers and forehead  
touching forehead. Ma Kilman bent hers forward,

and as her lips moved with the ants, her mossed skull heard

the ants talking the language of her great-grandmother,

the gossip of a distant market, and she understood,

the way we follow our thoughts without any language,

why the ants sent her this message to come to the wood

where the wound of the flower, its gangrene, its rage

festering for centuries, reeked with corrupted blood,

seeped the pustular drops instead of sunlit dew

into the skull, the brain of the earth, in the mind

ashamed of its flesh, its hair. (243)

Ma Kilman takes off the racially and religiously-coded attire that distances her from the ants (hear also, “aunts”) and prevents her from listening to them speaking the language of her ancestors. The poem emphasizes the socially constructed structures of distance that inhibit listening and notes how this prevention of listening keeps Ma Kilman from finding a cure for Philoctete’s wounded shin by trapping her in an epistemology that belittles her knowledge and elicits shame.

Inside the building of this racist, misogynistic system, Ma Kilman does not listen to the ant.

On the varnished pew

of the church, she remembered the frantic messenger  
that had paused, making desperate signs, its oars  
lifted, but she had ignored the deaf-mute anger

of the insect signing a language that was not hers (244)

However, once she enters the woods, she learns to listen and thus to connect not only with the ant, but with her ancestral community more broadly. She learns to understand their stories as interweaving vines.

but now Ma Kilman, her hair wild, followed the vine  
of the generations of silent black workers, their hands

passing stones so quickly against the white line  
of breakers, with coal-baskets, with invisible sounds,  
and the cries of the insects led her where she bowed

her bare head and unbuttoned the small bone buttons  
of her church dress.

Throughout *Listening for Justice*, we attend to such moments of departing from the structures that bind and distance interspecies communication as well as empowering connections across communities or with ancestors. The rejection of

these inhibitions on listening provides new spaces for connection and, thus, resistance.

Indeed, once Ma Kilman has listened to the ants/aunts and freed herself from the bounds of her church dress mindset, the false distinction between humans and all other animals (so important to the Christian faith) dissolves. Struck by the agony of the awareness that accompanies this reconnection, she “baye[s],” “screech[es],” and “howl[s],” her “dugs shifting like the sow’s” (245). The emerald lizard hears her, “remembering the sound” (245) and Philoctete’s pain drains after she “pray[s] in the language of ants and grandmother” (245). As each of the authors in *Listening for Justice* makes clear, listening is not the easier path. With listening comes acknowledgement of suffering and awareness of the interconnected systems of violence that perpetuate environmental destruction and social injustices. Yet, such listening also creates opportunity for new modes of paying attention, alternative paths, and deep healing of the emotional as well as the physical wounds caused by environmental injustice.

Increasingly, animal behaviorists are also asking us to rethink the boundaries we have placed between humans and all other animals. Taking a more qualitative than quantitative approach to their animal studies, these biologists often receive criticism from their peers for projecting too much humanity onto the animals they study. However, as Carl Safina writes in *Beyond Words* (2015), an animal behavior book written for a general audience, “By banning what was

considered anthropomorphic, the [earlier animal] behaviorists perpetuated the opposite error. They helped institutionalize the all-too-human notion that only humans are conscious and can feel anything” (27).<sup>10</sup> Such thinking resists the results of the Cartesian thought experiment, whose assumption of nothing unless proven has heavily influenced our Western conceptions of other-than-human animals as reflexive automata (Allen). Assuming an animal *can't* feel, if there is no way of knowing for certain, enables cruelty and disregard for their individual and collective needs. Safina joins other major animal behaviorists and ethicists such as Jane Goodall and Marc Beckoff in claiming that we should think the opposite: conscious until proven otherwise.

Although this increasing call to understand other-than-human animals as *whos* rather than *its* from within the scientific field is encouraging, our rethinking of how we relate as humans to our biotic communities still requires development and broader reach. In particular, animal ethicists often emphasize a need to *speak for* the “voiceless” animals rather than asking humans to better listen to the communications they are already voicing. For example, Marc Beckoff reminds readers in the conclusion of *Animal Matters* (2007) to “Remember, we are the voices for voiceless animals” (166). This framing continues to position other-than-human animals as unlistenable, and thus, under the protection of humans

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<sup>10</sup> From discussions with professionals in neuroscience and biology, I’ve understood that the notion that animals can suffer or feel pain is generally accepted. What remains debated is whether animals such as mice have sufficient cognitive capacity to process this pain such that it becomes unethical to impose.

rather than full members of a broader community. Yet, scholars such as Bernie Krause and Steven Feld offer particularly compelling descriptions of learning to listen to natural soundscapes through patience, the guidance of indigenous elders, and open-mindedness. For example, Krause notes a gorilla attack that he could have avoided had he “known to listen more attentively” to the warning calls (56). The perception that other-than-human animals are “voiceless,” we begin to understand, is largely the result of not knowing how or bothering to listen.

The authors I address in this chapter ask their readers to realize that declaring animals voiceless or choosing to no longer listen to animals is not a sign of maturity, it is a marker of patriarchal violence. This violence is enabled by humanity’s constructed dissociation from other beings. Although there are innumerable children’s stories that emphasize the importance of listening to animals, Simon Ortiz’s short story “Distance” from *Men on the Moon* (1999) and Timothy Findley’s novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984) are remarkable because they assume an adult audience. They also differ from novels such as Barbara Gowdy’s *The White Bone*, which make other-than-human animals their subject, but erase humans from their world. Although Gowdy offers a compelling narrative of elephant community and consciousness, it takes up the elephant-centric perspective by dropping a human presence. The rare depictions of humans focus entirely on their violent effects and do not demonstrate the potential for humans and elephants to listen to each other as members of a shared system.

Undoubtedly, creating a space for adult readers that offers the potential for listening to other-than-human animals receives push-back, especially when such listening is not simply playful, but necessary for justice. *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, for example, was criticized by a critic who proclaimed it laden with “sentimental trappings” because of its anthropomorphism (Webb 230). Associating listening to animals with sentimentality adheres to an inveterate culture of non-listening to those perceived as Other that furthers misogynistic structures of communication. Particularly given Findley’s public announcement his homosexuality in the decade before publishing this novel, the criticism of his work as “sentimental” also plays into stereotypes of gay men and listening as effeminate. Lauded as a feminist text, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* critiques a system that justifies only listening to power: namely, to a god it has itself created.

Literature such as “Distance” and *Not Wanted on the Voyage* asks readers to question these norms of listening taught in elementary school and often calcified by the Western canon. Coming from two very different approaches and backgrounds, Ortiz and Findley ask readers to stop letting the voices of those in power drown out everyone else. Showing the violence and destruction enacted by patriarchal social structures, both authors ask us to instead listen to our animal relations for guidance in creating a more just community. Listening to other-than-human animals means understanding that these animals are also beings with a place in the world and that their voices should not be ignored simply because it is convenient for us to do so.

Both Ortiz and Findley's texts also make clear arguments for better listening within human communities. Both members of minority groups, Ortiz and Findley use the case of listening to other-than-human animals as a particularly jarring polemic for the argument that a great number of beings from all species are speaking out without being listened to in the current system. What is more, these authors emphasize how built structures (literal and figurative) create distance and boundaries between beings such that listening proves ever more difficult. Like Walcott's *Ma Kilman*, their characters must reject the dominant system in order to listen beyond and realize how the distinction between listening to humans and other beings itself dissolves.

In this chapter, listening takes on a particular emphasis of acknowledging the speaker as a fellow subject rather than an object. In "Distance," a young girl learns to listen to the goat George as telling a more accurate version of the world than that of her father. *Not Wanted on the Voyage* retells the biblical flood story such that readers may listen to the voices of the beings disproportionately impacted by Yaweh's wrath; Findley highlights the unthinkable violence enabled by Dr Noah Noyes' refusal to listen and offers a healing alternative through Mrs Noyes increased attention to her fellow animals instead of to the raving patriarch.

Sometimes represented as literal words and sometimes as interpretable sounds, the listening portrayed by Ortiz and Findley grounds itself in the knowledge that animals are our kin and should be attended to accordingly. Listening may not require exchanging human words. When Linda Hogan

encounters and listens to a tufted titmouse, for example, she remarks that the titmouse “insistently called to me again—although I did not hear in words what she said” (*Walk* 29). Hogan listens to the titmouse even though they do not share a language, and she grants what she eventually realizes is the bird’s request for some hairs for her nest. Similarly, the characters in these texts realize that just because a being does not speak Human, does not mean it is “voiceless.”

Neither Ortiz nor Findley offer utopian listening success stories. Rather, their stories predominantly narrate injustice; as a result, they provoke resistance and the desire to do otherwise in their readers. Their writings open a space that encourages readers to think about how they relate to the other-than-human animals with whom they share life and how they might listen to them as community members rather than materials. Like Hogan and Walcott, these authors ask us to admit the possibility that communication will find its way across language barriers if we relocate ourselves outside the strictures of Western epistemology and listen in earnest. It is in listening to other-than-human animals as our relations that the characters in these stories find the courage to stand up against structures of injustice and environmental destruction.

## Hearing from a Distance

*Story listening is about slowing down and learning  
to listen with our hearts, not with our heads.*

-Larry Littlebird, "Listening Ground"

Written over several decades, the stories of *Men on the Moon* draw from Ortiz's life experiences, particularly his identity as a member of the Acoma Pueblo community (ix). Ortiz writes of stories and storytelling as profoundly powerful—"we exist because of it" (viii). Stories are not just to entertain, but to teach and build relationships with the world. In his introduction to *Speaking for the Generations*, Ortiz writes of the reminder often given to the young by their elders: "these lands and waters and all elements of Creation are a part of you, and you are a part of them; you have a reciprocal relationship with them" (xiv). "Distance" draws on Acoma Pueblo teachings related to those described by LaDuke in *All Our Relations*; upon reading or listening to the brief story, we are undoubtedly meant to rethink the relationship between humans and other-than-human animals.

In "Distance," Ortiz undermines the West's monolithic knowledge system by arguing that sometimes we must refuse to listen to the dominant narrative in order to listen to those it drowns out. "Distance" tells the story of George, a goat, a little girl and her father (both humans are unnamed). That George is the only

named character in the short story immediately signals to readers the attention this story gives to the assumptions of importance and individuality among human and other-than-human animals. Just after he is bought, George knocks down the little girl, and she scrapes her knees. In response, the little girl's father ties George up away from the water to "teach that old goat something" (164). At first, George seems to "ignore" the inaccessible water trough and the hard rope around his neck (163). The little girl accepts her father's vengeful "lesson." Although she pities George as sweltering days pass and he loses his initial heartiness, her father's "soothing voice" quells her concern (164). It is comfortable to listen to her father. Their exchange is marked by terms of endearment indicating their relative positions in the social hierarchy:

At their noon meal the girl asked her father, "When are you going to let George loose, Daddy?"

The father looked at his little girl, and he smiled and said, "When George learns, sweetheart, when George learns not to be so mean." (165)

The little girl places her faith in the assumed wisdom of this smiling patriarch, though it is apparent to George and the reader that his lesson is one of slow and callous cruelty. Ortiz's short story describes how the socially constructed distance between the young girl and George must be crossed in order for her to learn to listen to him as meaningful and to resist the structures that had prevented their communication.

On a particularly clear night, the girl sees George's still shadow by the shed. Because every other scene has happened during the blistering heat of the day, the lingering emphasis on the radiant full moon notes that this is a time of power reversals and shifting perspectives. Often associated with women because of menstrual cycles and other-than-human animals because of their frequently better night vision, the moon hovers over an environment released from the masculine symbolism of the sun-bright scenes.<sup>11</sup> Through this shift, "Distance" indicates the structural influences on how we pay attention to our environment and fellow beings. At first, the little girl seeks comfort by attempting to ignore this other way of inhabiting the world; she "crawl[s] deep under her covers" trying to avoid the disturbing sight of a still shadow in the yard. When it becomes too hot, she "cover[s] her eyes with her hands" instead. "But she couldn't sleep," Ortiz writes. Instead, "She listened" (166). Only after she listens to the "very quiet night," does the little girl act beyond posing tentative questions to her father. She rushes over the sharp pebbles to reach George, only to find herself too weak to untie the hard rope: "there was no way to undo it." She changed her attention too late. In the end, she can "only whisper, I'm sorry, I'm sorry" to dying George (166). That the little girl talks to George in the end marks an important shift in her awareness of him. Throughout the text, dialogue is marked with the standard

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<sup>11</sup> Animal scholar Laurie Shannon discusses the understanding of nighttime as the time of other-than-human animals at length in her chapter, "Night-Rule: The Alternative Politics of the Dark; or, Empires of the Nonhuman" from *The Accommodated Animal* (2013).

quotation marks. Yet, when the little girl apologizes to George these are not used. This seems to mark a different mode of communication that does not rest on the assumption that discourse is only what fits within the bounds of quotation marks. Although she hears him bleating earlier in the story, here she finally acknowledges his consciousness by apologizing to him; no longer just hearing George, she chooses to listen to him.

When the sun goes down, the little girl listens beyond the authorized partition of the perceptible; she hears George as an equal with whom she can communicate. When she whispers, “I’m sorry,” she acknowledges his ability to perceive justice. She assumes that George hears her apology for his unreasonable punishment. Of course, we could read this scene more cynically, taking the little girl’s apology as being spoken more to appease her own guilt than as an acknowledgment of kinship with George. My goal is not to refute such a reading, but to challenge us to admit the possibility of another one. If it were unquestionable that George could understand and appreciate the little girl’s words, then this essay would not need to be written. It is the cases where we are prone to assume non-listening that must be studied.

It is essential to my point that George’s bleating remains worth hearing for his own sake. By linking George with his Mexican seller, Ortiz offers the option of reading the story metaphorically as commenting on US/Mexico border relations and water justice. Yet, as animal scholar Laurie Shannon writes, it is necessary to defend literal readings of animals rather than to assume that “all

textual animals labor equally under the yoke of human symbolic service” (5). This critique of a symbolic reading is important because it is in understanding George as part of the community—as someone who can be listened to—that Ortiz underscores the relationship between human and other-than-human animals.

The story of “Distance” is a too-familiar one. At some point, we will not be able to hide under our covers any longer—like the little girl’s bed, our world will get too hot. Ortiz’s story warns us not to wait too long to start listening beyond the dominant narrative because listening is not the end point. In this case, listening reframes the system such that action becomes possible: it is in listening to George that the little girl realizes the injustice of his punishment and works to reverse it. As storyteller Larry Littlebird (Laguna/Santo Domingo Pueblo) explains, “listening is the first step to making th[e] discovery that everything is connected” (in Cajete xi).<sup>12</sup> As Ma Kilman finds upon listening to the ants, Littlebird describes how listening helps us to attend to the relationships among beings and stories.

By putting the emphasis on listening rather than on speech in this reading, we realize that injustice continued not because there was a lack of outcry from George, but because there was a lack of listening. When the little girl listens to her father, she conforms to gender and age stereotypes that declare women and children should listen while men speak. Once the little girl listens to George rather than solely to her father, however, she decides to enact justice. But, she did not

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learn to listen outside the dominant power structures until it was too late for George. Ortiz shares his stories with “a younger generation of readers and listeners” because they might “learn something” from them (*Men ix-x*). Although the little girl is too late, the readers and listeners of Ortiz’s story need not wait. Instead, they might, like the little girl, look “fiercely into [the father’s] eyes and past him and into a great distance beyond” (*Men 167*). *Listening for Justice* takes on the fierce determination of this little girl, seeking alternative ways of understanding how we listen and relate to the world in order to promote justice.

One of the greatest challenges presented by this call to listen is the determination of when not to listen. Listening to elders is often part of the listening that promotes healing, but listening to the father in this story permits brutality. The emphasis on listening to all our relations helps to distinguish between those elders that offer wisdom and those that incite violence. Listening beyond humans helps us to determine who is supporting the health of the entire biotic community, not just the profit of a few humans. As such, listening to other-than-human animals not only provides the wisdom of these ancient relatives, it also helps us to listen to the voices of our fellow humans. *Listening for Justice* emphasizes listening beyond the literal or figurative father in order to bring attention to those whom he has drowned out. The disproportionate attention given to powerful, patriarchal voices means that we must make dogged efforts to create space for listening to other voices.

## Structures of Listening

*The defect which hindreth the communication  
betweene them and us, why may it not as well be in  
us as in them?*

-Michel de Montaigne,

“An Apologie Of Raymond Sebond”

Similarly to “Distance,” Ontario author Timothy Findley’s novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage* presents and protests a world dominated by an unlistening patriarch. Findley’s retelling of the biblical flood stresses the constructed boundaries that prevent listening and the potential for promoting alternative modes of listening that strengthen community and accept diversity by inhabiting a space outside of this structure. Like the father in “Distance,” Noah models extreme non-listening. Noah’s hierarchy-maintaining interactions illustrate the connection between non-listening and violent power structures. Throughout the novel, listening to other-than-human animals disrupts patriarchal power and develops interspecies relationships. Findley does not present listening across species as something that happens effortlessly; it requires belief, patience, and effort.

By rewriting a keystone of the Western canon, Findley implicitly addresses how the refusal to listen pervades such monologic narratives; a retelling

asks for a relistening. Findley's novel demonstrates the degree to which patriarchal structures enforce modes of non-listening that perpetuate and justify violence. Listening is not inherently good or non-violent, just as speech is not inherently good or bad. Rather, it is the denial or subordination of either that perpetuates structures of injustice. We are used to thinking of speaking up as a mode of resistance. We must also think about the power of listening to promote social and environmental justice.

*Not Wanted on the Voyage* revels in instances of collaborative meaning-making and attentive interspecies listening. Written predominantly from the perspective of Mrs Noyes (Mrs Noyes is the only character never given a first name) and Mottyl (a cat), *Not Wanted on the Voyage* asks its readers to listen into silences of the biblical allegory and acknowledge that it wasn't just like that. Set during the lead-up to the flood and the first weeks on the ship, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* communicates a world vibrant with life, community, and conversation.

The distance between humans and other living beings in Findley's antediluvian world seems variable, but never very great. Throughout the novel, there is a deep interest in dismantling the constructed boundary that divorces humans from other-than-human animals in conventional Western ideology. As the flood rains begin, Mrs Noyes encounters a person trapped by the raging river: the ape-child Lotte. Although Lotte's parents are human, she resembles an ape. Dr and Mrs Noyes also had an ape child ("Adam"), but they murdered him because his existence as proof that humans are animals terrifies Noah. Mrs Noyes rescues

Lotte and brings her aboard the ark, feeling atoned for her drowned child, only to watch Noah trick his militant son, Japeth, into murdering Lotte. One more ape-child appears near the end of the novel when Hannah, Noah's eldest daughter-in-law, gives birth to Noah's stillborn child. The ape-children emphasize connection rather than distinction between species; they are literally the humans' relations. Their repeated reappearance speaks to the folly of denying this relationship and the graphic violence necessary to maintain denial.

These passages link mindsets that depend on the separation of humans and other-than-human animals with the brutality necessary to maintain this boundary. Donna Haraway's bold declaration that teaching creationism is an act of "child abuse" becomes horribly literal in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*: the ape-children are killed in order to maintain the illusion of Man as apart from all other beings. The aim is not to make "irrational denials of human uniqueness" as Haraway puts it, but to offer a "a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture" (293). Throughout the novel, Noah works to sever while Mrs Noyes struggles to heal the relationships between human and other-than-human animals. For, the more Noah can distance himself from other-than-human animals, the more easily he can excuse maltreatment and experimentation on them by refusing to listen to their outcry as significant.

Communication between humans and other-than-human animals occurs throughout *Not Wanted on the Voyage*. For example, Mrs Noyes teaches songs to the sheep, and Mottyl understands her human housemates. Variations of

quotation, italics, and capitalization make it difficult to determine what is spoken aloud, and the novel pushes readers to question their assumptions about what is literally happening. A text of magical realism, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* blurs the reality of communication among species, asking readers to notice how these boundaries are constructed and to accept that more might be real than seems rational. For example, Findley leaves no ambiguity in the novel's beginning that Mottyl hears the words and not simply the sounds of Mrs Noyes and her family.

“Mumble -- mumble -- mumble . . .” This was all the reply that Mottyl could hear from under the table.

“And where might Emma be?” said Mrs Noyes (30).

The contrast between the muffled voice and Mrs Noyes's articulated one makes clear Mottyl's level of understanding. In addition to the humans, she also hears the other local animals and the mysterious whispers that seem to be some combination of demanding hormones and wise guides. For Mottyl, more than any other character in the novel, listening is essential to life. Almost entirely blind due to Dr Noyes' experiments, Mottyl relies on her ears to survive.

Although Mottyl's attention to the humans is clear from the beginning, the degree to which Mrs Noyes or any other humans attend to other-than-human animals as listenable remains ambiguous until the flood waters begin to rise and the different systems of power and listening are made literal. Old and decrepit, Mottyl was not wanted on the voyage. But, Mrs Noyes will not leave without her and searches for her in the heavy rains. In order to find her friend, Mrs Noyes

listens to and follows Crowe to where Mottyl has hidden in a tree. Any skepticism that Mrs Noyes is imagining her exchanges with the other-than-human animals dissolves at this point. Mrs Noyes' exchanges with Crowe do not make sense if she is simply speaking to animals *as if* they can understand her. Rather, she gains new information from Crowe (186) and is only able to find and rescue her best friend because she decides to listen to this voice.

Noah's dominant system of limited, hierarchical listening weds itself to claims of rationality. When Mrs Noyes returns to the ark with Mottyl hidden from Noah's prying eyes, he declares,

“So. You have come to your senses at last.”

“Yes . . .”

Noah grills Mrs Noyes for over a page about whether she found her cat (she claims Mottyl has died) and to ensure that she plans to behave herself on board. He is correct when he declares that she has “come to her senses,” but these are not his so-called rational senses. Rather, she has come into her physical senses in her quest for Mottyl that depended on listening. The novel highlights how mind and body are disconnected in Noah's epistemology, putting sense and senses in opposition rather than as part of the same human being.

Although *Not Wanted on the Voyage* portrays those who listen beyond Noah's rationalized violence, it also admits the challenge and potential exhaustion that stems from this broader listening. Not listening to those less powerful than oneself maintains the status quo and avoids discomfort. Like Ma Kilman who

cries out in agony when she listens to the ants, Mrs Noyes laments her attentive listening when Noah picks a beloved sheep for sacrifice. Both people hear the same sound before the killing, but only one listens to it as coming from a fellow being. Unlike Noah, who doesn't perceive the sheep's cry as indicating fear or pain, Mrs Noyes listens to it as the suffering of a friend. How someone is heard does not depend on the volume so much as on the intention and habits of the listener.

The most striking instances of listening for justice appear in the spaces outside or in opposition to Noah and his hyper-structured ark. Refusing to board without the missing Mottyl, Mrs Noyes throws off her figurative church hat and tromps across the soggy countryside in search of her friend. She feels that "civilization was falling away from her shoulders, and she was gratified" (Findley 146). As the flood waters rise, Mrs Noyes thinks she hears the Faeries stranded by the raging river. "Faeries? By the river?" she thinks, "It was unheard of. They never went to the river" (150). But rather than assuming because she hasn't heard of it previously, it couldn't be what she's hearing now, Mrs Noyes listens harder and begins to converse with the faeries that are indeed present. Unable to either see or feel the Faeries, she is nevertheless "certain they were near her" (150). Twice, Mrs Noyes hears a "sheet of noise," which she interprets as coming from the Faeries. This is not to say that Mrs Noyes imposes meaning where there was none previously—*Not Wanted on the Voyage* definitely believes in Faeries. The faeries represent the possibility of accepting something as real that is not provable

by Cartesian-based systems of rationalism as well as hinting at those who are excluded from normative society. Rather than “hearing things,” Mrs Noyes has sufficiently shed the systems that would restrict her modes of paying attention and listens to them as fellow beings.

Listening to the Faeries also requires a quieting of self. Mrs Noyes feels glad that “she had almost lost her voice” for “Human voices of certain kinds—and every voice, if raised—could blast the Faeries like a hurricane and lift them into the trees” (151). Mrs Noyes knows that she is in a position to easily drown out the Faeries. Used to being in charge of many other beings, Mrs Noyes needs to learn to listen. When she first finds the Faeries, Mrs Noyes warns them that they should return to the safety of the woods. It feels efficient to give advice. And, hers would be a valid suggestion, except that the Faeries, trapped from their food source, are too weak to fly. Meaning to be helpful, Mrs Noyes ends up patronizing the Faeries because she does not fully understand the context before showering more ‘wisdom’ on the already drenched Faeries. However well-meaning, reasoning that precedes listening often ends up imposing structures without accommodating for necessary modifications or collaboration. The exchange of Mrs Noyes and the Faeries points to the absurdity of universal fixes. How could Mrs Noyes know what they need better than they themselves do?

