Black Women's Listening: An Ethnography of Listening in a Southern Inner-City Adult Learning Center.

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BLACK WOMEN'S LISTENING: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF LISTENING IN A SOUTHERN INNER-CITY ADULT LEARNING CENTER

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

by

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ABSTRACT

The research investigated the phenomenon of listening in the context of adult literacy education. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe listening from the points of view of African American women who were teachers and adult learners in a welfare reform program. Using ethnography as a research methodology, this two-year study explored listening as it occurred in the Writing Class, a classroom culture that was situated in a Southern, inner-city adult learning center (Spindler & Spindler, 1982). The study investigated women’s assumptions about listening, their own listening behaviors, and the behaviors they expected of listeners. An aim of this ethnography of listening was to discover and to describe women’s meanings of listening and those patterns of behaviors that they associated with listening.

Central to this study was a belief that listening is a primary language art that plays a major role in becoming literate, learning culture, and creating meaning. An assumption that listening is automatic, passive, and less socially relevant than speaking, reading, and writing has been pervasive in Western culture (Purdy, 1989). By adopting a symbolic interactionist perspective, this research embraced the notion of listening as an active, interpretive aspect of human symbolization and meaning making. Significantly influencing this study are the notions that listening validates speaking (Escheverria, 1990:2) and listeners are authors of meanings (Pellowe, 1986). Presenting scholarship which challenges traditional notions of literacy as the ability to read and write
(Langer, 1987; Jennings & Purves, 1991), this research also embraced notions of literacy as "cultural wisdom" (Biggs, 1991) and "communicative competence" (Purves, 1991).
CHAPTER ONE

EXPLORING WOMEN'S LISTENING AND WOMEN'S LITERACY WORK

Without dialogue there is no communication, without communication there can be no true education (Freire, 1990:74).

LISTENING VALIDATES SPEAKING. It is listening, not speaking, that provides meaning to what is said. Therefore, it is listening that guides the whole process of communication (Escheverria, 1990:2).

Listening is an integral part of the classroom interactions between and among adult learners and their teachers. Over the last five decades, scholars from diverse fields have called attention to the importance of listening in human interactions and human learning (Wolvin & Coakley, 1992; Escheverria, 1990; Fiumara, 1990; Levin, 1990; Wolvin, 1984; Wood, 1982). In 1978, federal legislation recognized the central role of listening in the learning process by amending the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 under Title II (Public Law 95-501). This amendment mandated that listening and speaking be included as basic competencies and as measures of literacy in addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic. In light of available research and the legislative action mentioned, research that explores teachers' and learners' assumptions about listening and their beliefs regarding appropriate and/or effective listening behaviors in a classroom is valuable to educators.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe listening from the points of view of adult learners and instructors in a natural adult literacy classroom setting. This research examined teachers' and learners'
assumptions about listening and their beliefs about effective and appropriate listening behaviors in an adult learning center called Lakota Adult Learning Center. The study was situated in a single classroom setting referred to as the Writing Class. By focusing on the Writing Class as a classroom culture, I investigated the explicit and tacit knowledge of the members of this unique classroom culture with regard to listening (Spindler, 1982; Wilcox, 1982; Spradley, 1980). The aim of this research was to describe what listening meant and what behaviors were appropriate for listeners from the perspectives of the members of the Writing Class.

**Research Questions**

The questions guiding this research were:

1. What behaviors do members of the Writing Class identify as listening?
2. How do members of the Writing Class listen?
3. What meanings do members of the Writing Class ascribe to listening?
4. In the Writing Class, what relationships exist between listening and literacy work, the processes and products of literacy?

**Terminology**

As with all questions, the context in which the above research questions were asked is important. The following is a brief discussion of terminology used in this study.

Context shapes the meanings and interpretations created, shared, or negotiated by participants in any dialogue, written or oral. Some researchers have considered context as a checklist of elements in the physical and social
setting of an event (Briggs, 1990). For this study, I embraced a dynamic notion of context as "a phenomenological construct that is created jointly by the participants . . . continually negotiated during the interaction" (Briggs, 1990:25). This understanding of context is more consist with and appropriate for an investigation of listening as a fundamentally interpretive language process.

Words and the meanings ascribed to words are a fundamental part of this study. It is important to note that particular terminology and unconventional uses of common words are used intentionally in this study. For this research, I refer to dual aspects of dialogue, voicing and listening. Voicing refers to act of articulation (oral or written). Listening refers to an act of interpreting what is voiced (spoken or written). Listening also refers to the act of interpretation. Listening is referred to as a product as well as a process. To illuminate the active, interpretive nature of listening, I have adopted Escheverria's (1990) unconventional uses of listen as a transitive verb (I listened [interpreted] that she was angry) and listening as a noun denoting meanings created by a listener (women's listening were influenced by their personal experiences).

