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## Broadcasting Stories of Racism on the Radio

### *A Soundtrack of Lost Control*

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**ABSTRACT** Throughout its history, radio in the US has reflected and reproduced dominant racial ideologies. This article highlights the experiences of individuals who shared their stories for the 2016 "Radical Listening" equity-focused podcasting project. As part of this project, participants recorded stories of racism and resistance from the larger Seattle area. Some participants chose to broadcast edited segments from their stories on the local public radio station. Their experience working with producers to broadcast their clips exposed the sonic centering of whiteness within public radio. The musical choices and stylistic norms of the station catered to the predominantly white listening audience, leaving contributors of color to accept these terms or keep their stories off the airwaves. Moments of suffering packaged and made public are inherently risky. Through mapping a particular instance of failed listening and its reverberations, this article traces the complicated ethical entanglements that can arise between storytellers and producers when editing audio for broadcast. How personal stories are disseminated and by whom impacts how these stories are then taken up and understood as meaningful by listeners. Listening occurs within gendered and raced bodies, and our positionality impacts how we understand the significance of the stories we hear. As their narratives traveled farther from the recording studio through radio and online spaces, participants contended with their inability to control the soundtrack of their experiences.

**KEYWORDS** podcasting, listening, racism, radio

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

—Dave Isay, TED2015

In March 2015, Dave Isay, the founder of the audio storytelling non-profit StoryCorps, gave a TED talk on the power of sharing and listening to personal narratives, especially for individuals whose voices too often go unheard. As Isay proclaims, "I exist" became the

clarion call for StoryCorps”.<sup>1</sup> The phrase “clarion call” implies a call to action and a battle to be fought. As bodies, buildings, and communities continuously vanish from public consciousness, will audio storytelling projects like StoryCorps be able to bring their call for acknowledgment, for equity, to ears willing to hear? What are the risks in terms of appropriating the pain of others, of erasing the specificity of their histories, to generate a sense of empathy with a wider public? After Isay’s book was published, after the man screamed “I exist,” after the long halls of the flophouse were replaced by new apartment buildings, what happened to those men, and what was the impact of recording and sharing their stories? This article examines what is gained and what is lost when editing and broadcasting intimate narratives of suffering and resilience over the airwaves.

In 2016, I organized a “Radical Listening” project in partnership with StoryCorps where individuals from across Seattle came together to record stories of racism and resistance. Some participants chose to broadcast edited segments of their stories on the local public radio station. Their experience working with producers to edit and broadcast their clips illuminates the risks storytellers of color face when working within the largely white spaces of public radio. The musical choices and stylistic norms of the station catered to the predominantly white listening audience, leaving contributors of color to accept these terms or keep their stories off the airwaves.

Moments of suffering packaged and made public are inherently risky. Through mapping a particular instance of failed listening and its reverberations, this article traces the complicated ethical entanglements that can arise between storytellers and producers when editing audio for broadcast. John Biewen argues that producers “do not simply hold microphones in front of people and ask questions. They get tangled up with their subjects in all kinds of ways.”<sup>2</sup> This article explores how these entanglements are impacted by race and power. I look at how musical choices and editing norms often center whiteness in audio storytelling. Throughout the history of radio in the United States, the medium has reflected and reproduced dominant racial ideologies.<sup>3</sup> This article illuminates the public significance of how processes of mediation impact the affective experience of listening. How personal stories of suffering are disseminated and by whom impacts how these stories are then taken up and understood as meaningful by listeners. Listening occurs within gendered and raced bodies, and our positionality impacts how we understand the significance of the stories we hear. As their narratives traveled farther from the recording studio through radio and online spaces, participants in the “Radical Listening” project contended with their inability to control the soundtrack of their experiences. In this article, I address the motivations of storytellers and the risks they take in letting others remix their voices.

1. Dave Isay, “Everyone around you has a story the world needs to hear,” filmed March 2015, TED Talk Video, 21:29, [https://www.ted.com/talks/dave\\_isay\\_everyone\\_around\\_you\\_has\\_a\\_story\\_the\\_world\\_needs\\_to\\_hear/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/dave_isay_everyone_around_you_has_a_story_the_world_needs_to_hear/transcript).

2. John Biewen, “Introduction,” in *Reality Radio: Telling True Stories in Sound*, ed. Alexa Dilworth and John Biewen (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 10.

3. Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The sonic color line: Race and the cultural politics of listening*, vol. 17 (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016).

