What does it mean to listen? Composer Pauline Oliveros has devoted her life to exploring this idea and has organized her ideas and practice under the label of Deep Listening. Unlike the involuntary and often casual act of human hearing, Deep Listening welcomes whole body hearing and “listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear no matter what one is doing.”¹ This practice has evolved since 1988 into the foundation of the Deep Listening Institute, dedicated to awareness and exploration of the practice of Deep Listening and the Deep Listening Band, which continues to record and perform.²

This peer-reviewed anthology, published on the occasion of the composer’s 80th birthday, serves as an oral history of Deep Listening praxis. Many contributors are long-time collaborators of Oliveros, yet the book is not a congratulatory festschrifte: The focus remains on Deep Listening. Though a few essays exude nostalgia as the authors detail their early experiences with Deep Listening, many are full of exuberance. Founding member of the Deep Listening Institute...
Band, Stuart Dempster presents a joyous essay, “Training for Listening: a Lifelong Practice,” detailing his lifelong fascination with the sound of trains and how it lead to his own journey towards deep listening (p. 13). The excitement as he details his listening experience is contagious! Ione, the artistic director of the Deep Listening Institute, also brings a playful approach to the practice in her essay on listening to our dreams (p. 299). After reading it, I had a night of particularly sound-rich dreams full of incongruously combined sonic wonders from Stravinsky to the rock band Boston along with myriad voices from my past that I had all but forgotten.

In addition to inviting us into the authors’ listening worlds, the anthology also champions listening as a radical act, which can occur in unexpected environments. Renée Coulombe’s essay (p. 113) examines how electronic dance music (EDM) events serve as communal gatherings to practice deep listening. This counterculture is organized around communal listening as part of the group or alone. The unique outsider settings allow attendees to selectively control spatial interaction with their sonic environments as they immerse themselves in one-to-four day listening events. Coulombe contends that in today’s Western culture, communal listening is not a common act. Citing Marshall McLuhan’s observation of the emergence of our visual culture (p. 115), she reminds us (or examines?) how it is increasingly difficult to remove ourselves from our visual surroundings to listen (p. 126).

In “Ear Piece,” 1998, Oliveros asks the performer “What will you hear in the future?”(p. 3). Looking at the counterculture described in Coulombe’s essay, one must ask what Deep Listening could bring to a future where it was not relegated as a fringe activity. Susan Key’s essay (p. 169) on how she employed Deep Listening techniques in the classroom is inspiring. Deep Listening not only provides teachers with a pedagogical practice for bringing the arts to the classroom, but also serves as a pedagogical approach to professional development for teachers who had little arts exposure in the classroom themselves.

Taken in concert with Gayle Young’s commanding essay, a powerful look to what the future of Deep Listening could be begins to emerge. Young uses Marshall McLuhan’s concept of acoustic space to provide “a broad cultural context within which Deep Listening can be understood to have contributed tools needed to enhance listening within changing cultural context.” Young’s assertion that “our experience of acoustic space is, rather, one of increasing information overload of all media, not only of sound, in a cultural context that often appears to lack opportunity for contemplative attention” (p. 227) is hard to refute. The effects of this are something I often see in my classrooms as students attempt to parse and make sense of the massive amounts of information and myriad media they face. Her notion that Deep Listening can mitigate this information overload in many ways mirrors the work of pioneers in the information field like David Levy whose recent work on the use of mindful meditation as a tool to manage stressful information environments received widespread media attention in scholarly and mainstream news organizations.3 Key and Young’s essays point to a future where Deep Listening is a more wide-spread practice. Young affirms that Deep Listening enables practitioners to “develop an open approach to listening that enables them to deal effectively with the challenges of controlling attention” (p. 226). I believe that the recent media attention Levy’s work received signals a desire from mainstream culture for practices like Deep Listening that can aid in helping us to refine our attention and sense-making skills to mitigate the effects of information overload in our media-saturated culture.

Currently, the anthology is only to be available as a print monograph. This is a curious choice in light of the content and the technological focus of the Institute itself. The accompanying web page on the Deep Listening site (http://deelisting.org/essays) is somewhat sparse and perhaps could have been developed more extensively as a companion piece. For example, Miya Masoaka, Paula Matthuson, and David Rothenberg, include cited links to audio, video, and web digital content cited in their essays. However, these are not linked on the companion site. The content that is available is presented in a somewhat puzzling way. Tom Bickley’s fantastic Prezi, illustrating the relationships among the anthology’s authors and the Deep Listening Institute, is presented as a link to a footnote on the web page that links to the presentation, which was somewhat confusing. The videos that Susan Key presented of student work resulting from her project would not play in any of the browsers I had
available, but were downloadable. I would welcome a more comprehensive companion site from the editors that included embedded digital content and links to digital content cited by the essayists represented. However, such a small inconvenience should not inhibit those who seek inspiration and concrete techniques to bring Deep Listening to their students or those who interested in new ways of thinking about listening.

References