*Not Wanted on the Voyage* offers a potential alternative to the advice-giving scenario. After offering her two cents, Mrs Noyes again hears that indescribable sound like “wind chimes—but not . . .” and asks, “Yes?” (151).

With this question, she offers to listen to what the Faeries need rather than attempting to provide them with solutions (152). Like Linda Hogan listening to the titmouse, Mrs Noyes realizes she can listen to the Faeries even if they do not speak the same language. The Faeries respond by boarding her “like the ark” (152). For a few moments, Mrs Noyes becomes their ark, one very different from the wooden behemoth atop the hill. This ark takes all the Faeries, not just two, and warns them to stay away from the pockets that might get dangerously wet during the crossing. The Faeries tie themselves into Mrs Noyes' hair, taking a lofty, interwoven position that contrasts with the dank, sequestered lower decks reserved for the animal “cargo” of Noah’s ship. As Mrs Noyes becomes a ferry for the Faeries, the bounds that differentiated them acoustically slip, though they remain independent beings. Listening, as Hogan and Findley share with us, provides a space for those in need to direct their aid rather than having it imposed upon them.

The shift in Mrs Noyes’ conversational method (i.e. hollering advice to asking how to help) precedes a parallel spiritual shift. After Mrs Noyes delivers the Faeries safely to forest, she kneels down and lowers her head “as if in prayer, until it touched the earth” (155). This prayer follows thanks to the river and overt rejection of the absent Yaweh, marking Mrs Noyes spiritual turn away from Noah’s patriarchal, monologic religion. As she watches the Faeries disperse into the forest, she wonders “how it was that she had paid so little attention to the trees in her life” (156). Mrs Noyes' changing value system accompanies a shift in her

attention. In response to her kneeling, “There was a swelling sound of chiming: very glasslike—very definite: a cheer! *Thank You*” (155). The longer she spends with the Faeries, the more definite their communication becomes. No longer is the text written as if she is interpreting the noise of the Faeries. Instead, the italicized words “*thank you*” have their own line, distinct from any framing by Mrs Noyes. A timid optimism exists in this development of their communication: noise can become meaningful sound with reframing, patience, and shared effort.

The living ark Mrs Noyes creates by listening and responding to the needs of the Faeries contrasts the built ark that justifies genocide and segregates its inhabitants. Revived by their time in the forest, the Faeries attempt to board the already shut ark. As they approach, they make a sound “that fell on the waiting ears [of the unboarded animals] like a familiar shout, though, in fact, it was little more than a whispered sound: like bits of glass that are blown in the wind” (192). The local animals had all grown up listening to the Faeries and “almost everyone had been rescued” by them (192). Their sound is loud in the ears of those who find it familiar and protective. Yet, even as the entire animal population minus two per species hears the Faeries, one wonders, “Do you think anyone will hear them?” (192). The animals barred from the ark understand that what they all hear does not count in this situation. According to Noah’s system, they aren’t “anyone.” The animals think, “perhaps Mrs Noyes, who was kind—or Ham or the Angel Lucy would look out through the cracks and see or hear the Faeries. And—if the Faeries were admitted—would the doors not open then to everyone?” (192).

The doomed animals hope that the Faeries will lead the path of everyone to safety within the ark, not realizing (or, perhaps, not admitting) that the ark was constructed without enough room for everyone on purpose.

The ark takes on a certain persona in this moment of mass rejection. The Faeries' voices and lights gradually extinguish until they all were "silenced and removed from life and from all that lives forever. And the bell tolled—but the ark, as ever was adamant. Its shape had taken on a voice. And the voice said: *no*" (193). This final stated "*no*" directly opposes the questioning "Yes?" that led into Mrs Noyes' communication with the Faeries in that it does not open a space for listening to a response. The ark not listening to them is not a matter of chance but the result of constructed distancing. Its embodiment of structural violence is "just another manifestation of the craziness" that everyone else expects of Noah. At the peak of his power, however, Noah doesn't care what anyone thinks, because "they would drown—and with them, their opinions" (116). He does not need to listen to them because they aren't going to make it anyway. To what extent are those who critique current structural violences treated similarly—why does causing sea level rise matter if we control the high ground? Findley's treatment of the ark asks readers to consider how often "not hearing" the outcry of people suffering disproportionate harm is not accidental, but the direct result of institutions that enforce and benefit from non-listening.

These two passages juxtapose two arks: one fosters listening while the other resists it. Mrs Noyes' version models interspecies communication and

cooperative solutions to environmental and social disaster, whereas the built ark incurs genocide and extinction. Justice begins with listening even before action is taken. In a book on the ethics and postmodernism of Findley's novels, Dagmar Krause notes that "humans are portrayed as the creators of their own destruction" in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (108). Yet Krause's use of Noah as a synecdoche for "humans" is precisely the problem the novel addresses. Humans are not the creators of their own destruction in this story; one privileged human is the creator of everyone else's.<sup>13</sup>

Justice comes from shared listening that incorporates many distinct voices. An interest in building rather than winning a conversation creates room for collaboration where only opposition or stalemates were previously available. The attempt by those on the ark's upper deck to sever connections contrasts the collective meaning-making that happens outside the ark and below decks. When Mottyl falls to the bottom of the ark and again gets lost, Mrs Noyes has everyone sing to help Mottyl find her way home, thinking "maybe she'll hear us" (Findley 231). As the song travels from animal to animal, its verses accumulate the needs of its singers: light for elephant, a wallow for rhino, some gin for Mrs Noyes... This song helps Mottyl, while also comforting everyone below deck. Its

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<sup>13</sup> The problems with Krause's generalizing synch parallel those of the commonly employed term "Anthropocene" to describe our current climate as one influenced by human action without acknowledging the disproportionate influence of a very small portion of humanity that has engineered these effects.

collaborative construction epitomizes how in a listening framework “you have to be more interested in building-meaning-through than in being right” (John Stewart 236). Each interlocutor gives up some level of control over the whole, but, in doing so, opens up space for everyone to participate and for ideas to grow beyond any one participant’s vision. Though the walled ark attempts to segregate those it has designated “cargo,” this scene demonstrates the healing that grows from coalition-building. Their song does not incite radical change, but listening across species below decks offers encouragement and strength.

Collective storytelling and listening builds a context that extends beyond any of the individual stories. As Leslie Marmon Silko writes in “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination,” communal storytelling and listening enables cultural health and survival. Mottyl notes how gathered “tales of escape” of the local residents provide safety for the other-than-human animal community—being an attentive listener could be the difference between having lunch and being it (41). These stories provide the options needed to engage with a dangerous problem. Those responding to climate change and environmental injustices need many stories. We are too easily trapped into the promise of a single story in which many voices are ignored or forgotten. Those who wish to make one story *the way* to combat these many issues end up limiting their ability to work with other groups and of realizing unexpected collaborations. As political theorist Susan Bickford writes: “Listening opens up the chance that something else will happen” (4). Of course, those who disproportionately benefit from the current

system have little reason to listen; they have reason to maintain the status quo. Resistance to the injustice of the ruling system thus requires listening outside of its dominant narrative for alternative ways of understanding, engaging with, and relating to the world.

The longer Mrs Noyes inhabits the ark, the harder it is for her to think outside of its confines. In one of the novel's final scenes, Mrs Noyes attempts to draw the ark's sheep back into song. Before the flood, she joined the sheep in various hymns and popular tunes, but this attempt goes quite differently. She starts to lead them in *I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen*, only to realize she's forgotten the words (346).

“Baaaa . . .” said one of the sheep at her feet.

“What?” said Mrs Noyes.

“Baaaa . . .” said the sheep.

Mrs Noyes began to laugh. “What a curious sound,” she said, “*Baaaa*.”

“Baaaa . . .” said the sheep.

“I know,” said Mrs Noyes. “Much, *much* better! We'll sing

*The Skye Boat Song*. All right?”

Upon exhorting the sheep to sing, Mrs Noyes again only hears “Baaaa”s.

“Baaaa!”

“Baaaa!”

“Baaaa!”

They were all saying it. All of them—the ram, the sheep,  
the lambs . . .” (346-347)

Despite her pleas and continued singing, the only response Mrs Noyes receives from the sheep is more baaaa-ing. The sheep have lost their ability to sing, she thinks. And, yet, each time Mrs Noyes asks something of the sheep, they respond. When she sings, their baaaa-ing becomes italicized just as her voice is. When she begs Daisy to “please--*please* sing . . .” Daisy immediately replies, “*Baaaa*” (347).

How might a listening-centric interpretation shift the way we read this scene? We would wonder if the deficiency is not in the sheep’s ability to sing, but in Mrs Noyes’ ability to listen. What if it is Mrs Noyes, not the sheep who has changed? If this were the case, then the response would be to teach Mrs Noyes to listen, not to teach sheep to speak.<sup>14</sup> A listening framework helps move us away from the assumption that any struggle to communicate across communities or species is due to a problem with the speaker.

What impels this lost ability to listen to the sheep’s sounds as meaningful? Mrs Noyes and her fellow rebels had just before forced their way to the top deck and finally achieved an equal physical position with Noah and his followers. She

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<sup>14</sup> For example, consider the research impacts of this shift of framing in dolphin studies. Unlike the ill-fated work of early animal behaviorist John Lilly to teach dolphins to speak English, the current work of Denise Herzing and those of the Wild Dolphin Project takes a listening-centric approach by attempting to learn Dolphin.

brings the sheep up onto the top deck to teach them to sing, carrying some of the new lambs into the sunshine for the first time. Even as it appears a success, Mrs Noyes' move to the top deck does not undo the hierarchy embodied by the ark. Rather, she simply raises her own position within its system. Change for the individual can happen by moving between decks, but the entire system must be abolished in order for actual change to occur. The dominant epistemology of the top deck has decreed that other-than-human animals are “cargo”—objects to be used for privileged human purposes, unrelated to humans and unlistenable.

By retelling a major story in the Western canon, Findley asks readers to listen for what is missing in the monolithic narrative dictated by the Western canon. The novel begins with an epigraph from Genesis about Noah and family entering the ark, immediately followed by responsive text: “EVERYONE KNOWS it wasn’t like that. To begin with, they make it sound as if there wasn’t any argument; as if there wasn’t any panic—no one being pushed aside—no one being trampled—none of the animals howling—none of the people screaming blue murder” (Findley 3). It is not simply that voices were not included in the Biblical text. Findley emphasizes that “they make it *sound* as if” these voices did not exist, period. They make it sound as if silence is natural rather than imposed. And yet, he begins by writing that “everyone knows” otherwise. Why, if everyone knows otherwise, would this story need retelling? Why does it matter, then, how it “sounds”? The answer depends on the importance of how we listen. If we listen

passively, as hierarchal culture demands that we do, then what we know doesn't matter. We are the little girl soothed by her father's reassurances, even though she sees George dying. Findley asks us to listen as the little girl does in the moonlight, to move beyond the orderly strictures of the Biblical narrative and listen for kinship. He claims, "To survive, we must imagine more" ("Everything" 165). *Not Wanted on the Voyage* questions the bounds of perceived reality and the frameworks by which those with power dictate truth and define community. Findley rewrites the flood story in response to the "suffering" and "excruciating consequences" of the 'sanctified' Biblical version. If such allegories profoundly impact the world, so might there be power in revising them.

In encouraging readers to pay attention to what must be missing from the Biblical flood story, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* asks readers to listen differently to all such stories. These narratives depend on society accepting their constructed silence. Retellings are often valued for bringing in new voices, which is indeed an important act. Even more necessary, however, is this underlying principle of encouraging readers to reimagine the contexts of traditional stories such that they listen not only to what is told, but also to what is omitted—an idea we will return to in more depth in Chapter Four's discussion of *Zong!*. Although more often read through queer studies than ecocriticism, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* proves a fruitful space for considering listening and environmental justice because of its interest in the mentalities and normative power structures that shape the relationships of among beings. It contributes to environmental scholarship by

examining the ways normative narratives and underlying confines of the imagination contribute to a lack of listening and environmental injustice.

Although it ends with a loss of listening, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* offers a tinkling faerie bell of hope: arks that are built can be taken apart; escape methods learned by one person can be shared with another. Both within the web of the text and as a response to the canon, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* underscores the constructed nature of how we listen and the potential for unbuttoning the church dress, striding into the forest, and listening to all our relations.

### **Listening to Resist**

*I'm glad I understand that while language is a gift,  
listening is a responsibility.*

-Nikki Giovanni, *Racism 101*

The stories of “Distance” and *Not Wanted on the Voyage* do not offer idyllic visions of a lasting alternate world where listening to other-than-human animals is consistently valued and enacted. Rather, they both share moments of resistance to the dominant patriarchal system. In these instances, the distance that separates beings collapses. Ortiz and Findley’s stories help readers perceive the damage enabled by hierarchical modes of communication that refuse to listen to

certain humans and other-than-human animals, pushing readers to question why they assume that certain beings cannot communicate and whether this conclusion is based on reality or on the desire to maintain power and justify violence.

What we research and thus declare to “know” depends more than we admit on what we imagine to be possible and how we design our studies in relation to these assumptions. In field biologist Barbara Smuts’ description of her time with a troop of baboons in an essay response to J.-M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, she remarks on her realization that her intention to objectively observe the baboons is impossible. The baboons never had this misconception, she admits, “Right from the start, they knew better, insisting that I was, like them, a social subject vulnerable to the demands and rewards of relationship” (110). Soon enough, she not only interacts with the baboons as fellow persons (a term she employs and explores throughout the essay), but also listens to their communications and learns from them how to navigate the forest by “abandoning [her]self to their far superior knowledge” and “mov[ing] as a humble disciple” (109). Smuts describes how personhood depends on the acknowledgement of a relationship between beings, such that “when a human being relates to an individual nonhuman being as an anonymous object, rather than as a being with its own subjectivity, it is the human, and not the other animal, who relinquishes personhood” (118). The relationships Smuts forms rely significantly on learning ways of listening past her preconceptions of the distance between beings.

Ortiz, Findley, and the other writers of this chapter ask their readers to reconsider the definition of kinship, relationship, and personhood in light of an awareness of how these concepts have been limited to enable injustice and exclusion. In listening beyond those structures, we cultivate alternate ways of relating that promote equity.

CHAPTER TWO

**Listening to Landscapes:  
Ecological Healing in Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark  
House*  
and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day***

*The future of our planet has its roots in the stories  
we tell: we need new narratives that reinforce the  
necessity of cooperation, of reciprocity, of respect  
for all beings, and of living within ecological limits.*

—Robertson and Westerman,

*Working on Earth*

Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* (1999) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) challenge readers to lean in and listen. Though they draw from different traditions, both depict nature's connection with ancestors and healing through a deeply-rooted place-based epistemology. The texts remind us that, in addition to new narratives, we need to hear the narratives that already exist. Emphasizing voices of plants and ancestors, Erdrich and Naylor's novels reinforce the idea that cultivating respectful modes of understanding our world depends on remembering and listening to old stories. In *The Birchbark House*,

plants are themselves ancestors—the older brothers and sisters of humans. In *Mama Day*, human ancestors become part of the landscape, communicating in the rustling of leaves and the whispers of an ancient garden. Even as both novels depict plants as medicines to be harvested by the novels' protagonists, they stress the importance of regarding these plants as beings to be respected rather than as materials to be accumulated. The novels ask that readers attend to traditional knowledge as voiced by other-than-animal beings and by ancestors, describing the deadly stakes of not listening to these experienced voices.

That plants communicate with each other is not a new idea, though it has gained considerably more attention in recent years as scientific priorities and technologies have shifted (“What”). The introduction to the *Nature* documentary “What Plants Talk About” (2013) notes the ridicule often inspired by studies of plant “behavior,” acknowledging the continued questioning of this topic’s validity. The film, however, takes a strong stance, declaring that “from nurturing their young to eavesdropping on their neighbors, it seems plants are doing and saying quite a bit [...]; we just need to listen.” Although this statement introduces humans as listeners, the content of the program prioritizes communication within plant species rather than among species and poses human scientists as snooping auditors rather than respectful interlocutors.

By contrast, indigenous ethnobotanist Robin Wall Kimmerer presents her life-long study of human and plant interactions in her biological memoir, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013). Rather than asking “what is it?” about a plant, Kimmerer

encourages her readers to ask a plant, “who are you?” (42). In this switch from interacting with a plant as a material (“what”) to a being (“who”), Kimmerer makes a linguistic shift that allows humans to communicate *with* plants rather than only *about* them. She describes, for example, the practice of asking a basket weaving tree to offer itself for harvest and ways of listening to and understanding the tree’s response; the tree could very well say “no,” and the harvester would have to move on to ask elsewhere. Combining her knowledge as botanist, essayist, Potawatomi tribal member, and listener, Kimmerer asks her readers to weave together strands of indigenous and scientific knowledge through storytelling and active listening. She cultivates gratitude and respect for the natural world and repeatedly articulates modes of interacting with plants as persons rather than as substances. In these claims, Kimmerer echoes the wisdom of Leslie Marmon Silko in “Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit,” which discusses the relationship among all things, noting that “a rock has being and spirit, although we may not understand it” (1) and that human beings are “viable” insofar as they are able to “imagine themselves as sisters and brothers to the badger, antelope, clay, yucca, and sun” (6). These connections to story and landscape, she explains, are “alive again within us, within our imaginations and our memory, as we listen” (8).

In the wake of the recent upsurge in Animal Studies, a few scholars have begun extending their arguments on biopolitics and ethics to plants. Michael Marder’s *Plant-Thinking* (2013), *The Philosopher’s Plant* (2014), and *Through*

*Vegetal Being* (2016, co-authored with Luce Irigaray) and Jeffrey Nealon's *Plant Theory* (2015) provide introductions to the burgeoning field of what we might call vegetal philosophy. Based heavily in the Western philosophic tradition of scholars such as Aristotle, Foucault, and Derrida, these texts introduce plants as a lacuna in philosophic thought, which often obscures or omits plants in its Aristotelian hierarchy from rocks to humans. These contemporary philosophers use plants to disrupt metaphysical assumptions of identity and free will, asking readers to question not how human-like plants are, but rather how plant-like humans are. Yet, they deal very little with plants as individual beings or with the subject of plant-human communication.

It is undoubtedly more convenient to regard plants as non-beings. Since we are unable to photosynthesize, our survival depends on consuming plants. And, as ever more humans live in urban areas distanced from the land that produces our food, clothing, and other goods, harvesting with respect becomes ever more neglected. If we admit plants as beings, must we think of ourselves as vicious plant-killers? Most likely, this question sounds ridiculous. But, do the discomfort and unfamiliarity of this question mean that it is not worth asking?

Declaring those with economic value to be 'non-beings' without basic rights is a foundational enabler of Western imperialism.<sup>15</sup> In the poem, "Map" from *Book of Medicines*,

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<sup>15</sup> Jeffery Myers discusses this destructive materialism/imperialism in regards to Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* in his book on early American Environmental Justice literature, *Converging Stories*.

Linda Hogan describes the process of “men / who brought hunger / from other lands” coming in fear to an unfamiliar world. Rather than hearing the world’s inhabitants speaking their own languages, these men tried to trap them in new names. The poem begins:

This is the world  
so vast and lonely  
without end, with mountains  
named for men  
who brought hunger  
from other lands,  
and fear  
of the thick, dark forests of trees  
that held each other up,  
knowing fire dreamed of swallowing them  
and spoke an older tongue,  
and the tongue of the nation of wolves  
was the wind around them.  
Even ice was not silent.  
It cried its broken self  
back to warmth.  
But they called it ice, wolf, forest of sticks,  
as if words would make it something

they could hold in gloved hands,  
open, plot a way  
and follow. (37)

In this opening stanza to the poem, Hogan notes the linguistic shift attempted by the newcomers. Seeking to control the world around them, they attempt to name it as graspable material. The gloved hands imply a perceived need for protection and a distancing. Rather than listening to the world's sounds directly, the men impose a linguistic and physical barrier. However, Hogan's depictions of knowing trees, dreaming fire, and crying ice are those of vibrant beings with their own stories and purposes. To what degree, the poem asks us, are the words that classify plants and other parts of the earth as inert materials the consequence of fear and greed?

Hogan concludes the poem with rumbling potential:

There are names each thing has for itself,  
and beneath us the other order already moves.  
It is burning.  
It is dreaming.  
It is waking up. (38)

In these final claims, the poem exhorts the reader to realize that the earth is not what humans make of it. It is what it makes of itself. In his nonfiction work *The Control of Nature*, geologist John McPhee studies human attempts to confine nature for the convenience of material productivity. Yet even as the engineers seek to control nature as a material entity, they begin to describe it as an adversary—a

being rather than a thing.<sup>16</sup> Rather than listen to the Mississippi, the Army Corps of Engineers puts ever more resources into attempts at controlling the river's course. Instead of seeking to live in conversation with nature, the communities McPhee describes try and fail to dictate the relationship, exhibiting a deadly deafness.

What does it mean to listen to plants or rocks or ice? At times, this listening remains a literal acoustic practice. Leaves rustle. Ice cracks. Much of the time, however, this listening cannot depend on sound waves. At this point, the meaning goes back to the Germanic root of listening, *hlysnan*: "to pay attention to." This deeper form of listening requires a precise, patient attention rarely taught or valued in contemporary Western society. In his 2004 article, "The Stones Shall Cry Out: Consciousness, Rocks, and Indians," George "Tink" Tinker explores the "disjunction between the worldviews of American Indian and Euro-Western cultures with regard to Western scientific, religious, and commonsense knowledges," particularly in regards to what is perceived as animate or inanimate (105). He begins with plants:

Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they'll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people

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<sup>16</sup> McPhee quotes the narrator of an U.S. Army Corps of Engineers film about controlling the course of the Mississippi: "This nation has a large and powerful adversary. Our opponent could cause the United States to lose nearly all her seaborne commerce, to lose her standing as first among trading nations. . . . We are fighting Mother Nature. . . . It's a battle we have to fight day by day, year by year; the health of our economy depends on victory" (7).

don't listen. They never learned to listen to the Indians, so I don't suppose they'll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees; sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit. (105)

Tinker notes that those who do not even listen to other members of their own species are unlikely to listen to those of other species or those that they do not regard as animate. Yet Tinker does not write that white people *can't* listen. In that distinction lives the hope of the novels I discuss here. There are those who already know how to listen beyond themselves. Often, these are the elders in indigenous communities and those from communities that have actively resisted Westernizing their modes of thinking and communicating, such as the Gullah community depicted by Naylor in *Mama Day*. However, those who do not already know how to listen can learn to do so. Notably, although neither Naylor's nor Erdrich's novel describes a white person learning to listen, their texts are addressed to all readers, an audience quite likely to include many who have been raised in Western epistemologies.

Even though ecocriticism attends to plants and other elements of nature, I wish to push this attention further by beginning with the understanding that plants are beings, not materials or settings. I ask, as Kimmerer does, not what we can learn *about* plants, but rather what we can learn *from* them. In *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry notes: "We are talking only to ourselves. We are not talking to the rivers, we are not listening to the wind and stars. We have broken the great

conversation” (59). The novels I discuss are among those that attempt to revive this conversation—to portray a world in which we listen beyond ourselves.

My goal is to contribute to the rapidly growing field of Sound Studies, particularly those that analyze ecological soundscapes. I join scholars such as Don Ihde, R. Murray Schafer and Veit Erlmann who maintain that sound has been devalued in academia to the detriment of our understanding of environment and community. To an even greater extent than the more often discussed dismissal of animal voices, current cultural listening practices in the West perceive the sounds of the other-than-animal living world as noise, lacking in intent. Kimmerer notes the tendency in science to equate a Western white male worldview with neutrality. “Science pretends to be purely rational, completely neutral, a system of knowledge-making in which observation is independent of the observer. And yet the conclusion was drawn that plants cannot communicate because they lack the mechanisms that animals use to speak” (Kimmerer 19). I respond to this neglect by arguing that environmental healing requires that we expand our definition of listening beyond the framework of sounds produced by animal mechanisms in order to listen to plants and the earth more broadly.