## BACKGROUND ON THE PROJECT

As a fellow with the Center for Communication, Difference, and Equity (CCDE) at the University of Washington, I proposed and led the “Radical Listening” project in partnership with StoryCorps. We recorded stories of racial discrimination and resistance from the larger Seattle area. After organizing the initial storytelling event, I conducted follow-up interviews, edited recorded conversations, helped organize listening events to bring conversations to community spaces, and created an online archive of the audio clips. The listening events occurred on the University of Washington campus and were publicized across the CCDE’s network throughout the city, including at the Northwest African American Museum and the Wing Luke Museum of Asian Pacific American Experience. While the online archive allows stories to be shared with distant others, the in-person listening sessions enabled me and the CCDE to center processes of ethical listening, afforded storytellers the ability to contextualize their audio stories, and provided an embodied sense of community with a diverse group of individuals from across the city.<sup>4</sup>

This article focuses on the experiences of two participants in particular, Melony and Matt. They were engaged participants throughout the lifecycle of this project, from the original recording and archival project with StoryCorps, to the listening parties, the broadcasting of their stories on a local public radio station, and reflecting on this engagement at the Critical Ethnic Studies Association (CESA) conference in Vancouver, Canada. Within our discussions at CESA, the common thread throughout was the simultaneous and contradictory pull of publicly sharing stories of pain and suffering, and the desire/need to control the way our stories are picked up and heard.

In the following sections, I first discuss the potential and limitations of audio storytelling as a counterpublic tool. I then tackle how processes of editing together voices and music shape the affective relationship among storytellers, stories, and listeners. I end by addressing a particular instance of failed listening in which a storyteller from our project grappled with the precariousness of sharing her narrative. Her experience speaks to the challenges participants faced as they weighed the personal risks against their desire for public acknowledgment and action against racism.

## VOICES OF COLOR IN AUDIO STORYTELLING:

### Fighting to Be Heard Over the Din of Sonic Whiteness

Several prominent new media scholars have argued that the participatory culture of the digital age offers hope for marginalized groups to resist dominant ideologies and push for social change.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, critical scholars have questioned the ability of changes in

4. Anjali Joshi Brekke, “Radical Listening: Cultivating A Feminist Ethics of Reception Through Collective Listening,” in *Listening: Journal of Communication Ethics, Religion, and Culture* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 96–107. <https://doi.org/10.5840/listening202156216>.

5. Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, and Arely Zimmerman, *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*, vol. 3 (New York: NYU Press, 2016); Howard Rheingold, “Using Participatory Media and Public Voice to Encourage Civic Engagement,” in *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, ed. W. Lance Bennett (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2008), 97–119.

technology to transform long-entrenched corporate structures and hegemonic ideologies.<sup>6</sup> The larger the target audience, the greater the incentive to minimize potential points of conflict and to foreground harmony and narrative closure. In this process, diversity is celebrated, but power differentials are obscured to appeal to the masses and make more money to sustain the platform.

While some scholars have lauded grassroots audio storytelling for its democratizing and counterpublic potential, others have questioned the limits of this potential within an industry averse to change. Biewen argues that the power of audio storytelling lies in the intimacy of the medium, which connects the storyteller and listener through the power of voice.<sup>7</sup> He states that audio stories display a democratic impulse “through attentive rendering of the ‘ordinary’ human story.”<sup>8</sup> Photini Vrikki and Sarita Malik argue that this emphasis on the intimacies of daily life can also offer a critique of wider systems. They see podcasting as a unique tool for creators of color to “make audible struggles for representation, challenge institutional colonialisms, and traverse both the political landscape and lived experiences of racialized oppression.”<sup>9</sup> They trace how podcasters of color in the United Kingdom use audio storytelling to mobilize counterpublic podcasting networks that work “against the grain of dominant racialized representations.”<sup>10</sup> Audio producers who seek a wider audience, however, must work within a system of creative production resistant to change. As Vrikki and Malik found, when podcasters of color tried to increase their listener base, they discovered a culture of production by established industry players that “can limit the autonomy, creative freedom and alternative perspectives that minority practitioners can have.”<sup>11</sup> In an interview with Raven Wallace, producer Cecilia Garcia echoed these frustrations with the constraining norms of mainstream media: “If it’s a group of white men primarily making programming decisions, it becomes almost impossible for our voices, voices of producers of color, to be heard.”<sup>12</sup>

While public media in the United States was initially positioned as an “agent of change,” funding pressures have incentivized clinging to the status quo.<sup>13</sup> The early mission of NPR envisioned “a type of radio that felt like a public square, commercial-free, diverse, and equal parts sober and strange.”<sup>14</sup> Raven Wallace argues that efforts to make NPR “mainstream” in the late 1970s undermined the original mission of the organization. The need for widespread appeal to boost revenue “reduces risk-taking and

6. Cindy Gao, “The Virtuosity of Asian American YouTube Stars,” *S & F Online* 10, no. 3, (Summer 2012); Herman Gray, “The feel of life: Resonance, race, and representation,” in *International Journal of Communication* 9 (April 2015): 1108–1109.

7. Biewen, “Introduction,” 2.

8. *Ibid.*, 3.

9. Photini Vrikki and Sarita Malik, “Voicing Lived-Experience and Anti-Racism: Podcasting as a Space at the Margins for Subaltern Counterpublics,” in *Popular Communication* 17, no. 4 (2019): 276.

10. *Ibid.*, 274.

11. *Ibid.*, 276–77.