Context of the Study

This research explores listening in an adult literacy writing composition class. The Writing Class, as the staff and students refer to it, is located in a southern inner-city adult learning center known as Lakota Adult Learning Center. The following is a brief description of the center, the class, and my reasons for selecting this research setting. More detailed descriptions of Lakota and the Writing Class are included in Chapter Three.
Lakota Adult Learning Center

The setting for this research is a writing class that is located in a southern, inner-city adult learning center. The staff and students Lakota Adult Learning Center most often refer to the center as simply Lakota. All students at the center are participating in a federal welfare reform program known as Project Independence. The motto of the program is "Breaking the Welfare Cycle." The major function of the program was to aid parents with dependent children in becoming independent of government assistance. In 1991, Lakota Center was established to provide the educational component of the program.

Lakota has a three-track curriculum which includes adult basic education (ABE), General Educational Development (GED) preparation, and enrichment. Student placement in one of the tracks is based upon their reading level as determined by the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Persons scoring at or below a fifth grade level are placed in one of two ABE (Adult Basic Education) classes. Persons scoring above this level are assigned to one of three GED (General Educational Development) classes. In these classes, students prepare to take the GED exam. Participants who have earned high school diplomas are referred to as enrichment students. They are assigned to a GED class, but work only in those academic areas in which they have been assessed to be deficient. Academic deficiencies are determined by scores obtained on the TABE.

At Lakota Center, five full-time teachers provide instruction in self-contained classroom settings for a student population that consists almost
entirely of African American women. Only one male student and less than half a dozen Caucasian females attended the center during this research. Women’s ages ranged from 16 to 60 years, and the center’s enrollment varied from 65 and 150 students. How long a woman was enrolled at the center depended on academic ability, attendance, and commitment to academic goals. Some women completed the Tests of General Educational Development (GED) in a matter of weeks; others left, after two years, without having earned a GED.

The Writing Class

The Writing Class is a composite of three two-hour classes that were taught by Sophia Sonders, Lakota’s only part-time instructor. The class was initially created to help the ladies (a term staff and students used when referring collectively to students) pass the writing component of the GED exam. All the ladies were required to go to “Miz Sonders” once a week. Even students with high school diplomas were required to attend until they had written a well-developed exit essay. This essay was a description of women’s individual educational experience at the Lakota Center.

Reasons for Selecting the Writing Class

I had four reasons for selecting this class as the setting for this research. First, Sophia’s highly interactive instructional approach provided a setting which was rich with women’s dialogue. Secondly, since all women were required to attend “writing,” I was able to observe and listen to the women from the five
regular classes in a single setting. Thirdly, women regularly read aloud in the Writing Class. They read their own and others' written texts which became listening artifacts. Listening artifacts were texts which represented in print what had been read aloud and made available for women to listen. In essays, letters, newsletter articles, testimonies, and poems, women articulated much of what they had listened in their lives. Their texts contained the meanings they had made of the words, phrases, and expressions of others. Some of their texts revealed what women knew implicitly or explicitly about listening. A final reason for narrowing the focus of this research to the Writing Class was Sophia's personal interest in listening. Her eagerness to participate in this study and her willingness to share her personal experiences and knowledge enriched this research and my experience as an ethnographer.

**Research Methodology**

Ethnography is the work of describing culture. The central aim of ethnography is to understand another way of life from the native point of view... [it] involves the disciplined study of what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that are different. Rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people (Spradley, 1980:3)

The central aim of this research was to explore and describe listening from the points of view of women in the Writing Class. In order to understand listening from the perspectives of women in a culture different from my own, I investigated what they said (terminology), did (behaviors), and made (artifacts) that related to listening (Spradley, 1980). I listened for what women knew, explicitly and implicitly about listening to discover the meanings women...
ascribed to listening and to learn what behaviors women associated with the act of listening.

Ethnography provided a methodology that was consistent with the aims of this study, to explore and describe an aspect of a particular classroom culture. This study did not purport to be a comprehensive ethnography that sought to document a total way of life. Instead, this study focused on one social situation (listening) and a single social event (the Writing Class) within a specific social institution (Lakota Center). Spradley (1980) referred to this type of study as microethnography. Because this study was centered around a particular topic within a culture, it may also be referred to as a "topic-oriented ethnography" (Spradley, 1980:31).

This ethnography of listening sought what women in the Writing Class knew explicitly or implicitly about listening. Through the use of ethnography as an epistemological orientation as well as a research methodology, I was able to explore and discover what women of a nondominant culture knew about listening and how they listened in a natural classroom setting.

For this ethnography, I relied heavily upon participant observations and interviews to discover women's meanings of listening and their patterns of listening behavior. Cultural artifacts such as articles, essays, letters, and other texts supplemented what I discovered in the observations and interviews. I refer to them as listening artifacts. A detailed description of the research strategies and methodology are presented in Chapter Three.
Importance of the Study as It Relates to the Literature

An ethnography of listening in the context of adult literacy education contributes to three fields of inquiry: adult literacy education, listening, and ethnography of communication.

Adult Literacy Research

In view of traditional notions of literacy as the ability to read and to write, it is not surprising that listening, the primary form of student communication in the classroom, has received little, if any, attention in adult literacy research (Luttrell, 1993; Wolvin & Coakley, 1992; Scribner, 1986). Even among current understandings of literacy as “cultural wisdom” and “communicative competence,” listening has not been explicitly addressed (Purves & Jennings, 1991). Listening research has called attention to the role of listening in the learning of other language arts noting that we listen before we speak, read, or write (Lundsteen, 1979). Listening has not been explicitly recognized by adult literacy researchers to be part of the literacy process.