Further, as is well-known, the racist grip on language described by Kimmerer has perpetuated the ruse of “neutrality” by restricting many groups of people from engaging in environmental discourse. As Kimberly Ruffin argues, people of African descent have often been refused space in conversations about nature. She notes that “verbal art is crucial to understanding the ways in which

African Americans have engaged ecology because it has been an imaginative tool that allowed African Americans to insist on sophisticated relationships with human and nonhuman nature despite the social scripts that have denied their authority to do so” (12). The intricate portrayal of the Willow Spring’s biotic community and the deep environmental knowledge of its residents in Naylor’s *Mama Day* challenges the disregard of African American ecological authority highlighted by Ruffin, instead illustrating the necessary work of a Black community to retain and communicate its local knowledge in the face of racist ideologies and practices. Likewise, Erdrich’s *The Birchbark House* dwells in the deep environmental knowledge developed through generations of living on Lake Superior and learned from listening to the wisdom of elders, both human and other-than-human. Both Erdrich and Naylor make clear arguments in their texts that environmental literature must not be limited to the Edward Abbeys of the world.

Listening to plants and the earth is deeply linked with spirituality for Erdrich, Naylor, and many others who approach the subject. Often, listening to other-than-animal beings demands an understanding of the world that accepts information from sources far distant from direct human-to-human exchanges, with spirituality offering an otherwise untenable point of connection between humans and other beings. In noting this spiritual connection, I acknowledge the importance of accepting knowledge from beyond scientific routes to “truth” as key to an environmental understanding that promotes healing.

Although Western science's tendency to pull pieces apart in order to study them in isolation has brought innumerable insights, we increasingly see the importance of studying communities and individuals within their contexts, as Wendell Berry so eloquently defends in his essay "Reductionism." Novels such as *Mama Day* and *The Birchbark House* ask readers to realize that more connects us than meets the eye. In listening, we can begin to sound the depths of our biotic relationships.

### **Plant Beings**

*And I think there is another language, the forgotten language of the land. Its alphabet is the elements themselves, carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen. The words are living beings and its syntax is connection. There is a flow of information, a network of relationship conveyed in rising sap of cedars, in tree roots grafted to fungi and fungi to orchids, orchids to bees, bees to bats, bats to owls, owls to bones and bones to the soil of cedars. This is the language we have yet to learn, and the stories we must hear, stories which are*

*simultaneously material and spiritual. The archive of this language, the sacred text, is the land itself. In the woods, there is a constant stream of data, lessons on how we might live, stories of reciprocity, stories of connection. Species far older than our own show us daily how to live. We need to listen to the land, not just for data, but for wisdom.*

—Robin Wall Kimmerer,

“Interview with a Watershed”

Louise Erdrich’s chapter book, *The Birchbark House*, narrates the daily life of 8-year-old Omakayas, an Anishinaabe girl living on the Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker in Lake Superior in the mid-1800s. The first in a trilogy depicting Omakayas’ coming of age, *The Birchbark House* presents readers with traditional Anishinaabe ways of knowing and “implicitly critiques Euro-American assumptions about humanity’s supremacy over nature and the importance of individualism, as well as a generalized Western tendency to accept stark divisions between the sacred and secular realms” (Gargano 28). Described by one scholar as a literary example of counting coup by reconceptualizing U.S. household standards such as Wilder’s *Little House in the Big Woods* and Brink’s *Caddie Woodlawn*, *The Birchbark House* offers a “critically instructive” response to these pervasive frontier narratives, celebrating Anishinaabe history and

storytelling (Stewart 216). Though Erdrich's critique of the U.S.'s westward expansion on Omakayas and her community develops throughout the series, I focus on the first novel because of its emphasis on introducing readers to Anishinaabe epistemologies and practices.

Although praised by educators and reviewers, Erdrich's *Birchbark* novels have received minimal attention from scholars. What exists centers on their response to the children's literary canon (Stewart), their portrayal of variant gender roles (Latham), and their depictions of traditional oral storytelling practices (Gargano). Considering Erdrich's oeuvre more broadly, Catherine Rainwater notes Erdrich's drive to "revise not simply the record of the past, but the shape of the future, by reinscribing the audience with new rules for constructing self and world" (xii), a process born from oral storytelling traditions and threaded throughout *The Birchbark House*'s depictions of interspecies communication and the intersection of listening and healing (*Fiery* xii; "Yellow" 8).

*The Birchbark House* disrupts the assumptions modern Western readers might hold about plants from its first pages. When Omakayas ventures out with her grandmother to gather birchbark for their summer home, Nokomis reminds the young girl of the importance of asking the tree for her bark and of thanking "Old Sister" for her gift. In this simple exchange, the novel stresses that humans are not the only persons present in the world of the story, even if they are its current focus. As Silko writes of the squash blossom in "Yellow Woman and a

Beauty of the Spirit” the birch in Erdrich’s novel “is one thing: itself” (2).

Listening to Sister Birch identifies humans and plants as kin, rather than adhering to a more Judeo-Christian-based Western environmentalist framework which locates humans as the stewards and namers of voiceless nature. Unlike frontier novels such as *Little House in the Big Woods* which “implicitly compares the indigenous peoples to wild animals” by claiming that there were “no people” in the Wisconsin woods (Stewart 219), Erdrich shows the woods brimming with people—human people, bear people, birch people. For ecological health, the issue is not so much, as Stewart writes, the implicit comparison of indigenous peoples to animals, but rather the degree to which the Westerners conceive of themselves as *apart from* rather than *part of* the landscape, perceiving themselves as subjects and all other living beings as objects.<sup>17</sup>

Curious, I decided to discuss this passage with a group of 2nd grade readers. I had prepared myself to meet their questions about why Nokomis spoke with the tree and to offer alternative modes of understanding the world so that this book could be read by them as realistic fiction rather than fantasy. But, I overestimated the degree to which Western constructions of reality have taken hold in early elementary years. My preparations proved more necessary for me than for my young students. Still full of wonder for the living world, they had not found it in the least counterintuitive that someone would thank a tree. This lesson

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<sup>17</sup> See William Cronon’s “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” for a consideration of the tendency to put humanity and nature in opposition to each other such that humans are not part of “authentic” nature.

helped me to realize the training we undergo to distance ourselves from nature.<sup>18</sup> Rather than seeing ourselves as part of nature, as a human body among fellow animal and plant bodies, as children do, we are trained in the Western philosophic tradition which stresses boundaries, individuality, and hierarchy.<sup>19</sup> Anthony Doerr presents a compelling reflection on how the false distinction made between “Human” and “Nature” is disrupted by the trillions of microbes that inhabit us, that *are* us: “To even write that you are ‘you’ and the microbes are ‘them,’” he explains, “is, perhaps, a failure of pronouns” (“The New You”). Books such as *The Birchbark House* help to remind readers that placing humanity on a separate plane from the rest of the earth is *a* worldview, not *the* worldview. Further, as Doerr notes, this Cartesian worldview increasingly proves to be not only ethically and ecologically unsound, but also scientifically unfounded.

*The Birchbark House* offers a coming of age narrative in which Omakayas, in order to become a fully functioning adult in society, must learn to listen and know other-than-human beings as elders and friends, not as materials or pets. Erdrich depicts listening as an advanced skill that children are expected to

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<sup>18</sup> See environmental educators such as David Sobel (*Beyond Ecophobia*), David Orr (*Earth in Mind*), and Richard Louv (*Last Child in the Woods*) about the distancing of children, and ultimately adults, from nature encouraged by standard(ized) educational practices. These writers also look at current efforts to reverse this trend.

<sup>19</sup> David Gruenewald discusses the potential of bringing together critical and place-based pedagogies to address this ecojustice problem of contemporary education practices in his article, “The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place.” Like Myers, Gruenewald emphasizes the link between the subjugation of people and of the land, as both are rooted in the institutional and ideological domination of capitalism and colonization (6).

hone as they mature. In the novel, it is the result of a selfish refusal to listen to use materials without asking, to hoard them, and to demand that animals serve only as pets rather than respecting them as people with independent lives.

Her family wracked by smallpox, Omakayas seeks medicine in the forest and begins to hear unknown voices. She asks herself, “What were these voices? What did the whispering mean?” She hears how “the sounds of voices, small and whispery, still floated from the depth of the woods” (203). As Nokomis listens to Omakayas describe what she’s heard, she smiles; Nokomis knows that her granddaughter has been chosen to be a healer. The child asks her grandmother why she only sometimes hears the voices of the plants and why they seem to all talk at once. “I think they talk to each other all the time,” Nokomis responds, “but our minds are not always peaceful enough to hear them” (207). Here, Nokomis expresses the distinction between not having a voice and not being heard. What has shifted is not the plants’ ability to speak, but Omakayas’ ability to listen. Kimmerer makes a similar argument when she writes, “I suppose that’s the way we humans are, thinking too much and listening too little. Paying attention acknowledges that we have something to learn from intelligences other than our own. Listening, standing witness, creates an openness to the world in which the boundaries between us can dissolve in a raindrop” (300). This is not an argument for giving voice to the plants; it is an argument for quieting ourselves enough to hear the voices that are already present.

The scene in *The Birchbark House* is not anthropomorphizing plants. As in Hogan's poem "Map," the plants have a language of their own. They remain plants *and* speak. Omakayas hears the voices of plants and talks to the bears, but this does not make her plant or bear. She is her own self. Toward the end of the novel, Omakayas encounters the urge to humanize Andeg, the crow she has raised from a fledging; meanwhile, Andeg tries to woo her with a "sweet and gurgling sound," as if she were a bird (217). Eventually, Omakayas talks with Andeg. She acknowledges his affection, concluding, "I love you, but I'm not a bird" (217). This passage reminds us that interspecies communication does not mean that the interlocutors are any less their own selves, no less human, no less birch tree. In fact, the location of this acknowledgment at the conclusion of this coming of age novel shows that it is through awareness of these relationships that one matures.

The novel ends in an idyllic scene as Omakayas, still grieving her baby brother's death to smallpox, lies in the spring grass and listens to the sounds of birds and the earth. As she listens, she hears her brother in the spring songs. "Omakayas tucked her hands behind her head, lay back, closed her eyes, and smiled as the song of the white-throated sparrow sank again and again through the air like a shining needle, and sewed up her broken heart" (239). This last scene depends on listening to heal. The voices of those who have passed become part of the sounds that can be heard with a quiet mind. Omakayas is restored not from seeing the beautiful earth come to life with new buds, but by closing her eyes to attend to the soundscape that surrounds her.

The call to listen to plants is not about never using them nor is it about humanizing them. Instead, it is about perceiving plants as deserving respect as beings with wisdom of their own, wisdom which can help humans to heal physically, mentally, and spiritually. Kimmerer describes how we think about scientific learning regarding plants, rejecting the common construction of experiments as “discovery,” and instead conceptualizing experiments as being “about listening and translating the knowledge of other beings” (158). Plants are our ancestors, and they carry with them the voices of our human relatives. For Omakayas, the plants whisper their uses, teaching her how to use them to help herself and others. Kimmerer offers a similar message of hope: “So much has been forgotten, but it is not lost as long as the land endures and we cultivate people who have the humility and ability to listen and learn. And the people are not alone. All along the path, nonhuman people help” (*Braiding* 369). In listening to plants, we learn.

In *The Birchbark House*, Erdrich urges readers to redefine themselves as listeners both within the natural world and within a philosophical community. Catherine Rainwater notes that the project of many Native authors is one of “redefining authorial power according to a nonwestern agenda,” thereby effecting “social reform through relocation of non-Indian people from positions of authority to positions of listeners and receivers of knowledge” (xiv). Rainwater’s repositioning implies a role reversal that maintains the power dynamics of dominant speaker and passive listener in a way that oversimplifies the interwoven

nature of strong listening and storytelling displayed by Nokomis. Even so, her emphasis on disrupting the status quo by prioritizing Native authors as authorities and non-Native readers as knowledge-receivers proves necessary in order to create an alternative understanding in which these roles are fluid rather than fixed.

### **Plant Spirits**

*Many of the gardeners talked to me about the spiritual power of the act of gardening. The land is said to 'speak,' and the gardener learns, from wisdom passed down orally through generations, how to listen for its voice and respond with reverence. With this, a second reason for collecting these stories emerged. I began to understand that in preserving and restoring their own culture, these gardeners are also conserving and restoring the land.*

—Patricia Klindienst,

*The Earth Knows My Name*

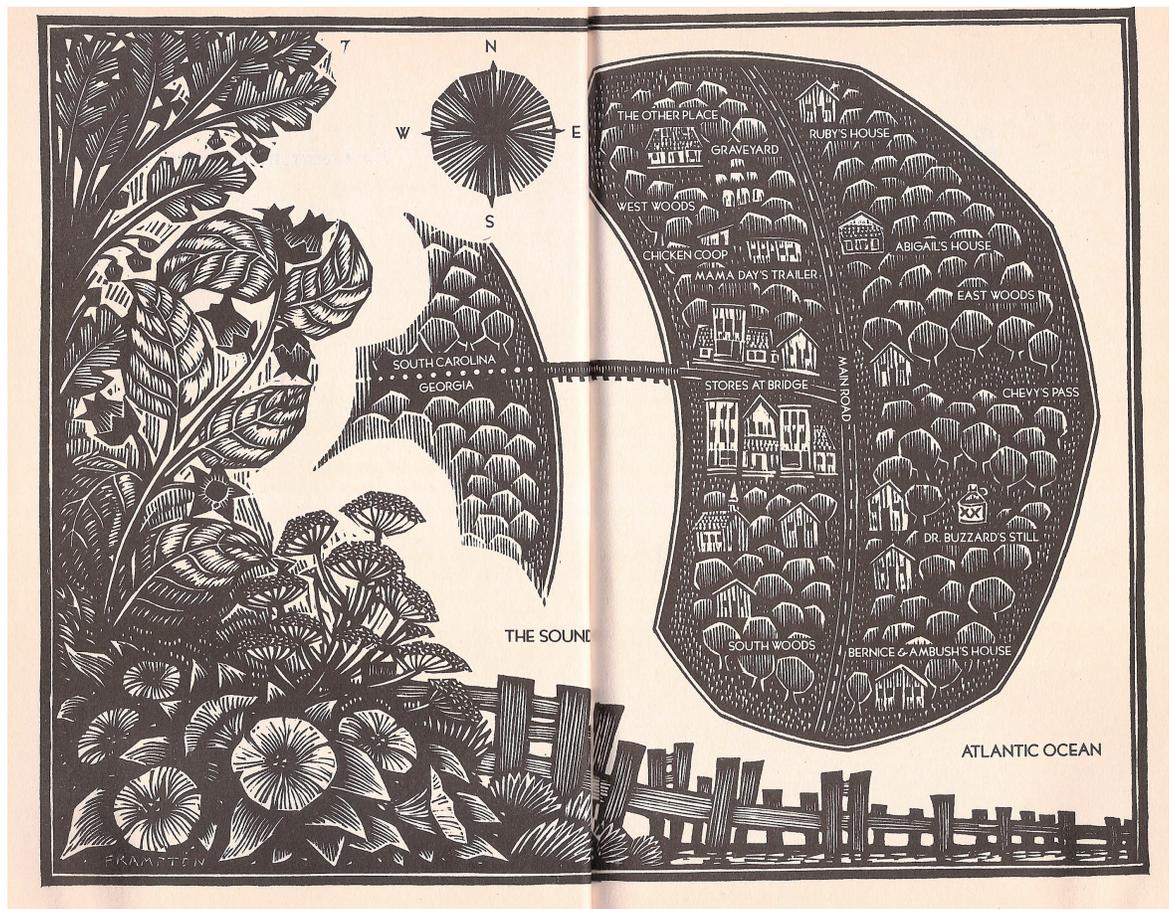


Fig. 1. Introductory map to *Mama Day*. Image from *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

Nature bursts from the first page of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* in the gorgeous map that welcomes readers into the text (Figure 1). It is a map, as one critic notes, that "demands an imaginative journey, an immersion in social space" (Thorsson 132). A profusion of flowers and other plants fills a third of the page. Far overshadowing the small shapes of Georgia and South Carolina, each state is hardly bigger than a sweet potato blossom. Even the island of Willow

Springs appears diminutive next to the plants—its church is equal in size to a dill seed pod cluster. We might read this relative size as a commentary on the leveling of these two bearers of knowledge. Bean-like, Willow Springs appears ready to burst into new life, full of the nutrients stored by the plant that nurtured it; the woodcut printing style reminds readers that even this image comes from plants.<sup>20</sup>

Although plants are not directly represented as persons in *Mama Day*, the novel portrays them as animate beings that embrace the character and history of a place, holding its memory and spirituality in powerful ways. Naylor repeatedly reiterates the importance of not limiting our understanding to what is scientifically measurable or provable, as this discounts the workings of spirituality, community, love, and memory. Healers and elders, the plants that make up Willow Springs (itself named for plants and water, not humans) store the collective memory through the passing of generations and form an integral part of the community with contributions that must be heard for healing and health.

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<sup>20</sup> Although several critics make note of the map, they don't focus on the importance of plant life. Cheryl Wall notes that "*apart from* the dense woods that cover much of the landscape, the map charts relationships in a community that finds its primary connections between each other" (1452, my emphasis). Others address only the metaphoric qualities of nature. Susan Meisenhelder discusses the "complex symbolism" regarding ethnicity and gender that lives in the "rich natural imagery" of Naylor's descriptions of hurricanes and trees (1440). Missy Dehn Kubitschek declares that "the storms *are* the heritage of slavery, periodically ravishing the land; the novel's perspective recognizes no division between their literal physical being and their symbolic meaning" (76). Although Kuitschek grants that the novel does not distinguish between physical and symbolic regarding the storm, her own reading only attends to the latter.

*Mama Day* asks readers to learn to attend to plants as physical beings with deep spiritual resonances, rather than as symbolic matter. Profoundly alive and attentive, the plants of Willow Springs resound with specificity and being.

“Listen —

A thump of the stick: morning glories start to sing.

The other place. Butterflies and hummingbirds. And the wisdom to draw them.

Ancient eyes, sad and tired: it’s time you knew. An old house with a big garden. And it’s seen its share of pain” (Naylor 152).

The island’s plants, wild and cultivated, have witnessed and retained the human histories that have surrounded them over the generations. They hold the history of the island even further back than the all important year 18 & 23 when the previously enslaved residents became owners of the island. Indeed, the placement of “Listen —” on a line of its own highlights the importance and the quiet surrounding the act of listening, while also drawing out its potential for connection in the dash. Listening needs to be intended and learned. In *Soundscape Ecology*, Almo Farina describes how a “sonic landmark” for some will be “simply a noise” for others (145). *Mama Day* asks us to reconsider what we understand to be sonic landmarks and what we deem noise as we listen to our environment, reminding us that, like weeds, what counts as “noise” depends on the context and understanding of the listener, not on the sound’s inherent qualities. In this passage, Naylor puts words to the interwoven landscape of the woodcut map. The

blossoming morning glories with their heart-shaped leaves, the flying animals, and the old house are all meant to be listened to. In particular, the acknowledgment that the garden has seen “its share of pain” emphasizes that these are not static settings in which humans live out stories, but instead that the landscape is alive to and part of the community and its history.

The memory that courses through the vegetation of Willow Springs resonates with that described by Uncle Julius in Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman* (1899), expressive of a kinship with the land that grows both from generations of agricultural labor and from epistemologies retained from West African cosmologies.<sup>21</sup> “Po’ Sandy,” in particular, depicts this plant-human connection, as Sandy is transformed into a tree that protests being axed and processed by the sawmill (20). The resistance of Sandy/the pine tree to being harvested follows the warning of Kimmerer that a plant’s permission for harvest must be granted and that plants communicate their refusal through means such as causing the axes to “glash off” and making an unusual racket of “creakin’, en shakin’, en wobblin’” (Chesnutt 20), even if they do not pronounce in English, “No.” The laurel trees in the opening stanzas of Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, also communicate their willingness to be harvested. Initially, they resist with creaking sounds that make the loggers “leap back” (5), but eventually they shift to trunks with an “eagerness to become canoes” (7). They then “endured the decimation / of

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<sup>21</sup> See Myers in *Converging Stories* for further discussion of the challenges to the paired issues of mastery of the land and mastery of fellow humans made by *The Conjure Woman*.

their tribe without uttering a syllable / of that language they had uttered as one nation, / the speech taught their saplings” (6). In each of these narratives, trees are not simply materials to be used, but vibrant beings that respond to humans’ actions.

Joining in a strong tradition of authors of African descent that challenges the separation of humans from nature, *Mama Day* disrupts the conception of humans as more powerful or developed than plants and therefore automatically having the right of way. As Mama Day walks through the woods, “A bramble scratches her on the face, and a few feet on she trips over a creeper from a sweet bay. *No point in cussing*, she hears her daddy’s voice. *Little Mama, these woods been here before you and me, so why should they get out your way—learn to move around ‘em*” (Naylor 79). Passing through the woods, Mama Day listens to the long-ago teaching of her father recalled due to the reminder from the outstretched sweet bay plant. She has regard for nature not out of some intrinsic connection, but because she was taught to understand the environment around her as possessing the right to life. The sweet bay that trips Mama Day is first and foremost a plant being with whom humans share an environment.

Like Nokomis in *The Birchbark House*, Mama Day models a deep knowledge of and respect for the plants with whom she shares space.<sup>22</sup> However, we must be careful not to separate her concrete plant wisdom as the ‘real’ part of the novel and the spiritual connections as the ‘unreal’ parts. Mama Day’s power comes from understanding the relationship between the biotic world and ‘the other place’ and knowing that both are real. Plants are not solely indicators of the personality traits of a human character. The sweet bay tells us about Mama Day, but also is a part of the story. It is a character whose role in the novel is unquestionably peripheral, but who exists before and after its appearance during Mama Day’s walk. The sweet bay makes its presence known in the moment of tripping Mama, preventing her from distancing herself from the forest. The plant exists in literary space of its own right, not simply for creating a natural “other” against which humanity is defined and refined.

Indeed, the text depicts Mama Day as part of the environment. Described as a “spirit of the woods” as a child (79), Mama Day “kinda blooms” (78) when she enters the forest to seek a cure for the impatient would-be mother, Bernice. As she searches for a choke-cherry tree, Mama Day listens to the hoodoo tippler, Dr. Buzzard, carousing. Determined to shake him up a bit, she throws “her voice off

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<sup>22</sup> See Kubitschek, who notes that Mama Day “knows the various powers of roots, of course, and having trained her sensitivities through most of a century, can perceive—hear or see—extraordinary things in the familiar landscape” (83). Also, Lindsey Tucker posits that “Naylor suggests that what is often denoted as second sight or precognition is actually an acute awareness of the behavior of plant and animal life” (181). Nature, in these analyses, underscores the keen perceptions of Mama Day as an expert herbalist.

into the bush” and stands “so quiet, she becomes part of a tree” (81). In these descriptions, Mama Day becomes *part of* a plant herself, a member of the woods. The phrase “part of” rather than “becomes a tree” refuses a common metaphor that would describe Mama Day as figuratively interchangeable with a tree. Instead, “part of” emphasizes her ability to be drawn into the community of trees and to develop a relationship with them. Naylor’s language asks readers not to separate plants and humans into separate symbolic realms, but to read them as part of one community. Through the strength of her connection with the forest, Mama Day simultaneously remembers her relationship with her father, gathers the medicine to soothe Bernice, and scares Dr. Buzzard into laying off his drink for the night. While this moment is more humorous than holy, it shows Mama Day’s relationship with nature as part of her ability to navigate and heal her community.

Admitting that the Western systems do provide information, Mama Day nevertheless questions the increasing reliance on specialists to translate the environment to the public. As a storm approaches, she shakes her head at the news obsessed residents of Willow Springs, saying, “Just keep listening to them bulletins. You better listen to the crows [...] When it gets so they start screaming,

the wind's gonna come in screaming too" (236).<sup>23</sup> Unlike the changing, "fanciful" stories of the meteorologists and old-timers, the other-than-human residents of Willow Springs share precise information about the time and location of the coming storm (227).

In *Mama Day*, this failure to listen to nature's storm signals recalls the even more explicit decision not to listen to the local environment in one of Naylor's intertexts: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As the largest band of Seminoles they've ever seen walks by, Janie and Tea Cake ask them where they're going. A man responds: "Going to high ground. Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming" (154). The Seminoles model an attention to the plant communication that Janie and her companions do not understand and then do not give weight to even when told its significance.

