

## Theorizing Listening as a Tool for Social Change: Andrea Dworkin's Discourses on Listening

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Theorizing listening's multifarious functions has meaningful potential for critical communication studies. I argue that our understanding of listening can be enriched by examining the discourses of the U.S. radical lesbian feminist Andrea Dworkin. Employing and extending McRae's method of performative listening, I argue that Dworkin's rhetoric can be read as a theory and practice of radical, caring listening that promotes social change and moves us toward collective action.

*Keywords: Andrea Dworkin, listening, feminist studies*

Investigating cultural and performative practices of listening and their roles in bringing into being the self, the other, and our social world have become areas of burgeoning interest in communication studies (Beard, 2009; Dreher, 2009a, 2009b; Lipari, 2009, 2010; McRae, 2015; Peake, 2012; Ratcliffe, 2005; Vicaro, 2015). Such efforts have illuminated the ways in which Western culture's privileging of sight and the field's privileging of voice have circumscribed our ability to conceptualize the constitutive role of listening in communication, as well as theorize its multifarious functions. Only now are we beginning, as Royster and Kirsch (2012) argue, to mine the resources of listening and to assess listening's varied "rhetorical purposes and outcomes, including expressions of resistance and challenges to authority" (p. 150). Advocating a shift away from the "ocularcentrism" that dominates Western culture and toward aurality, Ratcliffe (2005) encourages scholars to identify the ways in which hierarchical power relationships, varied social locations, and dominant logics inform and shape listening practices (pp. 3, 22). Such a movement would be significant, McRae (2015) posits, opening up the possibility for transformational research experiences and even different realities (p. 17).

Theorizing listening, particularly its relationship to power and oppression, has meaningful potential for critical communication studies. In an effort to further elaborate listening's multifaceted functions, I examine the discourses of the radical lesbian feminist Andrea Dworkin (1946–2005). Although based in the United States, Dworkin had an expansive reach; her writings have been translated into French, German, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Spanish, Russian, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Lithuanian, Flemish, Croatian, and Galacian. Perceived as a polarizing and galvanizing figure, some Americans viewed Dworkin as an outspoken feminist who threatened First Amendment Rights when she

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struggled against the U.S. pornography industry and strove to create civil rights protections for those it harmed. However, for many others, Dworkin was a sexual assault and battery survivor who championed resistance to violence against women (Stark, 2008). As an intellectual and activist, Dworkin saw voice as an essential political modality and a form of fidelity to people and causes; she perceived failing to speak out in the face of injustice to be a betrayal (Dworkin, 2002, pp. 135–137). Consequently, she devoted herself to “the testimony of women who had no other voice,” taking their stories seriously: “I don’t count sheep at night; I see in my mind instead the women I’ve met, I see their faces and I can recollect their voices” (pp. 185–186). At first glance, it may seem an unusual choice to look to Dworkin for contributions to our understanding of listening given that she has a tendency, like that of our field, to valorize voice. However, even though she valued voice deeply and was well known for her radical, challenging voice, she found profound meaning in listening, referring to it as a holy act and the most important pedagogical tool available to us. That Dworkin found such value in listening, despite her clear propensity toward voice, suggests that examining her corpus more closely may prove a fecund endeavor, especially for a field that possesses similar proclivities. Additionally, if, as Bickford (1996) argued, “both speaking and listening are central aspects of citizenship” (p. 4), then Dworkin’s discourses have the potential to illuminate how citizens might become more effective listeners, especially to those who find it difficult to speak or whose voices are not being heard.

As Dworkin does not systematize her thoughts on listening, I mined her work for relevant treatments of the topic. I examined the following writings, which span the course of her career and provide a meaningful overview of her perspective: *Letters from a War Zone* (1993), a compilation of the speeches and essays she wrote between 1976 and 1987; *Life and Death* (1997a), a compilation of her discourses from the late 1980s and mid-1990s; the essay “Suffering and Speech” (1997b), which represents her work from the late 1990s; and her memoir, published three years before her death, *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant* (2002). To analyze Dworkin’s discourses, I employed Chris McRae’s (2015) method of performative listening, which he presents as a qualitative methodology and critical communication pedagogy. As a methodology, performative listening highlights the constitutive function of listening in creating realities and experiences (p. 36) and emphasizes listening as “an embodied method of knowing and learning” (p. 16). This method ruptures the false binary between speaker/performer and audience/listener by emphasizing that meaning is not produced alone or by a single actor; rather, it is co-created via the listening experience: “The co-performance enacted through and by listening emerges from a desire to hear and engage with others, and as such, enables an interaction that focuses on questions of creating new meanings” (p. 37). This methodology differentiates itself from others in its focus on the pleasures of listening and by moving from a skills-based approach to “a more relational and performative conception of what it means to listen to others” (p. 35).