12. Lewis Raven Wallace, *The view from somewhere: undoing the myth of journalistic objectivity* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 89.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 89.

creates a paradox for the stated goals of diversity.”<sup>15</sup> Despite task forces and initiatives aimed at increasing diversity within public radio, Raven Wallace argues these attempts have largely failed. “Public radio voice,” he asserts, is still firmly rooted in the public ear as “homogeneously white and East Coast sounding.”<sup>16</sup> Although audio storytelling provides a space for marginalized voices to articulate counterpublic narratives, these voices must compete against an established culture of creative production grounded in norms that perpetuate a sonic whiteness. In the next section, I take a deeper look at the ethical implications of audio editing practices and their impact on the Radical Listening project.

## THE POLITICS OF EDITING

Oral historians weave individual voices together with the wider social and historical contexts in which these voices are embedded. Many digital storytelling projects like StoryCorps, however, present floating snippets of life where the listener is not necessarily able to locate the individual narratives as part of a larger ecology of meaning situated in space, time, and place. How does the edited form of digital oral stories impact the way listeners interpret the meaning and significance of these “conversations”? Nancy Abelmann et al. argue that in contrast to traditional oral histories that “reveal the tracks of the investigator,” the editing of the 40-minute StoryCorps interviews for mass consumption leaves no trace of the editors.<sup>17</sup> Freund similarly voices concern that popular oral storytelling projects like StoryCorps present themselves as “direct access to authentic experience that speaks for itself and needs no expert interpretation.”<sup>18</sup> The ways in which StoryCorps segments are edited is invisible to the listener, giving the sense that these stories provide an open window into the life of another rather than a carefully molded segment. In our partnership between the CCDE and StoryCorps, StoryCorps producers offered to edit the recordings for \$1000.00 per clip. We decided, however, that it made more sense to work with participants to edit clips ourselves to better center storyteller wishes. In this section, I start by looking at the risks inherent in the process StoryCorps and many audio producers use to edit audio clips. I then turn to how I negotiated the risks inherent in editing others’ words as a story editor for the Radical Listening project.

Biewen notes that “audio storytellers gravitate toward the close-up portrait.”<sup>19</sup> StoryCorps producers are trained to draw out moments of emotional intensity to create immediate points of identification between the listener and the speaker. They edit for the aesthetic qualities of voice. A StoryCorps editing manual from 2016 instructs editors, for example, on how to identify and create a distinct character out of the raw audio. In finding that relatable character, editors are told to listen for “the quality of their voice,

15. Ibid., 94.

16. [1]Ibid., 93.

17. Nancy Abelmann, Susan Davis, Cara Finnegan, and Peggy Miller, “What Is StoryCorps, Anyway?” in *The Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2009): 257.

18. Alexander Freund, “Under storytelling’s spell? Oral history in a neoliberal age,” *The Oral History Review* 42, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2015): 126.

19. Biewen, “Introduction,” 3.

their mannerisms, and their turns of phrase.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, those sonic and sensorial elements that draw you in and make you feel as though you are sitting with a close friend instead of listening to a stranger. StoryCorps producer Michael Garofalo stated that a great StoryCorps piece “connects you to another person in an immediate, intimate way. You’re just sitting with that person for a few minutes, and it feels like they’re speaking directly to you.”<sup>21</sup> Although there is this appearance of transparency and authenticity, Garofalo notes that the average StoryCorps segment has 274 edits in a roughly two-and-a-half-minute product. The 2016 manual advises editors to “be liberal with rearranging and editing,” by both editing out undesirable sounds, words, and phrases and also by editing in moments of silence (or more specifically room tone) to slow down the pace and emphasize the emotional resonance during key moments.<sup>22</sup> Radio Diaries creator Joe Richman emphasizes the immense amount of work it takes to make a piece sound effortless: “It’s not like being a fly on the wall. If you want to create something with drama, structure, meaning, and emotion, you need to be a producer. A producer doesn’t just get a good story, a producer makes a good story.”<sup>23</sup>

Garofalo argues that in contrast to vision, which is more linear, audio is both immersive and ambient, and thereby runs the risk of turning into background noise. He notes that unlike a striking image that lends itself to virality online, audio storytelling is often “the overlooked sad little child . . . when was the last time you heard of an audio piece going viral?”<sup>24</sup> To increase reach online, Garofalo says audio segments must attempt to mimic photojournalism, creating a quick snapshot of life that requires little context and encourages the listener to form an immediate affective connection. Like the iconic Migrant Mother photograph, he states that to capture our attention, the story must cut through the noise. The image of the Migrant Mother hits us, Garofalo argues, despite the fact that we don’t know them, “we don’t see where they live, we don’t see the conditions.”<sup>25</sup> What is lost in this act of shearing voices from their situated context to connect with the largest possible audience?