Literacy researchers have noted the scarcity of ethnographic studies in adult literacy education and some have called for increased use of this research methodology (Newman & Beverstock, 1990; Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989). Ethnographic research offers the field a valuable perspective, the adult learners' views of literacy instruction and their views of themselves as learners. Exploring the role of listening in literacy acquisition from the adult learners' point of view offers valuable insights for adult literacy educators. An ethnography of
listening offers insights regarding the interrelatedness of language, culture, and literacy. As we consider seriously Freire's claims about dialogue and education, it is critical to examine the role of listening in literacy work.

Listening Research

Listening research has rigorously sought to define, predict, measure, and evaluate listening for almost three decades (Wolvin & Coakley, 1992; Roberts, 1988; Watson & Barker, 1988; Nichols, 1969). While these researchers have made invaluable contributions to a relatively new field of inquiry, some listening researchers have recognized the value of qualitative studies particularly in exploring the dynamic interpretive nature of listening (Purdy, 1989). Ethnography provides a new perspective for listening research.

An ethnography of listening allows for multiple meanings of listening from diverse cultural perspectives. An ethnography of listening also offers "thick descriptions" of listeners and their culture-specific listening behaviors (Geertz, 1973). Ethnographers explore and describe diverse contexts in which listening occurs and inscribe what listeners know explicitly and implicitly about listening. Ethnographic research also provides an opportunity to investigate the active interpretative nature of listening. While quantitative researchers pursue more precise definitions and a more concise concept of listening, this ethnographic study seeks to expand the notion of listening to include the meanings of female African American adult learners.

Listening researchers have addressed issues of gender and culture, but have not concerned themselves explicitly with the communications of women in
nondominant cultures (Pearson, Turner & Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Borisoff & Hahn, 1993; Ostermeier, 1992). Communication scholars, in general, have published little literature specifically addressing the communication of women of a nondominant culture (Rakow, 1992).

As feminist communication scholars, we want to develop theories, research questions, and methods of inquiry that allow the perspectives of women from nondominant groups to guide our interpretations of their communication (Houston, 1992:55).

Scholarship on women's communication has been based primarily on the communication of white middle-class women (Houston, 1992). Houston suggests that communication research has omitted or distorted the experiences of women from nondominant cultures. The recent research of Etter-Lewis (1993) and hooks (1994, 1993, 1990) illuminated some unique characteristics of black women's communications. This research explores an area of communication which has not been adequately addressed among African American women.

**Ethnography of Communication**

*Ethnography of communication* is also a relatively new and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. Ethnographies of communication explore the relationships between culture and language; however, with few exceptions, ethnographies of communication have primarily concerned themselves with speech, speech patterns, speech behaviors, and speech communities (Bauman & Sherzer, 1974; Gumperz & Hymes, 1986). Tannen & Saville-Troike's (1985) edited work *Perspectives on Silence* considers listening
peripherally. Tannen's (1989) *Talking Voices* explicitly addresses listening in one chapter; however, her development of the concept of constructed dialogue implicitly addresses the issue of listening.

This study focused explicitly on listening to call attention to an aspect of communication that has been ignored by ethnographers of communication. This ethnography explored the role of listening in the adult literacy process to illuminate a language art that adult literacy educators have considered less academically significant than writing and reading. Although this research focused specifically on listening, this focus does not suggest that listening is or should be treated as a separate or discrete mode of communication. On the contrary, this research assumes listening to be an essential strand in the fabric of African American women's culture and communication.

**Theoretical Perspective**

For this research, I approached listening from a symbolic interactionist perspective (Wood, 1982; Blumer, 1969) and literacy from a cultural perspective (Akinnaso, 1991; Ferdman, 1991; Purves, 1991; Wagner, 1991; Langer, 1987; Heath, 1983). Blending these perspectives, this research also embraced an expanded notion of listening as an active, interpretive language process. From a cultural perspective, literacy is considered broader than the traditional of basic skills of reading and writing (Jennings & Purves, 1991).

Symbolic interactionism asserts that meaning arises in social interaction and that meaning is shaped through a process of self-communication (Blumer, 1969; Wood, 1982; Becker & McCall, 1990). Symbolic interactionists are
concerned with the creation of meaning and self through the use of symbols. Symbols include words, gestures, or emblems which represent the concrete and abstract aspects of our world (i.e., persons, objects, events, concepts, emotions, or relationships).

A symbolic interactionist's perspective views listening as a critical and active aspect of human beings' act of symbolizing. Listening involves a commitment to share and negotiate meanings with others through the use of symbols (Wood, 1982). The language act of listening is an act of interpretation as well as an attitude of openness. Listening requires that we temporarily let go of our own meanings and self to consider the meanings of others. In being open to others and their meanings, we are risking that our meanings and our selves may be altered. We create meaning by listening. We are also created by these meanings (Pellowe, 1986).

