# WHAT ARE WE LISTENING FOR?

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#### Abstract

Drawing on critical bodies studies, the author conceptualizes "embodied social listening" as a senses-driven engagement with the structures and ideologies of anti-Black racism and how these mark and reshape human life. The author argues that it is through embodied social listening that education researchers can strengthen their intentionalities to documenting materially and discursively absorbed racism in the social spaces of Black lives. Connecting embodied social listening to participatory action research (PAR) suggests that its purpose is not be treated as an activity separate from the PAR process, but rather to be exercised as a central anticipatory form of action that implicates the individual co-researcher with anti-Black racism, with each other, and with the research process. The author concludes with a few points of deliberation that apply Chela Sandoval's framing of radical love to listening in PAR to fight anti-Black racism with political education and social mobilization.

*Keywords:* anti-Black racism, listening, radical love, participatory action research

#### **PREFACE**

I am about to open this conversation by making a few severe generalizing and perhaps accusatory statements about the shortfalls of critical and participatory researchers in education even though their scholarship is dedicated to intentionally examining and disrupting the current neoliberal(ized) social order. I make these assertions to punctuate the limited, hierarchized, and racialized spaces (physical and ideological) out of which the academic industrial complex operates to rank university-based collaborative and community-centered research that frames the systemic irresolution of social inequalities as fundamental component of the visceral effects that racism has on human lives.

## WHAT ARE WE LISTENING FOR? (PARTICIPATORY ACTION)

## RESEARCH AND EMBODIED SOCIAL LISTENING TO THE PERMANENCE OF ANTI-BLACK RACISM IN EDUCATION

The stories that researchers in education gather about the injustices that young people endure while in school do not fall short in highlighting the heartbreaks, disappointments, systemic neglect and denials. However, the conclusions of these narratives tend to be predictable and pre-scripted, because education research, albeit critical of social structures of inequalities, tends to remain hinged in the same methodological body counts of people who are disproportionately dispossessed, annihilated, surveilled, policed, incarcerated, and thus indexed by racist education policies that advocate for equally racist schooling procedures. Even though they vary in theoretical groundings and methodological application, researched narratives that connect individual loss to system failure have been told and retold repeatedly. Nonetheless the sharpness of individually sustained pain, the numbness caused by chronic collective suffering, and the urgency of desire and hope evaporate by the time the manuscript is submitted for publication.

It appears that critical education research is increasingly rising as a homogenous narrative that relies on the unresolved and thus normalized drama that the statistical weight of non-white students in special

education, school suspension, school closures, juvenile justice, foster care, unemployment, and detention centers maintains in analyses of current crises in education. I claim that critical research in education runs the danger of ossifying the epic story of "The Achievement Gap" as the mainstreamed disaster worthy of all research efforts. In the meantime, the specificity of antiblackness as one of the most palpable, vile, visible, performed, lived, uncontested, non-specified and under-interrogated form of racism continues to reign over knowledge productions in education and maintains Black youth as presumably uneducable, disposable, and as the necessary collateral damage for profit-driven and privatizing educational reform.

Very rarely do educational researchers stop and listen to the lived details of anti-Black racism that ought to make the logics of their inquiry cringe. In the next section I will highlight two recent examples of how quick white leaders are to silence Black youth who strategically reveal the racist intentions of their political and educational agendas. Prioritizing anti-Black racism as human-made and as one that continues to cause incommensurable forms of injustice in Black communities demands from researchers "to try to save lives in the process of research" (J. King, personal communication, February 25, 2016). I invite education researchers, in their inquisitive roles as first responders to anti-Black racism, to do better in answering this call when they claim their inquiries are designed to directly respond to the systemic pulse of state sanctioned disdain and disgust of Black lives. I probe that it is through an intentional embodied social listening to ongoing anti-Black racism, and a deliberate slowing down of researchers' primary preoccupation with implementing and performing methodologies to construct validity, dependability and generalizability, that strengthens researchers' preparedness to intentionally and lovingly document evidence for materially and discursively absorbed racism in the social spaces of Black lives. Yet, do we, as researchers, know what to listen for? What identifiable sounds does structural racism make? And how can listening to the harm that structural racism inflicts on Black bodies inform research narratives that are free off "damage-centered" pathologies (Tuck, 2009)?

