



Open Anthropology

A PUBLIC JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Hearing Women Talk

Volume 7, Number 2

July 2019

The Editors' Note: Hearing Women Talk

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In this issue of *Open Anthropology*, we explore a range of concerns surrounding women's talk, speech, and language and whether or not women are heard. We seem to be in a transitional moment for "Hearing Women Talk." In the United States, a female candidate for president won the popular vote in 2016, and as of August 2019, four women who already hold elected legislative offices are currently running for the US presidency. The #MeToo movement and women speaking publicly have upended established orders and taken-for-granted male privileges. Within anthropology, the [Association for Feminist Anthropology](#) is launching a new *Feminist Anthropology* journal, while #MeToo resonates in [Anthropology News](#). Despite this visibility, "Hearing Women Talk" has hardly been straightforward. Female presidential candidates are framed with sexist tropes, often heard quite differently from their male counterparts. The Trump Administration has attempted to [reduce gender to biology](#) and roll back gender equality measures. At the same time as many adopt the motto of "Believing Survivors," women who speak out are publicly dehumanized and privately threatened. Within anthropology, it is unclear if publishing patterns and tenure awards have really changed that much over the past 30 years.

This issue of "Hearing Women Talk" highlights how anthropology has been studying the issues of women and language for over a century. Featuring articles that have appeared in the publications of the American Anthropological Association, we particularly draw on the work of linguistic and cultural anthropologists for this collection. We hope that these articles will open potential connections between our present moment and a fascinating archive of anthropological work on voices that have often been unheard.

We begin with four selections that discuss women and language in terms of difference and identity.

In a short piece from 1912, published in *American Anthropologist*, [Alexander F. Chamberlain](#) considers “[Women’s Languages](#)” and the various explanations then given for the variations of language associated with biological sex. The notion of distinct “women’s languages” both reflected and reinforced a view of essentialized differences between women and men. Though never a widely held idea, James Frazer had suggested even that grammatical gender in language had its origins in separate women’s and men’s languages. Chamberlain reports on German anthropologist [Fritz Krause’s](#) description of “women’s words” in the language of the Caraya (Karajá) of Brazil. While some scholars speculated that women’s languages represented simplified registers (akin to baby talk), Krause suggested that the Carayan women’s language, which Carayan men derided as “‘very bad,’ and make jests about it” (580), represented the older or original form of the language. Thus, this piece also illustrates the conceptualization of “women’s languages” as marking the “primitive peoples” among whom these varieties were thought to be most prevalent.

To this day, the notion of a Japanese women’s language has remained what [Miyako Inoue](#) calls “a socially powerful truth. By this, I do not mean that the phrase refers to the empirical speech patterns of women but that Japanese women’s language is a critical cultural category and an unavoidable part of practical social knowledge in contemporary Japan” (392). In her 2002 *American Ethnologist* article, “[Gender, Language, and Modernity: Toward an Effective History of Japanese Women's Language](#),” Inoue traces the nineteenth and twentieth-century construction of the speech forms now commonly categorized as women’s language, pinpointing the works of fiction where it became presented and popularized. The construction of Japanese women’s language is situated within a larger historical moment when efforts to construct Japan as a modern nation-state included the creation of a standardized language from the various dialects then spoken across the island. Among the proponents of language modernization were writers interested in the development of literary style and narrative prose modeled on the Western realist novel. They championed a “write as you speak” colloquial style which, Inoue suggests, introduced an ideology of language as reflecting what is already out there—always one step behind the world, docilely ratifying and confirming it. Such a realist conception of language is inherently ideological because it effaces the semiotic work of language in actively mediating and producing what is seemingly merely given, reversing the order of things as if the world existed as it is without the mediation of language. Linked up with the regime of modern power, language serves to turn things, categories, events, and ideas into a *fait accompli*. (402)

Purporting to report or naturalistically represent the language of ordinary women, the authors of Meiji era novels in effect invented it, drawing specifically from the speech of schoolgirls in the service of developing female characters who were recognizable from the way they talked. Thus, Inoue suggests not only was a Japanese “women’s language” created, but also the social category of “modern Japanese women.”