Becoming literate involves more than mastering minimum reading and/or writing skills when one considers literacy from a cultural perspective. From this perspective, becoming literate means learning the wisdom of a particular culture. Learning the wisdom of a culture involves learning the language, social practices, and accepted behaviors of that culture. Being literate also includes embracing fundamental beliefs which make it possible to function effectively in a culture (Biggs, 1991). A cultural notion of literacy also considers the development of communicative competence which is the ability to interact appropriately with other members of their speech community. Communicative
competence is an essential aspect of becoming literate (Purves, 1991; Hymes, 1971).

Those who explore listening from a symbolic interactionist's perspective uncover and challenge Western culture's traditional assumptions that listening is automatic, passive, and less socially relevant than reading, writing, or speaking. By considering literacy from a cultural perspective, limitations of our traditional notions of literacy as the ability to read and write are revealed (Purdy, 1989). The linking of these perspectives invites us to consider listening as an active, interpretive language process, and literacy as a social as well as an academic achievement. These perspectives provide opportunities to expand our limited understandings of listening and literacy while illuminating the intimate and intricate interweavings of language, culture, and literacy.

Background of the Study

When we listen, we not only listen as individuals, we also listen from the HISTORICAL BACKGROUND in which we live. We human beings are historical beings and even our individuality is the product of particular historical conditions (Escheverria, 1990:22).

... blacks often probe beyond a given statement to find out where a person is "coming from," in order to clarify the meaning and value of a particular behavior or attitude (Kochman, 1981:16).

The Background of the Study is subdivided into two sections: Coming From: The Background of the Ethnographer, and Getting There: The Background of the Study. Coming From, an autobiographical text, locates my cultural/personal background, the positions from which I observed, described, and made sense of the listening as a white researcher of black women's
communication. Getting There relates how this study unfolded from a brief, unintentional eavesdropping into a two-year ethnography of listening. The Background of the Study includes many voices I have listened to, in person and in print, which have shaped and reshaped what I know and who I am. This section reveals what has led me to research African American women's ways of listening, their meanings of listening, and their listening behaviors.

**Coming From: Background of the Ethnographer**

Escheverria (1990, 1994) claimed that our personal and historical backgrounds influence how we listen and what we listen. Kochman (1981) called attention to the importance of knowing where persons are “coming from” to understand their meanings, behaviors, or attitudes. Knowing where speakers or writers come from, her/his cultural, epistemological, and ontological background, is essential in understanding what is said or written. The process of creating an autobiographical text allowed me to uncover numerous personal and cultural assumptions that significantly influenced the meanings I had made about listening. Through this autobiographical process, I discovered cognitive blindnesses (what I don't know that I don't know). Although an inherent aspect of the human condition, these blindnesses may have distorted the meanings I made in this ethnography.

As Pellowe reminds us, "Meaning is created by an individual's sense of his or her connections to a space-time percept" (Pellowe, 1986:10). With knowledge of my background and space-time percept, readers may better
understand the meanings I have made of how listening happened and what listening meant to the women in Lakota's Writing Class. By revealing aspects of my personal and cultural backgrounds, I intend to clarify the meaning and value of this ethnography.

**Listening and Learning: Growing up Catholic, White, and Female.**

While culture allows us to talk to each other, it also prohibits us from being with one another. We can no longer reach out and touch our other selves; we can only encounter what we imagine others to be. We can't approach our other selves directly, but only as we symbolize the others to be: man, woman, black, white, friend, enemy. No matter how hard we try, we cannot escape labeling and being labeled . . . Culture is our blessing; it is also our curse, our fatal flaw (Richardson, 1990:26-27).

I was born in 1948 in a small rural community. I grew up in a culture that was both a blessing and a curse. Growing up Catholic, white, and female in the South during the 50s and 60s influenced my perspective and world view in many ways, none warranting such adjectives as "multiple" or "broad."

Immersed in this culture, I lived basically unaware of the many racist and sexist voices to which I listened at school, in church, and at home. Without conscious intention, I learned to speak in a Cajun accent. I also became fluent in idiomatic expressions that had meaning only within a small radius of my small community. Abstaining from meat on Friday, saying "Yes, Ma'am" and "No, Sir" to adults, and kissing aunts and uncles were expected and accepted social practices of my culture. My religious beliefs, self-concept, patterns of behavior, and values emerged almost as unintentionally as my accent. My beliefs, behaviors, and values seemed to have adopted me, rather than my adopting them.
As a child, I moved through the "everydayness" of life, listening obediently and learning (Van Manen, 1990). I traded my curiosity and imagination for logical reasoning, fixed truths, and an objective reality. I learned by listening to the authoritarian voices of parents, teachers, and the Catholic Church. I continually listened to and listened for knowledge and truth from external sources. My world was a product of what I listened, the meanings I ascribed to the many symbols that surrounded me. My "lived experience" was largely a product of what I listened (Van Manen, 1990).

Although I listened carefully, I often did not understand; however, I learned at an early age that to question authority was to be disrespectful. Questions were indications of doubt and doubting was sinful. No good Catholic girl would commit such sin! Instead, I learned to listen silently and conceal my curiosity. I learned to be quiet, still, and obedient.

