Sounds of a City: Listening with Podcasts and Public Humanities in Baltimore

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Abstract

"Sounds of a City: Podcasts and Public Humanities in Baltimore" reflects on the Baltimore Traces: Communities in Transition project, a collaborative teaching endeavor that began in 2015 to document changing Baltimore neighborhoods through student-produced media. The essay provides a definition of public humanities and a discussion of organic methodological innovations that evolved through the process of creating a series of student-produced podcasts focused on listening to a city in a specific moment. Sharing authority and deeply listening to both students and the diverse voices of a city led to the "on the street" interview methodology. Organic methods blending journalism with scholarship, push engaged research into new transdisciplinary territory that centers voices from the street within the university classroom.

Keywords: public humanities, podcasts, methodology, engaged research and teaching, American studies

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Share why 'cause some people will listen. A lot of people might not and just see violence, but a lot of people will listen if you say why.

—*Nadja Bentley Hammond*
(Baltimore Traces, 2015b, 42:07–42:16)

As I walk by ransacked businesses, members of the National Guard flash automatic weapons while police helicopters buzz above. I reluctantly board the shuttle to campus to teach my Baltimore Traces course. As we take the ramp toward the interstate, I can see dozens of National Guard vehicles gathered in the parking lot of the Ravens' football stadium as if preparing for war. It feels strange to be heading out of the city. But I have class and I feel a responsibility to my students. My phone buzzes. I look down and see a text from a student asking if he could miss class to go record interviews in the city for our podcast project.

The previous day, Monday, April 27, 2015, felt as if the city was going to explode.

Freddie Gray, a Black man killed by police, was buried that afternoon. Police in riot gear cornered city youth as they gathered at a transportation hub in West Baltimore after school when city officials shut down public transit. The nearby CVS Pharmacy at Pennsylvania and North Avenues burned as unrest spread throughout the city. Working from home in downtown Baltimore, I looked out my window at a city in turmoil. I heard people running, yelling, windows breaking, and sirens as the buzz of helicopters chopped through it all.

I text the student back: "Yes." He can miss class to go into the neighborhood where we were working that semester to conduct interviews and listen to the city.

That day, April 28, 2015, the student recorded the sentences acting as an epigraph for this article and the concluding lines of the podcast my students produced that semester on the Station North arts and entertainment district for local public radio. It turned out to be the first podcast in what became the *Baltimore Traces* podcast series, all of which were informed by that moment in 2015, when a student headed to the streets

instead of the classroom to ask questions and listen.

Introduction

The Baltimore Traces: Communities in Transition project is a collaborative teaching initiative that brings students from a variety of disciplines in the arts and humanities together to create media focused on Baltimore neighborhoods. It evolved from years of collaboration with professors in other departments such as Visual Arts; Media and Communication Studies; and Gender, Women's, + Sexuality Studies. All of the project's media, which in addition to podcasts include digital maps, films, and zines, are archived on the Baltimore Traces website (https://baltimoretraces.umbc.edu), and the project has Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and informed consent forms that are available for use in all associated courses. The foundational question of the project is "How do neighborhoods change and how do people feel about those changes?"

This reflective essay focuses on the first few years of this public humanities project—spring 2015 through fall 2017—when students in my courses produced a dozen podcast episodes for public radio. The project evolved out of an exploratory partnership with the host and producers of *The Marc Steiner Show*, a daily program that aired on WEAA 88.9, the "voice of the community." The first two podcast series—*Station North Voices* (spring 2015) and *Bromo Speaks* (fall 2015)—focused on relatively new arts and entertainment districts in Baltimore. "Arts district" is a state designation providing tax incentives for artists and development within the district's boundaries (*Maryland State Arts Council, 2020*). For the *Downtown Voices* (spring 2016) podcast series, students talked to city dwellers on the west side of downtown, part of the Bromo Arts District, about their thoughts on the past, present, and future of Baltimore. And the final podcast series, *Learning from Lexington* (fall 2017), explored the impending redevelopment of the west side anchor and the oldest continually running public market in the United States, Baltimore's Lexington Market, which is located in the Bromo Arts District. We were interested in how neighborhoods change and reactions to potential gentrification in parts of the city that have been resistant to it.