I do not offer here instructions for translating racism from its visual and physical manifestations into audio iterations. Neither do I provide any descriptions of what racism ought to sound or look like. Instead, I conceptualize an embodied social listening to the permanence of anti-Black racism as a full body engagement with our racialized social living environments that are informed by how its historicized structures and ideologies materialize within the multiple layers of the human body. Thus embodied social listening is attentive to people's lived experiences with these structures and ideologies and how these mark human status. The field of critical body studies is very useful for this framing as it is centered on "how bodies produce real effects in the world, how bodies are impacted by structural and material conditions, and how bodies are represented in multiple diverse contexts" (Moore & Casper, 2015, p. 4). Racialized contexts inform to what extent we can see, taste, hear, smell, touch and interact with our social environments as well as with each other. By highlighting the sociality of listening we can create more nuanced conversations about how anti-Black racism manifests physically, emotionally, conceptually, rhetorically, actually.

If education researchers pause to absorb with their full bodies the gravity of what Michael Dumas has framed as "schooling as a site of Black suffering" (2013), perhaps we can reduce the epistemological and ontological spatial-temporal distance between the permanence of anti-Black racism in education today and the private profiteering of the ruling class under ongoing white settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012). I also encourage education researchers to make economic justice the nexus between our embodied social listening and researching anti-Black racism to loosen the bolts of defaulted power circuits that normalize the durability of uneven materialities in our anti-Black racist world

This article continues with the recalling of two events that recently filled the evening news hours about current educational and political leaders' willful denial to listen to Black youth who revealed the impact of electoral and educational racist practices on Black lives. I then turn to Participatory Action Research (PAR) as an epistemological positioning towards conducting research that includes the implementation

of action and creation of research products that broaden the base for social and political transformations. I connect embodied social listening to PAR to suggest that its intentionality is not to be treated as an additional activity separate from the PAR process, but rather to be exercised as an ongoing action that implicates individual co-researcher with each other and with the research process by way of a collective love for transformational change. I lean on Chela Sandoval's conceptualization of revolutionary love she documented in "Methodology of the Oppressed" (2000) to unravel the political alliance between listening in participatory and collaborative research and radical love. I will leave this conversation by inserting a few points for deliberation: to sharpen but also to harmonize our politicized hearing and motor skills, to be readied for mindful action informed by a hearing that is ready and anticipatory of anti-Black racist assaults and thus fundamental to informing a knowing how to respond with specific actions; and to frame radical love as a source for fighting anti-Black racism that is led by political education and mobilization (Kelley, 2016). It is this kind of daring, fearless, living, ahistorical, inconclusive, transient, irresolute love that trusts survival and is not hinged in neoliberalized discourses of helpless victimization.

## IT'S A NON-LISTENING, ANTI-BLACK RACIST WORLD

The continuous soaring racist assaults of Black people in their public places of learning, worshipping, containment, living, healing, playing, and commuting in the United States and around the world simultaneously frame anti-Black-specific racism into evidence for how current global racialized capitalism and the brute force of white supremacy is versatile, deliberate, permanent, and non-reconciliatory. At the time of composing this article, two more anti-Black racist incidents filled national news to remind readers and viewers about the mundane and normalized character of anti-Black racism.

Scenario one: during a private pre-election event, a Black youth activist asked presidential candidate Hillary Clinton to apologize for comments she made during her husband's 1996 re-election campaign. Clinton defended the then-President Bill Clinton's Crime Bill that

supported heightened policing in Black communities living in poverty and called Black children "super-predators" and connected them to drug cartels. After his re-election, Bill Clinton's administration oversaw the elimination of rehabilitative programs for drug users and supported the rapid expansion of prison constructions, thus intensifying the incarceration rates among Black people for non-violent (drug consumption-based) offenses. The activist, Ashley Williams, a member of the Black Lives Matter Movement, stood up in front of Hillary Clinton and demanded an apology for the statement Clinton issued about the disposability of Black children and for the mass-incarceration of Black people that resulted directly from the ratification of this federal bill (Tynes, 2016). Almost immediately after, Clinton's Secret Service escorted the young activist out of the event space.