In many ways, the risks of isolating a mediated moment of suffering from its history and situated context of production is apparent by analyzing the iconic Migrant Mother photograph itself. The photograph achieves the intimacy and affective potential that the StoryCorps editing model seeks to mimic but also highlights the problematic threat such mediation presents in terms of commercialization and exploitation of personal suffering. The portrait is both intensely intimate and abstracted from the situated life of the subject. As Robert Coles argues, photographer Dorothea Lange’s careful editing and cropping of the photo “make it more accessible to her anticipated viewers” by separating out

20. StoryCorps, *StoryCorps Editing Workshop Manual* (Brooklyn: StoryCorps, 2016), 4.

21. Michael Garofalo. “The Cut and Paste Narrative: A Disappearing Act,” Filmed December 2015 at SVA MA Design Research, New York, NY, video, 1:37:35, <https://vimeo.com/150176538>

22. StoryCorps, *StoryCorps Editing Workshop Manual* (Brooklyn: StoryCorps, 2016), 19.

23. Joe Richman, “The Radio Diaries Manifesto: How to Turn the Messy, Contradictory, and Often Boring Raw Material of Ordinary Life Into a Story,” *Radio Diaries DIY Handbook*.

24. [1] Garofalo. “The Cut and Paste Narrative.”

25. *Ibid.*

“sociological cues” to “make the particular universal.”<sup>26</sup> It presents a snapshot of Depression-era poverty and despair as well as a call to action. All mediated stories create structured relations of feeling between the subjects of the stories and the public audience. As Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites argue, the Migrant Mother photograph interpellates the viewer into the role of the absent father, the one with the ability to take action and provide.<sup>27</sup>

While the photograph is often heralded for creating empathy for the poor and generating popular support for the New Deal, the real “migrant mother,” Florence Thompson, is largely forgotten. Hariman and Lucaites note that Lange never wrote down Florence Thompson’s name. According to Thompson, Lange told her she would not sell the photographs taken and promised Thompson she would receive a copy for her own use. Thompson said she never received any photographs, nor any compensation for the use of her image. She felt exploited.<sup>28</sup> Hariman and Lucaites lay out how this moment when a subject speaks back disrupts the supposed authenticity captured by the camera:

Here, of course, we see what happens when the living, named subject of the photograph speaks back in a way that undermines the structure of feeling that the photograph has conventionally evoked. In the original photograph the viewer is invited to identify with and act upon the victimage and despair of an anonymous migrant mother as a duty of family and community . . . When she speaks back and demands compensation, the aura of the original—or at least the presumed authenticity of the original structure of feeling—is destroyed, and underneath is revealed a harsh (and corrupting) world of alienated labor and commercial exploitation.<sup>29</sup>

In the context of listening to stories of racialized trauma and resistance, the fantasy of being able to reach the other through listening, of embodying their experience of trauma as one’s own, is an appropriation of that wound. This appropriation through listening fetishizes the wound as a site of collective identity and thus universalizes the trauma and erases the specificity of that experience and the histories and structures that coalesced to construct it. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, “Stories of pain can be ‘shared’ only when we assume they are not the same story, even if they are connected, and allow us to make connections.”<sup>30</sup> In the context of the Migrant Mother photograph, the image engenders an affective connection with the viewer that appropriates Florence Thompson’s suffering as the nation’s suffering.

It is telling that in the photograph, Thompson’s race is erased while her gender and class identity are brought to the fore. As Coles notes, the series of photographs Lange took of Thompson “narrate a kind of white migrant life in the mid-1930s.”<sup>31</sup> Although the

26. Robert Coles, *Doing documentary work*, (Oxford University Press, 1997), 104.

27. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 62.

28. James Estrin, “Unraveling the Mysteries of Dorothea Lange’s ‘Migrant Mother,’” *The New York Times*, (November 28, 2018). <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/lens/dorothea-lange-migrant-mother.html>.

29. Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 62.

30. [1] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 174.

31. Robert Coles, *Doing documentary work*, (Oxford University Press, 1997), 104.

subject of the image is often read as a mother from the white working class, a subject “deserving” of national protection, Hariman and Lucaites point out that when Thompson spoke back to the use of her image decades later, she was positioned in the media as a “full-blooded Cherokee Indian” who was unable to see past her own greed to acknowledge “the significance of the image in U.S. public culture.”<sup>32</sup> There is thus a disconnect between the public feelings elicited by the iconic image and its embodied subject: whereas the “Migrant Mother” is perceived as emblematic of Depression-era white working-class suffering, Florence Thompson, in her efforts to speak back to her image, is racialized and alienated from the (white) American public. Through evoking the image of the Migrant Mother as the affective ideal of what a story can accomplish, StoryCorps producer Michael Garofalo inadvertently pointed to the dangers inherent in processes of editing and dissemination that center an immediate affective empathy. In positioning the Migrant Mother as the ideal model for eliciting empathy, as a model that audio storytelling should seek to emulate, Garofalo glosses over the problematic politics of the image. The draw of the image for Garofalo is in the universality of its pain, but this universality comes at the expense of the specificity of Thompson’s pain. Rather than reach for the universal in a piece of tape, editors should be keenly aware of the specificity of the narratives entrusted to them. This necessitates that the editor also be aware of how their own positionality may shape how they are listening.