In this reflective essay, I argue that organic and inductive methodological innovations, which evolve in the moment and are developed through listening, should be centered in publicly engaged humanities projects. Education researchers (Casey, 2008; Hashtroodi, 2013) have applied an organic food analogy to pedagogy. Public educator Leo Casey argues in his teaching blog that

> just like modern farming we have over-engineered our education system, we have over-relied on fostering narrow skills, we are obsessed with measurement, we continuously intervene in learning, we confine the site of learning to the classroom and we strive to make people homogeneous in their thinking. (Casey, 2008, para. 9)

In turn Casey argues for a new way, an "organic movement in learning and teaching" (Casey, 2008, para. 10). The Baltimore Traces project has evolved through embracing organic methods tuned through a process of engaged listening to a city in a specific moment.

When a group of university professors designed the Baltimore Traces project in fall 2014, no one knew the Baltimore Uprising was going to happen, but we were able to bend toward the moment and amplify voices not normally covered in the national media. Centering how these organic methodological innovations—most clearly illustrated through our "on the street" interviews—evolved during the first 2 years of the project adds a more humanistic perspective on engaged research and teaching, which is often analyzed from a social science perspective focused on quantitative rather than qualitative and narrative-based assessment. Publicly engaged projects must be designed with clear but flexible goals, which allows for the development of new tactics that arise in and with the moment. These tactics arise from listening, both to students and to the city.

For the instructor, giving agency to students and allowing them to be collaborators involves a radical act of listening and sometimes ceding the power and authority (and even the credit). We should model the methods we want our students to take from the classroom into the streets. There needs to be a shift in higher education, especially in engaged research and teach-

ing, to integrate the cacophony of voices in our cities in new ways. And this shift must foster an understanding that publicly engaged projects do not always involve one central long-term community partner, but sometimes a cacophony of voices. The ethical directive to do no harm is central and admittedly more complicated when projects evolve and move organically into new territory. The focus should shift from "solving problems" and measurable outcomes and move, instead, toward asking questions and listening. Active listening as a public humanities method can address disconnections, misrepresentation, and inequalities on the streets of our cities and in our classrooms.

There is a plethora of scholarship on listening in oral history practice (Norkunas, 2011; Pollock, 2007; Shopes, 2002; Thompson & Bornat, 2017) and acoustemology, "one's sonic way of knowing and being in the world," in anthropology (Feld & Brenneis, 2004, p. 462). As an interdisciplinary scholar in American studies, I am combining these practices and theories to rethink the impacts of engaged humanities projects when students listen in place and produce media. The emerging work on podcasts currently in the literature primarily focuses on how to incorporate podcasts in the learning process or individual assignments (Altvater, 2009; Jarvis & Dickie, 2010; Moss et al., 2010; Perez & Kite, 2011) rather than collaborative and student-produced podcast series for the public. Here I reflect on podcasts as a theoretical and methodological tool for expanding engagement with a place and a cacophony of voices (for an audio example of the "cacophony of voices," listen to the *Bromo Speaks intro*; Baltimore Traces, 2015a, 1:16–2:05).

Using Baltimore Traces as a case study, I first foreground listening as a method in the fieldwork and production of public humanities projects that engage the idea of the public good from a humanistic perspective. I then use the concept of "scholarly reportage" to examine how ethnography and oral history methods can be expanded and enhanced through collaboration with journalists and through emerging transdisciplinary fields of study, like sound studies. Building on this organic methodological framework, I then show how, once a course is designed with clear goals, students can shape and reshape the project's methodology through "on the street" listening. As we continue

to develop engaged projects in higher education, we should remain open, dynamic, flexible, and iterative in our methods but never compromise our ethics, which must center the agency of the voices we honor and the students we educate through the process.

Yet, as I tried to turn the podcasts into scholarly articles, like this one, I found that something was lost in translation—the trace, the sounds in time and place. My colleagues and I decided to call the project Baltimore Traces to evoke the layers of change and traces upon the landscape that you can see and feel in historic cities like Baltimore. But we also sought to conjure up the poststructural idea of the trace, the "mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present" (Spivak & Derrida, 1998). For us, the term traces evokes remnants of the past that can mean different things to different people depending on their social location and the historical context. These projects are designed to present perspectives and questions for the public to grapple with rather than offer solutions or answers, which I argue differentiates public humanities projects from more traditional civic engagement projects focused on outcomes over process.