Irish Sign Language of the mid-twentieth century provides another fascinating case of the social construction of language as gendered, the role that language plays in the construction of gender,

and the significance of both language and gender for modern nations, as [Barbara LeMaster](#) describes in “[Language Contraction, Revitalization, and Irish Women](#),” published in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* in 2006. Sex-segregated residential schools for the deaf were established in Dublin during the mid-nineteenth century, with Irish nuns introducing French signs at the girls’ school, St. Mary’s, founded in 1846. This system of signs also became taught and used at the boys’ school, St. Joseph’s, founded a decade later in 1857. Over time, however, separate lexicons developed at the girls’ and boys’ schools, which were distinct enough to obscure communication between students of different sexes, who had little opportunity to interact with each other. In these circumstances, LeMaster questions whether the two varieties of ISL ought to be called “gendered” dialects, given that they emerged due to geographical separation and might be described more simply as school forms of language. However, she notes: “The difference in the way of speaking between these school-leavers became one of female versus male” (214). The differences were most extreme among women born before 1931 and men born before 1946. Upon leaving school, St. Mary’s students began using the St. Joseph’s signs, which were considered “nicer” and more proper. With the adoption of school policies of oralism (which involves lip-reading and speaking without signing), first at St. Mary’s in 1946 and then at the St. Joseph’s in 1959, the use of ISL and especially the signs used by girls and women became devalued and even stigmatized. Oralism was cast as modern and progressive in contrast to ISL, which was seen as backward. A movement for Irish Deaf identity and a renewed interest in ISL led to the publication of a dictionary in 1979 that created a unified, standard form of ISL incorporating some female and mostly male signs. The result was that a younger generation of ISL learners schooled in oralism had little or no awareness of the history of women’s and men’s ISL. However, since 2000, there has been a push for the recognition of ISL as the legitimate first language of all Irish Deaf, including in Northern Ireland, where it is used alongside British Sign Language, and women’s signs are being revived as authentic ISL. Intriguingly, LeMaster mentions in passing that Deaf gay men were using what they called female signs among themselves—however, these were not the older signs of the St. Mary’s lexicon, but the signing styles of (younger) oral women. “Little is known about this, other than the expression of interest in the reappropriation of female ISL” (222).

The interactions of ideologies of gender, language, and culture are the focus of Amelia Rector Bell’s 1990 *American Anthropologist* piece, “[Separate People: Speaking of Creek Men and Women](#).” Bell gains first-hand knowledge of how local understandings of female and male become both reflected in and reinforced by language use when she undertakes fieldwork in a Creek (Native North American) community in northeastern Oklahoma. As she makes attempts to participate in the life of the community, however, she is baffled: “As time went on, I realized that conversations with adult Creeks, men or women, young or old, usually led to the topic of menstruation, no matter how or where the discussion started. This situation both intrigued and annoyed me” (334). Many contemporary Creeks, Bell notes, continued to require the separation of women during menses, so that men and older male children sleep in separate quarters and women kept special sets of dishes and utensils that they used at meals while they were menstruating. Failure to follow these practices was understood to cause sickness. These menstrual regulations fit into the broader cultural associations of the feminine with a watery

fundament that is generative and powerful and also requires male intervention to give shape and form, so that female is regarded as “flowing” and male as controlling. Women’s talk is described as flowing, and their gossip in particular is likened to a summer flood; most public and ritual speech can be made only by men, who employ formulaic litany that also makes explicit the expectations and rules governing the occasion. Language also initially “flows” in the babble of young children, but as they begin to speak Creek with control, they are understood to enter into the social order. Eventually, Bell comes to the realization that as an outsider to the language and culture, she is treated symbolically as a menstruating woman who requires regulation.

As an adult woman who explicitly asked to be taught to use the Creek language and culture ‘correctly,’ I entered their society as if I were a Creek baby (i.e., ‘flowing’) without mastery of either Creek speech or social rules. However, I was obviously not a baby. As a mature woman, my inclusion in the child’s role was extended metonymically to its logical (in the Creek view) co-referent—menstruation. (340)

As she becomes comfortably fluent in the Creek language, Bell finds that the topic has been largely dropped from conversation, marking her incorporation into the Creek world.

The next two articles explore practices of language that exclude or segregate women and yet also appear to enable their exercise of power.