Everybody was talking about it that night. But nobody was worried. The fire dance kept up till nearly dawn. The next day, more Indians moved east, unhurried but steady. Still, a blue sky and fair weather, beans running fine and prices good, so the Indians could be, must be, wrong. You couldn't have a hurricane

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<sup>23</sup> J. Herman Blake notes in his study of rural Black folk medicine that the elders of the Sea Island communities have the ability to accurately predict weather 24-36 hours in advance based on knowledge passed down through families; given their dependence on fishing and their distance from Western sources of information, "this knowledge was for survival" (35). Further, Blake notes that the Sea Islanders approached health and healthcare from "a frame of reference that assumes that nature has its own processes and that the actor must understand them and becomes a part of them, not alter or master them" (36).

when you're making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans,  
Indians are dumb anyhow, always were. (Hurstun 155)

Hurstun, more explicitly than Naylor, shows how the refusal to listen can be driven by a lust for profit and justified by racism. The shifting stance of “could be, must be” illustrates an all-too-familiar insistence on financial success as proof of correct behavior. The workers talk themselves into a version of what “must be” based not on listening to the world around them, but on the potential for economic gain. Lacking a relationship with the saw-grass, they can ignore its communications and discount the perspective of the Seminoles, who do listen to the plants. The use of the word “dumb” to dismiss the Seminoles is particularly ironic as it, in addition to declaring them stupid, marks them as “unable to speak” despite the fact that they have just done so. The Seminoles are declared “dumb” not because of their inability to speak, but because of the workers’ determination not to listen.

In Naylor’s text, the information about the coming storm is expressed by the other-than-human animals before it is known by the humans; in Hurstun’s, the plants communicate the upcoming storm even before the animals (human or other-than-human) know of it. The Seminoles are soon followed by snakes, deer, and panthers. Only when “the palm and banana trees began that long distance talk with rain” (156) do any human beings other than the Seminoles start attending to the signs of the incoming storm. Still, only a few decide to listen to the Seminoles, crows, and saw grass. The rest sit around “laughing and waiting for the sun to get

friendly again,” while Tea Cake remarks upon how “Indians don’t know much uh nothm tuh tell de truth. Else dey’d own dis country still. De white folks ain’t gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it’s dangerous” (156). Tea Cake’s logic describes the narrative that the authors I discuss seek to disrupt: power and wealth are taken as indicators of wisdom at the expense of older and more varied forms of place and community-based knowledge. In both Naylor’s and Hurston’s texts, this trust in the knowledge of white institutions to the exclusion of other ways of knowing leads to death. Furthermore, the harm of this mistaken understanding disproportionately falls on those who have the least financial means or social capital to get out or start over.<sup>24</sup>

Listening in *Mama Day*, as in *The Birchbark House*, is not automatic. One must learn how to quiet oneself and listen. In the novel’s opening, the narrator describes a young, formally-educated descendant of a Willow Springs family who is doing an anthropological study of the island’s inhabitants and their speech. The narrator is unimpressed, noting that the budding ethnographer didn’t know what questions to ask.

But on second thought, someone who didn’t know how to ask  
wouldn’t know how to listen. And he coulda listened to them the  
way you been listening to us right now. [...] You done heard it the  
way we know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas,

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<sup>24</sup> See “Down by the Riverside” in Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) for a focused portrayal of how environmental racism amplifies the violence of flooding for communities of color.

quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car—you done heard it without a single living soul really saying a word. (Naylor 10)

Listening, the text stresses, is not simply a matter of hearing words and processing their meaning. Although ears are what Don Ihde describes as the “focal ‘organs’ of hearing,” the entire body participates in listening (135-136). In fact, if hearing words with our ears is the only conception we have of listening, the narrator informs us, then we won’t hear anything worth hearing. In these early pages, *Mama Day* insists that listening must not be limited to words that can be recorded on magnetic tape. Really listening requires understanding languages other than one’s own as meaningful. Further, it requires accepting that there are modes of communication and layers of meaning beyond one’s own perception of reality.

This deep listening is nearly impossible for those not raised to do so. Mama Day’s granddaughter Cocoa remembers the struggles of her husband George to listen beyond his worldview when he comes to visit Willow Springs from Manhattan: “Yes, George, you tried hard. But it would have been too much to ask for you to understand those whispers as we passed through my family plot. As soon as I put the moss in my shoes, I could hear them all in the wind as it moved through the trees and stirred up dust along the ground” (Naylor 223). Cocoa puts moss in her shoes to connect herself with the voices of the earth and ancestors that are already present, but often difficult to hear. In considering the prismatic nature of the past and its ties to oral history, Paula Gallant Eckard notes

that the powerful “legend of Sapphira Wade is passed along not by re-tellings, but through intuitive, transcendent ways of listening and knowing. The knowledge of the past comes through daily living in the community” (129). The act of listening to voices carried by the wind through the family graveyard is one that requires both belief (acceptance that such voices exist) and preparation (putting moss in one’s shoes). Plants play an essential role in this connection of the community to its ancestors. The act of putting moss in her shoes resonates with the aphorism of imagining life in another’s shoes, except that Cocoa is welcoming another’s life into her shoes as a way of broadening her sensory and spiritual awareness with those whose lives have passed. The act also speaks to a disruption of the separation between humans and their environment created by shoes. Although, as Morrison’s novel *Beloved* demonstrates so beautifully, shoes and their sole (soul) protecting qualities can be a marker of freedom, in this instance, the moss that likely stuffed the pillows of Cocoa’s enslaved ancestors and staunched their blood also serves as a means of reconnecting with both history and environment while still inhabiting the security of shoes.

Naylor does not describe the ability to listen as instinctual or genetic. Over and over, the novel demonstrates that George must choose to learn new ways of knowing and to trust beyond his own knowledge as a New York structural engineer who has placed his faith in the Western creed of rationality. As Ihde notes, “the rationality of the West owes much to the *clarity* of its vision. But the simple preference for sight may also become, in its very richness, a source of the

relative inattentiveness to the global fullness of experience and, in this case, to the equal richness of listening” (8). Because rationality and its devotion to sight provide so much information, George—and all of us raised in predominantly Western ways of knowing—has been trained not to seek input from other epistemologies. Yet, as *Mama Day* stresses, embracing other sensory experiences that trouble the boundaries of what is acknowledged as real by the West offers more options for engaging with and healing our histories, communities, and environment.

Such listening can be exhausting and painful. Mama Day doesn’t always feel ready to face the heavy truth. She pauses in the woods, noting that “the sound of the twigs breaking under her feet is hollow and the echo can’t move up through the haze.” Although she “stands still and listens,” she isn’t up for figuring out what’s going on. “I’m tired,” she thinks, “tired of knowing things I can’t do nothing about” (174). Eventually, Mama Day will return to this knowing, but it is important to admit that the determination to listen can also mean holding the weight of knowledge without the ability to change the outcome. Nevertheless, *Mama Day* shows us that it is undoubtedly better for the health of the community (and the individual) to listen closely and have more knowledge, than to listen too little and not know the full context in which choices are made and missed.

The novel’s call to listen, as Daphne Lamothe argues, “demands a willingness to challenge the hierarchies imposed by social norms”; respectful listening provides the potential for “cross-cultural communication facilitated by

the willingness of those in a position of privilege and dominance to relinquish their assumption of cultural and/or racial superiority” (165). As Mama Day watches George repaint all four sides of the chicken coop (even the one “nobody sees”), she considers how

everybody wants to be right in a world where there ain't no right or wrong to be found. My side. He don't listen to my side. She don't listen to my side. Just like that chicken coop, everything got four sides: his side, her side, an outside, and an inside. All of it is the truth. But that takes a lot of work and young folks ain't about working hard no more. When getting at the truth starts to hurt, it's easier to turn away. Yeah, you go on and paint the back of my coop so them live oaks can witness what you made of. (230)

The difficulty of listening, as Mama Day describes it, is to admit that the three dimensional world does not form from a single perspective. It is in listening and believing in the reality of multiple dimensions that the world takes shape. We must disrupt the normative communication structure so that it goes beyond human exchanges, as suggested by the phrase, “so them live oaks can witness what you made of.” While it is tempting to paint only the three sides that humans will see, George proves his character by doing just as good a job on the side apparent only to the oaks. In witnessing, the trees also become judges—comparing George's strength and durability of character to their own oaken selves.

These aptly named live oaks return in the final sentences of the novel, as Mama Day considers her own death, remembers her sister who has recently passed, and sees Cocoa aging. The oaks circle the graves of the Day family and root in the bodies of those who've gone before; for the Sea Island Gullahs, live oaks "invoke the spirits of ancestors" (Klindienst 33). Mama Day looks at Cocoa and remembers George, thinking that "one is closer to the circle of oaks than the other. But both can hear clearly that on the east side of the island and on the west side, the waters were still" (312). The novel ends on this declaration of closeness to oaks and listening to both sides of the island, linking the East and West to ancestral ties in Africa and to the modern era of Westernization. In the *circle* of oaks and the still water that encircles the island, we can hear these terms not as a linear past leading to the future or as opposites/in opposition, but as indicators of an environment in which memories and potential futures flourish through interconnection. It is perhaps tempting to regard the novel as an idealistic return to nature, but *Mama Day* does not advocate that fantasy. The past is not untroubled. Rather, a healthy future requires building bridges to bring together the wisdom and stories of various communities through listening.

*Mama Day* ends with a scene remarkably similar to the conclusion of *The Birchbark House*: Mama Day's sister Abigail has died, so instead of calling out her morning greeting from the doorway, Mama Day "turns her face up into the warm air—You there, Sister?—to listen for the rustling of the trees. There's never a day so still that at least one leaf ain't moving" (Naylor 312). As is true for

Omakayas, the sounds of the earth carry the voices of deceased loved ones. Mama Day does not simply greet the trees with a “Hello, Sister,” acknowledging Abigail’s presence, but not anticipating a response; rather, Mama Day asks a question of the world and listens for a response from the rustling leaves. In such a moment, Naylor’s writing resonates with Ihde’s claim that “the silence of the invisible comes to life in sound. For the human listener there is a multiplicity of senses in which *there is word in the wind*” (4). In our vision-dominated culture, much that is unseen becomes undervalued or even nonexistent; seeing is believing, after all. Erdrich and Naylor’s texts insist, however, that we realize that there is more than meets the eye. Listening provides information that needs to be known and valued for bodily, spiritual, and planetary well-being.

### **Listening for Wisdom**

*[I]n Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as ‘the younger brothers of Creation.’ We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance.*

— Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

The works discussed in Chapters One and Two address a major project of environmental literature: to use its imaginative potential to expand a reader's perception of who can be listened to. How, *The Birchbark House* and *Mama Day* argue, can we act justly if we do not even imagine the possibility of listening meaningfully to many members of our community? Again and again, these two texts recognize the importance of reframing questions of voice away from the conventional question of *whether someone can speak* to the question of *whether someone can be heard*. In so doing, they demonstrate how the conventional focus on speech rather than listening enables people in positions of power to avoid ethical response by claiming that no one has "spoken out." This practice perpetuates dominance by powerful institutions because they have no compelling reason or cultural expectation to listen. Further, by claiming the power to "silence" various beings, these institutions retain control over who can and can't be heard. Thus, they evade the ethical responsibility of listening and responding to those they have themselves declared "dumb."

Really listening, as Erdirch, Naylor, and others indicate demands working to hear beyond one's own echo. It is not the selective hearing of Reema's Boy in *Mama Day*, the ethnographer who gathers only the words that fit on his magnetic tape. Really listening depends on the presumption that everything around you is speaking and you must learn to listen. This deep, broad listening erodes boundaries of Western individualism and power by dismantling the white noise of

anthropocentrism. As Tinker argues, “first we need to shift the Euro-Western commonsense base of knowledge to allow for what is presently unimaginable” (122). In *The Birchbark House* and *Mama Day* both the characters and the readers are pushed to expand what they imagine to be listenable. Without this inclusion of the “presently unimaginable” wisdom of plants and ancestors, the communities depicted by Erdrich and Naylor would not survive or be able to heal from the storms (be they wind, disease, or social injustice) that strike them.

As Anna Tsing argues: “Familiar places are the beginning of appreciation for multi-species interactions” (142). Erdrich spends all of *The Birchbark House* teaching readers to hear the depth of connection to the Lake Superior region that has developed in the relationships between humans and their fellow beings. In Naylor, the memory of the Middle Passage and the threat of displacement by tourism, ocean-view condos, and tempting mainland salaries loom, underscoring Mama Day’s determination to retain the land and “the living history, the communal, earth-based way of life, and the deeply spiritual Africa-derived *healing values*” that grow from listening to the Sea Islands’ vital communications (Ammons 131). Forced relocation from a familiar environment tears human communities apart *and* ruptures the deep bond between humans and their other-than-human relations.

Despite the violent disconnection enacted by colonial domination, Erdrich, Naylor, Kimmerer, and Hogan all present a seed of hope in their insistence that the plants are still speaking their wisdom. In their storytelling, these authors help

readers to reimagine reality, inviting us to take it upon ourselves to expand our understanding of the possible, to listen, and to learn from the other-than-human persons' teachings. The opportunity for developing a sense of place and for healing our communities through respectful relationships with all beings does exist. Once we are able to listen, we are able to make the choice to respond. In *The Birchbark House* and *Mama Day*, the natural world bears conscious wisdom, accessible to those who take the time to quiet themselves and listen. In each novel, readers are asked to hear the stories of our plant and human ancestors stored in roots and whispered by leaves—stories that cultivate healing, interdependence, and community.

Listening to plants does not mean that other voices and new stories do not matter or should not also be considered. *Mama Day*, in particular, does not argue for the replacement of one worldview with another. Rather, in emphasizing listening, *Mama Day* and *The Birchbark House* encourage hearing many sides to many stories. George dies not because his connections to the West are inherently wrong, but because he cannot accept that there are multiple ways of knowing. We must stress listening to plants not because they are the only bearers of knowledge, but because their role is presently so undervalued.

Yet, this complexity of sound raises a major question to be addressed in the subsequent two chapters. How, when there are so many stories and so many voices, do listeners determine which sounds to tune into and which ones to filter out? How do listeners respond to these competing calls for attention?

CHAPTER THREE

**Listen Here:**

**Noise Pollution and Place-based Learning  
in Ann Pancake's *Strange As This Weather Has Been***

*Oh workers can you stand it?*

*Oh tell me how you can will you be a lousy scab or*

*will you be a man?*

*Don't scab for the bosses don't listen to their lies*

*Us poor folks haven't got a chance unless we*

*organize*

-Florence Reece

If some environmental authors create imaginative spaces that encourage readers to rethink sounds they may have interpreted as meaningless noise and instead listen to them as the sounds of valued community members, this chapter argues that other texts demonstrate the necessity of refusing to listen to powerful sounds in order to hear what they are drowning out. In particular, I examine how industrial noises, both the literal blasts and the narratives in self-promotional materials, hinder environmental justice by making it difficult to hear and relate to the biotic community. By disrupting the ability to listen to the land, industries

promote the separation of people from their environment and thus enable their own exploitative practices. This maneuver, which relies on a mechanical conceit of interchangeable parts, posits that people and land are moveable and replaceable, justifying the exploitation of both; and, the feedback loop amplifies as it goes, creating ever more noise and ever less connection between people and nature.

Appalachia proves a particularly compelling place to analyze listening and noise because of the multigenerational connection to the land, vibrant storytelling and folk song culture, and life-consuming coal mining presence.<sup>25</sup> Although the coal industry fights to create a monolithic narrative of this region as “coal country,” naming coal as Appalachia’s sole sense of purpose and success, stories and songs remind listeners how these fertile mountains foster many forms of sustenance and community. A song such as John Prine’s “Paradise” laments how coal sabotaged ways of knowing Appalachia by destroying the fertile farm country that led early European settlers to give towns names such as Paradise.<sup>26</sup> The specificity of songs and stories confronts the coal industry’s homogenization of people and place and defends the importance of each mountain and each person as members of a respected and respectful community. Addressing those issues,

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<sup>25</sup> For a detailed study of the songs and stories of Appalachia focusing on 20th century mining see *Voices from the Mountains*, collected and recorded by Guy and Candie Carawan.

<sup>26</sup> The chorus of “Paradise” (called by one local newspaper, “something of a hit”) is “And Daddy won’t you take me back to Muhlenberg County / Down by the Green River where Paradise lay / Well I’m sorry my son, but you’re too late in asking / Mr. Peabody’s coal train has hauled it away” (Carawan 32-33).

this chapter considers the relationship between various forms of power and methods of listening in a particular environment by examining how cultural norms are created, taught, and challenged through narrative. I discuss the complexity of learning to listen for environmental justice above the drone of a major capitalist power, analyzing the industrial noises of coal and contrasting the forms of listening taught by the industry on the one hand and artists, activists, and old-timers on the other. Ann Pancake's *Strange As This Weather Has Been* (2007) and many Appalachian songs, poems, and stories insist on the importance of teaching individuals how to hear past patriarchal industry noise and listen instead to the environment as an empowering site and source of community.

Because listening requires patience, skill, and community-specific practices, this chapter argues for the importance of place-based learning and cultural health as integral to environmental justice, particularly in response to the attempts of fossil fuel industry narratives to make these specifics of place appear irrelevant, instead defining the region simply as homogenized "coal country." The power of that simplifying narrative was helped by the forcible removal of many Native Americans from their homelands to create the United States, which deracinated place-based stories that remind people how they are related to land. Elders, such as Nokomis in *The Birchbark House*, take their knowledge of how to listen to their environment with them as they move, leaving those that come in or remain with fewer who can teach how to listen to the local environment. This place-based knowledge, so undervalued in Western education models, is

necessary for the deep, healing listening described by Erdrich and Naylor. As coal mining, especially the extensive strip mining of mountain top removal (MTR), bulldozes, poisons, and floods Appalachia, it causes a second round of detachment from the environment for the relative newcomers to the area, who have also developed a deep cultural bond with the hollows and creeks, as well as for the Native people descended from ancestors who resisted removal and those who have returned to the mountains.

Given the arguments of writers such as Kimmerer and Erdrich that the landscape itself teaches those who make the effort to listen, coal mining destroys the primary teachers of ecological listening and health. In stripping the land of its vegetation and barricading locals from seeking things such as healing ginseng in the hollows, the mining industry also erodes the traditions that connect people and land.<sup>27</sup> This lack of access gnaws away at the ability to listen in order to determine *whether* something is wrong and, if so, *what* is wrong.<sup>28</sup> Without both a sense of what an ecosystem should sound like and the ability to listen to it in enough detail to determine how well the system matches this expectation, an ability to keep an ear to the heartbeat of a community is strained if not destroyed. Passing down

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<sup>27</sup> For further discussion of the psychological impacts of MTR in Appalachia, see Aysha Bodenhamer's "King Coal: A Study of Mountaintop Removal, Public Discourse, and Power in Appalachia" and Michael Hendryx and Kestrel Innes-Wimsatt's "Increase Risk of Depression for People Living in Coal Mining Areas of Central Appalachia."

<sup>28</sup> Discussing the role of listening in medicine, Tom Rice distinguishes these forms of listening as "monitory listening" and "diagnostic listening." Without a sense of "normal" or "healthy" these close listenings would be useless.

generational knowledge and social organizing combats the blare of industry that listens to nothing beyond itself. For, how can place-based listening and education continue when the place itself is being destroyed?

This question drives the texts analyzed in this chapter. Activists of all sorts in Appalachia confront the difficulty of combatting environmental injustice when the strength grounded in a sense of place is perpetually undermined by the coal industry itself. Yet, teaching people to listen to the land perseveres in stories and songs that share ways of knowing the world. Indeed, stories themselves become a form of community elder. As Eastern Band Cherokee poet and storygatherer Marilou Awiakta writes, traditional stories such as “Origin of Corn” are “designed to create a synapse in the mind, a lens in the eye, a drum in the ear, a rhythm in the heart. Listeners take the story in, think it through and, when the need arises, apply its wisdoms to life” (9). Songs and stories remember what was, cultivate shared understandings in a community, and provide strength and guidance for dealing with difficult choices. The devaluing of folk song and storytelling in labels such as “hillbilly” music or literary studies that privilege the Western canon at the expense of other narrative forms perpetuates a disdain for locally-grounded community knowledge and connection, which enables the encroachment of exploitative industrial practices that rely on a dissociation from place-based communities and allegiance only to profit. Story and song, as Awiakta writes, help communities to hear that “Selu [corn mother] is always singing.” Or, as former Cherokee Nation Chief Wilma Mankiller reminds us, “we are one small part of a

very large family that includes the plant world, the animal world and our other living relations” (Foreward to *Selu*, ix). Appalachian activists respond to two forms of distancing: (1) the removal of Indigenous people and their stories followed by the removal of multigenerational settler families and their deep cultural understanding of the environment, and (2) the destruction of the place itself so that newcomers cannot learn a sense of place.

The listening for health and justice portrayed in Erdrich and Naylor’s texts depends on environments largely free from the rumble of heavy machinery and industry propaganda. Listening to fellow community members, be they oak, crow, or human, requires teaching, but is otherwise readily available in the novels’ lush landscapes. In West Virginian Ann Pancake’s *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, however, listening for justice is not straightforward. Tracing multiple generations of a West Virginia family living at the base of a mountain in the midst of a massive strip mining operation, Pancake stresses the difficulty of hearing anyone, plant or animal, above the perpetual mine blasts and company broadcasts that jam up the airwaves. Pancake’s novel insists that readers remember that listening is a learned practice that relies on context. Environmentalists cannot, therefore, simply instruct everyone to “listen” and assume that this will lead to an identical or positive outcome. As not only the sense of place but also the place itself is ever more disrupted, stories and songs prove ever more necessary for teaching ways of listening and strengthening deep-rooted communities.

Without being taught, those of us raised in the persistent hum of modernity will not realize the possibility of listening to many sounds that already exist. Acoustic ecologists such as Bernie Krause and R. Murray Schafer write at length about the shrinking number of habitats undisrupted by the sounds of industry. Krause notes that those raised in industrial societies “tend to miss indicators that tell us about events taking place within earshot” because they have not learned the sounds’ significance (*Great* 65). Not only does the environment provide information about what is currently taking place, it also indicates the health of a community. The biophony (what Krause calls the collective sounds of living organisms) changes when it is “stressed, endangered, or altered,” producing less organization and complexity (*Great* 80). Yet, biologists have only just begun to evaluate the health of an ecosystem by listening to its entire community, rather than simply that of individual voices (*Great* 81). Even when a space may appear unharmed to the eye, its distress can be heard.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, environmental impact assessments often prioritize the visual at the expense of listening to locals, enabling cultural erasure because little that is culturally significant is necessarily visible from a road or on a map, especially given that these roads and maps may also have been constructed by people

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<sup>29</sup> Krause presents a particularly compelling case of a selectively logged forest site that, upon his return several years later, looks uninjured to the eye, but proves dramatically less complex in his before and after field recordings (*Great* 69-71). Such examples demonstrate the importance of not only relying on visual indicators to determine the health of a community or ecosystem and of having recordings of pre-disturbed spaces such that sound can be included in restoration expectations.

outside the community. As Mary Hufford explains, “The cultural portions of environmental impact assessments [in Appalachia] are grounded in acts of looking, in windshield and pedestrian surveys, and in consultation with maps. Consultation with local communities is rare and desultory” (113). The companies running the assessments have no motivation to listen to any stories that do not fit with their “official narratives of progress and preservation” (Hufford 113). By prioritizing the visual at the expense of other sensory sources of information, industries evade complete assessment and remediation practices; they mask polluted soil with imported sod in order to return it to a state of “productive use”<sup>30</sup> and “approximate original contour,” terms that signal their capitalist and visualist priorities. Organizations such as the Natural Resources Defense Council remind the public of the superficial nature of these goals. They point out that the so-called restoration “ignores the fact that it is impossible to replace the biological functions of a forested mountain whose ecological niche was 400 million years in the making,” while also noting that even such potemkin efforts at remediation are rarely completed due to lack of enforcement (Perks 4). Although the industry’s favorite example of a fertilized golf course may indeed return a surface mine area

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<sup>30</sup>[miningfacts.org](http://miningfacts.org) (an informational website created by the conservative think tank, The Fraser Institute) describes the process as follows: “The objective of reclamation is to return the land and watercourses to an *acceptable standard* of productive use, ensuring that any landforms and structures are stable, and any watercourses are of *acceptable water quality*. Reclamation typically involves a number of activities such as removing any hazardous materials, reshaping the land, restoring topsoil, and planting native grasses, trees, or ground cover” (my emphasis).

to “productive green space,” its cropped grasses will never host the biological diversity that once chorused there and will provide entertainment for wealthier people while replacing the habitat that provided needed forage and hunting grounds for poorer community members.