Traces of New Approaches: Listening as Theory and Method

Public humanities projects are transdisciplinary, combining methods and theories from history, literature, media, anthropology, and art to seek a better understanding of "what it means to be human," a phrase that offers the most simplistic definition of the humanities and evokes our inalienable rights as human beings. Learning to listen, in a critical and humanistic way, is the most central method in engaged public humanities teaching and research. As George Lipsitz wrote in "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies":

> In this period of creative ferment and critical fragmentation, virtuosity entails listening as well as speaking; it requires patient exploration into spaces and silences as much as it demands bold and forthright articulation. As a field, American Studies always has been at its best when engaged in dialogue with the complex and conflicted re-

alities of American life and culture. Yet too often its dominant paradigms have suffered from an overemphasis on what has been articulated from within the profession, and a consequent underemphasis on the voices, power struggles, and ideological conflicts outside it. The complicated relationship between scholarly methods and popular cultures, political economies, and ideologies of America demand a scholarship capable of adopting . . . and learning how to do careful and comprehensive listening. (Lipsitz, 1990, pp. 615–616)

Through the Baltimore Traces project, we learned to listen with the city and to build a sense of community with its people and places. Kathleen Woodward, director of the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, wrote, "In the humanities, communities of inquiry often come into being through the articulating of questions, which are often inchoate in the beginning and can never be definitively answered. Communities are formed around questions; they are communities of the question" (Woodward, 2009, p. 117). In Baltimore Traces, we were after the human aspects of change in all of its intricacy, which we sought in the voices of the people experiencing these changes most directly in the places where they occurred.

Public humanities projects are based on a narrative approach to culture, a belief that it is the stories we tell and interpret that make up our culture, our humanity, and our political economy (Mechling, 1989). In producing the Baltimore Traces podcasts, the focus was on the process of listening, analyzing, and editing, which turns stories into narratives (Abbott, 2008). Public humanities projects also entail a focus on the public good and the belief that we are in it (being human) together, though access to humanity in society is often not equitably provided to everyone. However, we strive toward and listen for traces of what humanity sounds like to better understand the public good.

Defining the public good is an ongoing project, and one documented in the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*. From decoding over 200 descriptions of the "public good" for themes such as community, society, and knowledge (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008) to an extensive and long-term institutional process of defining and integrating the public good at specific universities (Fretz et al., 2010; Harkavy & Hartley, 2012), these important conversations are never designed to come up with a single or monolithic definition of the "public good," because there is not one. However, we keep having these conversations with our students, within our institutions, and with each other because the conversation, the process itself, is productive. Ann P. DePrince, a researcher on gender-based violence, provided a framing for the public good that is applicable to Baltimore Traces. She wrote that the public good is based on a "responsibility to hold a light to people, issues, and places that for whatever reason were cloaked in shadows . . . a responsibility to tell and retell those stories" (DePrince, 2009, p. 71). With the Baltimore Traces project, we did not seek to "give voice," as the people we interviewed already have a voice; we used a microphone to amplify voices and stories from the streets through the airwaves of public radio and online.

The humanities are public when they include everyone and serve no single institution. As "traces" connotes, meaning is always shifting, changing, and moving through human context and experience; only remnants or recordings of the voices remain. The *Bromo Speaks* podcast series from fall 2015 begins, "It seems to me like a city is impossible to understand, it's too big" ([Baltimore Traces, 2015a, 2:05–2:09](#)). Yet, with Baltimore Traces, we are seeking to understand a city, something we will never fully understand, but the striving toward understanding is the goal. This striving, to understand a city or define the "public good," is a never-ending and beautifully incomplete project, because the city, like the humanities, remains a cacophony of voices.