As a sound editor for our digital storytelling project, I struggled to navigate the ways in which my editing of others’ words into short segments might simplify the complexity of their narratives and obscure the structures and histories behind their words. As Biewen exclaims, “Every choice the producer makes is up for grabs, from where (and at whom) to point the Microphone to the digital slicing of a phrase at the expense of some nuance. The Fox News slogan, ‘We Report, You Decide,’ is nonsense.”<sup>33</sup> When shaving off silences, editing out stumbles and false starts, I contended with how my attempts to “clean” up the audio might scrub away their sonic texture. Community-based research involves taking hours of recorded interviews, field notes, photographs, etc. and distilling these artifacts into narratives. Even as I, as the researcher, attempt to listen carefully to and ground my narratives in the affective ecology of voices, spaces, histories, etc. that construct the communities I work in/on, I am never simply mapping a pre-existing terrain but rather weaving between the artifacts I have assembled and my interpretations of them. Richa Nagar cautions scholars to continuously ask ourselves, “Who are we writing for, how, and why? . . . How do we interrogate the structure of the academy and the constraints and values embedded therein, as well as our desire and ability (or lack thereof) to challenge and reshape those structures and values?”<sup>34</sup> Within academia, success often necessitates performing intelligence and certainty while downplaying possible cracks and fissures in our work. The pressure to publish and produce clean narratives

32. Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 62.

33. Biewen, “Introduction,” 3.

34. Richa Nagar, *Muddying the waters: Coauthoring feminisms across scholarship and activism*, (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 18.

can obstruct the slow, confusing, and difficult work of collaborating with community partners to co-produce knowledge. Community-engaged work, then, creates an ethical imperative for reflexivity. Interrogations of the structures in which this work is embedded are political commitments. This research praxis can be messy and unsettling as we work through tensions that arise between the theoretical goals of research and how events play out on the ground.

The process of sound editing can feel even more personal, even more dangerous. The recordings seem animated in a way that a transcript of recordings cannot convey. As Joshua Gunn notes, recorded speech may reveal “that the measured voice is actually plaintive, or that canned laughter is simply another way to shriek.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, as much as StoryCorps producers may try to mimic photojournalism, sound engenders a different structure of feeling from listeners than a still image, a fact acknowledged by Garofalo himself. As Kate Lacey argues, whereas acoustic environments are “by definition immersive, as sound surrounds and pervades the body,” images are “two dimensional,” are felt as fixed and distanced from one’s own body.<sup>36</sup> Despite the development of increasingly sophisticated storytelling technologies, audio storytelling in the form of radio, podcasts, and audiobooks continues to be popular precisely because of its ambient nature; these stories can accompany us as we move through our lives and daily routines, creating a perceived intimate connection even in the absence of fully embodied intimate others. Charles Hardy III notes that audio storytelling is marked by a “dynamic tension between intimacy and distance.”<sup>37</sup> Edited recordings play on the boundary between embodiment and disembodiment, between authenticity and performance. The intimacy of recorded voice makes splicing and rearranging the voice of another both intensely personal and potentially problematic.

Packaging moments of suffering for mass consumption is inherently risky. This is true even when organizations seek to center storytellers throughout the process of editing and dissemination. During follow-up interviews after the original CCDE/StoryCorps recording event, I asked participants how they wanted their stories edited, who they hoped would listen to these clips, and what they hoped listeners would take away from the experience of listening. With this feedback in hand, I listened through the original 40-plus-minute conversations and took notes on salient sections that seemed to be in line with participants’ wishes. Drawing from these notes, I crafted three- to seven-minute audio stories. Ideally, these stories would have been edited by the participants themselves.<sup>38</sup> In subsequent versions of this project, I developed a podcasting workshop that

35. Joshua Gunn, “On Recording Performance or Speech, the Cry, and the Anxiety of the Fix,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 7, no. 3 (Autumn 2011): 25.

36. Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 45.

37. Charles Hardy III, “Authoring in Sound: Aural History, Radio and the Digital Revolution,” In *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 401.

38. Robin M. Boylorn, “The Storyteller Project: Introduction,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 15, no. 4 (2019): 1–10. <http://liminalities.net/15-4/storyteller.pdf>; Nadine Changfoot, “Creative Socialist-Feminist Space: Creating Moments of Agency and Emancipation by Storytelling Outlawed Experiences and Relational Aesthetic,” *Socialist Studies/Études Socialistes* 11, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 62–84. <https://doi.org/10.18740/S45C87>.

participants could take part in if they had the time and desire to edit their own stories. During this first version of the project, however, the time commitment in terms of both learning/teaching the audio editing software and constructing the stories was not feasible for either me or most of the participants. While I attempted to construct compelling narratives by editing these stories so that they would retain the feel of the longer conversations, the dangers and responsibilities of editing someone else's narrative were always present.