**An Early Listening Experience.** I learned what "lady" meant by listening to my mother, my grandmother, and one of my aunts. They always talked about ladies who

- had good table manners . . . never cursed . . . were quiet and soft-spoken . . .
- didn't interrupt when others talked . . . wore neat, starched dresses . . .
- smelled like perfume . . . had neatly combed hair . . .
- protected their delicate white skin from the sun . . .
- never had a mean or dirty thought . . .
- were respectful and respected.

Being a lady always sounded rather boring, but it was a cultural standard I was required to know and be able to do. No one said much about being a woman, except when they said, "THAT woman." The tone they used suggested they
meant something very different from the term lady. From listening, I concluded that being a woman and being a lady were not synonymous ways of being; they were mutually exclusive categories of females.

"You always address an older woman as Ma'am" was part of my southern cultural knowledge I acquired as a child. When I was reprimanded at a very young age for referring to a Negro woman as a "black lady," I vividly recall an adult telling me emphatically, "You DON'T say black lady. You say a black woman." I did not understand the distinction nor the purpose it served, but I dared not question an adult about this matter. Questioning adults was disrespectful for someone my age. This was another part of the cultural knowledge I had acquired by listening. Being too fearful to request an explanation, I concluded simply that black females were women, not ladies.

Two adjectives preceded many of the nouns I heard when I was growing up. The adjectives were white and colored. People were always talking about or separating things into two distinct categories. There were colored people, and there were white people. There was the white church, and then there was the colored church. There was the white school, and there was the colored school. By observing patterns of behaviors and reading signs, I learned that colored people and white people drank from different water fountains, swam in separate pools, and sat in separate sections of buses and movie theaters.

I do not remember being told anything explicitly about these social practices, but I inferred that something terrible would happen if I departed from
them. Although I questioned such social practices, I also listened silently and obediently and learned the wisdom of my southern, white culture. I became a literate, southern, white lady.

**Listening in School.** I never really thought about listening. I just did it. No one really told me how to listen, but they told me when I was not listening. I concluded from what I had heard and observed that listening involved being quiet and doing what you were told. In 1953, I had a disturbing listening experience in Miss Lynn's kindergarten class that made me realize that I listened differently. Miss Lynn had been a neighbor for as long as I could remember. She knew my family long before I was born. On a crisp fall morning, Miss Lynn made a gentle, but authoritative request, "Listen to Miss Lynn, little people. We're all going to recite *Jack Be Nimble* this morning." Of course, I knew *Jack Be Nimble* by heart, but I no idea what it all meant. I was confident that I could perform the academic task at hand successfully.

Miss Lynn called upon two little people on the other side of the room. I had time to listen and observe the pattern of the process. After being called upon, the little person moved to the front center of the classroom, stood up straight, faced the class, and waited until Miss Lynn said, "Jack be nimble." The student repeated, "Jack be nimble." Next there was a brief pause before Miss Lynn continued, "Jack be quick." The student repeated, "Jack be quick." This process repeated until the entire rhyme had been recited, then the student sat down. A clear and simple pattern emerged: pause, teacher says a verse,
student repeats it, pause, teacher speaks, student repeats, pause. The task seemed simple enough. When Miss Lynn called on me, I marched up to the front of the room, stood up straight, faced my classmates, and smiled while I waited for the first verse. "Jennifer! You know that nursery rhyme! Now say it because I'm not going to help you!" My smile quickly faded into quivering lips and my heart pounding fearfully. "What's going on here?" I thought, but dared not ask. I stood looking at her quite confused, but still respectful. "Now you listen to ME, young lady, and recite Jack Be Nimble right this minute!" I wondered what she thought I had been doing all that time. I had done what she said—I listened! I recited every verse without taking a single breath, then quickly sat down, confused and disillusioned. I had been listening!

A Special Listener. My father introduced me to ways of life and ways of thinking apart from my French Catholic culture. He was a Scotch/Irish Protestant from Tennessee and called "Les Americain," a Cajun term for "outsider." Daddy claimed to be a "hillbilly" who belonged to "the round church where the devil can't corner me." Because of something I heard the priest read in the gospel at Mass one Sunday, I was very reluctant to reveal Daddy's occupation to anyone. Daddy worked for the Department of Revenue and I certainly did not want people to think of him as a "tax collector."

I have a special memory about my father listening to me when I was about eight years old. I had made numerous unsuccessful attempts to convince him to buy a horse for me. On a hot, summer evening, he was sitting,
as he so often did, at his inexpensive oak-stained pine desk. In front of him were mounds of fuel tax invoices, weekly itineraries, and expense reports. I had prepared to approach him with the 999th request for a horse. I was certain that this request would be successful, because I had done some research. I had carefully calculated the monthly cost of keeping a horse and prepared a written proposal. My strategy was sure to convince him that owning and operating a horse was practical and feasible. I knew that I could convince him this time, if only he would listen.