Historian Jacquelyn D. Hall, the founding director of the Southern Oral History project, alluded to her collaborative oral history/performance studies project with communications professor Della Pollock as a "fantastic failure." She explained that the project was a "failure" only in the sense of the "impossibilities it revealed" and "fantastic" "precisely because of what the project dared and what limits daring will always reveal" (Hall, 2005, p. 196). Hall's work with her students centers deep listening across difference as essential to ethical work attuned to our collective humanity:

"Listening beyond and beneath words. Listening for layers of meaning, *for the cacophony of voices embedded in every story*" (Hall, 2005, pp. 191–192, emphasis added). Thinking critically about how to take the multitude of voices that make up a city and produce an engaging podcast for the public entails critically rethinking traditional oral history and ethnography methodologies. We recognized the differences in our Baltimore Traces interviews between oral history (focused on understanding the past), ethnography (in-depth life history or cultural analysis), and "on the street" interviews, which get at the pulse of what people on the ground are thinking in the moment. These categories provided different perspectives, but they also overlapped the more we listened beyond the words.

Jonathan Sterne, editor of *The Sound Studies Reader*, defines *sound studies* as the "interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival . . . it redescribes what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world" (Sterne, 2012, p. 2). There is a focus on positionality, reflexivity, and "transdisciplinary curiosity," and Sterne argues "the difference between sound studies and those other [more disciplinary] fields is that they don't require engagement with alternative epistemologies, methods, or approaches" (Sterne, 2012, p. 4). Through these collaborative Baltimore Traces projects, professors and students were becoming "sound students" as we developed our "sonic imaginations" and became "fascinated by sound but driven to fashion some new intellectual facility to make sense of some part of the sonic world" (Sterne, 2012, p. 5).

The sonic world itself is embedded in the tensions and inequalities of our cities. For students from a predominantly White institution of higher education working in a majority Black and hypersegregated city like Baltimore, issues of race, power, and social location cannot be elided. Cultural historians, such as Mark M. Smith, have written extensively on issues of race and sound (Smith, 2001, 2006, 2008). Jennifer Lynn Stoever's concept of the "sonic color line" astutely "describes the process of racialized sound—how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds—and its product, the hierarchical division sounded between 'whiteness' and 'blackness'" (Stoever, 2016, p. 7). We developed diverse student teams when working in the field with a recognition that we all listen from somewhere. While we often see race as a visual marker in society, working with podcasts it becomes clear that the sonic color line pushes us to grapple with the multimodal and multisensory issues of race, place, and power. For example, in class listening sessions students sometimes misgendered or misidentified race when listening to interviews other students recorded in the field. These moments led to discussions on why we make such assumptions. By listening to each other in these moments, as closely as they had previously listened to the city, the students further developed their community of inquiry.

Our students occupy many positions, identities, and communities simultaneously. They belong to various demographic and cultural groups, in addition to being students (Creed, 2006; Joseph, 2006). When we recognize the multiplicity of identities we all inhabit, we are able to see and hear the world in new ways.

Listening to Scholarly Reporters

Andrew Ross has described methods in American studies as "scholarly reportage," a "blend of ethnography and investigative journalism" that meets people where they are (Williams, 2009, para. 10). Historian Mark Tebeau wrote in "Listening to the City: Oral History and Place in the Digital Era" that "oral historians working in media contexts, along with radio producers using voices to evoke emotional response to audio storytelling, have led the way in exploring the capacity of sound to evoke place, offering a model for public historians to emulate" (Tebeau, 2013, p. 28). Steiner, his producers, and the Center for Emerging Media were our most central partners throughout, but we also worked with other public radio journalists, such as Aaron Henkin (WYPR 88.1 Baltimore) and Andrea Seabrook (past National Public Radio congressional correspondent). The podcast process made deep listening in place essential to the work, from fieldwork through to editing and production.

The combination of reading scholars and working with actual public radio journalists pushed me and my students to rethink our methods of listening. We began to think more critically about the questions we asked, our assumptions, and our process.