Based on my analysis, I posit that Dworkin’s rhetoric can be read as a theory and practice of radical, caring listening—especially in relation to hierarchical contexts, abusive relationships, and painful experiences—that urges social change and moves us toward collective action. Dworkin’s discourses suggest that, in a culture that ignores the oppression and abuse of others, performing caring listening is a radical act. More specifically, in her discourses, I argue that Dworkin urges audiences to: acknowledge the complexities of listening to painful experiences while performing listening with forbearance and rigor; view listening as sacred and to enact listening with no expectation of personal gain; recognize that failing to

listen enables oppressive structures to reproduce; listen to those who have “no claim” to speak; and recognize that personal stories have the potential to provide concrete knowledge that may serve as the basis of challenging social structures and motivating collective action. Dworkin compels audiences to understand that failing to listen and to stand with the powerless represents an abdication of our personal and collective responsibility. As I apply McRae’s (2015) method of performative listening, I also expand its explanatory value by demonstrating its utility for listening ethically, not only to those words, sounds, and utterances that bring us pleasure, but also to those that generate pain—those distressing stories to which we are called to listen. To begin, I review critical approaches to listening in communication studies to provide a foundation for the study. Subsequently, I provide an overview of McRae’s (2015) method of performative listening before turning to an analysis of Dworkin’s discourses.

### **Critical Approaches to Listening**

Calling the field’s tendency to overlook listening a “curious oversight,” especially “given the centrality of listening to communicative, experiential and public life,” Lacey (2013) challenged scholars to dispense with the idea that listening is associated with passivity (p. 3). As if answering this charge, varying scholars have begun rendering visible listening’s stake in ethical issues, examining listening as constitutive of the subject and our ethical being (Beard, 2009), and positing listening as a first philosophy and a mode of connecting to and receiving alterity (Lipari 2004, 2009). Others have examined the ways in which listening may disturb power relations. For example, Vicaro (2015) examined how listening to the body creates space for transformative political argument in carceral spaces, and Dreher (2009a, 2009b) demonstrated the various ways listening across differences can shift some responsibility for cultural transformation from marginalized groups to those at the center of privilege and power. Conversely, scholars like Peake (2012) found that listening functions to reproduce hierarchical power relationships as it shapes how we conceptualize urban spaces. Similarly, Ratcliffe (2005) posited listening as constitutive of dominant logics, while she offered her own concept of rhetorical listening as a mode of ethical cross-cultural conduct. These varying approaches suggest, as Thill (2009) argued, that even though “listening can figure as a way of responding to the other, thus sustaining the possibility for shared action in the future[,] it is certainly not always open, empathetic or transformative” (p. 541). In what follows, I navigate through relevant critical approaches to theorizing listening in hierarchical and painful situations to create a context for appreciating Dworkin’s contributions to our understanding of listening.

Theorizing listening as a pathway to ethical being and dialogical practice, Lipari’s (2009, 2010) conceptualizations of “listening otherwise” and “listening being” have complicated and deepened our understanding of the principled dimensions of listening. Listening otherwise articulates the value of listening unflinchingly to the vulnerability and suffering of others by suspending self-interest in an effort to receive listeners in all their diversity and complexity (Lipari, 2009, pp. 45, 56). Grounded in an ethic of “awareness, receiving, and obedience,” listening otherwise responds with compassion and the willingness to be transformed regardless of how the speaker’s experiences may register within our limited comprehension (pp. 45, 54). Although this listening process requires a “subordination” of the self as we connect with the other, Lipari (2009) has indicated that this approach does not require a “disavowal . . . of self, historicity or contingency”; rather, it is a “subjugation of the self to the other, the substitution of the self-for-the-other” (p. 53). Actively avoiding subsuming the other into the self by welcoming the other as

a guest, listening otherwise "doesn't insist on understanding or familiarity, or shared feelings" but it does insist on "listening without objectification or appropriation . . . [and] with a kind of awareness that makes space for the unthinkable, the unimaginable, the other" (p. 56). Expanding on her notion of listening otherwise, Lipari (2010) also developed the concept of listening being as an interior quietude or consciousness that resists intrapersonal communication and subdues personal histories and experiences in order to receive the insights of others without disruption (p. 355). Listening being eschews what is familiar and predictable in favor of engaging others on their terms despite our discomfort, with the aim of moving beyond the limits of what is already known (p. 359). Both listening otherwise and listening being share an invitational approach to listening in that one is encouraged to "liste[n] to the other's suffering as a kind of hospitality, invitation, a hosting" (Lipari, 2009, p. 56). In her elaboration of the invitational approach, Lipari (2010) argued:

I don't have to "feel" what you feel, or "know" what it feels like to be you. What I do need to do is stand in proximity to your pain. To stand with you, right next to you, and to belong to you, fully present to the ongoing expression of you. Letting go of my ideas about who you are, who I am, what "should" be. (pp. 350–351)

In these conceptual frameworks, there is an open offering to enter into interaction without an expectation of particular outcomes and there exists the idea that persuasion or a particular end in such listening encounters constitutes a kind of violence or repression (Lipari, 2009, p. 56).

