

Critical Theory of Social Inequality

I've always loved to talk, but I haven't always loved to listen; my parents, my brother, my grandmother, my teachers, and everyone who's grown up with and around me can attest to this. I would spend more time talking than eating at the dinner table, and I talked so much in class that raising my hand turned into a daily workout. Talking aloud has helped me make sense of the world, but, without listening, I can only (begin to) understand *my* world, which is a small world made up of *my* identities, *my* knowledge, *my* experiences, *my* truths, and no one else's. Listening is a portal to people, to their feelings, their ideas, in short, their worlds, and the only way to find out how our worlds, theirs and mine, intersect is knowing when to talk and, perhaps most importantly, knowing when to listen.

In Fall 2021, I decided, on a whim, to take CRES 230: "Difficult Dialogues on Race and Racism". Given that this class was a dialogic space (as demonstrated by the word "Dialogue" in its title and the fact that the desks were set up in a circle), I knew I would be forced to reckon with my tendencies both as a talker and as a listener. I would have to recognize that my identity as a white person was more salient in that space than in others (since the focus of the dialogue was race and racism), and as a result, my words had the potential to take up too much space and carry too much weight, despite my best intentions. I would also come to realize that listening isn't a monolith; you can actively listen or passively listen, and up until then, I had been doing the latter (and sometimes I still do, because as a long-time talker, it's a very difficult habit to break). My identity as a white person in that space meant that I had to "[take] responsibility without power" (Jordan 1982).

Actively listening, in that space and in other dialogic spaces, started off as an act of patience for me, but it has gradually evolved into an act of resistance, resistance to a system that

perpetuates inequality by uplifting the voices of those who hold privileged identities within the “white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy” (hooks 2009). I recognize, however, that as a white person, I have the choice to listen, whereas those with marginalized identities often feel trapped in the act of listening, since the system appears to have rendered their voices not only unimportant, but many times non-existent.

Dialogic spaces can serve to reveal inequalities, but they can also serve to enact them.