Even in those areas not directly destroyed by mining, the influx of noise pollution caused by the industry has major effects on the health of the region. Yet, rather than curtail the increase in noise, officials from the U.S. Government have been known to fight the reduction of noise pollution because they believe it threatens aviation practices (*Voices* 49-50). The prioritization of aviation indicates an allegiance to global commercial and military success at the expense of social or environmental health. James Watt, the Secretary of the Interior under Reagan, declared, “Noise is power. The noisier we are as a country, the more powerful we appear to others” (quoted in *Voices* 56). An earlier James Watt, inventor of the steam engine, is also reputed to have made this connection between noise and power, writing that “noise seems to convey great ideas of its power to the ignorant, who seem to be no more taken with modest merit in an engine than in a man” (quoted in *Carnegie* 127). This linkage of noise and industry and, thus, noise and power describes a very white, male, and monied ethic. These are the noises that created and symbolize oil, rail, and coal barons, but also the ones that accompany the deadly explosions and undemocratic political manipulation of the early coal industry seen in Upton Sinclair’s *King Coal* (1917) and Denise

Giardina's *Storming Heaven* (1987). The power maintained by this industrial noise perpetuates and thrives on institutionalized violence.

What is perceived as noise is, of course, itself a construction. Commonly defined as sounds that are loud or unpleasant and cause disturbance, noise's identification depends largely on subjective designations. In his sensory study of 19th-century Chicago, Adam Mack notes that turn-of-the-century noise complaints "focused not on industrial noise of 'progress' but on old world 'lower class' sounds" such as hawkers and street musicians (7). Sensory historian Mark Smith corroborates this when he notes that "the ability to afford and insist on quietude became increasingly associated with class and notions of refinement and taste" during the Jim Crow era (45). What defines noise and which noises are socially acceptable are thus major indicators of social values, norms, and power structures. As such, "the redefinition of noise and sound can reveal pivotal shifts in the political realm and social structure" (Smith 50). Integral to challenging the dominance of the coal industry in West Virginia, then, must be the process of redefining its noise-making not as a sign of power and progress, but of social and ecological destruction.

Because noise is "not really a kind of sound but a metadiscourse of sound and its social interpretation" (Novak 126), literature provides an excellent space for considering its construction, impacts, and potential for change. Not defined by particular qualities, but dependent instead on the social context and history of the listener, noise offers opportunities for considering habits of listening and the

power structures that underly sonic norms. As Novak explains, noise pollution disrupts the balance of ecosystems but becomes so ingrained in human understanding of a space that it “must first be located and brought back into human consciousness from its ubiquitous but subliminal position in the modern soundscape” (129). Humans learn to ignore noise, but in doing so also begin to ignore the effects of that noise on themselves and their community. Challenging the power of industrial noise also presents the opportunity to reconsider the sounds of inhabitants who have struggled to be heard through what Krause describes in his subtitle as “the human din.”

Outlining a definition of noise, sonic scholar David Novak notes the ways in which noises (e.g. alarms, buzzers) have been used to “regulate and control daily life” and demand the public’s attention (130). Noise has even been used as a weapon in the form of the Long Range Acoustic Device (Novak 130) and as torture (Ross), uses which Novak describes as shifting noise “from being the accidental byproduct of a technological environment to becom[ing] a deliberate form of coercive violence” (130). The distinction between accidental byproduct and coercive violence as regards industrial noise, however, becomes muddled in the case of what might be called the coal industry’s noise externalities.

Even if the coal industry’s noises are not explicitly designed as violent, they cause harm. Indeed, the harmful health effects of noise pollution have been acknowledged by organizations such as the Environmental Protection Agency and World Health Organization. Schafer calls industrial noise the “indiscriminate and

imperialistic spread of more and larger sounds” (3), a questionable description given that imperialism is inherently discriminatory. Noise pollution particularly troubles low-income neighborhoods and communities of color that have the least power to be heard in their calls for peace and quiet. Not only have loud noises been linked to damaged hearing, but also they are now being associated with increased levels of stress, heart disease, worsened educational outcomes, and sleep disturbance. These effects disproportionately impact children, shift workers, and environmental justice communities because of their increased proximity to sources of noise pollution, already disrupted sleep schedules, and the inability to afford residence in a quiet neighborhood or housing with sufficient sound insulation (Kelishadi, Hammer, WHO). Rather than being dismissed as a nuisance, noise pollution is an environmental justice concern that requires recognition and responsive action. In addition to causing human stress, industrial sounds, Krause argues, force other-than-human animals to modulate their calls to be louder or higher in pitch so that they can be heard by their potential mates and the noise actively disturbs and even causes decline in many populations (*Voices* 51).<sup>31</sup> Not all animals can change their vocal productions, especially not at the rate at which the world is getting louder (Anthes). In short, noise cannot be ignored as simply an obnoxious byproduct of industrial work, but should be

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<sup>31</sup> Krause describes, for example, how toad populations that are disrupted by jet engine noises take time to regain their common voice and are more easily picked off by predators in the meantime. More famously, humpback whales have been known to avoid the loud underwater noises caused by ships and navy activity (“The Loss”).

understood as a violent force disrupting communities and ecosystems. As is the case for many “accidental byproducts” of industrialism, its presence must be re-conceptualized as violence in order to receive adequate response. Rather than “inevitable,” industrial noise represents a socioeconomic choice of capitalism made at the expense of local communities, human and other-than-human.

Industrial noise consists not only of the literal sounds that blast from heavy machinery, but also of the noise made by the industrialists themselves, who seek to perpetuate a pro-coal discourse in Appalachia that associates the industry and, by extension, its sounds with narratives of strength, pride, and loyalty (Bodenhamer 1140). This “normative culture of coal” rejects any alternatives to the industry, using educational and other social programs to instruct communities in how to listen to the industry. Loud anti-environmentalist messaging “is used to silence concerns about the practice of the coal industry, as well as to create a scapegoat for the declining prominence of coal. The hegemonic masculinity of coal often vilifies environmentalists and deters men and others from opposing the coal industry” (Bodenhamer 1146). This capitalizing on a constructed association between environmentalism and effeminacy is discussed in the parallel military context described by Joni Seeger in *Dangerous Intersections*, who notes that “men who would place environmental priorities above military ones are often cast as unpatriotic, even effeminate” (169). Indeed, pro-coal discourse often connects coal and patriotism, offering coal as a nationalist alternative to oil. As Shannon

Bell and Richard York write in *Environmental Sociology*, by “linking coal to the military, a symbol of patriotism and strength—[the coal industry] is clearly trying to imbed coal mining in deep cultural traditions. It connects its legitimation efforts with those of the state, which has long worked to build the image of the military as a noble institution on which all Americans depend” (200). In aligning itself with masculinity, progress, and the state, coal complicates resistance movements by claiming that refusing to listen to coal also means refusing to listen to those fundamental values.

In addition to the masculinization of the coal industry, machines are usually coded as masculine, further securing the support for industrial over environmental work by men who fear being perceived as effeminate. Both industry and its not-so-distant military partner inculcate a cult of hypermasculinity that affirms itself through refusing to listen beyond its own discourse and profiting from environmental destruction. Although often described as a mastery *over* machines, hypermasculinity has been extended to a construct of men *as* machines both through the anthropomorphizing of machines and the mechanization of men. In this normative context, men are taught to listen to machines rather than to nature, perpetuating the feedback loop in which increased industrialism furthers and is furthered by increased patriarchal power.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ulf Mellström, for example, discusses the importance of car mechanics being able to diagnose the problem with an engine by listening (465), a form of embodied knowledge that is “transmitted and learnt through practical work experience and training” (469).

Although scholars such as Gaventa and Bodenhamer have discussed this “normative culture of coal” as a “culture of silence” because of residents’ hesitancy to voice opposition, it is perhaps more useful to understand it as one of industrial white noise that masks the potential for genuine, generative listening (1146). Even if most powerful men are silent on the issue, women, men, and other-than-human members are speaking out against environmental destruction. Further, the narrative of “silence” fails to acknowledge the industry’s efforts to drown out opposition through physical and social noise and its blanket refusal to listen to those who oppose coal, demonizing them as unpatriotic, regressive, or feminine.

The need for lessons in listening beyond the dominant voice of coal is especially true given the doublespeak of industry leaders such as Bill Raney, president of the West Virginia Coal Association: “Our coal miners are the best practicing environmentalists in the world as they do everything they can each day to protect the environment they work and live in throughout West Virginia.” The *miners* may indeed do everything they can, but nowhere does Raney say as much for the *industry*. This conflation of miners and industry is common throughout the industry’s discourse of itself. Meanwhile, even as the industry attempts to conflate itself with its workers, it replaces these miners with machines (NRDC 6-7). By associating itself with American patriotism and with miners themselves, the industry creates confusion and elides identification of itself as a profit-driven, exploitative industry.

A key role for Appalachian literature, then, is to create listening spaces in which people who oppose coal operations feel safe letting their thoughts be heard and where it is possible to listen beyond narratives produced by the industry. The imaginative space of literature such as *Strange As This Weather Has Been* provides an escape from coal's narrative of "progress" at any cost. Pancake advocates for listening to stories that cultivate a sense of place, promote stability and community in the face of MTR violence, reject the monolithic narrative of Big Coal, and attend to the many voices who work in concert for environmental justice and health.

### **Listening Lessons**

*Would you be okay with building a pipeline through national treasures, like one of the California Missions? How about a pipeline through the Ford Theater in Washington, D.C.? Would pipeline construction right through the Alamo in San Antonio be okay with you?*

*Truly ask yourself these and many related questions.*

*So to me, this is personal. From the time I was a child, I was taught to protect and respect our precious Earth. It is difficult to explain to Non-Natives that I was actively taught as a child by my Mono grandmother and tribal elders to listen to Mother Earth because she does talk to you. I was taught how to see and listen to Mother Earth at an early age, similar to learning a second language as a child. I was taught to respect sacred land.*

-Liz Perez Halperin,

“A Message from a Warrior About Protecting  
Our Sacred Lands: Why Standing Rock Matters.”

*Strange As This Weather Has Been* depicts the challenge of determining to whom to listen in a wash of sound. Ultimately, each family member in Pancake’s novel must decide whether to stay on the mountain despite the danger of mountain top removal mining (MTR) or to leave.

The novel follows the developing ecological and political awareness of Lace See and her family, particularly her three oldest children: Bant, Corey, and Dane. The family has lived in the foothills of Cherryboy and Yellowroot for several generations, developing a sense of place Lace finds hard to maintain as the mountains are blasted and the hollows are flooded with mining refuse. Often,

writers who advocate for listening imply that simply doing so will lead to the “right” thing; however, the differing perceptions of Lace’s children challenge these assumptions of common comprehension. All of the children describe themselves as listeners. They listen keenly, even obsessively. Yet, they do not all end up hearing an ecological message. Rather, they tune in to sounds that are far easier to hear. Corey, a 10-year-old driven by budding machismo, listens only for machines; even in sounds of a thunderstorm, he hears motor noises, and he glories in the powerful mine blasts. Dane, a self-conscious 12-year-old, listens intently to everything around him, particularly the always-on TV and his always-talking elderly employer; paralyzing fear dominates his comprehension. Bant, an independent 15-year-old, listens to the sounds of nature interwoven with quotations from her grandmother and uncle. Only her form of listening produces the determination to stay to fight MTR.

Everyone in Pancake’s novel hears the sounds of coal mining: the blasts, the rush of flood waters from improperly dammed up creeks, and, most painfully, the repeated coughs of folks whose damaged lungs are unseen, but incessantly heard. Long before Lace’s father becomes feeble in any other way, she hears his racking cough. Lace remembers how, as he became sicker, she would “try not to listen” by thinking about money or Bant, but “often not even that could drown the listening, could drown the one breath. One breath. One breath more” (145). Aggravated with her own thoughts and his tortured breath after breath, Lace “squeeze[s] [her] ears between [her] hands” (145). Of course, she does not

actually want her father's tortured breathing to stop, knowing that no respite but death awaits him. Through the sounds of black lung, the novel illustrates sound's ability to indicate invisible harms. We do not always need to see to believe. Listening often provides a warning for which the visual cue would come too late. No matter what words are or are not spoken, these breaths rattle their opposition to the normative coal culture—a "culture of silence" regarding the violence of coal mining is impossible.

The mining blasts reverberate through the family's home, preventing people from hearing each other and causing their houses to crumble. Sound itself damages these communities. The more these blasts overwhelm the landscape, the more it becomes difficult to teach local children to hear anything else. In a vicious cycle of environmental injustice, the coal industry destroys the land that connects and teaches the community, making it ever harder for the community to feel the attachment to place they need to resist further destruction. Bant repeatedly notes how much easier it would be to accept hearing nothing but the blasts, though each time she does, she hears her grandmother's old reprimand in her head: "you know better'n that" (330). Bant didn't just know better naturally; she was taught.

What listening leads to, the novel reminds us, depends on how it is directed and learned. Yet listening is rarely taught explicitly. American high schools often have a speech class, but active listening classes are few and far

between.<sup>33</sup> Listening to whatever is predominant may be automatic, and it prevails in standardized education. But, such listening does not promote ecological awareness and social justice. Instead, industrial capitalism profits from people's adherence to its monolithic narrative of how the world works. Because its ways of comprehending the world have become so internalized, it must be actively resisted in order to listen beyond.

The mining industry knows that ways of paying attention are learned. As Mark Nowak highlights in his mixed-media poetry book, *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009), the American Coal Foundation provides lesson plans about the history and operations of the coal industry for elementary through high school students. Unsurprisingly, mine-related health problems and mining disasters are largely excised from background information and sample discussion questions. Instead, risk to human and environmental health haunts the activities, which only mention these dangers in historical contexts or as a remediation expense. As students mine cookies for chocolate chips (i.e. coal deposits) in one such lesson, the cost in human and other-than-human beings' wellness is not part of their accounting worksheet. These materials encourage teachers and students to listen to the voice of authority and ignore anything else they hear.

Combining photography by Ian Teh and himself with excerpts from testimonies collected after the Sago Mine disaster in 2006 and numerous news

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<sup>33</sup> Arguably, the traditional lecture structure teaches listening, but this is exactly the sort of passive listening to the voice of hegemonic, placeless narratives that novels such as Pancake's critique.

reports of contemporary mining disasters in China, Nowak exposes the absence of these voices in industry lessons by demonstrating the continued violence of mine work. Rather than translating the industry information into his own words, he juxtaposes the emotion-laden voice of the Sago miner with the phlegmatic instructions of the coal lessons throughout *Coal Mountain Elementary*. In one such pairing, a Sago miner describes how he had to report to his supervisor the death of eleven people. He talks about his initial instructions to remove the humanity from his information:

They wanted me to tell him items, item one, item two, you know. They didn't want no names coming over because they said people were eavesdropping and stuff like that. So I told him we had 11 items, and he said, what. I said, we got 11 items. And he said, forget the code. What do you mean? I said, there's 11 deceased people. And he was just—he was speechless. He couldn't—. (150)

Here, the interlocutor refuses to follow the procedure of mechanical listening, speaking as if people were replaceable parts.<sup>34</sup> Facing this transcript is Step One of an industry mining lesson about the history of coal camps “from the late 1800s / to the early 1900s,” as if these spaces and their policies no longer exist

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<sup>34</sup> Sinclair lingers over a similar exchange in *King Coal* when the calls to abandon the men in order to save the mules or the coal seam are made, demonstrating that the workers are more easily replaceable than many other components of the coal industry machine. As such, it is to the industry's benefit to keep unemployment high and workers detached from place and each other, whether by hiring people from several language groups, encouraging drinking, or promoting in-fighting through derogatory language, competition, favoritism, and espionage.

(151). Nowak reformats the lessons so that the lines flow down the page as poetry, asking the reader to attend to these words with precision and appreciation for context and omission. What would it mean, Nowak’s work asks, to read educational materials for children as we do literature? How can critical examination draw out allegiances to place-deficient, anti-environmental-justice messaging and epistemologies?

Many among the lessons from coal companies beyond those included by Nowak teach superficial listening—acknowledging the word without realizing its significance. One lesson on land reclamation by [coaleducation.org](http://coaleducation.org) provides the following material for teachers:

What is land reclamation? Reclamation is returning the land to the way it was before mining. After the coal has been removed by surface mining the reclamation process begins. The overburden is returned to the same place from which the coal was taken. A bulldozer smooths the land. The topsoil is replaced and the area is replanted.

Some examples of reclamation projects include using the land for ball diamonds, parks, campgrounds, wildlife preserves, lakes, trails, golf courses, pasture and farmland. Driving past these places, you often would not be able to tell the reclaimed land from land that had never been mined. (“Kentucky Coal Education”)

The dedication here to the visual, claiming that land that *looks* the same *is* the same grossly simplifies and misunderstands the depth and complexity of a biotic community—especially if the only looking that happens is at 40 mph. Students are then instructed to learn this concept by coloring. “DIRECTIONS: Color all the shapes in the puzzle which have words that are in the sentence and discover what animal is in the puzzle. Some words appear more than once. LAND IS PUT BACK INTO GOOD SHAPE AFTER THE MINING OF THE COAL.”

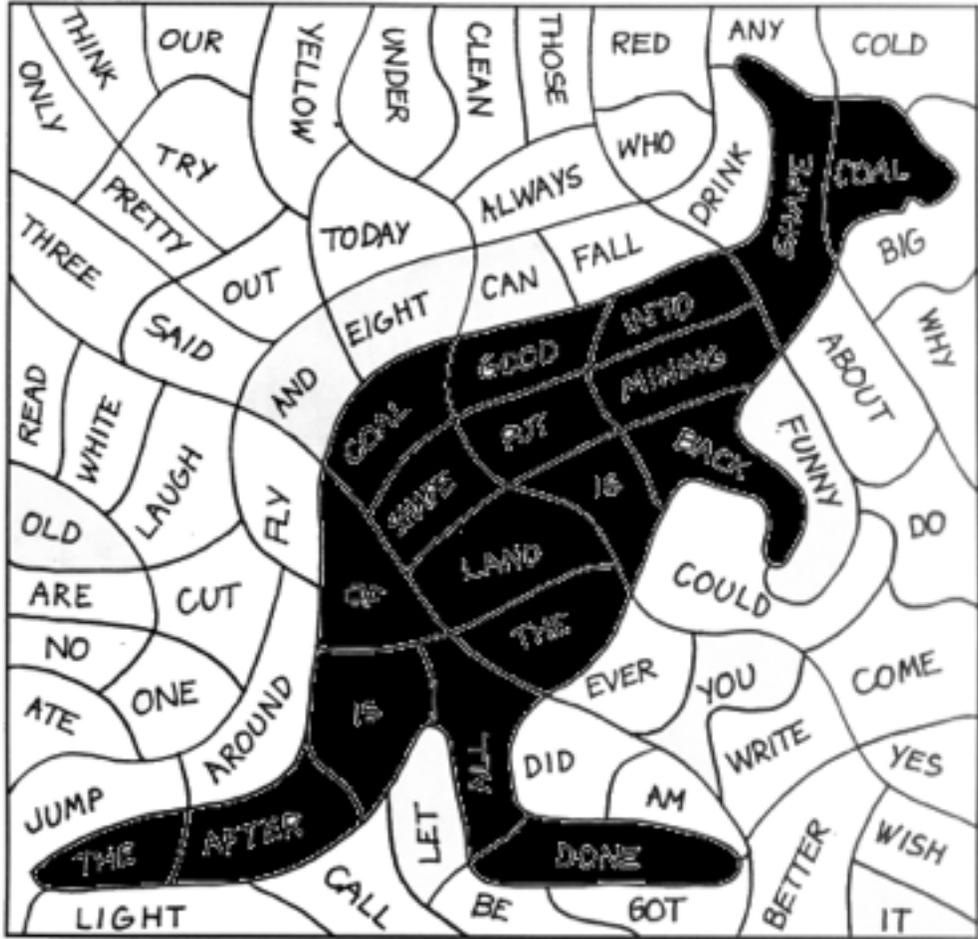


Figure 2. “Animal Energy Phrase.” Chapter 5 - Land Reclamation - Primary.

Kentucky Coal Education. <http://www.coaleducation.org>.

Additional activities include a math word puzzle (answer: RECLAMATION) and a word search for words in the sentence, “AFTER RECLAMATION OF MINED LAND IS COMPLETELY FINISHED, PEOPLE ARE NOT ABLE TO SEE ANY EVIDENCE THAT MINING ACTIVITY EVER TOOK PLACE THERE.” These lessons do not teach children to listen to, respect, or protect their environment. Indeed, the environment is so disconnected from these activities that even the animal revealed by the puzzle is one native to another continent. Students are taught to understand reclamation and, by extension, environmentalism as arbitrary paperwork puzzles unrelated to the land and its (former) inhabitants.

These coal lessons highlight the industry’s use of public education to strengthen corporate pride while discouraging students from cultivating a sense of place. Anthropologist Aysha Bodenhamer notes that residents of West Virginia often “face competing identities—one marked by loyalty to the coal industry, and the other signified by an attachment to place” (1140). Especially with the advent of surface mining, these sentiments exist in stark contrast to each other. The coal industry presents the local environment as interchangeable, replaceable, and valuable only according to what products can be taken from it. Although these coal lessons provide an extreme form of modern education methods, their foundations reflect a common practice in Western pedagogy. Environmental educator David Orr remarks that “toward the natural world [American education] emphasizes theories, not values; abstraction rather than consciousness; neat

answers instead of questions; and technical efficiency over conscience” (8). Such educational norms dismiss the importance of particular places for the efficiency of universalisms, which themselves further the Eurocentric neoliberal model.<sup>35</sup> Novels such as *Strange As this Weather Has Been* illustrate how desperately listening to the land and the community needs to be taught to counter the lessons so conveniently provided by the American Coal Foundation for underpaid, overworked public school teachers. Without such alternative education, trucks begin to sound more alive than trees and the places on television feel more real than the backyard.

Pancake’s novel argues that protecting a place depends on attachment to it. Lace’s oldest child, Bant, learned that from her Grandma as they foraged on the mountainside. “She’d make me sit quiet,” Bant remembers, such that the “space dropped away between you and the land” (35). The emphasis on space dropping away speaks to a theme carried throughout all of the texts I am discussing: that of becoming aware of distance as a construction that enables exploitative capitalism and environmental injustice and of quiet listening as a means to connect across that constructed distance and eventually remove it. Quiet listening defines Bant’s relationship with her home, learning “the real of this place” and “the deep of here” (36). She describes three lessons her grandma taught her about the

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<sup>35</sup> See “Universalism, Eurocentrism, and Ideological Bias in Development Studies: From Modernisation to Neoliberalism,” John Brohman *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Mar., 1995), pp. 121-140 for an introductory critique of the term neoliberal.

interconnectedness of mountain life: not to dirty the mountains with trash, not to pull up plants with no reason or respect, and not to kill animals needlessly as “it throws things out of whack” (38-39). The connection Bant develops with the mountain based on these lessons with her grandmother differentiates her from other children in the area, who look at the mountain and would “say it was pretty” but do not feel attached to it. Bant cares about the mountains because of the time she has taken to know them in their specificity.

Unlike those raised without a sense for diagnostic listening, Bant knows what Yellowroot and Cherryboy should sound like and notices when the soundscape changes due to a flash flood. “I started hearing something,” she remarks, “and, for a minute, I couldn’t figure out what it was. Then I started running” (17). Bant does not *see* any evidence of something wrong; her awareness of the flood is auditory. Amplified by the poorly maintained sediment ponds of the mining operation, the flood rushes with a force that prevents Bant and her mother from hearing each other’s screams from across the yard. Bant realizes that “the land has forgot where the water should go” (16). Rather than serving as a teacher, as the land does in the writing of Erdrich or Kimmerer, the land has been so “confused” by the mine’s movement of earth and water that it no longer knows how to exist (16). Bant realizes that Yellowroot Mountain is “dead,” “blasted to bits,” and covered in “pure mountain guts” (20). The land in her mind is not material to be shaped into a golf course or kangaroo, it is a once-living being that has been desecrated and dismembered.