Among the Warao of eastern Venezuela, as [Charles L. Briggs](#) describes them, women generally are prohibited from most important forms of public and ritual speech, including political oratory and shamanistic performance. At the same time, there are three forms of discourse open only to women: protests sung at celebrations marking the end of the year; complaints apparently addressing no one, but intended to be overheard; and *sana* or songs of lament over a death, which also express accusation. Briggs begins his 1992 *American Ethnologist* piece, “[“Since I Am a Woman, I Will Chastise My Relatives”: Gender, Reported Speech, and the \(Re\)Production of Social Relations in Warao Ritual Wailing](#)” with an account of a *sana* that a group of women wail in grief over a young man’s demise. They also express their anger with four young men from a neighboring community, whom they blame for their relative’s alcoholism, leading to his death. In almost immediate response to the women’s words, the four men are ushered out of the village by the community’s leaders and effectively banished. While anthropologists (and the Warao themselves) typically have described ritual wailing and songs of lament primarily in terms of their importance in dealing with death, the *sana* appears to have real consequences in the community, leading Briggs to observe: “Laments provide a highly public form for commenting on social and political-economic processes in general, thus affording women a voice in the public settings in which issues of importance to the community are decided” (350). A particularly powerful feature of the *sana*, he argues, is its incorporation of purportedly reported speech (which Inoue, above, also discusses). Significantly, the reported speech “does not simply draw on experiences and events” (346), but involves the *sana* performers’ reconstruction and interpretation, even invention, of those occurrences. This enables the speakers, as women, to use language typically not considered appropriate for them to use and to “assert the right to reply the discourse and claim a stake in the events” (345) as they may express complaints and accusations against men of influence (including shamans) otherwise not acceptable to be aired publicly.

The significance of ritual wailing for the construction of social relations is further explored by [Janet M. Chernela](#) in her 2003 *American Anthropologist* article, “[Language Ideology and Women's Speech: Talking Community in the Northwest Amazon](#).” Here, Chernela discusses the building of community in the Northwest Amazon of Brazil through the wept greetings—called *kaya basa* in Wanono—which women perform to welcome guests at ceremonial occasions. Anthropologists have been especially fascinated with the peoples and languages of this region due to a system of linguistic exogamy—that is, the out-marriage of women from their own group, which is defined by language. “The practice of virilocal postmarital residence, combined with patrilineal descent reckoning and linguistic exogamy, results in a local settlement in which males and their children speak one language, while in-marrying wives speak other languages” (796). Interestingly, because the preferred form of marriage is one of patrilineal cross cousins, a woman marries her mother’s brother’s son (i.e., a man marries his father’s sister’s daughter) and “back” into her mother’s language group. Ideally, then, a woman will have been raised with exposure to her mother’s—and now her husband’s—language, though she also will have been discouraged from using it publicly. When the marriage is not the preferred form, however, Chernela observes that it results in the woman’s profound linguistic and social isolation. Not surprisingly, given the ideologies surrounding language as marker of group membership, “every attempt is made to avoid hybridization, since it is considered essential that linguistic identities remain distinct and linguistic boundaries kept stable” (797). Thus, the *kaya basa* are performed by women, now wives and sisters-in-law from other language groups. “Despite differences in the phonological systems, the commonalities of themes and conventions of the *kaya basa* construct sameness in the context of difference” (798).

As users of language, all of us have at least some awareness that our uses of language communicate much more than our intended meanings and messages. Thus, we may strategically employ various linguistic resources in order to manage or mitigate the perceptions that others have of us—however, as with other resources, we do not all share the same availability or access, as the next three articles demonstrate.

Silence is one of the resources that requires attention in any consideration of women’s talk. Being heard and not being heard—or speak or not speaking—carry different importance and meaning for women and girls across social class and other social groups. In “[‘Those Loud Black Girls’: \(Black\) Women, Silence, and Gender ‘Passing’ in the Academy](#),” published in 1993 in *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, [Signithia Fordham](#) discusses the experiences of Black female students at a Washington, DC-area high school. Her focus is on the trope of “those loud Black girls” as “an example of both the diversity of gender construction in Euro-American contexts and the efforts to suppress that diversity” (8). On the one hand, it is “a quintessential example of African-American women’s commitment to being visible as culturally specific women. Curiously, these young women appear to be motivated to highlight the practices of gender-specific constructions in contexts that compel male impersonation or, at the very least, the adoption of a male voice” (8). On the other hand, Fordham finds that “the most salient characteristic of the academically successful female at Capital High is a deliberate silence, a

controlled response to their evolving, ambiguous status as academically successful students” (17). In other words, these students made active (if not entirely conscious) efforts to dissociate themselves from “those loud Black girls” and instead “‘passing’ for someone they are not: the white American female and, ultimately, the white American male. Silence is implicated in their greater school success because it conceals their female voice and the resulting gender expectations” (23).