Whereas Lipari (2009, 2010) has offered conceptualizations of listening that seek to recognize others in all their diversity, Tompkins (2009) has drawn our attention to the processes by which diverse others are rendered invisible and mute. Using the Tuskegee Syphilis Study to demonstrate her point, Tompkins advanced rhetorical listening as a modality to promote moral sensitivity regarding others—particularly those marginalized by dominant discursive practices—right to thrive. The 40-year study examined the effects of syphilis on 399 African American male subjects who thought they were being treated for the disease when in fact they were not being treated and instead were being studied to track the progression of the disease, from 1932 to 1972. The researchers reported their findings in 13 articles published in leading medical journals, yet no one in the medical community questioned the researchers' practices. Consequently, ethical issues were disregarded, not only by those conducting the study, but also by the broader medical community, whose members should have identified the injury to the men and their intimate others. As a remedy for such gross miscarriages of justice, Tompkins has posited rhetorical listening as an ethical communication practice that focuses on cultivating moral sensitivity by situating communicators in their relational contexts (p. 61). Tompkins has described rhetorical listening as "attentiveness to communicative connection in an effort to discern the traces of others obscured or hidden by language and communication practices that create rhetorical absence rather than presence" (p. 77). Rhetorical listening demands attunement to the relational connectedness of all humans, compelling communicators to view others as embedded in a network of relationships. This networked approach reminds people that decision making affects not only individuals, but also those to whom others have a connection, making it more difficult to ignore the ethical implications of actions or to render others invisible (p. 69). Rhetorical listening underscores our shared humanity as it reminds us that others, particularly the marginalized, are entitled to thrive in their lives and relationships, a notion that can be

obscured in dominant discursive practices (pp. 69, 77). Tompkins has argued that we need to pay attention to how such practices function to manufacture "rhetorical presence[s] and absence[s]," that subsequently "influence understanding of an event, issue, or problem" (p. 69). By listening for the absences, by engaging our moral imagination to identify seen and unseen others, we can cultivate the responsiveness appropriate for acknowledging others' entitlement to thrive and how our actions might prevent them from doing so.

Active listening practices can work toward achieving social justice by revealing, hearing, and understanding seen and unseen others, but listening in and of itself is not inherently liberatory. Problematizing the idea that listening can function to undermine established power relations and hierarchies, Lloyd (2009) investigated how listening has been appropriated by corporations within new cultures of work to facilitate dialogue and to promote the simulation of personal, rather than institutional, care without the goal of meaningful action, redistribution of resources, or redressing of grievances. Lloyd has argued that "listening as 'cure,' or [as] a solution that starts from communicative rather than political action, has the danger of remaining forever on the level of the symbolic"(p. 479); this is especially the case in contexts where listening begins with the center of power, at which point listening may simply become the regulation of who may speak. When corporate or state cultures frame listening as a therapeutic cure for problems, listening may become just another "soft technology of power" (p. 479), reinforcing the status quo and oppressive relationships. Similar to the corporate listening cure, Lloyd has posited that theories of listening often tend toward an "individualizing teleology," seeking to improve individual listening skills while failing to provide due consideration to power relationships, agency, broader social structures, and situational constraints (pp. 479–480, 485). To develop listening theory that moves us toward care, rather than only simulating it, Lloyd has suggested that critics must accept, rather than mask, conflict, focus on registering and transforming social and material conditions, and treat failures in listening as valuable in their ability to reveal problems and push them above ground (p. 485).

These studies stress our relational connection to one another, the discursive practices that produce absences and presences, the recognition of others' right to thrive, and the value of moving research on listening beyond an individualized teleology. The present study seeks to highlight the importance of these orientations to listening while being conscious of Lloyd's advisory that listening, in and of itself, is not necessarily helpful. This study also invokes Lipari's movement toward emptying ourselves of assumptions in order to listen unflinchingly to the suffering of others while militating against appropriation and objectification. To the extent that Lipari's conceptualizations may be considered exemplars of communicative interaction, this study extends Lipari's developments by offering an ancillary view that is germane to interactional contexts that include those who have been victimized by violence and who are entrenched in hierarchical or abusive relations. For such individuals, performing obedience and subordinating the self to engage in an ostensibly reciprocal listening encounter may be more complicated. Additionally, the invitational approach to listening, while unequivocally meaningful in many circumstances and certainly reflective of the dialogical approach Lipari seeks to advance, may not cohere with those who seek to influence outcomes in a more determined manner or who believe that listening is a political necessity. For some, as Lloyd (2009) argued, a more systematically persuasive approach may be a political imperative. As Dworkin (1997a) says, "Are you tired of hearing about it? Don't be tired in front of me" (p. 218). As I theorize listening in such complicated contexts, I make a contribution to the current

literature by mining Dworkin's discourses for what McRae (2015) calls "modes of listening" (p. 16) that address listening in situations that have been marked by hierarchy, exploitation, and pain. I now turn to an explication of McRae's method of listening, which serves as a guide to my analysis of Dworkin's discourses.

### **Methodological Considerations: McRae's Performative Listening**

McRae (2015) has turned our attention toward the possibilities of listening's pleasures in his conceptualization of performative listening, which he offers as a qualitative research methodology and critical communication pedagogy. Defined as "an embodied practice of critically and reflexively engaging with and learning from others" (p. 31), it is a methodology that is experiential, embodied, creative, and attentive to power relationships and contexts. This methodological orientation views performances of listening as creating realities and experiences and positions the researcher as the pupil of listening encounters (p. 36). What differentiates McRae's performative listening from other current conceptualizations is that it is "motivated by a desire for joy" (p. 28) and grounded in the pleasures and aesthetics of listening while it also seeks to move beyond a skills- and efficiency-based approach to listening (p. 33). Although McRae's conceptualization of listening is focused on pleasure, such an orientation does not preclude it from being applied to painful situations like those studied here; indeed, his focus on listening as a sensory experience that is located in the body and attendant to visceral reactions is particularly germane to heightened experiences like pleasure and pain, and this present investigation aims to demonstrate the explanatory value of his work outside pleasure. Additionally, this methodology positions listening not simply as a skill to be acquired or improved, but rather as a purposive discursive act that is "textured, interpretive, narrative, dynamic, and cultural" and "aimed at developing relationships and learning from others" (pp. 35–36). Taking the focus away from simply improving listening skills and toward the broader context in which listening occurs helps de-center the individualized teleology of which Lloyd (2009) warns.