Scenario two: earlier in 2016 in Boston, two Black female students at Boston Latin School (BLS), a competitive and elite public exam school, posted a YouTube video to draw the public's attention to the systemic racism (controlled and limited admissions of Black students) and the racially charged language that teachers had been using with Black students in the classroom. The Boston Public School District (BPS) responded with implementing an "in-depth investigation" consisting of interviews with BLS' students and school administrators. Less than three weeks later, BPS' superintendent closed this investigation. Student activists at BLS critiqued the investigation as being "too limited in scope and failed to reflect the 'racial climate' there" (Hoover, 2016). The student group "BLS BLACK" revealed that less than 10 students were interviewed which is less than one percent of the school's 2,600 students, of which nine percent are Black. BLS students also demanded a different investigation that would include the headmaster to stepping down and issuing an apology, the creation of a reporting system of incidents of racial discrimination, an alumni-run student mentoring program, mandatory cultural proficiency workshops for school staff, and the administration of a cultural respect code that BLS' parents and students would be required to sign every year. The Boston branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People committed to these demands and agreed to lead this more in-depth examination of anti-Black racism that will incorporate interviews with the families of Black students at BLS

Both incidents reveal how quickly white leadership pulverizes the courage with which Black youth spoke back to individuals acting on behalf of the power structures of white supremacy. In both cases the willpower of Black youth directed public attention to the systemic racism that young people are confronted with on a daily basis in their communities and while in school. Both cases also reveal young people as fighters, advocates, educators, and survivors of the trauma that white supremacy spills unequivocally into their lives. And in both cases white leaders failed to acknowledge Black youth as experts with the impacts of structural racism on Black lives. Instead, the adults fail to protect them from racist institutional and environmental harm in their lives. Hillary Clinton and BPS' superintendent abandoned Black youth by denying them the delivery of their messages about how fighting structural racism could potentially entail living with the long-term damage of silencing that white supremacy inscribes onto their bodies. In both cases, white adult leaders refused to listen. And not listening not only denied the racialized lifeworlds of young people; it also refuted radical traditions of willful resistance and refusals among Black youth to accept the racially blind and sanitized U.S. social order.

### PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

These two situations mirror many of the social contexts out of which PAR projects have grown. Around the world, the agendas of critical PAR and community-guided research have been fueled by the need to make visible the racialized and uneven materialities that capitalist economic structures re/produce (Lykes and Mallona, 2013). Moreover, PAR researchers are known for focusing their work on unraveling the racist ideological structures of institutions (schools and prisons) and discouraging the social practices (education policies) that sustain them. I also experienced PAR with young people to document the structural forces behind the racialized dispossessions in education (Krueger-Henney, 2012) and the systemic denial of minoritized young people's social worth (Krueger-Henney, 2014). PAR collectives are often perceived as not being afraid of drawing their epistemological and action-driven artillery against this anti-Black racist world.

This said, within and outside of academia, the practices, ontological stances, and accomplishments of PAR are frequently positioned as the panacea for counteracting research logics infected by the hegemonizing virus of neoliberalized research paradigms that follow the legacies of white settler colonialism and thus protect white supremacy and anti-Black racism. This view of PAR commodifies co-researchers (and the research process) as social-ill fighting heroes, who possess perhaps superhuman abilities because they push their knowledge productions into methodological spaces outside traditions of standardized racist and exploitative research principles. That is, through a code of ethics that is loyal to co-researchers, the stages of collaborative research processes, and dehierarchized relationships between researchers and their research participants, but less so to institutionalized ethical regulations (i.e. Institutional Review Board), PAR co-researchers can be insistent about uprooting the ethical and social wrongdoings of institutionalized racism