Sounding—or rather, not sounding—like a woman is a central concern for the women featured in [Barbara Johnstone’s](#) 1995 article in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, “[Sociolinguistic Resources, Individual Identities, and Public Speech Styles of Texas Women](#).” The aim of Johnstone’s study of women from Texas had been “to see how they draw on linguistic resources provided by history, culture, and society in constructing public voices that display personal and regional identity” (183). To this end, Johnstone and her research partners had interviewed a number of women who were natives of Texas and successful in their professions, which required them to speak in public; former U.S. Representative Barbara Jordan and union leader Linda Chavez-Thompson were among the interviewees. Despite the range of “vivid traditional models for female speech behavior in Texas,” which present Texas women as “tougher and stronger, more glamorous, more neighborly, and ‘friendlier’ than other people are,” Johnstone reports that her research subjects “resisted or rejected explanations of their linguistic behavior based on gender. They insisted they do not, and have never, made or oriented to gender distinctions, and all except labor leader Chavez-Thompson denied that gender discrimination had figured much in their lives” (187). In contrast, they acknowledged the influence and even strategic use of speaking styles associated with their regional (“Texanness”) and ethnic (African American and Hispanic) identities. Johnstone considers why there was this denial of gender:

It could be that, by these people, talking or acting “like a woman” is still seen as a liability in a way talking like a Texan or like an African American or like a Hispanic is not. It could be, in other words, that for these women ascribed gender identity is still a greater social and linguistic burden than is regional identity or ethnic identity. This is despite the fact that a Texas “twang” is a decidedly mixed blessing in terms of linguistic prestige for people in public life (and Texans are well aware of the stigma attached to Southern-sounding speech). (196)

Overall, the women insist that their speaking (and writing) styles—their voices—reflect their unique selves, and the speaking styles associated with regional or ethnic identity are resources that connect them with traditions and communities.

[Marjorie Harness Goodwin’s](#) work has examined the overlooked language practices of U.S. children interacting among themselves, bringing attention to the ways that they use not only speech, but also intonation, gesture, and other embodied performance to establish and organize their relationships. Her book, *The Hidden Life of Girls: Games of Stance, Status, and Exclusion*—[reviewed](#) by [Tanya Romaniuk](#) in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* in 2008—brings attention specifically to the language practices of U.S. girls. The book is based on ethnographic research conducted over the course of three years at a California elementary school,

documenting the interactions of children during lunch time and recess. Romaniuk observes that one of its particular strengths “is the way in which author makes use of traditional conversation analysis of numerous detailed transcripts alongside figures that capture the girls’ use of semiotic resources” (309).

One particularly powerful example she details involves a group of fifth-grade girls, who one day challenge the very social structure of the playground by laying claim to a soccer field the boys had occupied up to that point. The author not only shows how these girls take a stand for their own rights, effectively arguing a strong position against the assumption of the boys’ rights to “public space,” but also how they affect change that creates “a new moral order” (i.e., the implementation of a new rotation policy for school space). (309)