Drawing on musicology to demonstrate how we might listen to, and learn from, others, McRae (2015) argued that there are multiple modes of listening that fashion our experiences with the social world. This suggests that listening can provide us with unique insight into the structure and interpretation of experience: "Different modes of listening to different experiences shape those experiences in a variety of ways" (McRae, 2015, p. 16). Whereas visual frameworks, which predominate in our research methodologies, have a tendency to focus on static products from an exterior, judging position, an aural centered approach focuses on process and tries to move toward the interior of thought and being: "Listening resists the dominant object-centered and product-based conditions of visual metaphors of inquiry. Instead, the act of listening works to engage with experience in terms of and under the conditions of process" (p. 17). A process-centered approach also enables researchers to grasp the dynamic, changing development of ideas over time and space (p. 20). This process-centered, interior orientation to research involves embodiment, relationship, and pedagogy, which work together in a symbiotic fashion. Indeed, as we develop relationships with others through listening in specific contexts, our bodies absorb and respond to their words and utterances, which generate emotions and visceral responses, serving as the basis of an "embodied way of coming to knowledge" (p. 20) that has the potential to alter traditional ways of knowing and being. If we listen attentively, we have the possibility for a range of learning, and we might find that

the real stake in listening is "a curiosity for what might be possible through the act of hearing others" (p. 28).

Listening with curiosity is one of four fundamental commitments that McRae (2015) presented as central to enacting his methodology of performative listening. Such curiosity involves being open and willing to develop new relationships and to listen and learn from others with humility. Being open and humble to new ideas does not mean one suspends one's critical gaze indefinitely. Rather it requires that researchers understand their positionality and biases and how they may affect their ability to resist early foreclosure: "This is not an act that is absent of critique, but it is an act of listening first" (p. 38). When we listen with curiosity, we are attending to the ideas of others first so that we can capture the possibilities that they offer, rather than succumbing to the temptation to fall back on previously held conclusions. Listening to and with the body is the second commitment of performative listening. It draws our attention to the reciprocal relationship between our bodies and listening, in that our embodiment informs how we listen and how we listen (or, by extension, how we are listened to) influences our bodies:

This commitment asks the researcher to attend to feelings and sensory qualities as significant sites of inquiry. It also is a commitment to recognizing the way the sounds, performances, and stories of others are always resonating with and shaping our embodied experiences. (p. 40)

The focus on embodiment calls attention to the idea that the body is a locus of knowledge and affirms the insights that it generates. The third commitment calls for situating the listener and the listening experience in their appropriate historical and sociocultural contexts, while recognizing that contexts are dynamic and changing, rather than deterministic. McRae (2015) has posited, "Listening may not be determined by a context or location, but it is a performance that does not happen outside of or independent from context and location" (p. 42). Such a focus on context may help researchers identify the symbolic practices that produce, as Tompkins (2009) has stated, symbolic absences and presences, which may affect others' right to thrive. Correspondingly, drawing our attention to the idea that listening is never a neutral practice, the fourth commitment of performative listening requires that researchers listen with accountability. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of double-articulation, which indicates that practices reproduce structures, McRae (2015) called on researchers to be aware that performative listening is itself "a practice that creates structures and is informed by structures that are enacted by previous practices" (p. 45). Researchers become accountable by being mindful regarding the ways listening practices inform and reproduce existing structures and, when necessary, challenging dominant systems.

### **Dworkin's Discourses on Listening**

McRae's fundamental commitments to performative listening serve as a framework for understanding the nuance of Dworkin's discourses on listening; in a symbiotic fashion, Dworkin's discourses illuminate McRae's conceptualization of performative listening. To gain a deeper understanding of Dworkin's orientation to listening, I begin by explicating the origins of her perspective. Next, I turn to the theory and practice of listening that she advances. As I move through Dworkin's varying discourses, I

demonstrate how her work extends McRae's (2015) method of performative listening by offering modes of listening particularly suited to painful experiences.

### ***The Origins of Dworkin's Perspective on Listening***

In her varied works, Dworkin warned of the perils of silence and elevated the political power of voice; however, echoing McRae (2015), it is the act of listening that she found the most important for teaching, learning, and transformation. Dworkin (2002) stated:

If one has to pick one kind of pedagogy over all others, I pick listening. It breaks down prejudices and stereotypes; it widens self-imposed limits; it takes one into another's life, her hard times and, if there is any, her joy, too. (p. 179)

In her memoir, Dworkin credited her father and the ocean, which stands in metaphorically for her trip home from Greece, with teaching her the power of listening. Her father's listening practices enabled Dworkin to view listening as a fertile site for developing relationships with others and cultivating knowledge sharing that could subsequently enable teaching and learning. His example helped her recognize the importance of maintaining an open stance and forestalling early foreclosure, illustrating McRae's (2015) commitment to listening with curiosity: "My father could listen to anyone: sit quietly, follow what they had to say even if he abhorred it—for instance the racism in some of my family members—and later use it for teaching, for pedagogy" (Dworkin, 2002, p. 103). His patient responses to others resonated deeply with her: "Through watching him . . . I saw the posture of one strong enough to hear without being overcome with anger or desperation or fear. I saw a vital man with a conscience pick his fights" (p. 104). Dworkin described her father's listening performances as thoughtful acts of strength and conscience in which he listened mindfully and patiently, even to those topics with which he deeply disagreed, before coming to judgment or seeking to respond. These experiences showed her that listening with forbearance—what McRae (2015) might call "a kind of leaning into others" (p. 38)—could enable listening that later would serve as a valuable pedagogical tool.