As a sound editor, I yearn to believe that the clips I produce get to the core of the ideas expressed by the speaker. I also, however, know the importance of questioning the supposedly self-evident authenticity of these segments. I know how satisfying as well as inherently problematic the editing process can be. You take these long and winding dialogues, full of awkward silences, ums and ahs and circular reasoning, and turn them into clean narratives that you hope hits listeners in the chest. I tell myself that I am retaining the heart of the meaning communicated in the original recording, distilling it down to make its message more direct and resonant to listeners. As a critical scholar, however, I am aware that each cut I make may, at best, shear the recording of the nuance embedded in both sound and silence, and at worst shape the dialogue in ways that the speaker had not intended and would not approve of. This editing may allow listeners the illusion that the poignant vignette they hear gives them direct access to the experience of another rather than a highly edited and mediated narrative. On the other hand, most listeners would not sit through an entire 40-minute interview with all the "ums" and false starts attached. The listenability of a story obviously increases with professional editing, but the painful silences and awkward stumbles around difficult issues are also edited out.

Although there is a danger in placing editing power in someone else's hands, for some participants, entrusting others to edit their story also opened new possibilities for reciprocity. Editors are given the opportunity to enact radical listening through editing.<sup>39</sup> In her discussion of the ethical responsibilities of audio editors when dealing with stories of trauma, Mia Lindgren stresses that "trust is central."<sup>40</sup> While following up with participants, I had expected to hear storyteller concerns regarding the potentially exploitative nature of editing. I was surprised that some storytellers emphasized the ability of mindful editing in both honoring and protecting the storyteller. Tammy, one participant, explained that good editing retains the core of the speaker's message. It requires that the editor listen carefully and is attuned to moments in which "people are telling their truth."<sup>41</sup> For Tammy, the ums and silences and incomplete thoughts residing in the raw audio tie the recording to the physical speaker in a way that feels exposing and overly personal. She was comforted by the thought that the audio would be excised of those embodied elements. Editing offered Tammy a comforting distance between the larger "truths" expressed in the story and her private memories of trauma. Embedded in the act

39. Brekke, "Radical Listening" 96–107.

40. Mia Lindgren, "Balancing Personal Trauma, Storytelling and Journalistic Ethics: a Critical Analysis of Kirsti Melville's 'The Storm,'" *RadioDoc Review* 2, no. 2 (2015): 9.

41. Tammy, follow-up interview

of editing is the dual potential for exploitation on the one hand and collaborative creation on the other.

In the next section, I turn to the experiences of Melony and Matt, two participant storytellers from our project. Their story highlights the potentials and perils of sharing personal narratives.

#### **STORYTELLING AS RESISTANCE: REWORKING MOMENTS OF RACIALIZED VIOLENCE IN FRONT OF THE MIC**

In June of 2018, I traveled with CCDE coordinators and several storyteller participants to present at the Critical Ethnic Studies Conference in Vancouver, Canada. It was a year after the initial recording event and a few months after the final listening party. Ours was one of the last panels of the day, and the audience was small but engaged. After introducing the project and its origins, the participants each shared and discussed a short clip (thirty to sixty seconds) either from their original recording or from the edited stories I created from those recordings. Melony and Matt are a married couple and presented their story together.

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

In the clip, Melony's voice is slow and measured, but with a building intensity as she recounts her experience as a child standing in front of an audience at her school, about to sing her solo as Snow White. Her voice gains speed as she describes her initial confusion when the audience starts laughing and murmuring. Her voice, strained with anxiety, recounts: "And I couldn't figure out what was going on, I couldn't figure out if it was someone behind me." She pauses as she recalls the realization setting in, that "aha" moment when she is made aware that her fellow students are laughing at her. Her voice is low, almost a whisper, as she remembers hearing someone say, "Snow Black, that doesn't make any sense." In a tone that is both soft but brimming with emotion, she recounts the shift in her understanding, not of her own self-perception, but rather "the difference between how I view myself and how I came to learn the world would view me." Matt's voice is low, his words emerge in a slow and steady procession as he asks, "If one of our children in the future encountered a similar experience as you did, is there anything else that you would want to say to them that you wish you would have heard?" His words are met with contemplative silence before Melony sighs, "Yeah, I don't know." Her tone changes, and she lets out a laugh as she continues, "I think I'd prep 'em ahead of time. You know, if it was in a Snow White dress, with dark skin, you know?" Matt prompts her to continue, "How would you prep them?" Melony struggles for a second to find the right words. In a voice that is both quiet and powerful, she directs her response to her imagined

future child: “No matter what people say, who you are is a gift and what you offer to the world is a gift, and . . . and I want you to know that I celebrate that. And sometimes people might not always recognize that right off the bat, but who you are and what you have to contribute is wonderful, and don’t listen to anybody else who tells you otherwise. They’re not here to build you up, so tune them out.”