However, this is a monolithic, linear and abled-bodied interpretation of PAR, the research relationships in PAR, and the research processes that prioritize an action-centered vision of PAR. As such, PAR researchers are busy giving testimonials at media conferences in front of city halls during the daytime, and analyzing survey and interview results at night. And with whatever time remains, PAR researchers co-author workshops to be given to local schools about the effects of social injustices on people's everyday lives. To the external and perhaps unfamiliar eye, PAR co-researchers are in constant motion and do not need much rest; their sources for strategizing are insatiable; they are confident and they are ideologically aligned with each other and their research procedures. However, this vision ignores the hard work of co-constructions of some of the fundamental characteristics of PAR, namely critical consciousness and reflexivity that drive and inform the vision and course of the research collective towards harvesting more horizontal and socially just social relations (Martín-Baró, 1994; Cahill, 2007; Torre & Ayala, 2009). The elimination of ongoing dialoguing and listening between co-researchers and the structures of political economy creates a limited thus quick-to-consume understanding of PAR labor: it is ahistorical, rootless, homogenous, and uncomplicated.

Very rarely does this master narrative of action-driven PAR leak out glimpses into how listening among PAR co-researchers occurs and the extent to which listening guides the formations of PAR relations between co-researchers and communities; grounds analyses of social injustice; and attends to the dissonances among co-researchers' individual stances and collective actions. It is through a mindful being in tune with their socio-political living environment that coresearchers insert themselves into their social worlds. When individual co-researchers defend opposing ideological stances, feel unsafe to show personal vulnerabilities, abandon the collective's memorandum of agreement, are untrusting of the outcome of their research action, or feel frustrated with how their PAR study reproduces and maintains socially unequal power relationships among members of the research collective, the resulting mistrust, disappointment, fear, dismissal, doubt, and pain legitimize the coloniality in education research traditions

PAR is full of these ambiguous and in-between spaces that are packed with uncertainties and that can blur visions of constructing counter-hegemonic, anti-racist, and decolonial inquiries. I uphold that an intentional social listening to the beat of institutionalized forms of injustices is crucial to capturing the teachable moments of these entangled and sticky encounters. While listening in PAR has been framed as being part of PAR ethics or as an approach leading to a specific PAR activity (Fine, 2006; Manzo & Brightbill, 2007), less insights are available to listening as a type of action that assists PAR coresearchers with a deliberate and strategic pausing, a physical stillness, to "check coordinates of social, physical, and ethical locations, which profoundly compromise the potential for transformational change" in education research (Patel, 2016, p. 5).

The critical scholarship of Monique Guishard examines PAR ethicalities to highlight the importance of including the naming of paradoxes within the PAR process (2008). Guishard writes, "If we are serious about participatory approaches to research we *must* (original emphasis) highlight our blind-spots and biases with as much detail as we spotlight the seeming contradictions and inconsistencies of the people we conduct research with..." (p. 88). Following her call, I offer a conceptual move towards bridging listening for contradictions and more nuanced participatory and collaborative critical research with the versatility of a radical love for committing participatory knowledge productions to the structural violence endorsed by material inequalities and racial injustices.

### RADICAL LOVE AND THE PRODUCTIVITY **OF PLACELESS-NESS**

Truth is, things are bad. White supremacy enacted by the multiheaded hydra of racism (Pickower & Mayorga, 2015) appears rootless, ruthless, regenerative, uncontested, well fed, and interminable. The annihilation of Black people, their knowledges, traditions, relationships, organizations, and economic contributions that anti-Black racism has effortlessly harvested have also left profound scar tissues on collective desires for hope and social change. The "not knowing what to do", or the "not knowing what to say anymore" commonly intensifies urges of throwing oneself into an epistemology of "no-place:" an emotional and intellectual departure from existing and racist social power coordinates. While this deliberate disconnection can protect collective survivance (Vizenor, 2008), facilitate a purposeful fleeing into the undercommons to repair one's broken being (Harney and Moten, 2013), and harvest dreams about transformative freedom and love (Kelley, 2002), it can also fortify, protect, and accept structures and ideologies of white supremacy. Being driven into "no place" perpetuates the sociopolitical interests of current globalized racist capitalist ideologies, as well as the legacies of white settler colonialism inherent in community policing, criminal justice-centered school safety practices, non-criminal sentencing procedures, and also traditional research paradigms.