These early observations dovetailed with Dworkin's experiences at Bennington College and her trip home from Greece to give her a deep sense of listening's power, not only through listening with curiosity, but also in relationship to McRae's (2015) commitments to listening to and with the body and for context. This power becomes evident both in terms of being listened to, and listening to and for others, demonstrating the bidirectional, processural, and mutual nature of listening. During Dworkin's freshman year at Bennington, she traveled to New York to protest against the Vietnam War outside the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, where she was arrested and committed to the New York Women's House of Detention. Dworkin was detained for four days and subjected to an unnecessary, invasive internal exam, which included the drawing of blood from her vagina. This extreme response to her peaceful protesting left Dworkin bewildered and injured. When she was released from jail, Dworkin (1997a) said she could not speak: "I couldn't talk, I couldn't stop bleeding, I didn't know what they had done to me" (p. 56). Her speechlessness and disorientation were not unusual, as Dworkin later learned: "This is a frequent response to sexual abuse—but in 1965 no one knew that. Sexual abuse wasn't on anyone's map" (p. 56). These feelings were compounded when her roommates and her family would not hear her grievances



regarding what transpired in jail; thus, a lack of listening stunted her ability to make sense of, and cope with, the experience. It was not until a friend, writer Grace Paley, created a caring space for listening that Dworkin was able to gain her voice back: "Grace Paley . . . convinced me that speaking was right by believing me. So I spoke out" (p. 56). For Dworkin, the treatment she received and the pain her body endured were so intense and confusing that they resulted in an inability to speak. Paley's commitment to creating a safe space for the performance of concentrated, caring listening, which included the believing of her experiences and the condemnation of them as wrong, activated Dworkin's meaning-making abilities, enabling her to make sense of her situation and gain her voice back. Dworkin subsequently publicly excoriated the prison's practices, which led to a grand jury investigation. As McRae (2015) averred, performances of listening shape the body (p. 40) and meaning is co-created in listening encounters (p. 37); in this instance, Paley's listening performances influenced Dworkin's embodiment and meaning-making capacity meaningfully, enabling her to regain her voice and encouraging her to take public action. This would not have been possible given the listening context she experienced with her family and roommates.

Still recovering from, and trying to make sense of, that incident, Dworkin travelled to Greece where she hoped to find peace and focus on her writing. When she journeyed back to the United States, she found the quietude on the nearly three-week voyage at sea a revelation. Underscoring the importance of context through "discovering and developing relationships to and awareness of others" (McRae, 2015, p. 41), Dworkin (2002) said of her weeks at sea:

I mainly listened: to the narrative of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* . . . to the earth buried miles under the ocean; to the astonishing stillness of the water, potentially so wild and deadly, on most nights blanketed by an impenetrable darkness; to the things living under and around me; to the crew and captain of the ship; to the one family also making the trek, the sullenness of the teen, the creativity of the younger child, the brightness in the adults' optimism. (p. 104)

Dworkin approached listening with a desire to understand context, positing listening as providing a reflective space in which to learn about the world and others; this learning occurred not through her own voice or aims, but by reflecting on the expressions, sounds, rhythms, and emotions in the environment. Through her description of her journey across the ocean, Dworkin gestured toward the importance of performative listening and absorbing one's surroundings in order to cultivate new understandings about the conditions of our context and those who exist within it. Through these experiences, the mutuality of listening—the importance of being listened to and of listening to and for others—was affirmed.

### ***Dworkin's Theory and Practice of Radical, Caring Listening***

From these early contemplative experiences, Dworkin developed her perspective on listening as well as the grounding necessary to be the active, patient listener of painful stories that she would hear later in her life. These experiences prompted her to theorize listening to such stories as a sacred act that must be performed with forbearance and rigor, and without the expectation of personal gain. Dworkin (2002) stated that she "learned to listen with concentration and poise to the women who would talk to me

years later: the women who had been raped and prostituted; the women who had been battered; the women who had been incested as children" (p. 105). Perhaps most important, Dworkin learned to listen so deeply that she could unearth and receive the pain of others, however it was expressed:

My father and the ocean gave me the one great tool of my life—an ability to listen so closely that I could find meaning in the sounds of suffering and pain, anger and hate, sorrow and grief. I could listen to a barely executed whisper and I could listen to the shrill rant. I knew never to shut down inside; I learned to defer my own reactions and to consider listening an honor and a holy act. (p. 105)