Bant's well-developed sense of place motivates her to do the difficult work of listening past a comfortable trust in the dominant system to hear the sounds of her community. Once she has encountered the mountain's guts, she realizes that she "has to listen" to her mother's tirades about mountaintop removal mining and increasing levels of activism (78, 82, 83). Like the little girl in Simon Ortiz's "Distance," Bant struggles to believe that "the government or the companies or God or whoever was in charge" would "let it get like that," that they *could* let it get like that (83). This trust in the system makes it hard for her to believe her mother and her grim observations. She explains, "it was still hard to believe [Lace], even if I had to listen, how hard it was to believe things could get that bad" (83). Bant tries to block out listening to her mother by noting that it is "not how moms do on TV" but ends up listening anyway because she cares about the mountains (83). Since she does not feel herself separate from the mountains, she must eventually admit that harm to them is harm to herself (100). Her conviction strengthens as "the machines got heavier, thicker, the sound like grinding your molars while you have your fingers in your ears, only you don't have the say-so to stop it" (159). This description matches Bant's sense of being part of the landscape—the sounds of its destruction are as if they are coming from her own mouth.

The destruction of the land makes connection to place ever more difficult. Bant realizes that to remain connected to the mountains she must also remain tied to the sense of loss. "*First Pap, then Grandma, then woods mountains places,*

*then Corey, and now today, how many lessons in let-go?*” she thinks to herself (353). Places have a personhood that situates them between grandmother and brother in this list of relatives. Hearing herself crave the ability to say, “*don’t care,*” Bant runs into the woods and feels “the distance [that] came between [her] and it” fall away (355). Her mother, Lace, also notes how easily listening can overwhelm. As she learns about the effects of mining on those in surrounding communities, she feels “so full up by then it was like listening from under water, and over top it all, over top all they were telling me, *this can’t be, can’t be can’t be, us*” (274). As *Mama Day* also articulated, it takes strength to keep listening. Deep in the woods, Bant rehearses something Uncle Mogeey said at her grandma’s funeral: “Bant, I’ve learned something about times like these. In times like these, you have to grow big enough inside to hold both the loss and the hope” (356-357). Attending to Mogeey and the yellowroot growing around her,<sup>36</sup> Bant realizes how to listen to the land and to its loss simultaneously, strengthening her to fight against the destruction of her home.

Mogeey’s relationship with the land centers the novel. Literally placed in the middle of the book, his meditative chapter is removed from the day to day plot. Instead, Mogeey narrates his reverence for the woods that not only hold him, but *are* him. He cannot reconcile what his reason, church, dreams, and the land

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<sup>36</sup> The mountain—Yellowroot—is named for one of the key medicinal herbs gathered in the region, along with ginseng and black cohosh. But these healing herbs prove ever more difficult to obtain as surface mining destroys their habitats (Barry 435).

tell him, but trusts the feeling that grounds him in the woods: “This is me. This, all this, is me” (179, 173). He learns this connection by listening to a “higher hum” that pervades the woods. Not a literal sound, it is yet one that proves easier to hear as Mogey learns to quiet himself. As with Nokomis’ reminder in *The Birchbark House* that the plants are speaking all the time, but we are not always quiet enough to listen, Mogey remarks that he initially only senses this hum from big animals, but eventually, as he “come[s] to know [him]self and settle[s] down, [he] could catch it, just quieter, even off trees and dirt and stone” (169). The woods give you presents “just for paying attention,” he realizes (170).

Even those who do have habits of place-based listening can struggle as the noises of industry amplify and the natural world becomes distant or unfamiliar. The sounds of TVs and radios quickly become more present, even more real-feeling than those of the natural world. When Lace’s family briefly moves to a city in North Carolina, Lace notes all of the sounds that invade her home: the ‘ahhh’ of the interstate, the cars starting, doors slamming, engines starting and stopping. Every sound she mentions comes from a vehicle. She knows how to listen to nature where she was raised, but hears none of it when she moves only a few hundred miles.

Some sounds are hard to hear. Lace and Uncle Mogey demonstrate a tormented awareness of loss, acknowledging both its difficulty and necessity. Bant notes how scary it is to hear from Mogey and his wife Mary what has been lost on the mountains because “they said it like somebody was dying and others

had already died, quiet and prayerful and sad they spoke it” (40). Most people, Bant realizes, do not try to remember. “Quite a few people talked about what they thought was being lost, but already people weren’t remembering” (36). Bant does not mention that these people, their memory slipping away, listened. If they had, as she does, they would hear what was missing. Increasingly, Bant and her family must listen for the absence of what should be present rather than for the sound itself.

### **Listening Machines**

*I am not “against technology” so much as I am for community. When the choice is between the health of a community and technological innovation, I choose the health of the community. I would unhesitatingly destroy a machine before I would allow the machine to destroy my community.*

*I believe that the community—in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures—is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms.*

-Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace*

In addition to the destruction of environmental listening by disruptive blasts and farcical lessons, constructions of masculinity that align with independence from nature and adoration of machines distance humans and their environment. The boys in Pancake's texts are listening, but they are not listening for environmental justice. Rather, they are seduced by purring engines and doomsday tellers. Listening under the industry's influence generates a fascination with the sounds of machinery as if it were alive. People's identification with machines at the expense of listening to living beings leads to death, both of the natural environment and its inhabitants.

Pancake shows how this learned form of a manliness determined by relationships with machinery rather than the environment exemplifies an allegiance to patriarchal, exploitative industry. Given the hegemonic influence of patriarchy and industrialism, listening beyond their influence takes conscious effort and guidance. Although most of the male characters in Pancake's novel adhere to this masculine-machine stereotype, Uncle Mogey provides a nature- and community-listening counter-example, reminding readers that gendered modes of listening are constructed, not intrinsic. Bant and her mother Lace were brought as children by her grandmother and her Uncle Mogey to the quiet spots of the woods, but the younger boys did not get this opportunity to learn the hollows and creeks from their elders. Instead, they learn their lessons from the loudest voices: machines and fear.

As educators such as David Sobel and David Orr have argued, environmental education that does not develop a sense of place simply leads to horror and hopelessness. Without the solace of a relationship with the mountains, Dane feels trapped in stories of environmental destruction. “Dane is the listener. So he listens, wondering when he’ll finally get so full he’ll bust, have to bust, and day after day after day he strains, braces, he prays, just to keep from busting. Flood inside” (48). This listening without connection proves brutal—impossible for him to negotiate. He carries stories and embodies the disaster without learning anywhere to plant them and grows ever more burdened. Environmental education frequently struggles to navigate this boundary. Rather than rooting out the cause of the disaster, students stand frozen, wishing to run away. Such paralyzing fear, Pancake’s novel argues, benefits the coal companies, who, as Dane’s elderly employer Mrs. Taylor says, want nothing more than to “scare us to death and make everybody miserable to where we all just move out, then they can go on and do whatever they want” (49). Mrs. Taylor’s statement implies that only humans matter. But, even after all the humans left, there would be many more beings present for the coal industry to make miserable with its violence.

Although Dane is a close listener, he has not been taught to listen to the land. Instead, he works for old Mrs. Taylor and accumulates her paralyzing horror stories. The TV reflects off of Mrs. Taylor’s glasses so that “Dane sees Mrs. Taylor’s eyes as two little TVs, talking” (43). This merging of human and machine illustrates one troubling direction close listening can go. Although he is

seemingly listening to a local elder, the TV glaring in her eyes and the closed windows to the world indicate her distance from the mountains.

The impact of TV and other media on Dane's perception of the world haunts his narratives. At one point, he "lies in the extra-dark, listening for rain. A rumble. He hears only the television noise" (110). He is mesmerized by the pamphlet about End Times amidst Mrs. Taylor's scattered papers. For him, it has "a liveness in it" that "throbs with power" (73) and he becomes afraid of "insulting" it (113). Unlike the outside world, which holds a deadened, distant horror for Dane, the apocalyptic words pulse with life. He notes that he avoids praying too often because "he knows if God listens to prayers at all anymore, He listens only to a certain number of them" (74). And, regardless, "God says nothing back" (74). The relationship that Dane has learned to cultivate is one without reciprocal listening and, thus, without the hope of shared meaning-making. Left to teach himself, he jumbles what he hears, mistaking the sounds of nature for those of machines. When he first hears the coming flash flood, "all he could think was a *new kind of machine* must be coming" (46, my emphasis). Unlike Bant, who knows the land well enough to identify the sound, Dane does not realize what is coming until he sees the wall of chocolate brown water riddled with tires and logs headed straight for him.

Every day, the mining noises overpower Dane's ability to hear normally. When a blast goes off, he feels as if "a big stump whams into the bottom of [his] chest and splashes back down in his stomach" (71). Frozen, he does not at first

respond to Mrs. Taylor, leading her to ask “Did you hear me, honey?” (71). The sound embodied by the “stump” inhibits his ability to communicate and move through the world. Dane learns to listen for the rain in terror of coming floods, but has no relationship with the place itself as a way to connect that listening with anything beyond the fear inculcated by Mrs. Taylor’s stories and pamphlets (118). When disaster does strike in the form of his brother’s deadly four-wheeler accident, it does not resound with the long-anticipated thunderclap, and Dane is unable to respond to reality in time to help his brother. His obsessive, trapped listening inhibits his ability to perceive and engage with the world.

Yet, Dane is one of the best listeners in the novel. *Strange As This Weather Has Been* questions whether most people are listening closely enough even to notice the warning sounds, nevermind do something about them. Mrs. Taylor’s son Avery remembers neighbors’ misguided confidence that they would hear the disaster coming in time to escape before the Buffalo Creek flood that continues to haunt his mother (231). As the distance between humans and the natural environment increases, this assumption of foreknowledge becomes ever more unfounded. Not only do people suffer confused or paralyzed listening as Dane does, many of them aren’t listening at all. Avery describes his “stereo-playing roommates and TV-addicted neighbors”—their ears filled with a constructed reality. Such inattention proves disastrous. Descriptive of what Rob Nixon names “slow violence,” Avery observes:

Avery takes a slow final look, the corpse-colored ground, the strangled creek, the lopped-off mountains, and on the edge of the mine, three spindly trees. This is a disaster less spectacular, more invisible, than Buffalo Creek. This disaster is cumulative, is governed by a different scale of time. Chronic, pressing insistent, insidious. Kill the ground and trees by blasting out the coal, kill all the trees you don't kill the first time through acid rain, kill the water with the waste you have to dump, and then, by burning the coal—Avery smirks, he's on a roll—heat up the climate and kill everything left. Because Avery has come to understand (not learn, but understand, confirming) that the end times his mother obsesses about won't arrive with a trumpet and Jesus come back all of a sudden and everybody jump out of their graves. No. It is a glacial-pace apocalypse. The end of the world in slow motion. A de-evolution, like the making of creation in reverse. (240)

The visual imperceptibility that Avery describes emphasizes the importance of paying attention in ways beyond seeing. As Krause noted about the selectively logged forest that appeared unscathed, but sounded very different,<sup>37</sup> this difficulty in seeing might be, at least in part, remedied by more attuned listening to the land,

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<sup>37</sup> Suzanne Simard's TED Talk, "How Trees Talk to Each Other" further explains how selective logging removes "mother trees" from an underground network of shared resources and communication that depends on these tree elders to support the growth and pass on defense mechanisms to younger trees.

elders, and place-based stories, which remember what was and realize how the environment has changed.

Unlike Dane's confused listening that tangles nature and industry, Corey simply hears machines. He delights in engines, speed, and noise. His fascination with them trumps his attachment to humans and nature to the extent that they disappear in comparison. When Corey hears a train going by, he is drawn like a moth toward its CHOCK CHOCK CHOCK CHOCK until "he could no longer hear Dane's yell" (31). Mechanical noises drown out the rest of the world, and Corey loves it. He listens to a rumbling storm and hears "motor noise in the sky" (67). No matter where he listens, he hears industry. Unlike Dane, Corey's way of listening to machines is not a mark of his confusion, but a clear choice to seek out and replace the natural with the mechanical.

The call of hypermasculinity, the state, and progress is particularly alluring in regions with high levels of unemployment and depression, where power by association may feel like the only power available. Corey listens to machines over nature because being able to distinguish motor sounds makes him more masculine and offers the potential for profit.<sup>38</sup> The massive machinery of the coal industry creates a sense of pride for men and boys who feel belittled by the world. Corey

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<sup>38</sup> Corey's dad, for example, makes what money he can by repairing small machines. His lack of knowledge of the woods added to the increasing destruction caused by the industry prevent other modes of self-sufficiency that could be gleaned from the mountainsides, such as profitable ginseng harvesting.

remembers his dad describing the company dragline as being “*Like something out of Star Wars [...] maybe the biggest piece of machinery ever built, twenty stories tall, for sure the biggest shovel in the world, and we have it right here in West Virginia. And they call us backwards*” (163). Unlike Moge realizing himself as being part of the forest, Corey envisions himself as the “gigantic body” of the machine that “can change the shape of the world” (164). Once he has identified in this way, criticizing machines threatens his sense of self. Why should he care to protect what he perceives to be a pile of inert rock from the machines that hum with life to him?

Even the bonds between people become increasingly mediated by machines; rather than listening to each other, they listen to machines together. Corey’s connection to his father largely comes through machines. Never a great success in many parts of his life, Jimmy Make teaches his children what he knows of machines, calling on them to tune in to the sounds of his truck (61). Corey puzzles over the weird noise and derides Bant’s complete lack of attention, “like it’s not important.” He justifies his observation by stating that she’s a girl and contrasting her lackluster effort to his listening “as keen as he can” (61). His obsession with his father’s truck and declaration that “that truck can talk a little” seems a way of communicating with his role-model (60). But when the littlest brother speaks up, their dad yells at him to “shut up,” prioritizing listening to the machine over a person. Corey also notes how their father “doesn’t much care what they do as long as they’re not too noisy” (279). Implying that the family

truck is more valued than his children, Jimmy encourages his kids to mechanize themselves in quest of approval and worth. Wendell Berry writes at length about the loss of good farmers, men like Uncle Moge, who are “nurturers of life,” to the allure of exploitative industrial capitalism. He warns: “let ‘progress’ take such a man and transform him into a technologist of production ([...]), and it will have made of him a creature as deformed, and as pained, as it has notoriously made of his wife” (111). Just such a technologist, Jimmy models listening to power qua machines at the expense of listening to his own family.

Listening and relating to machines over fellow humans and the environment, Pancake argues, is suicidal. Rather than being revitalized as Moge is by his connection with the living world, Corey’s determination to exemplify “man-talent” and seem “metal-made” (341) all-too-quickly kills him. Unlike the rubbish he sees strewn about after the flood, Corey cannot be reconstructed from a heap of parts. As Wendy Varney discusses, popular toys and attached narratives such as the Transformers and Men of Steel celebrate the merging of man and machine, depicting machines as “powerful, ‘rational’ in their mechanical consistency and actively working toward a more technologically advanced, and, by definition, an unquestionably better society” (Varney 159). These man-machines are described as having “improved” beyond fallible emotions and flesh to a “safe distance from nature” (Varney 161); they represent power through “triumph over nature” (163). Given that “technological paths have in no small measure been guided by power in our society. It follows that there are links

between gender and technology which work in favor of patriarchy” and that make “technology assumed to be always progressive” (167, 169). Listening to this form of “progress” leads to environmental injustice and social disintegration.

No matter how we become habituated to metaphors of the human body as a machine, these remain comparisons, not equivalences.

The body is in most ways not at all like a machine. Like all living creatures and unlike a machine, the body is not formally self-contained; its boundaries and outlines are not so exactly fixed. The body alone is not, properly speaking, a body. Divided from its sources of air, food, drink, clothing, shelter, and companionship, a body is, properly speaking, a cadaver, whereas a machine by itself, shut down or out of fuel, is still a machine. (Berry 149)

The confusion of listening that stems from melding man and machine simultaneously serves to draw humans such as Corey into listening to industrial noise as if it were alive while also figuring themselves as machines incapable of listening beyond programmed commands.

The tendency to listen to machines over people is amplified by the community’s habituation to innumerable mechanical noises. Corey determines that he will be able to steal a four-wheeler without anyone noticing “because everybody’s used to engine noise. Four-wheelers, chainsaws, tractor lawnmowers, drills, monster machines working overhead. Everybody’s used to it” (322).

Pancake shows the horror that results from this normalization of “monster

machines.” Writing against the destructive exploitation that values technological progress over ecological and community health, Berry notes that the rejection of this normalized industrial system enables a new kind of listening. Returning as an adult to his childhood farm after time in the city, Berry describes the new sensory awareness he finds in the land, its history, and his neighbors upon it;

I listened to the talk of my kinsmen and neighbors as I never had done, alert to their knowledge of the place, and to the qualities and energies of their speech. I began more seriously than ever to learn the names of things—the wild plants and animals, the natural processes, the local places—and to articulate my observations and memories. My language increased and strengthened, and sent my mind into the place like alive root system [...] I came to see myself as growing out of the earth like the other native animals and plants.

(Berry 7)

Berry insists that development of a sense of place is learned through listening to a place and its community. Great hope resides in his example of someone who learns through listening to know himself as not a worker or a machine, but as a member of the biotic community.

Indeed, men can learn not to listen to and link themselves with machines. Virginia Hamilton’s classic children’s novel, *M.C. Higgins, The Great* (1974) offers a different portrayal than *Strange* of West Virginian boyhood. For much of the novel, M.C. embodies both the fear and belief in the power of machines that

Pancake illustrates in Dane and Corey. He listens to the “vague grind and hum of mining machines” coming across the strip-mined mountain and wonders if the “growling like a mountain coming to life” that he once heard could be a far off supershovel (55). He bursts with frustration at his father’s refusal to listen to the warnings of a wary visitor regarding an unmaintained spoil heap looming near the mountaintop. When M.C. imagines the spill coming down, he envisions his father “with mud oozing into his ears” (83)—his father’s ability to listen to the land literally clogged with the destruction of the earth caused by strip mining. Like Dane, he responds to his confused listening with anxiety and the urge to run away.

Yet, ultimately, M.C. listens even more closely to his family’s yodeled greetings and the voice of the hills: they are the sounds that enable survival. Unlike Jimmy Make, who does not know the land well enough to lead his children out of industrialized listening, M.C.’s father reminds his son to hear past the supershovel’s growl to listen to the memories still perceptible in their land. “When you are resting quiet,” he explains, “Trees, dusty-still. You can hear Sarah a-laboring up the mountain, the baby, whimpering. She say, ‘Shhh! Shhh!’ like a breeze. But no breeze, no movement. It’s just only Sarah, as of old” (79). Sarah, their ancestor who escaped slavery in these hills, resounds in them “to remind us that she hold claim to me and to you and each one of us on her mountain” (79). Leaving the mountain does not only mean leaving their home, it means leaving the ancestors that created the possibility of such a home. Agreeing with the lessons of *The Birchbark House* and *Mama Day*, M.C. Higgins, *The Great*

demonstrates not only the importance of knowing a place in its present state, but also of understanding its embodied memories. Like Bant, M.C. must learn not only to listen to the mountains tell of their destruction, but also to the voices of the land and his ancestors. Hamilton's novel reminds readers that connection to a place must be remembered and passed on in order to overpower the roar of machinery and fear.

The place-based listening modeled by Uncle Mogeey, Wendell Berry, and M.C.'s father teaches a practice of listening that, rather than imposing distance between Man and Nature, understands humanity as part of nature. Because men have been particularly socialized to listen to machines over people or nature in the industrialized West, it is especially important that environmental justice education explicitly works to retrain place- and community-based listening practices that connect people to each other and to their sense of history in an environment. To the extent that patriarchy and capitalism thrive on the interchangeability of men and machines, environmental justice instruction must actively oppose these cultural norms—to teach nothing would be to teach children to listen to industrial noise, with its inherent attachments to whiteness, masculinity, and capital.

## Listening for Common Ground

*You'd better listen to the voices from the mountains  
Tryin' to tell you what you just might need to know,  
'Cause the empire's days are numbered if you're countin'  
And the people just get stronger blow by blow.*

-Ruthie Gorton,

“Voice From the Mountains”

Just as environmental degradation relates to racism, so too does it coincide with the entrapments of sexism. Environmental destruction intersects with toxic allegiances to gender roles and constructions of what it means to be “manly.”

*Strange As This Weather Has Been* stresses the desperately important work of detaching constructions of masculinity from machines, while also supporting the leading role of women in environmental justice activism.

In part because of the dominant construction of masculinity as complicit with industry, women propel most environmental justice movements. Resistance to mountaintop removal mining is the most active grassroots movement in West Virginia and women constitute the majority of membership and leadership in resistance organizations (Barry 419; Bell & Braun 800). Decoupling masculinity from machines would help environmental justice organizations to find support throughout the community, rather than dividing homes upon themselves.

Toward the end of *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, Lace declares, “What I do know, after almost two years of not even getting anybody to listen, much less take action, is this: the best way to fight [the mining companies] is to refuse to leave. Stay in their way—that’s the only language they can hear. We are from here, it says. This is our place, it says. Listen here, it says. We exist” (314). If bodies in the way are the only language that mining companies can hear, then perhaps that tells us that environmental justice depends on helping humans to have the strength and connection to place to stay put. Protesters cannot just focus on what it feels good to say, but must also encourage listening beyond the noise of industry. Much of the positive environmental justice work done in Appalachia has depended on people of many opinions coming together to listen for common ground. Developing relationships that value humans above machines, that do not conceive of land and community members as interchangeable, replaceable parts, and that dismantle binaristic understandings of gender which pressure men to reject certain listening practices as effeminate is integral to environmental justice.

Perhaps, more often, our first steps should not be to incite action—to counter noise with noise, but simply to teach genuine listening. This is a role literature can fill. Novels, poetry, and song create imaginative spaces that teach readers to hear sounds as meaningful that were previously considered noise and to listen beyond the mine blasts and company broadcasts. As Ortiz makes clear in his story “Distance,” we must learn how, when, and to whom we listen, questioning the powers that tell us to trust that which would consume us. Literature creates an

escape from this normative listening model, enabling readers to learn alternate modes of comprehending themselves and their relationships with their biotic community. In so doing, readers root themselves, holding ground against the tirade of industry.

CHAPTER FOUR

**Re-Sounding Silence:**

**Environmental Justice and Anti-colonial Poetics  
in Rita Wong's *undercurrent* and M. NourbeSe Philip's  
*Zong!***

*It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that  
had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins,  
catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other  
bird voices there was now no sound; only silence  
lay over the fields and woods and marsh.*

...

*No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the  
rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people  
had done it to themselves.*

-Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

This chapter considers the relationship of language, silence, memory, and listening in the watery worlds of two poetic texts confronting oceans of injustice. In each, poetry's fluid form resists the ways language itself confines our modes of listening. Explicitly discussing voices that cannot be literally heard, Rita Wong

and M. NourbeSe Philip emphasize the ability of creative writing to help readers attend to the gaps and deceptions in official narratives. Positioning themselves as listeners to the stories and wisdom of indigenous ancestors, elders, activists, water, and other-than-human persons, Wong and Philip use their poetry to share what listening for justice could sound like.

In the introductory fable of *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson queries: How do we notice what is missing? How do we listen to silence? These questions underscore the importance of analyzing the construction and power dynamics of listening to silence, particularly from an environmental justice perspective. Carson's fable notes an absence of bird songs that should have been present. Although easily ignored as the space between meaningful sounds, such silences are deep with significance: silence can indicate extreme violence. But, how can we respond to change if we don't realize it has happened?

Relating water to language, poets Rita Wong and N. NourbeSe Philip acknowledge the propensity of both to dilute, wash away, and submerge evidence, while also reminding readers to listen to anti-normative voices that flow in the undercurrents of both. In the convergence of language, listening, and water, we find the imbrication of ecological and cultural erasure, as dams, for example, show in their submergence of culture and environment and their exploitation of labor for the sake of "development." The prayerful water protectors of Standing Rock work against this attack on water and culture, reminding us that Water is Life. Yet, as John, one of the people working to prevent the Dakota Access

Pipeline notes, it is time that we stop thinking about water as a renewable resource, given the rapid loss of access to clean freshwater (*Where*). Although water enables life as we know it, it has also become a vessel of environmental racism and violence through the disproportionate negative effects of sea-level rise, storm surges, poisoned wells, icy water canons, and privatization on poor people and people of color. Just as water is used to hydrate and heal, so too has it been used to mask crimes and transport harm downstream. Indeed, water justice is a critical issue around the world and is expected to increase as climate change and industrialization continue to alter and sap fresh water sources.<sup>39</sup> This chapter listens to the narratives of those most impacted, for survival and justice depend upon our learning to listen beyond the dominant narrative for what is omitted, muffled, and modulated by its monologue.

