

Slotta, James. 2023. *Anarchy and the art of listening: The politics and pragmatics of reception in Papua New Guinea*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 216 pp. Pb.: \$31.95. ISBN: 9781501770012.

Book review by

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Many people would argue that having a voice is central to political participation. For the people of the Yopno River Valley, Papua New Guinea, however, listening practices carry political power. As James Slotta shows in his ethnography *Anarchy and the Art of Listening*, choosing to listen or not listen is “one of the more conspicuous expressions of the anarchic ethos and the anarchic politics of Yopno villages” (p. 32). For the Yopno people, listening ideologies, like language ideologies, inform social, religious, and political projects.

Based on time living in the Yopno Valley between 2007 and 2015, Slotta’s ethnography examines the agency of listeners and the pragmatics of reception more broadly. In the introduction, Slotta situates the text at the intersection of politics and colonialism, emphasizing that he will focus on the underappreciated act of political action: listening, rather than speaking, which has been privileged since the beginning of the Western rhetorical tradition as a key source of political agency. Methodologically, Slotta acknowledges that studying listening requires studying speech as an outward manifestation of listening practices and ideologies. These metadiscourses of listening—“who to listen for, what to listen for, how to interpret what is heard, why one needs to listen” (p. 17)—form the foundation of the author’s evidence.

Slotta begins the first chapter by depicting a moment of anarchic listening, in which a community gathered to discuss preparations for the visit of many nearby villagers. One member owed a debt of several pigs to the village, which would provide important hospitality for their guests. Yet he was conspicuously absent from the meeting. “Disregard-

ing talk,” it turns out, is a routine practice in community politics. That is one of three ways people “assert and enhance their self-determination while constraining the power of others” (p. 26), along with “evaluating” others’ speech and “holding onto” it. The author then details daily life in the Yopno Valley villages and provides a rich description of the local kinship and clan structure to underpin his premise of an anarchic political context where listening is an expression of ethos and political will.

*Chapter 2* discusses the role of asking for others’ opinions and listening to them as a key part of the epistemology of the region. The author takes examples from dreams and their interpretation, a skit with a didactic purpose in the Christian church, and the school classroom. All of these contexts include lessons about how an individual’s perspectives are uncertain and how through listening one can acquire knowledge about the best way to act in the future. Slotta connects the sense of self described in this chapter to the broader “ontological turn” in anthropology, arguing that anthropologists “should seek out the ontologies of others to provide the conceptual material to transform ‘our’ own thought...” (p. 77).

Expertise is the key theme of *Chapter 3*. Here the author describes various discursive enactments of expertise within the context of Yopno anarchic politics, such as that of a young NGO worker. By using his expertise-laden narrative to present potential benefits to the people, Slotta shows how the worker exerts his control over their decision-making while accounting for their desire for self-determination as listeners.

In *Chapter 4* the author takes up the issue of deception, an underlying current throughout the text. Yopno listeners are so used to speakers using words to deceive, mislead, and influence, that they engage in cycles of listening, evaluation, discussion, and further listening. This is the heart of anarchic politics in this context, according to the author, though the text does not address how the Yopno Valley context relates to anarchy in other contexts beyond Melanesia. Slotta ultimately concludes that the ubiquity of deception in Yopno Valley culture leads to more listening, rather than less, and transforms listening into a collective endeavor.

In the final chapter and epilogue, Slotta connects the listening practices he has examined throughout the text to the Yopno Valley people’s identity as inhabitants of “the last place on earth.” For the Yopno people, Slotta concludes, engaging in listening at school and church, which are the physical and rhetorical centers of village life, is a source of empowerment and achieving greater equality with the rest of the world. In this way, performing specific listening practices in key institutional contexts is a way of exhibiting a modern identity, which compares to what Xochitl Marsilli-Vargas (2022) in the book en-

titled *Genres of listening* illustrated in her recent ethnography of psychoanalytic listening in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

In concluding the text, Slotta characterizes listening as an act based in hope and empowerment for equality and he insightfully reflects on the foundational role that listening plays in anthropologists' own ethnographic practice. Overall, *Anarchy and the Art of Listening* shines through its vivid examples of specific discursive practices and Slotta's ability to draw meaningful connections across levels of discourse. As a whole, the text is essential reading not only for anyone interested in ethnographically grounded approaches to pragmatics but for all ethnographers of language.