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

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

Although sharing stories of racialized pain places the storyteller in a position of vulnerability, it also opens the potential to rework the narrative, to examine the conditions that created the wound in order to subvert them. Through disidentifying with the socially prescriptive template of Snow White, Melony’s story makes possible an oppositional public where, in the words of José Esteban Muñoz, “a stigmatized identity is simultaneously decomposed and recomposed; where values and tastes are reordered and reweighed utilizing alternate criteria; where a degree of editing, deletion and supplementation is applied to an oppressive social script.”<sup>42</sup> The character of Snow White’s very name reinforces Eurocentric beauty standards. In Melony’s embodiment of Snow White, however, she reinforces a counterpublic call; her performance affirms that Black is Beautiful. In her story, Melony contrasts her self-image with that of the audience:

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

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

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

The singer is the subject who stands inside—and, in the most important ways, outside—of fiction, ideology, ‘the real.’ He is not its author and never has been. He hears a call and we remember not only the ‘hey you’ of Althusser’s ideology cop but also

42. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Vol. 2. (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 196.

the little white girl in Fanon who cries out ‘Look, a Negro.’ But something also hears this singer who is not the author of the song. He is heard by something that is a shared impulse, a drive toward justice, retribution, emancipation—which permits him to disidentify with the song. He works on the song with fierce intensity and the utmost precision. This utmost precision is what is needed to rework that song, that story, that fiction, that mastering plot. It is needed to make a self—to disidentify despite the ear-splitting hostility that the song first proposed for the singer. Another vibe is cultivated.<sup>43</sup>

Self and other are mutually constitutive. The singer reconfigures racist ideologies from the dominant culture and reimagines them—dreaming up a better past/future through song, through the act of storytelling. When Melony speaks to her imagined future daughter and tells her, “What you have to contribute is *wonderful*” she disidentifies with the “ear-splitting hostility” of the audience’s laughter, of the supposed beauty of skin as white as snow, and cultivates a “new vibe,” a new future where young Black girls are allowed to prosper.<sup>44</sup>

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

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

The knowledge that the interview was being recorded shaped what and how participants shared their stories. The physical space of the recording studio spurred them to engage in a selective performance of self; like Melony, many participants told me they carefully chose how they framed their narratives, reworking past experiences of racialized trauma into narratives of resistance. The farther their stories traveled, however, the less control they had to shape the narrative.

#### THE PERILS OF SENDING ONE’S STORY OUT OVER THE AIRWAVES

Tanya Dreher discusses the dark side of listening as surveillance and/or voyeurism: “Listening, of course, plays a central role in surveillance and can operate as part of imperializing projects of knowledge production.”<sup>45</sup> Once accessible and collected, the speaker can lose control of the meaning and purpose of their story, and it can function as evidence for other purposes, especially when the story seeks to cross difference. Risks of mis/appropriation, fetishization, decontextualization, and exoticization get stronger as

43. Ibid., 21.

44. Ibid., 21.

45. Tanja Dreher, “Listening across difference: Media and multiculturalism beyond the politics of voice,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (August 2009): 448.

stories move farther away from experience. As Cindy Gao notes in her discussion of Asian American representation on YouTube, “the current virtualization of the racial aura aestheticizes difference but not the power that produces difference.”<sup>46</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim similarly notes how Billie Holiday’s iconic voice is often heard by listeners not in terms of her artistry, but rather in terms of her biography. Holiday’s vocal timbre is exoticized and filtered through “the lens of the stereotypical tragic, sexualized, and wasted black female figure who lacks agency.”<sup>47</sup> In the case of Melony and Matt, when they gave the local public radio station access to their story of racism/resistance, they found their voices remixed to appeal to the predominantly white listening audience.

We played Melony and Matt’s clip for the first listening party. From the beginning, they were enthusiastic participants in the project. They were one of our first interviews and attended the first listening party where Melony contextualized their clip and shared additional experiences. A local radio producer was present during the community listening event and wanted to broadcast their story on the public radio station after the clip had gone through additional editing. When we contacted Melony and Matt to ask whether they wanted to broadcast their clip, Melony expressed some hesitation regarding how it would be edited, and whether she could remain anonymous because of her career as an educator. We were informed that the station’s policies did not allow for anonymous broadcasting and that participants would not be able to give feedback on the edited version.

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

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

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

The person who was producing it had asked, cause I was talking about a Snow White song and I still perform, and so I perform that song from time to time . . . She asked if I had a recording of myself singing it and I said, ‘No, but I can make one.’ So I spent

46. Cindy Gao, “The Virtuoso Virtuality of Asian American YouTube Stars,” *S & F Online* 10, no. 3, (Summer 2012)

47. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*, (Duke University Press, 2019), 167.

time, went to a studio and recorded it. Clipped it down so she had the choice between my version of ‘Someday My Prince Will Come,’—it’s the song that I sing from Snow White—and she ended it with the one from the 1920s ‘Someday’ [singing while mimicking the nasal voice of the original Disney version] and it was so weird! She could have just chosen nothing, but it was, like, the whitest. (Melony, CESA Conference)

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

After an audience member at the CESA conference discussed the potentially fetishizing, voyeuristic nature of collecting stories from marginalized communities and how the stories can be “twist[ed to] center whiteness,” Melony said, “That resonates in my bones. I am super not trusting of my story, period. Because it does become like a trope or voyeurism or you know, I don’t know how ‘The Help’ exists. That movie, that book. You know. Because your story can become so bastardized so quickly or like, configured or centered around someone else and whiteness specifically” (Melony, CESA Conference). Melony’s story was mediated through a white radio producer at a station whose listenership is 85% White.<sup>48</sup> The ethical standards of the station regardless of context (no anonymous broadcasting, no input from contributors in terms of the editing and framing of stories, etc.) center the interests of the listenership in terms of transparency and objectivity while ignoring the impact of these decisions on the lives of sources who volunteer their stories for broadcast. Raven Wallace notes that certain identities “are more politicized than others.” Although radio producers of color are often scrutinized for how their identities may introduce bias into a story, “white people are rarely asked to consider the possible conflict of interest” when covering stories that deal with race.<sup>49</sup> How personal stories of suffering are disseminated and by whom impacts how these stories are then taken up and understood as meaningful by listeners.