The ontological placeless-ness of "no-place" gets often erased by action-eager research agendas as any faint evidence of despair, fear and doubt can be detrimental to collectively remaining motivated for conducting critical research. Yet, this being in placeless-ness holds tremendous pedagogical value about social re-imaginations and political liberation for those who dare to let go. Socially and politically relating from "no-space" that is detached from current racialized space productions embody an epistemological stance that provides a unique

power of seeing the world for what it is; that it is messed up, hardened, deadly, and dangerous for Black people. With it, normalized structures of anti-Black racism can become more visible and palpable. I maintain that education research is in need of such socio-political clarity; freed from the hegemonic gaze that has systemically predetermined the usevalues of research directions and their outcomes.

In addition, collectively listening to people's "no-places" is rich and diverse in testimonies and lived expertise with struggles and survival. I argue that collectively listening can facilitate a falling in love with each other (with people's radical selves that could not surface otherwise), and with the potential that a "collective not-knowing" holds for reimagining and striving for something new, something notagain, and also not-yet. An absence of conventions is necessary for the possibility of creating liberating opportunities. It is precisely in these unsettling ontological, epistemological and pedagogical spaces where listening can facilitate an acting out of love and a falling in love; a radical love

I reach out to Chela Sandoval and her conceptualization of radical love in "Methodology of the Oppressed" (2000) to highlight the socially transformative possibilities that listening can drive in participatory and collaborative-based research:

To fall in love means that one must submit, however temporarily, to what is 'intractable,' to a state of being not subject to control or governance. It is at this point that the drifting being is able to pass into another kind of erotics, to the amplitude of Barthes' 'abyss.' It is only in [...] the abyss that subjectivity can become freed from ideology as it binds and ties reality; here is where political weapons of consciousness are available in a constant tumult of possibility. But the process of falling in love is not the only entry to this realm, for the 'true site of originality and strength' is neither the lover nor the self. Rather, it is the 'originality of the relation' between the two actors that inspires these new powers, while providing passage to that which I call the differential. (2000, p. 141)

Critical participatory action and collaborative research that wishes to respond to Sandoval's call for radical love cannot be built on coresearchers' political harmonization that uses the same structures and traditions that also causes them to be out of tune with each other. For radical love, the logics of our research processes require an intentional betraying of inherited linearity and ostensible innocence that drives the linear directionality of white settler colonialism in academic knowledge production: Introduction-Argument-Overview of the Study-Presentation of Findings- Significance of Findings- Conclusion. In other words, collaborative and participatory action researchers cannot commit to Black and other racialized communities thinking that their individual positionalities have not been touched by the deadly forces of structural racism. Anti-Black racism cannot be discovered throughout the research project; it has already been here. Therefore, desires for and consent to anti-racist research collaborations need to be driven by inspirations drawn from outside the ideological and material spaces of white supremacy.

## LISTENING TO THE POLITICAL **ECONOMY OF ANTI-BLACK RACISM** IS GROUNDED IN ACTION

Courageous and thunderous student-led movements against systemic racism and race-based educational inequalities have recently resurfaced in Chile and South Africa with high school and university students fighting against the racist neoliberal takeovers of their public learning institutions. The ongoing political education and community mobilizations against institutionalized violence of white supremacy by the youth of the Black Lives Matter Movement throughout the United States are part of this global politicizing work. Their being-in-this-racist-world and telling about what-is-it-like-to-learn-in-this-racist-world offer fertile grounds for political agitation and antiracist re-imaginations. Questioning and envisioning the role of education research in this white settling anti-Black racist world ought to join the uprising among Black youth.