I approached him with confidence and ambition. "Daddy, I began, pointing proudly to my page of calculations, "I figured out a way we can buy a horse. S-." "No," he answered before I completed the first lisped "s" of my prefacing remarks. Discouraged and angry, I returned to my room and slammed the door behind me. Not yet willing to accept defeat and determined to be heard, I immediately began composing a letter to him. When I finished my soulful composition, I walked briskly to his desk, placed the letter on top of mounds of papers, and quickly walked away. Writing the letter was more therapeutic than persuasive. Although I felt greatly relieved, I assumed my father never read the letter because he never mentioned it. I concluded he had not listened.

Twenty-six years later during his lengthy and courageous battle with cancer, Daddy and I spent precious times together, reminiscing and reflecting. He had always been the person who listened most. We had wonderful conversations about everything but horses and sex. Our lengthy dialogues
included topics from spats with friends, teenage heartbreaks, and homework to the more controversial issues such as psychic phenomenon, Catholicism, Protestantism, God, and life after death.

During one of the last conversations I had with him before his death in 1982, my father asked me to retrieve his worn, black-leather wallet that lay out of his reach on a bedroom dresser. As I handed it to him, he slowly and gently slipped his aging fingers into one of the compartments. With great care, he pulled out a tattered piece of paper that had been folded several times. With hands that matched his worn, faded wallet, he carefully unfolded the paper. Then he looked up at me and a mischievous smile crept upon his tired, wrinkled face. As he read once again a twenty-six-year-old letter his daughter wrote to him, I listened. I smiled. I cried. He had listened!

**Getting There: Background of the Ethnography**

Getting There describes not only a physical, but an emotional and cognitive journey that began before I had heard anything about Lakota Center. What called me to research listening was not my listening competence, but the many "mis-listenings" and "non-listenings" I experienced as a daughter, a mother, a wife, an ex-wife, a student, and a teacher. As Gloria Steinem described it, "we write what we need to know" (Steinem, 1992:6). My studies with Rafael Escheverria (1990) had drastically altered my understanding of language and listening. With a new understanding of language as action and listeners as meaning makers, I began to see a multitude of possibilities for
education. I sought a theoretical foundation for what I had learned experientially with Escheverria.

I was also drawn to research listening out of a desire to explore the boundaries that language and culture create, the boundaries that simultaneously include and exclude self and other. For me, listening was "a bridge that we, you and I, build over the chasm of otherness" (Richardson, 1990:4).

In the spring of 1992, I was required to read bell hook's Talking Back in a gender issue class (hooks, 1989). I was more resistant to reading that book than any other assigned texts that semester. I was disturbed by bell hooks' hostile literary voice. Her loud, angry voice disturbed me and I did not want to listen. When I read her book again almost two years later, what I heard in her voice was very different. I heard passion, frustration, and courage. I heard a plea to be listened instead of an angry attack on "whiteness." I wondered:

Has hooks changed over these years, or am I a different listener? Have new words appeared on these pages, or am I seeing them for the first time? Has hooks slipped in between the lines to say more to me, or am I hearing her voice for the first time? Who was listening almost three years ago and what was not being heard?

The answers became less important than the possibilities of asking new questions: Who was listening to hooks in 1992? What was she really saying? Who is speaking now and who is listening?

The person listening to hooks' voice in the spring of 1992 was a white middle class woman struggling to recover from divorce and empty-nest syndrome. I was suffering from the shock of sudden immersion in two cultures,
academia and singleness. I was one of those readers interpreting hooks' "direct, blunt speech as signifying anger" and saying "I don't feel this book is really talking to me" (hooks 1989:15). I was already overwhelmed by a cacophony of voices shouting "from the margins" and "from the text." Some voices proclaimed "The Truth" while others denied truth's existence. Women's voices emerged from the literature challenging me to find my own voice that had been buried under the rubble of patriarchy.

It was not only the hostility I heard in hooks' voice nor the cacophony of other voices that prevented me from listening to hooks' powerful message. My own historical background and personal experiences also prevented me from listening. Growing up in a segregated culture had limited my understanding of black women's experiences and had conditioned me to the comfort of my ignorance. Unknowingly and unintentionally, I was partially blind to the pain of black women's experiences and deaf to their powerful passionate voices.

The literary voices of women from non-dominant cultures invited me to listen, but also cautioned me not to speak for them (Lugones & Spelman, 1983; hooks, 1989; Houston, 1992). Hooks' voice, once loud and angry, became an invitation to listen as I began to understand where she was coming from:

Madness, not just physical abuse, was the punishment for too much talk if you were female. Yet even as this fear of madness haunted me, hanging over my writing like a monstrous shadow, I could not stop the words, making thought, writing speech. For this terrible madness which I feared, which I was sure was the destiny of daring women born to intense speech (after all, the authorities emphasized this point daily), was not as threatening as imposed silence, as suppressed speech (hooks, 1989:7).
I resonated with her fears of speaking, madness, and abuse; I was in awe of her courage, commitment, and determination not to be silenced.