What further captures Goodwin’s (and the reader’s) interest, however, is the girls’ use of language not only to band together and assert their position, but also to socially exclude individuals and create hierarchies among themselves. Goodwin and [H. Samy Alim](#), in their 2010 *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* article, “[“Whatever \(Neck Roll, Eye Roll, Teeth Suck\)’: The Situated Coproduction of Social Categories and Identities through Stancetaking and Transmodal Stylization](#),” analyze specific instances from Goodwin’s fieldwork that illustrate the ways that features of talk and gesture associated with race and class become used in activities of social aggression. These moments involve a clique of fifth-grade girls of diverse ethnicities (African, Asian, and European American). All are described as upper middle class except for one working class (European American) girl, Sarah, whose mockery of another working class (African American) girl, Angela, is the focus of this analysis. While Sarah is a member of the clique, she is herself often excluded from the other girls’ talk about their expensive clothing, cars, houses, and vacations; Angela is an outsider who desperately attempts to integrate herself into the group and is labeled by Sarah as a “tagalong girl.” In one exchange involving the two girls, Sarah utters “Whatever” and “Oh my God,” using phrases and intonations that all of the girls recognize as Valley Girl talk. At the same time, Sarah also sucks her teeth, rolls her eyes, and rolls neck and head, “a gesture used by some black women across class lines, but generally stigmatized by dominant culture and used as a gesture to index black working-class women. All the other girls laugh at the caricature that is produced, thus displaying their alignment toward the stance taken by Sarah toward Angela” (184). Angela, however, recognizes the racist and classist significance of Sarah’s performance and tells the entire group, “You guys are nasty.” Goodwin and Alim note the important effects of transmodal stylization—that is, the simultaneous use of talk and gesture, in this case, one indexing “Valley Girl” and the other “Ghetto Girl”—not only in this specific instance, but suggest “the performance and repetition of these acts, in conjunction with their broader circulation in popular culture and media, may also have longer lasting consequences, helping to create and reify social identities beyond the peer group” (190).

Whether or not women’s complaints about their health are heard has consequences for their well being. While there has been increasing awareness of [the disparities in the treatment of women’s and men’s pain](#), the perception persists among medical care-providers that women may be exaggerating or complaining about nonexistent physical pain. In “[Languages of Labor:](#)

[Negotiating the ‘Real’ and the Relational in Indo-Fijian Women's Expressions of Physical Pain,](#)” published in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* in 2007, [Susanna Trnka](#) examines the discourses surrounding “problem patients” and “real” and “unreal” pain at a public clinic in Fiji where conducted her fieldwork. The staff complain that overcrowding is caused not by a lack of resources, such as shortages of personnel and inadequate facilities, but by “patients with highly exaggerated or ‘unreal’ complaints who compromise physicians’ abilities to treat those who ‘really’ need their services” (389). These problem patients are women of South Asian origin now living in Fiji or “Indian housewives” as the physicians refer to them. The frustrated staff see their task as distinguishing real from unreal pain, which they nevertheless address by writing a prescription for acetaminophen (available for free). While some patients are assuaged, others object to their doctors’ apparent misapprehension of their complaints. Following the work of Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman, Trnka herself approaches the women’s statements about pain, whether physically existent, as valid claims for acknowledgement and an idiom of distress. “Patients almost always reject psychological and emotional explanations of physical pain”—with which physicians dismiss complaints of pain as unreal—“but respond positively to the suggestion that their pain is caused by physical, work-related stress” (398). Indeed, Trnka notes that the women rarely ever discuss the immense amount of work they perform on behalf of their households and communities. Instead, they refer to the stress and pain in their bodies that these labors have caused.

Women are expected to listen—and possibly be led by—the abortion counseling required by law in North Carolina. While the counseling forms part of the state’s assertion of power over the reproductive lives of its citizens, however, its performance also becomes an instance when health care providers—a number of whom are also women—communicate dissent and resistance that “occasionally helped to foster rapport between patients and abortion providers,” as [Mara Buchbinder](#) discusses in her 2016 *American Anthropologist* article, “[Scripting Dissent: US Abortion Laws, State Power, and the Politics of Scripted Speech](#).” While clinics already had provided and continue to provide counseling that included the technical aspects of the procedure and attention to patients’ emotional experience, the Woman’s “Right to Know” Act mandates that a physician, nurse, or physician’s assistant must deliver, in person or on the phone, an additional ten points of information to a woman seeking an abortion at least 24 hours before the scheduled procedure. The law was passed in 2011 as what is recognized widely as part of a larger effort to restrict access to abortion care; for example, a missed or delayed counseling appointment resulted in a delay in care. Buchbinder notes that similar legislation in other states, but not in North Carolina, requires abortion providers “to state disputed or incorrect clinical information, such as unsubstantiated link between abortion and breast cancer, infertility, and suicide or the ability of a fetus to feel pain” (776). In North Carolina, the law does not mandate the use a specific text; instead, abortion care providers have developed standardized scripts in order to aid in their compliance with this law. However, “in reciting counseling scripts with patients, abortion providers can begin to communicate more than what is written, which enables critical shifts in the meaning of such documents” (778)—for example, prefacing the reading of a script with the disclaimer that it was a legal formality or interjecting their own words to “soften” the language and its effect on the woman being counseled. “In this way, abortion providers are