## FAILURES TO LISTEN

Radio has a long legacy of centering whiteness.<sup>50</sup> Bryce Peake argues that studies of sound have too often “produced accounts of listening without bodies, abstractly defining

48. KUOW Public Radio. Business plan: 2017-2021, accessed May 2, 2020. <http://www2.kuow.org/reports/BusinessPlan20161021.pdf>

49. Wallace, *The view from somewhere*, 85.

50. Stoeber, *The sonic color line*.

listening as a generalizable practice amongst an implicitly assumed universal privileged subject.”<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Sterne argues that “hearing requires positionality.”<sup>52</sup> With the proliferation of digital storytelling projects and platforms, it is important to question whether the editing of audio stories related to discrimination may emphasize harmony and narrative closure to appeal to the widest possible audience, thus undermining the counterpublic potential of such stories to challenge systemic racism. As Michael Warner argues, for a text to have transformative power, it must construct a possible future soundscape that was before unheard. At the same time, it must resonate with the lived experience of individual members of the public to sustain their investment.<sup>53</sup> Although a public in theory offers unlimited accessibility, it always circulates within preexisting discourses that self-select based on identification. Therefore, the transformative power of publics to bring together a greater heterogeneity of interests is always circumscribed. Storytellers and organizations must negotiate the tension between reaching the widest possible audience (encompassing the most general public) and achieving resonance with certain identities. Because of this tension, Warner argues that for counterpublics to attain a degree of power in society, they must “adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse” and in doing so “cede the original hope of transforming, not just policy, but the space of public life itself.”<sup>54</sup> As audio stories are edited to resonate with the widest audience, they run the risk of reproducing the very logics the original storytellers sought to undermine.

As Melony stated in exasperation during the CESA conference, this editing of her story to appeal to the white listening audience constituted a failure of listening,

I was thinking, in between our conversation outside and here, frustrating conversations where you're talking to someone and they get hooked on the wrong detail and then they go that way and it's so maddening because you're like, 'no, that is not the point I'm trying to communicate to you. This is what I'm trying to communicate to you.'  
(Melony, CESA Conference).

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

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

51. Bryce Peake, “Noise: A Historical Ethnography of Listening, Masculinity and Media Technology in British Gibraltar, 1940–2013,” *Cultural Studies* 30, no. 1 (2016): 79.

52. Jonathan Sterne, *The Sound Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2012), 4.

53. Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49–90.

54. *Ibid.*, 89.

pathway for the future. As Melony told us during the CESA conference, the choice to be vulnerable and share these traumatic moments generates dual possibilities of rejection/stasis and validation/change:

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

In her podcasting manifesto, Jess Shane calls on producers to eschew the pressure to increase audience size by creating content aimed at “widespread palatability.”<sup>55</sup> She calls on listeners to reject “the passive listening industrial complex,” asserting that “the listening experience must become an encounter between maker and listener.”<sup>56</sup> This encounter is grounded in acknowledging that all such collaborations require navigating complicated entanglements and a multiplicity of positions. Shane argues that such an encounter makes possible (but does not guarantee) collective action against oppressive systems, proclaiming “IT IS POSSIBLE to radicalize the private space between the ears.”<sup>57</sup> Although participants in the Radical Listening project could not control in full how radio producers, family and friends, co-workers, and other listeners heard and used their narratives, in telling their stories they opened the possibility for others to listen differently.

## CONCLUSION

This article tackles the contradictions that reside in public testimonials of personal sufferings and our endeavors as storytellers and facilitators/listeners to control how these stories are heard by wider publics and the impact/value that they can have. On the one hand, we are dominated by media narratives that encourage us to share our personal struggles to generate empathy between different others and to educate the larger public. Digital technologies enable the dissemination of this public good in new ways, highlighting the distances that stories can travel. On the other hand, the politics of who hears these stories and how they use them remain central to the possibilities of these stories doing some public good. These politics are intensely personal, as storytellers sharing traumatic experiences of racialized violence must contend with how their stories are taken up and (mis)used by different listening publics. The music and editing choices used by producers to make these stories resonate with distant others may undermine the specificity of the pain and the possibilities for resistance contained within these narratives. ■

55. Jess Shane, “Toward a Third Podcasting: Activist Podcasting in an Age of Social Justice Capitalism,” *RadioDoc Review* 8, no. 1 (December 2022): 2.

56. *Ibid.*, 3.

57. *Ibid.*, 2.

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