Illuminating the embodied nature of performative listening, Dworkin indicated that reacting and shutting down were compelling options when faced with listening to troubling experiences. At the same time, her words expressed the importance of forbearance and restraint, in deferring one's own responses, when listening to the articulation of suffering. Notably, Dworkin posited listening as an honor, as something that is granted as a privilege and special distinction, which one is compelled to take seriously and which requires a specific kind of listening practice. Theorizing listening as a holy act, Dworkin symbolized it as a profound and sacred enactment that invokes what is righteous, good, divine, and which binds us to one another spiritually. The fact that Dworkin was not a religious person underscored the value that she conferred on listening, as did her positing listening as the "one great tool of my life," as opposed to her writing or speaking, for which she had gained fame and remuneration (Dworkin, 2002, p. 81). In contrast, Dworkin's listening was done privately, for free, and without the expectation of personal gain. As such, her perspective on listening echoes Lipari's (2009) enjoinder to suspend self-interest in order to receive the words of others. Here we see listening fashioned as the tool through which one not only gains meaning, in terms of thought and understanding, but also gains selfless meaningfulness in life, through validating others' experiences and lessening their suffering through the release that comes from voicing experiences in an environment that affirms. She expressed the importance of listening so deeply and sincerely that the listener can discern the message regardless of how it is delivered, and the speaker feels heard; it is a listening with an intention so refined that one can unearth the deeper meaning being expressed in diverse, painful utterances.

Dworkin theorized listening as a sacred part of our shared humanity, an enactment that we are privileged to provide. Illustrating McRae's (2015) listening with accountability, Dworkin also gave voice to how particular listening practices can interrupt structures that enable women's oppression. Specifically, Dworkin demonstrated that the performance of caring listening to gender-based violence could validate the experience as wrong, creating the foundation for change. She had the opportunity to experience first hand the power of listening when she was a victim of domestic abuse in Amsterdam. After fleeing and hiding from her abusive Dutch husband, Dworkin stated that she sought medical attention for the open sores on her chest caused by his cigarettes. She did not want to inform the doctor that the sores were caused by her abuse, since friends had blamed her, instead of her husband, when she revealed her battering. However, Dworkin (2002) claimed that the information "fell out of me" when the doctor saw the sores (p. 119). In response, the doctor said, "'That's horrible,' . . . about the beatings, not the sores. I'll never forget it. . . . 'No one's ever said that,' I told her [the doctor]. No one had" (p. 119). The seemingly simple act of listening and validating that the situation was unjust confirmed Dworkin's thoughts at a time

when she felt disconfirmed and alienated by intimate others who communicated that she had done something to provoke the abuse or that she somehow enjoyed it: "I again learned the power of listening, this time because of someone who listened to me" (p. 118). The confirmation of her abuse as wrong, despicable, and not her fault enabled Dworkin to begin to consolidate her thoughts on, and eventually take action against, the systemic silencing and disregard of gender-based violence.

Carving a space for voices that are silenced, Dworkin theorized that it was particularly important to listen to those who ostensibly had no claim to speak. This viewpoint was undoubtedly informed by her experiences of abuse and the difficulty she had in getting others to listen to, and believe, her. In addition to the abuse she endured as an adult, Dworkin was molested in a movie theater when she was nine. Dworkin's experiences and her work on behalf of stopping violence against women gave her a special status among survivors, whose aggregated stories further validated her belief in the systemic nature of gender-based violence. Women whom she barely knew, who would remain silent during her public speeches and the subsequent audience discussions, would speak to her privately to share their stories of abuse:

Women did not stand up after the speech and speak about a personal experience of rape; the questions [I received in such forums] were socially acceptable and usually abstract. It was when they saw me somewhere, anywhere really, but alone, that they told me, sometimes in whispers, what had happened to them. (Dworkin, 2002, p. 147)

That women repeatedly chose not to share their stories speaks to the idea that the broader culture often pushes such suffering underground by rendering its articulation unpalatable, improper to share in public. Survivors have a need to tell their stories; this need is echoed in the sheer number of accounts Dworkin heard (Dworkin, 1997a, p. 87; Dworkin, 2002, pp. 148–149), which prompted Dworkin (2002) to assert: "I've spent the larger part of my adult life listening to stories of rape" (p. 148). Breaking the silence around gendered violence can provide the foundation for social change. However, Dworkin believed that survivors did not share their stories publicly because, if the culture deigned to listen, it often blamed, ridiculed, or abused them. Ultimately, Dworkin (1997b) averred, "The fact is that the speech of the socially worthless, the sexually stigmatized, is hard to hear even when the victims shout" (p. 33). Moreover, the broader culture further victimizes the survivor by not caring: "The worst immorality is in apathy, a deadening in caring about others, not because they have some special claim but because they have no claim at all" (Dworkin, 2002, p. 202).

As she urged the performance of caring listening—a radical act in a culture that ignores the speech of the marginalized—Dworkin illuminated listening's epistemological value, which she thought was grounded in the concreteness of the stories of those who have "no claim at all," and coupled it with the need for action. After she relayed a series of accounts involving horrible abuse, Dworkin (1997a) stated: "Some women took a chance on me; and it was a chance, because I often did not want to listen. I had my limits and my reasons, like everyone else" (p. 87). Active listening to disturbing experiences demands a special commitment on the part of the listener, as she frequently repeated: "Listening to the victims . . . requires patience and rigor; it requires the courage to take in what they have to say—to feel even a tiny measure of what they have endured" (Dworkin, 1997b, p. 25). Although listening can be difficult, Dworkin

gestured toward its epistemological value when she indicated that it was a source of knowledge in her discussion of her civil rights work. In 1983, Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon composed an amendment to the city of Minneapolis's civil rights law recognizing pornography as a violation of women's rights. In reflecting on this situation, Dworkin (1997a) theorized listening as a form of knowing which can be used to help others on a broad scale:

The years of listening to the private stories had been years of despair for me. It was hopeless. I could not help. There was no help. I listened; I went on my way; nothing changed. Now, all the years of listening were knowledge, real knowledge that could be mined: a resource, not a burden and a curse. . . . My knowledge was concrete not abstract. . . . I knew the words the women said when they dared to whisper what had happened to them; I could hear their voices in my mind, in my heart. (pp. 90–91)

Dworkin accomplished a rhetorical reversal by calling the lived experiences of women who have endured gender-based violence a "resource." In so doing, Dworkin employs feminist insights on epistemology to enrich conceptualizations of listening by advancing listening as a knowledge-building practice grounded in people's lived reality, which can be used to precipitate collective action and enact social change. Dworkin was suspicious of abstraction, which she believed enabled people to ignore or minimize others' painful realities and the obligation to aid those who are suffering; she believed the abstractness of the academic community in particular was problematic (Dworkin, 1997a, p. 141). Instead, she urged a focus on what she called concrete knowledge, which she posited was better suited to enabling social justice. Concrete knowledge was discoverable, Dworkin averred, through listening and it could be used to challenge existing social and political structures. As a radical feminist, Dworkin saw caring listening as incomplete if it is not ultimately coupled with efforts to enact social change.

As a counterpart to illuminating listening's epistemological value, Dworkin elucidated the power imbalances and self-subjugation that inhere in listening and identified the symbolic practices that produce absences. For example, Dworkin indicated that women are often complicit in rendering other women's voices silent. This occurs when women, engaging in a form of internalized oppression, work to detach themselves from the victimized by not hearing their voices and enabling absences to proliferate: "Many women try to distance themselves from the shame and squalor of sexualized violation—and refuse to empathize with hurt women" (Dworkin, 1997b, p. 25). This distancing technique operates as a mode of containment that has the effect of silencing the injustices women face, an act made more complex and concerning because it is women who are working to consolidate the marginalization of other women. Inexplicably, Dworkin (1997b) averred, some women think they are immune from such treatment when, "in reality, they are rejecting the facts of women's lives, often including their own, and [rejecting] a politics of resistance to male power over women" (pp. 25–26). Whereas some women engage in practices by which they fail to listen and thus mute the voices of other women, the culture at large simultaneously diminishes the words of non-experts, amplifying survivors' marginalization, and further solidifying their status as those who would not be heard. In discussing wife battering in general and the case of Nicole Brown Simpson specifically, Dworkin (1997a) stated:

The words of experts matter. They are listened to respectfully, are often paid. . . .  
 Meanwhile, the voice of the victim still has no social standing or legal significance. She  
 still has no credibility such that each of us—and the law is compelled to help her. (p. 46)

Echoing McRae's (2015) listening for context, Dworkin directed attention to the ways in which positionality—or one's social location in a culture—enabled and, in this case, limited listening. When a culture refuses to listen to women's experiences of abuse, absences are created and citizens are denied access to concrete knowledge from the very persons most qualified to speak on the subject: "To refuse to listen . . . is to refuse to know" (Dworkin, 1997a, p. 45). Consequently, Dworkin theorizes, we "have a moral obligation to listen" to the voices of such women, even though they do not possess the ethos of ostensible experts: "We need, especially, to hear her call to a battered-women's shelter five days before her murder. . . . [We] need to hear what was obvious to her: the foreknowledge that death was stalking her" (Dworkin, 1997a, p. 47). By refusing to listen and give authority to the voices of the powerless, we fail to tap into the most vital source of knowledge regarding their situation while being complicit in their exploitation, silencing, and even death. Dworkin demonstrated the importance of listening for context and location as she drew "attention to the enabling and constraining factors that inform the practice of listening as well as the experiences of others" (McRae, 2015, p. 41). In the process, she contextualized women in a patriarchal culture that facilitated women's abuse while she interrogated the practices—some enacted by women themselves—that bolster patriarchal structures. Connecting feminist insights on positionality with listening, Dworkin demonstrated that "the individual, embodied listener is always located in contexts and structures that impact and inform the practice of listening" (McRae, 2015, p. 44).

As Dworkin illustrated the arduousness of listening to survivors' stories, she addressed our moral obligation to listen and to agitate for social change to address the injustices that we have heard. Otherwise, our listening is a failure, a curse, or a form of "treason" (Dworkin, 1997a, p. 47). Linking listening to an ethic of care and advocating collective action, Dworkin (1997b) assailed the hierarchies that mute such voices:

I am asking you to listen . . . to those who have been hurt—and to care. I have always thought that conscience meant bearing witness to injustice and standing with the powerless. I still think that. I have always thought that equality meant an antagonism to exploiters. (p. 35)

For Dworkin, we achieve what McRae (2015) refers to as accountability by listening to the powerless and collectively standing with them to achieve social justice, disrupting the structures and practices that render oppression simultaneously unspeakable and commonplace. Thus, refusing to listen becomes a refusal of knowledge, a refusal of care, and a refusal of our moral obligation to one another; it is an enactment that unsuccessfully attempts to evade our responsibility to one another: "If one values women as human beings, one cannot turn away or refuse to hear, so that one can refuse to care without bearing responsibility for the refusal" (Dworkin, 1997a, p. 88).