able to script dissent even as they appear to produce a conventional script of clinical informed consent. In doing so, they highlight their capacity to undermine, challenge, or otherwise resist the content of scripted speech (i.e., legislatively regulated speech) through verbal performance” (779).

The attempts of the state to speak to women so that they will hear (and follow) is examined also in [Stephen Kingsley Scott's 2017 *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* article, “The Politics of Commiseration: On the Communicative Labors of “Co-Mothering” in El Alto.”](#) In this piece, based on fieldwork in the Bolivian city of El Alto, Scott describes the ordinary practices of comadreando or co-mothering speech that binds Aymara-speaking women as neighbors and confidantes. Significantly, it frequently involves commiseration that can be viewed as “a subtle way of spreading gossip through renarration” (176). This everyday practice of women’s talk becomes appropriated by government-sponsored public health programs in the service of establishing trust and faith in the health care system. Specifically, local women are recruited as outreach workers who can “knock on their neighbors’ doors, politely invite themselves in, gather the family around, and sympathetically exhort” (181). In the article, Scott analyzes a specific conversation that one such outreach worker, Doña Sal, has with her neighbor, Doña Bea, who is being pressed into taking responsibility for her husband to continue his treatment for tuberculosis. On the one hand, the instance can be read as Doña Sal’s successful co-optation of comadreando in service of the state’s project. On the other hand, Scott also suggests that Doña Bea successfully co-opts the co-optation to air her own grievances about the men in her family, deflecting the responsibility that is being assigned to her. “From this perspective, governmental strategies aimed at mobilizing local affective and communicative economies are a double-edged sword, opening these strategies up to situated encounters with the potential to divert them in unanticipated ways” (186).

The final two selections return to questions about women’s participation in public discourses. [Roger M. Keesing](#), in his 1985 *American Anthropologist* article, “[Kwaio Women Speak: The Micropolitics of Autobiography in a Solomon Island Society](#),” takes on the perception that “in societies where the sexes are polarized and women are placed under jural control of men, consigned to hearth and home, they have often been relatively mute, unable or unwilling to articulate ‘global’ views, to talk insightfully about themselves, their life, their societies” (27). He counters this understanding based on a consideration of 20 years of ethnographic research in Kwaio (Solomon Islands) society. At first, his attempts at collecting the autobiographical narratives of women seem to confirm assumptions about the “muteness” of women in tribal societies as his interviews yield only a few fragmented responses to his attempts to elicit their stories or ribald joking. Keesing attributes his failure to the fact that he is a male ethnographer attempting fieldwork with women, and anticipates that his female colleague, Shelley Schreiner, will have more success. This, however, does not necessarily turn out to be the case. While Kwaio women appeared to be less comfortable and more willing to be interviewed by a female ethnographer, Keesing and Schreiner find that “the rhetorical/ideological content of the material increased” (32). Keesing then considers the wider context in which the research has been undertaken, including the conditions under which he was able to record so much about Kwaio

life from his interactions with men. Even before the time of Keesing's arrival, the Kwaio men already had become convinced of the necessity of documenting their *kastom* (custom) for the sake of having it written, codified, and legitimated. Thus, they welcomed Keesing into their discussions of kinship, debates over land rights, and other topics they considered important. Keesing notes: "When I recorded the humdrum routines of gardening and everyday life and work—not defined as *kastom*—they fretted about my digressions" (29). Initially, the men also assert control over *kastom* that is considered women's knowledge, like the taboos concerning menstruation and childbirth. Eventually, the women, too, become invested in the project of recording *kastom*. "Despite exclusion of women from political rhetoric, the idealization and objectification of Kwaio *kastom* has shaped their willingness and ability to talk about their culture as a coherent system of rules and roles as well as to talk particularistically about their lives" (36).