When I read Revolution from Within (Steinem, 1992:23) the following semester, Steinem's literary voice spoke to me in a soft whisper, "I began to understand with a terrible sureness that we teach what we need to learn and write what we need to know." The "terrible sureness" of knowing that I had lived so long in ignorance of black women's experiences disturbed me. Steinem reminded me, however, that recognizing my ignorance was a step toward knowledge. Her voice empowered me and challenged me to move on to learn more. Simultaneously, hooks' voice called me and Steinem's voice pushed me to listen and to learn from new teachers; black women could teach me what I needed and wanted to know.

I knew I would research listening for my dissertation, but I had not found an appropriate research site. My research site emerged from a dialogue I overheard. When the Literacy Education Project (LEP) staff meeting ended early, I utilized my extra time to catch up on the readings for my evening class. While I read Arlene Fingeret's (1989) Participatory Literacy Education, the project director and another graduate assistant were in an adjoining office discussing an evaluation of a local adult literacy program. I realized I had been "half-listening" to their conversation when three syllables captured my attention:

... Lagoda ... Steck Vonn ... L100 ... Lamota ... ABE ... profile sheets ... Lamosa ... program sheets ... newsletter ... TABE ... Lagoda ...
My curiosity grew as I listened sporadically to bits and pieces of conversation and I found it increasingly difficult to focus on what I was reading. Isolated words pierced my concentration as they interrupted Fingeret's voice. What was a TABE test? Who was Steck Vonn? Very little of what I heard made sense to me; however, I had surmised that the word repeated was the name of the center. "What a strange-sounding name," I thought. In spite of the indistinctness of its sound and the uncertainty of its meaning, what I heard had a smooth rhythm and pleasant, blurred tone. I could not speak, read, or write what I had heard. The experience of listening to it was like listening to a song in which the melody overpowered the lyrics.

I heard more about Lakota Center over the next several weeks and was intrigued by descriptions of its unique program and state-of-the-art computer lab. It was difficult to visualize what such a place and program were like, so I decided to see for myself. After a few phone calls, several requests, and three lengthy visits with the project manager, Barry Meaux, Lakota became my research site. Over a two-week period, I presented oral and written descriptions of my proposed study, received permission to conduct research there, and had a guided tour of the entire facility. I learned about the history of the site, the purpose of the program, and Mr. Meaux's personal philosophy of life and education. I was permitted limited access to the facility until Mr. Meaux formally introduced me to the staff. Until he introduced me, I was free to roam the halls and grounds of Lakota Center, take notes and photographs, and just listen.
Significance of the Study

As literacy research expands notions of literacy beyond the basic skills of reading and writing to include the acquisition of cultural wisdom and communicative competence, it is critical to concern ourselves with the role of listening in literacy acquisition. As literacy educators adopt instructional approaches which embrace holistic views of language (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), researchers have the opportunity and the responsibility to explore listening as a fundamental language art (Soifer, Irwin, Crumrine, Honzaki, Simmons, & Young, 1990; Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989). Additionally, as literacy educators adopt participatory instructional approaches, teachers and students will engage in classroom dialogue more frequently. Listening, a critical aspect of this dialogue, must be recognized and examined.

To communicate effectively with adult learners of nondominant cultures, educators must also consider culture-specific communication practices and the meanings that these learners ascribe to words and gestures. As educators, we must be open to new understandings of listening from the point of view of adult learners from cultural backgrounds different from our own. We must investigate what adult learners regard as appropriate behaviors for listeners.

A broader understanding listening is essential for successful classroom dialogues, and thus essential for what Freire (1993:74) claims to be “true education.” Increased awareness and understanding can reduce mislistenings, those nonsynchronous and noncongruent communications between and among
teachers and students. Mislistenings often generate resentment, distrust, resignation, and loss of self esteem and dignity for those involved in the literacy process.

Summary

This two-year research project investigated listening within an ethnographic framework and focused on the role of listening in the process of literacy acquisition. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe listening from the points of view of the African-American women in an adult literacy writing class. The ethnography approached listening from a symbolic interactionist's perspective asserting that listening is an active communication process which is fundamental in creating meaning and constructing cultural identity (Escheverria, 1994, 1990; Wood, 1982). This research embraced a cultural notion of literacy asserting that literacy is a process of learning "cultural wisdom" and developing communicative competence (Purves, 1991:52).

Central to this research is the notion that literacy is a social and an academic process. Literacy means more than the ability to read and write. It means learning the wisdom of a particular culture and developing communicative competence necessary to perform successfully in that culture. For example, we learn our native language and cultural knowledge primarily by listening since we listen before we speak, read, or write. The language we learn shapes and is shaped by culture in which we participate (Real, 1989). Our language includes us in some cultures and excludes us from others. We shape and are shaped by the meanings we create in language (Pellowe, 1986).
We listen to learn the wisdom of our own culture or to learn the wisdom of another culture. By listening we also learn the language and social practices that allow us to perform as successful members of our own or another's culture. Learning the wisdom of our own culture is called *literacy*. Learning the wisdom of another culture is called *ethnography*. 
Perhaps we could start out by admitting that there could be no saying without hearing, no speaking which is not also an integral part of listening (Fiumara, 1990:1).