Chronicling the socio-environmental impact of megadams, Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence* notes that “the production of ghosted communities who haunt the visible nation has been essential for maintaining the dominant narratives of national development” (151). Displaced human and other-than-human residents of these flood sites are suppressed in public discourse by euphemisms such as the “submergence zone,” which “suggests the drowning out of developmental refugee voices, voices rendered inaudible by the floodwaters of gung-ho developmental

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<sup>39</sup> See the World Business Council for Sustainable Development’s White Paper on water for a general overview, the IPCC report “Climate Change and Water” for detailed projections, and “Water Use and Economic Growth in the Anthropocene” for discussion of changing water demands with industrial development.

rhetoric” (Nixon 161).<sup>40</sup> Throughout, Nixon notes industry’s proclivity to propose milder harms than what actually results, change its narrative after the fact, and count on no one remembering its initial claims when it proposes the next project. Preventing such abuse demands remembering to listen to the past claims in relation to the present narrative and listening through and beyond the literal words.

Submerging landscapes also drowns communities’ connections to the past through burial sites, storied landmarks, and familiar environments. Because place-based education rooted in multi-generational knowledge is key to realizing that changes have been made to a biotic community, the destruction of these connections hurts a community’s ability to resist environmental and cultural degradation. In *All Our Relations*, Winona LaDuke writes about the impacts of a hydro-electric dam project in Nitassinan (Newfoundland), including the flooding of traditional burial grounds (61), and examples of dams submerging sites sacred to indigenous people abound. The Winnemem Wintu are currently fighting to block an 18.5 foot increase to the Shasta Dam on the McCloud River, whose resulting flood waters would inundate what sacred sites remain above water (Winnemem Wintu).

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<sup>40</sup> Nixon’s concern with the relationship between environmental justice and rhetoric is particularly well-articulated in the article “Of Land Mines and Cluster Bombs.” In it, he concludes, “We will first have to start dismantling the whole delusory rhetorical domain of ‘smart wars’ and ‘precision warfare’” (173).

As sentiment turns toward dismantling some of these giant structures, some tribes can hope to return to their sacred sites. The removal of the Elwha River dam, for example, not only allowed salmon to return to their traditional spawning waters but also uncovered the Elwha Klallam tribe's creation site which had been known only through story since 1913. Tribal Chairwoman, Frances Charles, expressed the intense emotions of recovering the site: "To be able to feel the spiritual tie to the land, and know, yes, this is real, the stories that you have heard, they are true. It is very, very powerful and very humbling" (Seattle). Charles' comment underscores how story, memory, and listening have maintained the knowledge of this invisible site for a hundred years. The people's successful reunion with the creation site demonstrates how environmental justice depends on listening outside the dominant discourse, which would have seen the creation site as indistinct rocks. Because the timescale of both harm and healing are so frequently beyond the lifespan or inhabitation of a single person, memory proves particularly important for holding on to alternative interpretations.

LaDuke's description also emphasizes the silence of the dammed river. The massive Patshetshunau falls, once famed for their great voice, are now silent (60). LaDuke asks readers to realize the significance of this silence, to listen to the absence of rushing water and question the definition of "progress." In the essay "Against Forgetting," Derrick Jensen exhorts readers to pay attention to the changes that are happening in the world rather than letting each loss of life or

increase of pollution become the new normal. Jensen argues for the importance of an individual paying enough attention to remember what came before.

I was horrified a few years ago to read that many songbird populations on the Atlantic Seaboard have collapsed by up to 80 percent over the last 40 years. But, and this is precisely the point, I was even more horrified when I realized that *Silent Spring* came out more than 40 years ago, so this 80 percent decline followed an already huge decline caused by pesticides, which followed another undoubtedly huge decline caused by the deforestation, conversion to agriculture, and urbanization that followed conquest. (Jensen 12)

Jensen, naming this habit of forgetting as a case of “declining baselines,” remarks on the difficulty of fighting for “an injustice you do not perceive as an injustice but rather as just the way things are. How can you fight an injustice you never think about because it never occurs to you that things have ever been any different?” (Jensen 12). LaDuke and Jensen ask readers to notice the relationship between environmental and social forgetting—they are often part of the same process. And, although Jensen stresses the importance of an individual paying attention and fighting to remember, LaDuke shows how this individual remembering relies on and is strengthened by a community of listeners. Wong and Philip add to Jensen and LaDuke by questioning the norms and operations of language itself in relation to how we pay attention.

In addition to disrupting the connection between Indigenous people and sacred sites, floodwaters and dams have proven major forces of environmental racism for African Americans. Demetrius Eudell writes of the degree to which the energy provided by enslaved Africans and African Americans enabled the capitalist development that led to today's reliance on fossil fuels and environmental degradation (195). In *The Landscapes of MAN*, he asks readers to remember the link among social injustice, environmental harm, and so-called natural disasters, which so often disproportionately impact communities of color. Eudell writes of how African Americans were forced to build and maintain levees, even to the point of adding their bodies to the blockade when sandbags ran short (Eudell 206). These levees and dams functioned in concert to control the environment and "structure the social order" (Eudell 207). As Anissa Janine Wardi concludes in *Water and African American Memory*, "as we come to recognize the full loss of Hurricane Katrina—this natural and man-made disaster that laid waste to lives, homes, and an entire metropolis—once again we are made aware that bodies of water are infused, circumscribed, and transfigured by the body politic of the nation" (141). A listening framework emphasizes how the structures that teach people not to listen to the land are synchronized with those that tell us not to listen to fellow humans in order to justify exploitative social actions.

Listening for justice involves listening with an intention to remember what has been said before and to remember what is heard into the future. Both Wong

and Philip refer to the current “state of amnesia” in North America that undermines the health and justice of our society, with Wong’s poetry growing from knowledge she has learned from listening to elders of the Salish Sea region and Philip’s building from the connection she makes with the voices of African ancestors through Setaey Adamu Boateng and Ewe elders in Ghana. Both respond to Linda Hogan’s declaration that “Indian people must not be the only ones who remember the agreement with the land, the sacred pact to honor and care for the life that, in turn, provides for us” (94-95). Their poetry offers ways of rethinking how we hear elders, not as forgetful, but as keepers of story and sources of memory.

Sometimes, there are living memories of alternate narratives that can be listened to anew, revalued, and carried forward. In other cases, the efforts for re-memory meet oceans of silence. Although voices did exist, they went unheard by the documentarians of their time and now can be heard only in the pauses in a white-male-centric narrative. Even as we can only approach these voices through attention to their absence, a listening-based approach remembers that there would have been voices and therefore makes listening to silence resound with significance. Put another way, listening for what can no longer be heard can be just as important, or more so, than listening to the voices that remain audible. Because violence against women of color, for example, has been largely institutionally forgotten or modified by mainstream historical productions such as many high school textbooks or feature films, Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*

considers the ways such memory has been raced, erased, gendered, and deformed in American society. Remembering, Morrison teaches us, is not simply a matter of listening to the past, but also of giving the past space to re-form itself as sensate and valuable—to re-member itself. This process of re-membering enables and requires a form of listening beyond the dominant historical narrative. Both Wong and Philip tie their work to water as a source of collective memory and resilience (Philip 203, Wong 5).

Furthermore, which absences are noted in the archives and which are erased adheres to the dominant power structures. Writing on the politics of the senses, David Howes and Constance Classen note that “[t]he social control of perceptibility—who is seen, who is heard, whose pain is recognized—plays an essential role in establishing positions of power within society” (65-66). As such, listening for silences proves one of the most important components of listening for environmental justice. For, it is the absence of song that too often indicates where the greatest harm has occurred. Yet, it is also this absence that we are likely taught by the dominant system to ignore or leave unattended, distracted by the blare of loud, monied voices.

Even in recovering understandings of the senses and the environment, scholars must use caution in interpreting the archive. M. NourbeSe Philip notes this in her discussion of *Zong!*:

I deeply distrust this tool I work with—language. It is a distrust rooted in certain historical events that are all of a piece with the

events that took place on the *Zong*. The language in which those events took place promulgated the non-being of African peoples, and I distrust its order, which hides disorder; its logic hiding the illogic and its rationality, which is simultaneously irrational. However, if language is to do what it must do, which is communicate, these qualities—order, logic, rationality—the rules of grammar must be present. And, as it is with language, so too with the law. Exceptions to these requirements exist in religious or spiritual communication with nonhuman forces such as gods or supra-human beings, in puns, parables, and, of course, poetry. In all these instances humans push against the boundary of language by engaging in language that often is neither rational, logical, predictable or ordered. (197)

Literature is well-positioned to bring attention to gaps and omissions of language and to encourage the disorder that enables listening beyond a dominant narrative.

A listening framework places the onus on listeners to pay better attention, rather than on those who are no longer present to continue their outcry. Indeed, the concept of being “silenced” is troubled by this reframing because it implies that meaning cannot be expressed without sound. But, if silence is understood as significant, then even silence is listenable and does not excuse inaction or dismissal. Poetry such as *Zong!* performs a model of listening through the

rationalist discourse that so often promotes environmental injustice and creates a space for listening to what cannot literally be heard.

Wong and Philip's texts challenge the grammar of English; they seek through recombination to take words that have been heard in a particular way and re-sound them. They show the ways that language colonizes thought and use poetry to break out of the molds that have constricted understanding. In *undercurrent* and *Zong!*, Wong and Philip share how poetry offers a space that refuses these bounds and plays with alternative modes of combining and resisting meaning to allow alternative ways of listening to our world and our memories.

### **Willing to Listen**

*History is a kind of listening for traces of other lives  
beneath the frequencies of the present, for the past  
is not just an absence; it is below us, the grounding  
of the now. The past reaches up from below the  
waves of history, telling us something again and  
again, if only we can hear it. But often the volume is  
turned too low, and those who are living are too  
loud.*

-Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below:*

## *Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*

Listening is not simply about hearing the voices that are currently present; it is about hearing the history of relationship and meaning that gives context to communication and pays attention to what goes unsaid. As such, listening teaches and maintains depth of connection, promise, kinship. The title of Rita Wong's poetry collection *undercurrent* (2015) invokes that deeper significance flowing under the visible surface of the earth and language. In this work, challenging the borders of nationality and personhood to think about how to listen to a watershed, Wong's polyvocal text is steeped in the memory of the indigenous communities of the Salish Sea region and of water itself as it flows and cycles through land, enabling life and remembering prior paths.

For Wong, *undercurrent* grew from a larger research-creation collaboration on reimagining water called *Downstream: A Poetics of Water*, which asked, "What roles do culture and poetics play in supporting a healthy, water-based ecology?" and was a project that "involves respectfully listening to local, global, and indigenous perspectives on water, and considering what is both spatially and temporally downstream" ("Home"). *undercurrent* builds on Wong's 2007 publication, *forage*, which addresses a range of environmental justice issues, focusing on toxicity, bioengineering, and environmental racism.

Although Wong's work is gaining recognition in the environmental literature community,<sup>41</sup> *undercurrent* has not yet received critical attention. Both *forage* and *undercurrent* integrate quotes from many environmental experts and advocates into the body of the poems and along the margins of the pages. Rather than a solitary monologue, Wong's poems respond to these marginal voices. They create collaboration and conversation, breaking from the tradition of the solitary, wandering poet that is stereotypical of the pastoral and much 20th century nature writing.

In the collection, Wong also uses wordplay to draw attention to habitual phrases or ideas bound up in unjust colonial practices. Through its study of watersheds, systems, and cycles, *undercurrent* seeks to "refus[e] the inertia of amnesia" (42), with the book's primary speaker presenting herself as someone learning to listen differently. The poem "DECLARATION OF INTENT" sets down this determination from its first lines

let the colonial borders be seen for the pretensions that they are  
i hereby honour what the flow of water teaches us  
[...]  
a watershed teaches not only humbleness but climate fluency  
the languages we need to interpret the sea's rising voice  
water connects us to salmon & cedar, whales & workers (14)

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<sup>41</sup> For instance, Rita Wong was a keynote speaker at the 2015 ASLE Biennial Conference.

This declaration to listen to water's teachings follows in the path of Robin Wall Kimmerer, author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, who in an interview for the radio program *On Being*, talks of how not only plants and other-than-human animals are considered animate in Anishinaabemowin, but also rocks and water.<sup>42</sup> The beingness of water as an animate body that remembers and can be heard resonates with the shifting habits of knowing that define Wong's poetry. Rather than learning about water, the speaker resolves to learn from it:

i hereby invoke fluid wisdom to guide us through the toxic muck  
i will apprentice myself to creeks & tributaries, ground water &  
glaciers  
listen for the salty pulse within, the blood that recognizes marine  
ancestry (14)

Water *teaches* remembering to those who are willing to listen and relearn the syntax of place and community in order to understand that the world is alive with beings rather than full of things. This shift in listening to the flow of a watershed is simultaneously marked by a disruption of the objectifying practices of the English language. Wong pulls apart words and reforms them to offer a new possibility: "not *tar* but *tears*, *e* inserts a listening, witnessing, quickening

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<sup>42</sup> Kimmerer explains: "Western science would give the criteria for what does it mean to be alive is a little different than you might find in traditional culture, where we think of water as alive, as rocks as alive — alive in different ways, but certainly not inanimate. Generally, the inanimate grammar is reserved for those things which humans have created [*sic*]" ("Intelligence").

eye” (15). In the fluidity of poetic form, Wong finds new approaches to understanding the world and humanity’s relationship with it.

In listening to water, we challenge the Western practice of not listening to other animate beings, and the definition of animacy itself. Conventional Western definitions of personhood have recently been redefined in countries such as New Zealand, whose courts have begun to acknowledge the environment as holding legal personhood.<sup>43</sup> The potential for listening to water as an animate being is thus not only a matter of spiritual or emotional import, but also of legal consequence. If we can understand the river as a being rather than a thing, then we can fight for its rights beyond the framework of potential use for humans. Wong asks readers to attend to the toxins that flow in these waters who are under attack by tar sands and plastic particles not only because of the impact on human health, but also for the water’s own sake.

In the second section of “DECLARATION,” Wong repeatedly figures herself as part of the problem and the solution. Itself a watery word, solution offers an admission of optimism that often feels distant in environmental justice literature. Wong elaborates on this hope in her poem’s final lines:

broken but rebinding, token but reminding, vocal buck unwinding  
the machine’s gears rust in rain, moss & lichen slowly creep life  
back

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<sup>43</sup> Motivated by listening to Maori ways of knowing, New Zealand has recently granted legal personhood to Te Urewera (formally a national park) and is in the process of doing so for the Whanganui River (“What in the World”).

the rate of reclamation is humble while the rate of destruction  
blasts fast

because we are part of the problem we can also become part of the  
solution (15)

This “rebinding,” “reminding,” and “unwinding” emphasize the key role of connection and memory as means to unravel the constructed distances between humans and their biotic communities. The rusting machine recalls the concerns of Ann Pancake regarding how the association of humans with machines and their replaceable parts furthers environmental injustice. But, as Wong writes, water wears away even these mechanical parts, bringing them ever so slowly back into the life cycles of Earth. In this description of resurgent moss and lichen, Wong’s writing resonates with the concluding scene of Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* and the founding event of Margaret Atwood’s *Maddaddam* trilogy. Both novels imagine futures where humanity (as least as we know it) does not survive the destruction we are presently causing, but life finds ways to continue with vigor. These authors ask questions similar to Alan Weisman’s premise for his speculative nonfiction work *The World Without Us*: what would happen to the world if humans indeed wiped themselves out? Each author expresses a strange comfort in believing that, with any luck, after a few millennia, “The world would start over” (Weisman). This empowerment of the world to heal itself, however slowly, reminds us that the current bloom of

industrialism is changeable and destructible, despite its seeming ubiquity and permanence.

*undercurrent* offers more hope than Yamashita or Atwood that machines might be allowed to crumble without the eradication of humanity if we can learn to listen to the water rather than the dams in time. Wong's poetry responds to the bitter violence of the capitalist industrial world: "who knows what alliances & monkey wrenches will be enough to stop the greed of the greasy machine?" (23). Each poem questions the relationship of hope, poetry, and action. Like Nokomis in *The Birchbark House*, Wong acknowledges that "medicines abound as the blind walk & dig: some can hear them, many can't. what will we learn from crowberry, blueberry, elderberry, yarrow, caribou, whitefish, Yamoza?" (*undercurrent* 75). The potential for healing and change is alive in the world; the challenge is to hear it.

The collection ends with an epilogue, "LETTER SENT BACK IN TIME FROM 2115," that offers a utopia where "we live in the world as if it were our only home" (87) and "the syntax of hope percolates into bathrooms & basements" (87). Listening to water—this syntax of hope—is what *undercurrent* models. While Wong's earlier environmental justice collection *forage* thrums with anger at the slow violence enacted on communities of color and future generations, *undercurrent* fights back with a song of interrelatedness as strength. Bringing attention to the lives, motion, and challenges of the Salish coast in particular and its relation to the global water system, Wong uses poetry to create a listening

space to hear what has been largely unrecorded in popular narratives. Throughout the collection, voices of the other-than-human residents of the area ask to be heard:

*We are tardigrades and tawny owls, river dolphins and rockhopper penguins, slow sloths and fast elk. We are not stuffed animals to be deserted and betrayed as your political 'leaders' listen to money and ignore the acidifying ocean, the tumultuous tsunami, hurricanes, floods that shout climate instability. We are your relatives. [...] We call upon you to remember your ancient oaths, your debts to all realms that enable your existence, your obligations as earth-dwellers. (35, italics original).*

The listening that Wong describes depends on actively learning new information from those who have maintained ways of knowing the earth.

In a way, Wong picks up where the little girl in Ortiz's "Distance" leaves off: Wong's speaker has stopped listening to the men who hold power and instead trusts herself and listens to the many voices that enable life. She declares, "what i do know is the humble migrants who've travelled the ocean have felt its wisdom more deeply than an arrogant elite that doesn't heed the world's necessary stories" (23). Wong stresses paying attention beyond "the corridors of power noisy with mistakes" (*forage* 41). She writes of learning a new syntax, new languages, both those of the Salish Coast indigenous language group and of the unceded land that they have inhabited for generations. She goes to community elders and the water

for teaching. In many of her poems, Wong exhorts readers to stop listening to money and start listening to the earth and each other.

A poem late in the collection moves to a call to action: “TAKE A ST.AND.” The poem follows the flow of sewage “under fifth and st. george,” as if positioning the confining street as that Christian killer of a plague-bearing dragon (60). Yet, the poem reminds us, “the ground underneath is what really feeds us” (61). How has our definition of sewage as “waste” kept us from understanding the essential water and nutrients of this system? Although sewage water did once lead to plague, we now have ample means to rethink the products of our consumption not as “waste” but as nutrient-rich material.<sup>44</sup> The struggle is not one of insufficient information about how to change this system, so much as it is one of a conceptual block amplified by our habits of language. Wong’s speaker wonders how to resist these habits; she asks, “how does one handle two, three, four-faced adversaries” who have stolen the ground of indigenous peoples “through lies, deceit, conceit” (61). She responds:

the tricks

with the knife

i’m learning to do :

splice languages

barter carefully (61)

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, the work of the Rich Earth Institute to study and use human urine for fertilizer and thereby protect our water from unnecessary pollution and misuse.

Listeners, as Wong presents it, cannot simply take in what they hear at face value; the surface is too riddled with layers of lies. Even something so simple as grass, Wong reminds readers, is an aesthetic norm created by Western European grazing practices that guzzle water and lawn mower oil.<sup>45</sup> The seemingly innocuous grass wastes water to benefit the aesthetic desires of the wealthy at the cost of drinking and agricultural water needed for survival by those farther downstream. As Leslie Marmon Silko makes graphically vivid in *Almanac of the Dead*, the golf courses of Arizona are sapping life from the entire Colorado River watershed.<sup>46</sup> “who imposed these / lawns & do i really / want them?” Wong asks (61). The listener must learn to attend to the undercurrent in order to begin to listen beyond what she describes as “psychobabble” (*forage* 61).

For Wong, much of this ability to listen beyond the growl of the greasy machine is a matter of remembering. In a “Magical Dictionary,” she defines “ceremony”

: shaping one’s gestures to honour what has not been lost,

just buried

: the music that we forget is music (28)

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<sup>45</sup> Gasoline-powered lawn and garden equipment accounts for nearly half of the non-road CO emissions (about 12% of all emissions) and significant portions of VOCs and other toxins (Banks and McConnell 8). Meanwhile “landscape irrigation [in the U.S.] is estimated to account for nearly one-third of all residential water use, totaling nearly 9 billion gallons per day” (WaterSense EPA).

<sup>46</sup> The character Leah Blue’s determination to build a watery retreat town, “Venice, AZ,” depends on her purposefully risking the drinking water for the entire region and using legalese to attempt to trick her judges into hearing something different from this reality (Silko 652).

Such remembering is aided by listening to water:

kindred spirit, autonomous water remembers

forest before rubble

revives the forest after the terror is reined in (27)

Water has memory on a longer timescale than any human, from before forest was rubble. Its interconnected path that flows through all parts of life—“the memory of rain sliding into sink and teacup, throat and bladder, tub and toilet” (42)—teaches remembrance of where we came from. The river is connected all the way to its source. In this way, listening for environmental justice requires not only paying attention to the voices that are currently in the world, but also listening to the depth of interconnection and sources of meaning that exist within words and relationships. Listening only to English-speaking humans traps us in a timescale too small to help us understand alternative modes of interacting with our biotic communities.

In listening to the stories of elders and of water, Wong shows how we can know what once was and realize what is changing. In “Sunset,” Wong writes:

she hears amanda nahanee tell the story

wild rice used to grow where chinatown is now      she

invokes its return

q’élstexw (58)

By naming Amanda Nahanee, a major young aboriginal activist of the Squamish Nation who supports language and cultural recovery and aboriginal approaches to climate change, Wong recasts her poetic “speaker” as predominantly a listener: someone listening to the people, stories, and languages indigenous to British Columbia. The considerable space between the invocation and “q’élstexw” creates a patient listening space that interacts with the once-present wild rice. Wong does not put other-than-English languages in italics as convention would dictate, but instead implicitly asks why these are not already familiar, given that they are the indigenous words of her inhabitation. She resists the violent irony of labeling indigenous words “foreign” through her font. In listening to Amanda Nahanee, the water, the tardigrades, Wong’s speaker finds a degree of solace to the “languish” of a colonized tongue, much as M. NourbeSe Philip describes in her poem “Discourse On The Logic of Language” and other poems in her collection *She Tries Her Tongue — Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1988).<sup>47</sup>

Over the course of *undercurrent*, more and more other-than-English words spring from the cracked cement of the English narrative. q’élstexw: to return it, give it back in Halq’eméylem, a Central Salish language branch of Coast Salish, demonstrates how in listening to the language of the land, we return to it.

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<sup>47</sup> Jeannette Armstrong also writes of the relationship between indigenous language and place, describing her continued efforts as a fluent speaker of Okanagan and English to “battle against the rigidity in English” and “revel in the discoveries [she] make[s] in constructing new ways to circumvent such invasive imperialism on my tongue” (“Land Speaking” 194).

Remembering the human language of a place helps to pay attention and listen to the biotic community. As MacFarlane argues, these words grow out of the particularities of a place and help us to attend to them: “language deficit leads to attention deficit” (“The Word-Hoard”). Listening to water, to elders, and to the indigenous language of a place teaches newcomers to hear relationships built before colonization forced removal and forgetting, while also recognizing the ways language, culture, and environment have changed over time. *undercurrent* argues that in order to listen for justice for our biotic communities, we need to challenge our habits of to whom we listen and engage with the boundaries and deceptions of the English language itself.

### **Listening to Remember**

*The poem hovers between the obligation to seek permission to listen and the impossibility of obtaining it from a voice that cannot be reached.*

-The Blunt Research Group,

*The Work-Shy*

Taking deconstructive wordplay to a greater extreme than *undercurrent*, *Zong!* pulls apart the violent grammar of capitalism in order to listen to

submerged voices. Describing the process of writing *Zong!*, M. NourbeSe Philip notes how her poetry lingers in the silences of the historical record of the infamous slave ship *Zong* to create a text loud with utterances, groans, and songs. It channels a form of performative listening that figures the poet herself as someone who listens to hear what cannot be told, but must be heard. Published in 2008, *Zong!* joins scholarship seeking to read against the grain in transatlantic studies such as the massive archival projects of Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005) and Stephanie Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery* (2007) made possible by archives such as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database. Unlike Baucom and Smallwood's more traditional historical forms, *Zong!* uses the flexibility of contemporary poetic form to manipulate and rearticulate the legal document of the *Zong*'s famous trial, which adjudicated an insurance claim for the 133 enslaved Africans thrown overboard during an Atlantic crossing. Her project grows from wondering "whether the sounds of those murdered Africans continue to resound and echo underwater" (203). Like Wong, Philip figures herself as a listener, sharing what there is to attend to even in silence. Philip's poetry turns silence into a soundscape latent within the archive and argues for the necessity of listening to it, asking readers to attend to other constructed silences as Philip has done.