This issue closes with a look back at the 1991 public hearings to confirm Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court and the testimony of law professor Anita Hill, a former colleague who accused Thomas of sexual harassment. [Frances Trix](#) and [Andrea Sankar](#) published their *American Anthropologist* article, "[Women's Voices and Experiences of the Hill-Thomas Hearings](#)," in 1998; however, they had initiated their research the day after Thomas had been confirmed. Within three weeks, they had conducted interviews with 100 women in the Detroit area, ranging in age from 19 to 76. More than one third of their interviewees were African American. The motivation for this study was "to allow the diversity of women's voices and experiences of the Hill-Thomas hearings to be heard" (32). Trix and Sankar contrast their project with the media reports and publications that appeared subsequently.

While these books differ widely in alignment and conclusion, they all share a focus on the figures of the hearings themselves, or on a single individual's response to the hearings. But it is our assessment that the lasting import of the hearings rests less with the actions and machinations of the central figures than with the response of the public, particularly women's responses. (32) While most journalistic accounts of the time portrayed race-based differences in support for either Hill or Thomas, this analysis found "the variable that distinguished strong Hill supporters from strong Thomas supporters was not race but age" (38). The majority of Hill supporters were women in their 30s to 50s, and the majority of Thomas supporters were younger, which Trix and Sankar interpreted as related to time in the workplace and familiarity with (and experience of) sexual harassment. The anthropologists conclude many women were politicized by the hearings. "In concert with their talking with strangers about the hearings and disagreeing with male family members, we see these expressions as signs of women moving toward taking public space" (38).

With this concluding article, we return to some of the themes that introduced this issue of *Open Anthropology*. In the 30 years that have passed since the Hill-Thomas hearings, women have successfully run for elected office. Women continue to fight to matter in the political life of the United States, whether raising loud voices or speaking softly. "Hearing Women Talk" is crucial to our present and future.

Acknowledgements. Many thanks to Chelsea Horton for her patience and encouragement on this issue of *Open Anthropology*.

Volume 7, Number 2
July 2019

“Women's Languages”

Alexander F. Chamberlain – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 14, Issue 3:579-581 (1912)

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Gender, Language, and Modernity: Toward an Effective History of Japanese Women's Language
Miyako Inoue – *American Ethnologist*. Vol 29, Issue 2:392-422

[Read more about this article >](#)

Language Contraction, Revitalization, and Irish Women

Barbara LeMaster – *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. Vol 16, Issue 2:211-228 (2006)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Separate People: Speaking of Creek Men and Women

Amelia Rector Bell – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 92, Issue 2:332-345 (1990)

[Read more about this article >](#)

“Since I am a Woman, I Will Chastise My Relatives”: Gender, Reported Speech, and the
(Re)Production of Social Relations in Warao Ritual Wailing

Charles L. Briggs – *American Ethnologist*. Vol 19, Issue 2:337-361 (1992)

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Language Ideology and Women's Speech: Talking Community in the Northwest Amazon

Janet M. Chernela – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 105, Issue 4:794-806 (2003)

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“Those Loud Black Girls”: (Black) Women, Silence, and Gender “Passing” in the Academy

Signithia Fordham – *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. Vol 24, Issue 1:3-32 (1993)

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Sociolinguistic Resources, Individual Identities, and Public Speech Styles of Texas Women

Barbara Johnstone – *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. Vol 5, Issue 2:183-202 (1995)

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“Whatever (Neck Roll, Eye Roll, Teeth Suck)”: The Situated Coproduction of Social Categories
and Identities through Stancetaking and Transmodal Stylization

Marjorie Harness Goodwin and H. Samy Alim – *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. Vol 20,
Issue 1:179-194 (2010)

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Book review of Marjorie Harness Goodwin's *the Hidden Life of Girls: Games of Stance, Status, and Exclusion*

Tanya Romaniuk – *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. Vol 18, Issue 2:308-310 (2008)

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Languages of Labor: Negotiating the “Real” and the Relational in Indo-Fijian Women's Expressions of Physical Pain

Susanna Trnka – *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. Vol 21, Issue 4:388-408 (2007)

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Scripting Dissent: US Abortion Laws, State Power, and the Politics of Scripted Speech

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