How can critical and antiracist education researchers break the gaze of master research narratives away from paralyzing and ahistorical stances that maintain the body counts of those who are invisibilized, predetermined as socially dead in our public schools, and warehoused in the punitive and contained spaces of criminal justice, housing, health care, unemployment services and facilities? Listening to the structures of anti-Black racism urges educational researchers to look directly at the actual living, moving, Black bodies who fight with their lives to be visible, acknowledged, and accounted for. Albeit economically marginalized, Black youth are adamant about demanding that their communities and schools be treated as lifeworlds, and not as dead worlds, as these are spaces that are not disposable, reusable, exploitable, and unimaginable.

I exit this conversation with a few points for deliberation to further project the interconnections between embodied social listening, radical love and political action in participatory action research against anti-Black racism. I hope these final thoughts are not taken as closedended and definite recommendations for building "best practices" but rather as cautious ontological and epistemological standstills needed to sharpen our political hearing and motor skills for doing anti-Black racist research and work. With these I attempt to offer possible cues for what we might be listening for while tuning in to the sounds of anti-Black racism

Listening for anti-Black racism is similar to listening for the other shoe the upstairs neighbor is about to drop. Because we implicate each other, it is an intentional anticipation, a constant being ready for what is about to come, because racist assaults do not occur as onetime, isolated events but are rather systemic by composition and hence repetitive by way of their structural circuitous wiring. Understanding and living anti-Black racism as a defaulted characteristic of social realities prepares the listening body to connect the pace of individual racist incidents to the equally racist social structures that permit them. It is an ontological undoing of the tone deafness that white supremacy has instilled in all of us. Waiting for the other shoe to drop is not to be mistaken as a passive waiting, but instead an eager and politically aware listening that requires self-insertion in racist assaults by intentionally calculating the spatial temporal details of the event and matching it with personal readiness to strategically counteract, mobilize against, refuse, and fight it.

Listening to anti-Black racism is not only connected to seeing anti-Black racism around us; it also requires its recognition within each of us. Echoing Sandoval's "originality and strength" found in the abyss of radical love, novelist Junot Diaz astutely questioned during an interview: "Is it possible to love one's broken-by-the-colonialityof-power self in another broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power person?" (Mova, 2012). Interrupting the perpetuation of white settler legacies of racialized violence requires from researchers to wrestle with how anti-Black racism flows through their own bodies and thus demands, as Diaz argued, "the kind of internal bearing witness of our own role in the social hell of our world that most people would rather not engage in." Hence the quieter we are, the louder anti-Black racist action. The stiller we are, the more visible and faster its mobility, speed and the interconnections between ideological structures of anti-Black racism, social procedures and individual acts through which racism operates. Embodied social listening does not silo the jurisdictions of our senses; instead their interconnectivity maximizes our listening and hearing performativities towards strategically consenting to loving more complicatedly and thus more openly than what current anti-Black racist structures allow for

Listening for anti-Black racism pushes towards an epistemology of survivance (Vizenor, 1998) that is fundamental to determining, individually and collectively, how to live in and navigate in this racist world. More noteworthy, an epistemology of survivance puts our eyes in roaming mode. Similar to looking out of the window while inside a moving train, our eyes are in quick back and forth motions to calibrate, evaluate and decipher the details of our spatial temporal coordinates, boundaries, and topography of anti-Black racism. This continuous aligning of individual positionalities with surrounding social and physical environments connects us to the road maps of anti-Black racism, past and future.

I also uphold that embodied social listening frees PAR and other collaborative and community-centered research desires from monolithic renderings of being called "action-prone." Instead, embodied social

listening is a whole-body praxis for deliberately deceiving and disobeying racist white settler logics of inquiry. Finally, embodied social listening is a strategic place of dwelling that provides not only protection and security from anti-Black racist obliteration; it also lovingly sculpts struggle, camaraderie, inspirations, freedom, determination, and action for social change into anticolonial and anti-racist participatory and collaborative research procedures.

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