In spring 2014 when we were working on our first podcast, our public radio partner Marc Steiner gave a talk on campus, "[The Importance of Deep Listening](#)," which drew on his decades of work in theater, activism, and public radio in Baltimore. He explained the centrality of listening in his approach:

> One of the things I was thinking about with this project you're doing is you're out there interviewing people, talking to them, meeting them. And listening is very critical. . . . one of the things about being an actor is that you focus in on a moment. You're in a moment. You're in a place at that time, in a moment. And everything else around you is suspended. You know, you don't let anything come in your head. You're that character. You're somebody else. Well, when you're doing this kind of work you're doing, you also have to be like an actor, because you have to be in that moment and just focus on what that person is saying and what that story is around you . . . because that's listening. (Steiner, 2014, 18:13–19:08)

Steiner discussed the importance of research and clear methods in the planning and preparation process. Yet he advised students to follow the organic trajectory of the conversation:

> I ask a question. But then it's like improv jazz. You go with the flow. Someone talks to you and gives you an answer, you hit that key, you play with that key. Someone else has another key, you play with that key. But you always have the composition in the back of your head, so you know how to connect the keys to bring it to where you want it to go. But you let it be like improv. You just don't worry about all the questions you have on the paper. It will flow and it will all come out eventually. (Steiner, 2014, 22:10–22:39)

Improvisation is an apt metaphor for how listening as an essential organic methodology integrates into community-engaged projects. You must really know the structures and practice them to move beyond into new territory.

The two most central aspects of this process are simply to show up and listen. Aaron Henkin told students that in making the award-winning *Out of the Blocks* podcast—"one city block, one hour of radio, everyone's story"—he would show up for weeks before ever bringing along a microphone. Listening in place is part of building trust and relationships, which helps prevent purely extractive practices. We were striving for honesty in the podcasts more than objectivity. "If you're going to tell somebody that you're going to listen to their story and you're going to let them tell their story, you better be honest about it," Steiner told the students. "Not use people for your own ends. Which we all have a tendency to do. We're human beings" (Steiner, 2014, 24:19–24:30).

After rigorous readings on Baltimore history, reflection on methodology, and the clear formulation of our project goals, I take students into the city for walking tours, which makes boundary spanning a physical and social intervention (Romero, 2014; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Boundary spanning is often discussed in the context of the change that comes from being in a new place when we take students outside the classroom. There is less focus on the practices and the ethics that help students engage once they have crossed those boundaries. As Romero's work on boundary spanning gets students on the bus, I ask them to get off the bus and hit the street and talk to strangers, which pushes the boundary further (Romero, 2014). One of the ways historically hypersegregated cities remain divided is ingrained conceptions (often misconceptions) about place—this place is or is not for me; I do or do not belong here (Cresswell, 1996; McKittrick & Woods, 2007). Engagement with scholarly reportage allows for inductive and emergent approaches to emerge.

We learned that a podcast is made not simply from the human voice, but from the human voice recorded in place. As the project developed and we became better sound students, we learned that collecting "room tone," the nuanced and distinct sound of the room or space where the interview is conducted, is essential for the editing process. The editing/production process pushed us to hear on a new level and to realize that in addition to interviews, we needed to document the ambient sounds of the city—the dings of the light rail train as it passes, the caws of birds overhead, the blend of music

and voices in a crowded public market on a Saturday afternoon. Voice exists in place.

As students became embedded in place, they also became attached to the voices they recorded for the project. However, as Andrea Seabrook told the students in a class talk titled "On Podcasting and Listening," doing so was half of a two-part process: "You must fall in love with your subject but, when it's time to edit, you have to break up and fall in love with your listener" (A. Seabrook, personal communication, February 25, 2016). This advice made us consider our audience and the economy of listening. The traditional trajectory of scholarly interview analysis is to transcribe, code for themes, analyze, synthesize, and write up your findings. Seabrook, however, explained that for a podcast we should base our selections not only on *what* was said but on *how* things were said as well. The humanity, the emotional resonance, is found in the intonations, the slight rise in pitch, the crack in the voice, the slowing of the pace, the breath, and even the pause or the uncomfortable silence. These are human sounds that can be used but not created in the editing process.