### Listening as a Tool for Social Change

In her capacious experience listening to survivors of abuse and exploitation, Dworkin learned that ideal listening situations are often beyond the reach of survivors. The responsibility for listening to them, Dworkin avers, centers on each of us who cannot evade our responsibility for listening and taking action on what we have heard. Otherwise, Dworkin posits, our listening is a failure. Consequently, a reconceptualization of listening practices that radically contextualizes the listening encounter, registers power disparities, and challenges exploitative situations is necessary. In her discourses, listening emerges as an act of conscience that is enacted through patience, courage, deep concentration, poise, and a deferral of one's own reactions. Radical, caring listening constitutes a space of learning and knowing, providing insights about the self, other, and the world that moves us toward, and indeed demands, social change and collective action. For Dworkin, listening is not an invitation in these circumstances; it is requisite and fundamental to our humanity, particularly in hierarchical contexts. She underscores the power imbalances that inhere in whose voices are heard, demonstrating that those designated socially worthless may not be heard even though they shout. However, knowledge lies in the words of the oppressed and, Dworkin argues, when we refuse to listen, we refuse to know. When we discount the concrete knowledge that we are given by these sources, we fail in the communicative encounter and enable exploitation to persist. Yet our refusal to listen does not release us from our responsibility.

Dworkin theorizes the centrality of listening for promoting healing and social justice efforts while she underscores particular practices of listening in service of the powerless. I have argued that Dworkin's discourses on listening can be read as a theory and practice of radical, caring listening as they urge us to: acknowledge the difficulties of listening to painful experiences while performing listening with forbearance and rigor; grasp the sacredness of listening and enact listening with no expectation of personal gain; understand that failing to listen enables oppressive structures to reproduce; listen to those who have no claim to speak; and recognize that personal stories have the potential to provide concrete knowledge that may serve as the basis of challenging social structures and enabling collective action. Dworkin emphasized the idea that *not* listening and standing with the powerless suggests a failure of our personal and collective responsibility. While Dworkin's work was centered on women, it has obvious resonances for marginalized people writ large. Indeed, performing caring listening is a radical, purposive act in a culture that routinely mutes and invalidates the utterances of the marginalized and oppressed.

While the modes of listening that Dworkin presents are not comprehensive, in that they cannot be expected to address everything listeners need to understand in such listening contexts, they do provide a starting point for bolstering our thinking around how to approach listening to painful experiences in hierarchical contexts. As such, this analysis of Dworkin's discourses works to expand the explanatory value of McRae's (2015) approach to performative listening beyond pleasure and aesthetics to also include modes of listening to painful, despicable situations. Future studies might continue to map listening across the intersecting nexus of culture, power, and pain. Additionally, too often the painful stories of the oppressed are invalidated and silenced by those who should have listened, allowing knowledge that is epical to understanding hierarchical, exploitative relationships to be obscured and collective action to be deferred. McRae's emphasis on the coproduction of meaning in listening and Dworkin's demand for responsibility dovetail and illuminate each other meaningfully as they highlight the duty of the listener in

responding ethically to issues of oppression. McRae insists on the importance of both speaker and listener in creating meaning and argues that unreflective listening practices can reproduce hierarchical social structures; Dworkin's insights regarding the ways in which marginalized voices become silenced calls us to recognize the listener's responsibility to hear such voices and to understand how listeners are complicit in oppression when they fail to listen or do not take action. Both urge us to fulfill our responsible role as listeners. Further, Dworkin's radical feminist discourses enrich conceptual work on listening by connecting feminist insights on epistemology and positionality to listening practices, opening up intriguing pathways in critical listening research. As this is just a starting point, future research might explore further how diverse strains of feminist thought can contribute to our understanding of critical approaches to listening. Finally, it is important to map the unique complexities of listening to painful experiences in non-Western and non-democratic social systems and to explore the structures that hinder and enable listening within and across borders and transnational flows. As listening contexts vary considerably across time, space, and culture, they require localized treatments.

Today, mainstream culture in the United States still has difficulty listening to the voices of survivors and the oppressed for all the reasons Dworkin mentions, including that it is difficult to truly listen, that we tend to value certain voices over others, and that we seek to distance ourselves from the suffering of others. However, listening to such voices is essential to challenging systemic oppression:

We know that when you see a situation of terror and you hear about it over and over again, it's not likely that each woman is making it up. It is likely that there are systematic characteristics of this terror that we can look at and understand. (Dworkin, 1997a, p. 159)

Too often we ignore the collective voices of the oppressed, even when they are proclaiming the same injustice repeatedly. Dworkin prompts us to recognize the pedagogical and epistemological value of listening—so that we may, as Tompkins (2009) urged, recognize seen and unseen others and respect and understand their right to thrive. Dworkin compels us to acknowledge our own biases in listening and demands that we recognize the worth of everyday voices that so often get muted. Dworkin's ideas are not the panacea for what happens to the oppressed, but they induce us to think about the symbolic and cultural threads that enable suffering and oppression to carry on, and how we might prevent the reproduction of abuse and exploitation. It is the unique value of communication—and the pivotal continuum of voice and listening—that it lies at the root of uncovering, understanding, and halting oppressive situations—or covering up, neglecting, and enabling exploitation to proliferate.

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