The importance of memory in listening rises to the surface throughout Philip's work as she encounters the collective amnesia which allows so many people to read history and not attend to its gaps. Philip describes *Zong!* as a work

told to her by Setaey Adamu Boateng, marking it from the start as a work of listening to an ancestor who, much as Wong writes, has been submerged, but not lost. *Zong!* illustrates how the repetition of overwriting and forgetting defines the dominant historical narrative. Philip describes *Zong!* as fugal, a form remarkable for its interweaving voices that create many ways of hearing and relating to the same musical subject. She also invokes the fugue's psychiatric definition:

The fugue has, however, another darker meaning, referring to a state of amnesia in which the individual, his or her subjectivity having been destroyed, becomes alienated from him- or herself. It is a state that can be as brief as a few hours or as lengthy as several years. In its erasure and forgetting of the be-ing and humanity of the Africans on board the *Zong*, the legal text of *Gregson v. Gilbert* becomes a representation of the fugal state of amnesia, serving as a mechanism for erasure and alienation. (204)

Literature thus becomes important for encountering and upsetting the fugal state of forgetting.

As Philip sinks into the project, she determines that “[s]ilence was its own language that one could read, interpret, and even speak” (195). In drawing out untold sounds, the poem encourages its reader to relisten to silence and realize the voices that did indeed sound. It demonstrates the innumerable listenable exclamations within the silences constructed by the court documents. This listening model works against the collective habit of “construct[ing] blackness as

silent, suffering, and perpetually violated, just as it attempts to erase the ways antiblack violence is enacted in the present” (McKittrick 9). Rather than continuing the narrative of people of color being silenced, *Zong!* puts the onus on readers to change how they listen.

Like the silence of Rachel Carson’s DDT-destroyed spring, the silence of the suppressed history demands that we attend to what we cannot hear. *Zong!* asks readers to listen for absence. Philip pulls apart the *Zong* narrative created by the legal case of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, using the flexibility of poetic space to draw attention to the text’s gaps and erasures. “While a concern with precision and accuracy in language is common to both law and poetry, the law uses language as a tool for ordering; in the instant case, however, I want poetry to disassemble the ordered, to create disorder and mayhem” (199). Like Wong, Philip notes the colonialist power of English syntax to constrain comprehension to its own ways of knowing. In disordering its syntax, Philip brings other meanings to the surface; although the story is too dispersed to tell as a linear counter-narrative, poetry enables a form of listening that does not rely on those traditional structures.

Philip channels the voices of the enslaved Africans and crew of the *Zong* that are still resonating in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. She stresses the distinction between not speaking and not being heard. “In *Zong!*,” Philip writes, “the African, transformed into a thing by the law, is re-transformed, miraculously, back into human. Through oath and through moan, through mutter, chant and babble, through babble and curse, through chortle and ululation to not-tell the

story...” (196). How does one listen for lost voices rather than declaring them silenced? Philip offers: “Our entrance to the past is through memory. And water. It is happening always—repeating always, the repetition becoming a haunting. Do they, the sounds, the cries, the shouts of those thrown overboard from the *Zong* repeat themselves over and over until they rise from the ocean floor to resurface in *Zong!?*” (203). Even if we cannot know for certain what those voices said, the act of listening through poetry supplements and complicates the evidence-based form of history privileged in Western knowledge systems. In listening to the ancestors through broken syntax and water, *Zong!* offers ways of acknowledging the structure and bounds of that epistemology and listening beyond it.

Although *Zong!* is in many ways a very visual text, with its undulating sea of unevenly spaced words, phonemes, and letters, analyzing it sonically helps to move away from the hierarchal power systems aligned with that visualist perspective and hear multiplicity in the sounds presented. *Zong!* produces a fugal polyphony from the jumble of languages, voices, and cries that would have been heard amidst the wash and slap of an Atlantic crossing, a cacophonous soundscape that resonates with sound historian Mark Smith’s discussion of raced modes of listening: “The enslaved contested such efforts [by slaveholders to control their soundscapes], however. Sometimes, they countered by offering alternative soundscapes, ones meaningful to, and made by, them. What for white ears was jumbled cacophony, black ears heard as expressive of African American

cultural values” (51). Philip resists the oppressive monologism of mainstream history by giving space and amplification to this culturally vital tumult.

Philip has given many readings of *Zong!*. In listening to her, the soundscape of the ocean and the ship’s passengers comes to life. The repeated “w”s of the collection’s initial poem, “Zong! #1,” that appear so visually disconnected and lost, become a stuttering, humming, questioning sound of waves and worries in Philip’s performance. The sighing, groaning, wailing sounds of “wa” and “oo” come forward from the bland phrase “good water” (3).

Why the exclamation mark after *Zong!*? *Zong!* is chant! Shout!  
And ululation! *Zong!* is moan! Mutter! Howl! And shriek! *Zong!* is  
‘pure utterance.’ *Zong!* is Song! And Song is what has kept the  
soul of the African intact when they ‘want(ed) water...  
sustenance...and preservation.’ *Zong!* is the Song of the untold  
story; it cannot be told yet must be told, but only through its un-  
telling. (207)

The pages of *Zong!* brim with the sounds of the ship: cries, song, the pounding of dancing feet, moans, pattering rain, and prayers. Philip listens inside the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert* to remind readers of the sounds that must have accompanied its calculated narrative. In her performance, we hear not only English, but also water and wing, human song and suffering.

Philip describes the process of writing *Zong!* as one of “locking” herself into the word bank of the legal text in order to find the story whose words are

unrecorded, but must be heard. “It is a story that cannot be told; a story that in not telling must tell itself, using the language of the only publicly extant document directly bearing on these events—a legal report that is, at best, only tangentially related to the Africans on board the *Zong*” (Philip 199). She seeks out “the many silences within the Silence of the text” (191) and finds that “within each silence is the poem” (195). Philip wants her poetry “to release the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself” (199). Although art of all kinds could perform this act of disassembly, poetry’s relationship to wordplay and aurality is particularly suited to the task. Its intense focus on paying attention makes it a figurative form of listening.

Within the legalese of the trial, Philip unpacks the scents (“a rose,” “scent of mortality,” “piss”) and sounds (the sighing “es es” and the groaning “oh”) on which those words are built. These “oh”s and “es”s also spell the “os” of the bones from those people whose bodies were thrown into the ocean.<sup>48</sup> Although these bones will forever be invisible to us, the poem asks us to listen to their existence as brought to the surface through archival poetics.

The structure of words shatters into ever more possibilities as the text progresses: words within words, sounds breaking free from calcified sentences. What begins as the reordering of the syntax of the trial document becomes a fragmentary polyphony of overlapping letters, words, and sounds. Singing and

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<sup>48</sup> Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* also lingers in the moaning bones of the sea/mother that resound in the French hearing of “o-mer-os.”

sound grow ever more present in the text as its dry legal language is pulled apart to let out the cries encased within its lines. “There are times in the final book, Ferrum, when I feel as if I am writing a code and, oddly enough, for the very first time since writing chose me, I feel that I *do* have a language—this language of grunt and groan, of moan and stutter—this language of pure sound fragmented and broken by history” (205). Ironically, justice depends on listening past, through, and into the legal document, rather than trusting its superficial narrative.

Philip reminds the reader that a word can hold different meanings for different listeners. The sonic importance of Philip’s project presents itself in the glossary: “Words and Phrases *Overheard* on Board the *Zong*” (183, my emphasis). This list of Dutch, Latin, Shona, Yoruba and other languages helps readers to realize the multiplicity of meaning in listening, given that the same word or sound can mean many things depending on the listener. Is “ague” the 19th century English term for a flu or Yoruba for “fast”? Is “ave” the Latin “hello/goodbye” or the Shona “so that he/she can be”? These overlapping definitions ask readers to note their listening contexts and realize there are other modes for understanding the same sounds. As the poem continues, words that were English dissociate and start to resonate with French, Yoruba, and Shona meanings. Perhaps most jarring is the transition from English to French within “& rum they sang & sang & sang le sang” which drips diagonally down the bottom of page 68. The singing that often accompanied the ship’s forced exercise is bloody. Meanings become simultaneous in such a space, where it is not one word breaking down into

another, but one word meaning differently depending on how and by whom it is heard. Similarly, the line “there was piss cum bile cum pus” (70) resounds with sexual violence by making cum mean both “with” and “semen.” “*Zong!*” bears witness to the ‘resurfacing of the drowned and the oppressed’ and transforms the desiccated legal report into a cacophony of voices—wails, cries, moans, and shouts that had earlier been banned from the text” (Philip 203). The work realizes the extent to which poetry provides alternative ways of listening to entrenched narratives.

Resistance through listening to silence directly acknowledges communal histories and accepts the depth of meaning that is present even if, sometimes particularly if, unspoken. Don Ihde writes about the “latent significance” of “the unspoken context which surrounds speech. The context belongs to a degree of silence” which depends on the listener’s awareness that “what was not said has been said in a community with a history” (162). Literature is especially suited to demonstrating the importance of listening to silence because its access to interiority makes listening within silence possible.

The undulating word waves of the poem “Sal” encourage the reader to hear rather than to see meaning. “*video video vide o,*” Philip writes on the left of page 62, *video* meaning “to see” in Latin and *vide* meaning “empty” in French. Philip points to the emptiness within seeing and asks us to hear multiplicity. As

*Zong!* continues, the words modulate into ever more variations, their sounds stretching over the wave-like gaps that lap across the page.

her and me the song *so la*  
*fa so* *la far isola*  
*g long*  
*g long* *g long*  
gong gong we ate dates with rose water the man  
in the red fez and i  
to  
the east the & gold  
tunis it is a yarn i  
spin a tale to be  
told not  
heard nor  
read not be  
un  
told we  
were

(107-108)

In this passage, we hear the solfège of classical vocal training interspersed with the “gong gong” of, perhaps, the ship’s bell tolling the watch. The “*g long g*

*long*” in the middle of the passage hints of water slapping the hull of the ship, of chains jangling heavily, or of a dry throat struggling to swallow. As a listening text, *Zong!* represents the voices and words of humans and the nonverbal sounds of the human body, the clanking signals of the ship, and sounds of the sea.

Although acknowledging her own surprise at their presence, Philip creates a soundscape that includes not only the voices of the enslaved Africans, but also those of the young European or American sailors (204). The passage above, which hints at the fairytale Rumpelstiltskin with its glimpse of spinning and gold, gains clarity in conjunction with a repetition of many of the words a few pages later that describes a young cabin boy, “ned,” who runs away to sea because “he too had / heard of a seam / of gold so / broad & so / wide in an age of lust” (117). The crew are seduced by a story that they cannot un-hear: capitalism’s siren song of incalculable riches. But, these are tales of riches that sacrifice human life. The text of *Zong!* is not just the voice of the enslaved people whose possible names line the bottom of the first section’s pages, but also of the other humans on board.

Listening to these voices together brings out the jumbled anxiety of the ship. “sift the air for enemies / of my soul,” one speaker calls out. “they are many sh h / hush can you not / hear the plea s we were deaf to / how to mend this” (117). There is a confusion of listening in each of these statements. It seems impossible not to hear the “plea s,” yet those who should be “deaf.” As transatlantic scholars have argued, the slave ship is a capitalist factory for making

people into items—a place of ideological transformation.<sup>49</sup> The ship, as Philip represents it, also causes a breakdown of language in which many voices are heard, but few, if any, are listened to. This violent distinction between hearing and listening is integral to the functioning of the chattel slave trade, helping to justify its existence by declaring people unlistenable.

As *Zong!* continues, the imperative to listen grows.

sin with salve *tais* *toi* do  
you hear a  
bove or is it un  
der the roar of  
water their song *aide* *moi aide* *moi*  
help  
me help me i can t it is  
late too late the *oba* sobs

(128)

At first, it seems that this order to *tais toi* (“shut up”) might be directed at the enslaved woman whose breasts and arms have “weals on” them. But, as the appeal continues, it also becomes possible to interpret it as the necessary quiet in order to listen that so many of the authors in *Listening for Justice* have

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<sup>49</sup> See Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1995) for an extended description of the slave ship as a moving place of people, ideas, language, and ideologies. This understanding of the ship is extended in fictional works such as Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and other non-fiction texts such as Markus Rediker’s *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007).

encouraged. What sounds are present for us to listen to once we shut up? What are the calls for help that have not been silenced, but went unlistened to by those with the power to make a difference? The painful response of the too-late *oba* (Yoruba for king, leader) underscores that these voices are listenable by those who attempt to do so.

*Zong!* offers the poet as one who has learned and worked to listen to the supposedly incomprehensible, the silence, the gaps and share what meaning was already there. The difficulty of inhabiting the horrors of the slave ship comes through in the ever more broken prose that ends the penultimate section: “ha / ve the s ea say to yo / u what i can / not i he ar only the ro / ar of r / aw water t he sea s voi / ce a fis t to the he ad” (171). The poem listens to silence, and although it is not possible to know everything held by that silence, *Zong!* listens to the sounds present but filtered out of the legal record.

### **Changing How We Listen**

*And the language of “it,” which distances, disrespects, and objectifies, I can’t help but think is at the root of a worldview that allows us to exploit nature. And by exploit, I mean in a way that really seriously degrades the land and the waters,*

*because, in fact, we have to consume. We have to take. We are animals, right? But that, to me, is different than really rampant exploitation. But this is why I've been thinking a lot about — are there ways to bring this notion of animacy into the English language?*

-Robin Wall Kimmerer,

“The Intelligence in All Kinds of Life”

By pulling apart the text of historical records, *undercurrent* and *Zong!* listen for what cannot be heard until the dominant voice is spliced and fragmented. Philip does not give voice to the enslaved people onboard so much as she draws attention to ways of listening to the languages, cries, and exclamations that haunt an archive's gaps and pauses. By pulling apart and emphasizing those pauses, the poets allow us to hear the deception of the historical monologue and therefore understand the importance of listening for justice, because it is the unheard stories that are most easily ignored and that often indicate the greatest violence.

Too frequently, the history of slavery is not included in the understanding of environmental justice despite the role of exploitative labor in producing an industrial system that depends on destructive energy forms and the transformation of beings into materials or machines. This system depended upon and created

pervasive, lasting inequity. As Eudell and Wardi emphasize in their books on environmental racism, chattel slavery has been a major factor in the development of the fossil fuel industrial model that produces current environmental problems.

Language and memory change how we listen. In an interview, Robin Wall Kimmerer discusses how her family members' time in the Carlisle Boarding School left silences in the spaces where family narratives, stories, and wisdom should reside. She goes to plants to relearn much of this wisdom. When she talks of water as an animate being in Anishinaabemowin, she reminds us that water must be cared for and listened to. *Zong!* and *undercurrent* both look to indigenous languages and the language of water itself to rethink how to pay attention to the world. A listening framework proves especially important in silent spaces, for it is through listening that we notice what is changed, missing, unattended.

Water proves the underlying metaphor because of its potential both for providing life, but also for its potential to make invisible those whom it washes away or drowns in its depths. The vast waters of the Atlantic Ocean return us to the biblical flood waters of *Not Wanted on the Voyage* that are used by a dominant power to dispose of people. This violent use of water is a basic part of Judeo-Christian tradition. The idea that water can purge a world of evil forgets that water systems are interconnected and that the sins washed away from one polluting industry will be washed onto the shores of those living downstream.

*undercurrent* and *Zong!* ask readers to hear the silences within pro-environmental narratives. How, when we consider the health of the ocean, must

we also learn to remember the countless humans who were thrown into those waters in order to muffle the violence of the Middle Passage? Although the bodies of those Africans are physically and visually unrecoverable, they are heard in the stories that were remembered and passed on by those who survived. The primary language that we in U.S. and Canada use to listen is itself wedded to the mercantile and, eventually, capitalist colonial system that has wrought such damage. How might environmentalists need to learn to listen outside of English's norms in order to promote environmental justice?

## AFTERWORD

### Learning to Listen

*16) Environmental Justice calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.*

—First National People of Color

Environmental Leadership Summit,

“The Principles of Environmental Justice”

*Listening for Justice* asks the reader to rethink the bounds of how to listen. The authors I consider critique the systems that dismiss listening to certain human communities and other-than-human beings and that inhibit our ability to hear our biotic communities through the din of industrial noise, political bluster, and archival violence. By shifting our critical attention to listening, we understand that the devaluing and feminizing of listening itself enables environmental injustice.

As I argued in Chapter One, the refusal of patriarchal figures to listen to anyone other than themselves allows them to justify their violent acts by claiming that no one spoke out in opposition rather than admitting that they did not listen to others. In response, authors such as Gloria Naylor, Louise Erdrich, and Robin

Wall Kimmerer, as I discussed in Chapter Two, ask us to question the limits of the listenable and to acknowledge that what much of Western philosophy has derided as “hearing things” might instead be listening to beings who share our community. I moved in Chapters Three and Four to the challenges of listening and the role of language and education to address these obstacles. Chapter Three acknowledged the struggle to listen for environmental justice amidst the blare of industrialization and the importance of intergenerational and place-based education to counter powerfully distracting noise. Amplifying memory and language itself’s role in listening, Chapter Four argued that rather than only understanding silence as a space without or between meaning-making sounds, we need also to attend to the absence of sound as potentially loaded with significance.

*Listening for Justice* considers how the definition of environmental justice has itself been influenced by a Western industrialist notion of the separation of humans and their biotic communities. Although the first of the “Principles of Environmental Justice” stresses the kinship of the biotic community: “(1) Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction,” the importance of interspecies relationships is often underplayed in the legitimate concern for providing justice for all humans. Yet, particularly for many indigenous communities, the well-being of the spirit and culture, which are key to environmental justice, depend on deep bonds with other-than-human beings such as salmon, corn, and wild rice. Louise Erdrich, Robin Wall Kimmerer,

Rita Wong, and others help us to understand that justice depends on the health of all members of an interdependent community.

What, then, is our role as educators to encourage listening and to be listeners ourselves? The speaker in W.S. Merwin's poem "Native Trees" wonders about the names of the trees where he is born:

what is that  
I asked and my  
father and mother did not  
hear they did not look where I pointed  
surfaces of furniture held  
the attention of their fingers (*Rain* 6)

Entranced by the material realm, the speaker's parents ignore their child in the same manner that they wander inattentively through the biotic world. The speaker repeats, "What were they I asked what were they" in frustration as the parents claim never to have known (6). Merwin's poem emphasizes the curiosity of children about our biotic communities that is so often deadened by amnesiac adults. Who benefits from an education that instructs us to attend to furniture over trees or children? Too often, the health of the environment and future generations is discounted for the present material gain of a few people.

Environmental education thus becomes a matter of environmental justice in that it helps people to develop a sense of relationship and agency regarding

healthy environments. In an interview, Robert Bullard discusses the importance of environmental education for promoting long-term environmental justice:

We have to educate young people that it is their right to have access to open space, green space, parks, outdoors, as opposed to people thinking that their supposed to be living in an area where the only park is a basketball court with no net. We have to give people this idea that it's their right to have access to open space and green space and we have to provide funds to make sure that we get them early on and take them on field trips, take them to a wilderness area, a refuge, a reserve, to a park—a real park and to integrate this information into our curriculum.

In your geography course, in your social studies course, or science course make sure you integrate this into it, and have videos that you can show, but ultimately the best example that you can have is that young people visit these places and see for themselves what nature is. (Schweizer)

While writing *Listening for Justice*, I have consciously sought to bring place, community, and listening into my teaching practices. I ask myself how I can help my students pay attention to the particular place they inhabit in order to develop a sense of relationship and right to access. How can I teach them, as Merwin's speaker does in his poem "Trees," to attend to fellow community members and "listen to them tenderly" (*Flower* 49)? How can students use this increased

attention to their biotic community to notice and understand local environmental justice issues?

As a writing instructor, I quickly realized that my students, like the parents of Merwin's poem, find it hard to notice enough interesting details to analyze and write about. Listening to the stories of a place and its inhabitants in all their specificity works against the structures of power that declare place and people interchangeable, replaceable, and forgettable. As I have argued, this process of homogenization and forgetting transforms biotic communities into materials rather than understanding them as populated with living, interrelated beings. Authors such as Louise Erdrich, Linda Hogan, and Ann Pancake help us to understand how this process enables social and environmental violence by excusing the forced dislocation of people and the destruction of habitats. The importance of moving past the visual in order to listen is not only relevant for attending to trees and other members of the biotic community; it is also crucial in the struggle for environmental justice. In an era of blanket immigration bans, the importance of listening to communities as individuals rather than seeing them as a homogenous mass represents a basic environmental justice issue.

Paying attention to the immediate environment is not easy in the clamorous modern world. In one assignment, I asked first year college students to research a local landmark, park, or building. As part of their site observation, they were required to close their eyes and listen for several minutes. Students reported how sounds that they had been unconsciously filtering out or muffling with music

suddenly rampaged through their ears. The honking, rumbling noises of the city leapt out to them. Several remarked that they had never realized how much noise there was and began to wonder what other sounds the truck engines muffled. Some admitted they never closed their eyes; they did not trust their ears to keep them safe.

Having gathered their own observations, the students dove into their projects. But, they soon came to me frustrated: they could find hardly any information about local places. Although the internet contained ample information about famous places, it returned only an article or two about the nearby community organization or public park. I encouraged students to go talk to people instead. One student researched food justice in relation to the school dining hall; information she could glean from the internet quickly proved insufficient, so she made appointments to talk with the staff in food services. Troubled by how much information about the food system was not available on the dining services website, she shared her research with the university community by publishing an op-ed. Another student later joined the food rescue organization she had researched. Both students took their broader research about food justice and waste and connected it to local impacts and efforts. Attention to the stories of a place does not preclude learning about larger trends or concepts; rather, it encourages students to understand and value how individual narratives in communities participate in larger stories. Such research helps students to think about who benefits from or is injured by this lack of local knowledge.

In place-based education, the humanities have a lesson to learn from environmental science's praxis. Although environmental science education often uses local issues to guide research projects and case studies, the humanities, for all our theoretical opposition to hegemony and structural violence, have tended to remain detached from a sense of place. Students are asked to analyze Derrida but do not know the traditional stories of the place they inhabit; they form nuanced arguments on the Dublin-infused prose of James Joyce, but cannot name an author who has written about their neighborhood; surveys in British literature are a standard requirement, while seminars on local authors are generally optional and offered on a rotating schedule, if they exist at all. To become a licensed educator of English Language Arts in Massachusetts, I did not need to demonstrate any knowledge of the stories indigenous to this region. The degree to which stories help us to hold onto information, remember details, notice change, and attach to a place makes this inattention to local stories deeply troubling. How are our habits of teaching the humanities encouraging students not to listen to their immediate environment?

The insufficient attention to and denigration of place-based stories inhibit the motivation and means to protect sacred, historical, and culturally significant areas, a major environmental justice concern of organizations such as the Indigenous Environmental Network. This refusal to listen to indigenous or folk stories of a place as more than children's stories marks a linkage between cultural and emotional violence and environmental degradation. As we heard with story of

the Klallam creation site on the Elwha, listening to these stories is part of remembering and protecting significant areas—knowing the stories of place promotes environmental justice. Listening enables us to realize, protect, and care for a biotic community, to notice how it has changed and who is unjustly impacted by that change. In both our scholarship and our pedagogy, humanists need to attend to the representation and function of listening, to help students learn the stories of the place they inhabit, and to admit that we cannot understand what it means to be human only by looking at ourselves—we need to understand our relationships with other-than-human beings and we need to hear the experiences of people other than ourselves.

Place-based humanities cultivate listeners who pay attention to what can be learned from the entire biotic community and from people with deep knowledge of particular environments. In listening, we become equipped to help defend particular communities (be it a neighborhood or watershed) against the homogenizing force of industrial capitalism's assembly line attachment to obsolescence, interchangeable parts, and materialism. Industrial capitalism disproportionately places the burden of dangerous labor practices, environmental degradation, and toxic waste on communities of color, women, and low-income people. When we listen beyond its hegemonic discourse, we realize that those who are being unduly harmed have not been silenced—they are speaking out. It is our job to listen in order to take a stand for environmental justice.

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