The "On the Street" Methodology

On April 28, 2015, when a student missed class to go interview people in the city, it shifted the conclusion of the *Station North Voices* podcast and our methodology moving forward. The "vox pop"—asking people on the street their thoughts to locate the "voice of the people"—has a long history in radio (Loviglio, 2005). For our "on the street" practice, students approached strangers, explained our project, received informed consent, and completed an interview on the spot in a public place. Over time, we came to see that these interviews yielded different types of sounds and perspectives. The more formal "oral history" interviews were often with officials, such as arts directors, developers, and managers of city markets or arts districts, and often had a more flat or public relations feel. The emotional heart of the podcasts often came from the "on the street" interviews.

For the "on the street" interviews we developed a clear script using language from our IRB-approved consent forms. We consulted with a Baltimore Traces professor who works at the university's media studio, which has legally vetted language for film interviews. The process evolved in part from working with journalists and media producers and was driven by the goal of finding the perspectives and sounds we lacked. For example, the "on the street" interviews often included voices of the city's homeless residents or people who preferred not to remain anonymous, an additional option we later added to our consent forms. Almost every concluding line in the podcasts comes from an "on the street" interview.

The conclusion of the *Station North Voices* podcast in 2015 moved from a focus on how an arts district can change a city to how larger structures of inequality connect to redevelopment, including issues of policing. The theme of policing was not engineered into the course; it emerged organically from the city at the moment. The students pulled this theme from the interviews we had conducted, including ones recorded before the death of Freddie Gray. When asked questions about arts districts and change, people often talked about policing, which made us think about how gentrification, crime, and policing are connected. In the concluding segment of the podcast, one of our interview participants explained: "I don't know. Something seems it's changed within the police force in the last year and a half." The student interviewer asked, "How so?" He replied, "I don't know. You have more policemen walking the beat and harassing people" ([Baltimore Traces, 2015b, 29:49–30:13](#)).

Because we were willing to learn from our reporting, a podcast series about the Station North arts district had to make room for stories of police harassing employees at local businesses and an especially chilling story from a resident of Greenmount West, a majority Black neighborhood in the arts district, describing attempts to help a neighbor who was shot. When her family called 911 for help, the police arrived and began to harass the family who called the police in the first place ([Baltimore Traces, 2015b, 30:52–32:04](#)). The earlier speaker concludes,

> I would like, not only Station North, but I would like to see the police make an effort to interact with the community. I mean, instead of just telling us what to do and randomly beating the shit out of people, I think you could try and connect, find out what people's concerns are, what their gripes are, if you will,

work with it. ([Baltimore Traces, 2015b, 32:09–32:34](#))

Next, the audio shifts to a restaurateur who managed a business located in the neighborhood in 1968 during unrest in Baltimore following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The White restaurant manager described working with the police to make sure his predominantly African American staff members got home safely ([Baltimore Traces, 2015b, 33:03–34:39](#)). Then, in a voiceover, a student says,

> Now, nearly 50 years later, Baltimore finds itself again at the beginning of a new uprising. On the first night of the riots, people saw looting of buildings and cars set ablaze. They saw a city divided. The following morning, I saw a community come together. ([Baltimore Traces, 2015b, 34:41–34:59](#))

The student saw it because he was there. He was on the street instead of in the classroom, and it was the right place to be.

Next, the listener hears a cacophony of voices recorded on April 28, 2015 ([Baltimore Traces, 2015b, 35:00–35:03](#)). We meet Kate Khatib of Red Emma's Bookstore Coffeehouse (a cooperative bookstore and café) and Nadja Bentley-Hammond of the YES Drop-in Center for homeless youth. Khatib explains that the drop-in center's space in Station North was "hit pretty hard" the previous evening, so she opened up Red Emma's, not only to provide food and a safe space for youth who couldn't access the drop-in center but for the community "to gather and reflect and regroup" ([Baltimore Traces, 2015b, 35:03–39:09](#)). The students wanted to present media that showed the other side of the cable news images of fires and looting and the stereotyping of city youth as "thugs," a word used at the time by both Baltimore's mayor, Stephanie Rawlins-Blake, and the president of the United States, Barack Obama.

The conclusion of the podcast episode is a plea to listen more to the people on the streets, not talking heads broadcasting from afar. Rather than seeking to address problems or offer solutions, the Baltimore Traces students chose to listen to and amplify voices that challenge simplistic stereotypes of city residents. Our motto could have been "Share why 'cause some people will listen. A lot of people might not and just see violence, but a lot of people will listen if you say why" ([Baltimore Traces, 2015b, 42:07–42:16](#)).

As the project evolved, the "on the street" method produced emotional connections, evoked tensions, and challenged preconceived notions for students and—we hoped—for listeners. Students' own ambivalence rather than a misguided commitment to "speak for," "help," or "solve problems" is expressed to Marc Steiner in the in-studio dialogue that followed the airing of the *Bromo Speaks* podcast in fall 2015. Steiner asked, "So what did you walk away with that you didn't expect?" A student responded, "I think I was left feeling ambivalent" ([Steiner, 2015, 13:36–13:49](#)). Asked to explain, the student continued:

> Feeling a renewed sense of hope but rivaling with this sense of cynicism at the same time. Seeing that people are really engaged, and they . . . aren't stupid. They know what's going on. They see it very vividly and clearly. And there are these pockets of dissent or these pockets of yearnings for collaboration, meaningful solidarity amongst different demographics. But there does seem to be this ingrained sense of disability to actually cross those lines in a focused and effective way. And it seemed to me, it was interesting that people who had maybe the social or financial privilege to be passé about changes. Kind of, I think I started this class with this very idealistic envision of what the arts do for culture, for society, what they bring to all of us, and then the reality of sometimes how the arts are used to package economic developments. ([Steiner, 2015, 13:52–15:17](#))

Another student added her thoughts, which are framed very much in the context of sound:

> I would definitely say I have this uneasiness about the project, because you come into the Bromo Arts District and there's a language there on the streets that you hear that you had, their sounds, their sights. There's this beautiful historic part of this city and it's changing. And

there's a tension there that it's hard to miss, and I don't want the beat and the sound of that area to be completely taken away or missed by future generations. ([Steiner, 2015, 15:18–15:51](#))

These are deeply nuanced responses derived from listening in place. Often, the goal or the payoff of the podcasts was to challenge preconceived notions and honor the "beat and the sound" of the place. Through listening, students began to feel ambivalent or uneasy about things they thought they knew, and that is a productive outcome.

The purest example of the "on the street" methodology is the 10-minute podcast segment "Word on the Street," which was framed as "a little sidewalk talk from the west side of downtown, what people love about downtown and what needs to change for it to serve its citizens better" (Steiner, 2016, para. 2). This was the second episode in the four-part podcast series *Downtown Voices* from spring 2016.

The student narrator asks: "Is the west side of downtown safe? If so, for whom and who keeps it safe?" ([Singlenberg, 2016, 4:18–4:22](#)). Using a collagelike editing technique, the students juxtaposed contradictory perspectives and voices:

"The police actually—the police look out for us. Actually, they come up and say, 'Hey, Man, hey, are you okay?' Because this is kind of a rougher part of town."

"One thing I hate about Baltimore, [*beep*] police, I mean, I don't hate the police, I hate the way they treat us. That's not right. That's not right at all. The way they treat us, that's not right at all. And that got to change" ([Singlenberg, 2016, 5:51–6:02](#)).

Then the students cut to an interaction they recorded on a city sidewalk:

> Speaker 1: Take for instance down at the Harbor [Inner Harbor tourist area downtown], it's a lot more laid back. But then again you got to deal with the security officers. And if you're homeless, they don't really dig on that, down there, 'cause they got all the tourists coming in there. So, I'd rather hang out, like, in the more, I'd say, like, "ghetto places," because I'm more accepted than places where the security guards,

they're going to come up to you, sit there for a second. They're coming up going, "Yo."

> Student 1: No, I hear ya.

> Student 2: [*Voiceover*] Literally as he said it, the cops broke us up.

> Speaker 1: All right. Gotcha. Gotcha, Boss.

> Speaker 2: We're taking off.

> Police officer: Thanks, y'all, I appreciate it.

> Speaker 2: All right.

> Student 2: All righty, folks. Thank you guys so much for talking.

> Student 1: Yeah, thanks, guys.

> [*Crosstalk*]

> Speaker 1: That was the policeman, by the way. ([Singlenberg, 2016, 7:28–8:13](#))

We had a discussion in class about adding the 10-word voiceover. The student team who did the recording thought the interaction spoke for itself because they were there. The rest of the class felt they needed more context to get the point, the payoff.

This section of the "Word on the Street" podcast concludes with a student voiceover:

> Standing there on Howard Street, we were shouted at to disperse. A group of citizens standing on a public street, no drugs, just conversation. It's impossible to talk about the west side of downtown as if it was an island. Like its future is somehow disconnected from the rest of the city's. If you're from Baltimore, you want the best for it and despite its faults, the west side is home. Everyone included. There's a love here. A love that echoed across everyone's thoughts about the future for Baltimore. As a new administration begins in City Hall, what does the future hold for the west side of downtown? What do we need and how do we get it? ([Singlenberg, 2016, 8:15–9:04](#))

We discovered that policing was the word on the street in neighborhoods dealing with the long history of inequitable development and potential gentrification. Following these podcasting projects, policing has become part of my research and teaching on gentrification (Laniyonu, 2017). Now, especially in light of the role of police associated with gentrification efforts in the death of Breonna Taylor specifically (Beck, 2020) and the growing emphasis on the Black Lives Matter movement in general, thinking through structural inequities seems even more relevant for publicly engaged humanities projects.

Futures: "What do we need and how do we get it?"

With Baltimore Traces, we were studying and documenting change and people's reactions to it. But what we were really trying to get at was what the public needs, what they, or really what *we*, deserve. Through those early years of the Baltimore Traces project, we were trying to decode the public good by listening to the sounds of the city: "Share why 'cause some people will listen." For the people of Baltimore City, and humanity in general, we have to ask why, and then we have to actually listen to the responses, even if those responses, those sounds, push us into new territory we never anticipated—even if they produce more questions rather than definitive answers. Organic and inductive methodological innovations in publicly engaged research and teaching evolve in the moment and are most productive when we center listening.

When producing podcasts for public radio or any public humanities project, there is a real responsibility to be honest, to be respectful, and to represent the nuances of divergent perspectives. Acknowledging that we are all part of the cacophony of voices, despite the ways privilege and access to resources often divide us, is the theoretical underpinning of the "on the street" methodology. The moment that begins this article illustrates the spark for a methodological innovation that evolved from giving students agency in a moment of crisis and ends with a student's question.

In Baltimore Traces, we were listening to the sounds of the city in a period of momentous change and instability. These moments—uprisings, global pandemics, political upheavals—cannot be planned, but engaged courses must be designed in a way that offers an organic methodology open to embracing them. The 2015 Baltimore Uprising was such a moment for Baltimore Traces, one that loomed over our project in a difficult yet productive way. Baltimore, like many other postindustrial legacy cities, continues to struggle with complex issues, ranging from gentrification to police violence, that skew its image and dehumanize its residents.

Through listening, my students and I began to better understand not only how people on the street distrust the police, but how this distrust is reflected in their distrust of scholars in higher education who desire, often with good intentions, to come to the streets of a city to "solve" problems, "give voice," or "help." My own ambivalence about the ethical complexity of the work is what made it so difficult to turn the podcasts into this reflective essay. There is always so much that is left out, unheard, unrecognized—beyond words.

As we tried to answer our central guiding question—"How do neighborhoods change and how do people feel about those changes?"—another question rather than a definitive answer arose. "What do we need and how do we get it?" With the latter question, we can attempt to think through our collective needs, both as a city and as human beings. Higher education, especially when committed to public engagement, must learn to value the cacophony of voices in new ways. What would institutions of higher education look like if we listened, really listened, to the word on the street and embedded those sounds, those voices and human strivings, more deeply in our institutions?

"Share why 'cause some people will listen." "What do we need and how do we get it?"

Through the process of listening and reflection, we see that our collective needs and what we all deserve as human beings is what comprises the public good. We all have stories, and we all deserve to be listened to and respected. We did not define the public good through the Baltimore Traces project, but we do have a better understanding of what it sounds like and how to listen for it.

The project is ongoing.

About the Author

Coming soon.

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