This chapter reviews literature and research from discourse communities that informed this ethnography of listening. The review includes research from the fields of education, communication, anthropology, philosophy, linguistics, and biology (Fiumara, 1990; Escheverria, 1990; Levin, 1989; McGregor & White, 1986; Maturana, 1987; Pellowe, 1986; Wolvin, 1984; Wood, 1982). This research has provided fertile ground for new understandings of listening and listeners. Current research and literature offers new understandings of language, communication, and culture that provide fertile ground for new understandings of listening and interrelationships between listening, literacy, and culture.

For several decades, scholars from diverse disciplines have sought to define listening, to clarify a concept of listening, to isolate listening variables, and to determine components of effective listening (Wolvin & Coakley, 1992; Brownell, 1986; Nichols, 1969; Nichols & Stevens, 1957). Listening experts have developed and validated numerous instruments in order to predict and to measure effective listening (Bostrum, 1990; Barker, 1971).

During 40 years of researching the function of the human ear, Alfred Tomatis, a French physician, psychologist, and educator, found numerous
connections between listening abilities and learning abilities (Tomatis, 1991). His research significantly impacted on our knowledge of the human ear and the treatment of dyslexia. The "Tomatis Method," a comprehensive approach to communication, language, and learning, is based upon human listening capacity. His "electronic ear" increases a hearer's ability to focus on sounds by the use of sound stimulation. Tomatis (1991) considered listening the origin of voice. In his words, "The voice contains only what the ear hears" (p. xiii).

**Listening: The Hidden Side of Language**

Recent scholarship has challenged a Western philosophic stance that has viewed listening as a passive, receptive, and automatic language process (Fiumara, 1990; Escheverria, 1990; Levin, 1989; McGregor & White, 1986; Pellowe, 1986; Wood, 1982). Traditional assumptions about language, communication, and reality have hidden the active, interpretive nature of listening and inhibited our understanding of or appreciation for listening, "the hidden side of language" (Escheverria, 1990:1).

Shifts in understandings of human communication, language, and reality have provided a theoretical framework to explore listening and uncover the power of this "hidden side of language" (Fiumara, 1990; Escheverria, 1990). Some of these scholars have suggested that although a speaker may be the author of an expression, it is the listener who is the author of its meaning (Pellowe, 1986). By considering listeners from this perspective, listeners are no
longer passive receivers of information or messages. Other researchers are challenging the pervasive assumption that human communication involves the transmission of information or messages (Maturana & Varela, 1987).

The Fallacy of the Transmission of Information

Maturana and Varela (1987) illuminated the faulty assumption that human communication is transmission of information or messages. This assumption has distorted our understanding of language and listening. In *Tree of Knowledge*, Maturana uncovered the deeply embedded assumption that human beings are capable of transmitting and receiving information (Maturana & Varela, 1987). From a biological perspective, Maturana explained that humans do not have the biological capacity to perform these two actions. He referred to this assumption as “the fallacy of the tube” (p. 67).

An early model of communication, intended for electronic communication, was adapted as a model for human communication (Escheverria, 1990; Wood, 1982). While this model was important in emphasizing the message component of communication, it fostered the notion that human beings, like electronic devices, transmit information. Following this understanding of communication, speakers become the active participants who transmit messages and create meanings while listeners became passive recipients of messages.

Escheverria (1994) echoed Maturana's concern regarding “the fallacy of the tube.” He claimed that failure to recognize the metaphorical function of a
mechanical model of communication has distorted a true understanding of the phenomenon of listening as an active, interpretive process. Escheverria reiterated that meanings and messages cannot be transmitted by speakers to listeners; instead, the words and actions of speakers "trigger" listeners to create meanings or make sense of what has been said.

**Language and Description**

A second assumption which has distorted our understanding of listening as an active interpretive language process is the assumption that language is descriptive. Until the last several decades, description has been considered the primary, if not sole, function of language: Language describes a reality. The reality described by language was singular, fixed, and objective.

Recently, scholars have begun to recognize the generative function of language. In other words, human beings generate reality with language. New approaches to understanding language and communication are shifting our understanding of listening and its essential role in the social construction of meaning. Escheverria (1990, 1994) has developed a theory of listening based upon a new philosophy of language. The philosophy, referred to as the *ontology of language*, is based upon two basic claims: humans are linguistic beings; and language is action. He contends that humans live in language and create reality with language.

According to Escheverria, "When we listen we not only listen to words, WE LISTEN TO ACTIONS" (1990:6). His writings reveal a strong influence
from *speech act theory* (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969). Speech act theory embraces the assumption that when we speak we always perform a restricted number of actions. Escheverria refers to these actions as basic linguistic acts. He classifies these acts as assertions, declarations, requests, promises, and offers.

**Listening and Hearing**

Escheverria (1990) also differentiates between hearing, a physiological process, and listening, a linguistic process.

Hearing is a biological phenomenon... associated with the capacity to distinguish sounds in our interactions with the environment (which could be someone else) (p. 4).

Hearers physiologically experience the sound of speech, and listeners ascribe meaning to what is said. Listening, according to Escheverria, always “implies interpretive understanding” (p. 4). Illuminating the “active side of listening,” he claims that “when we listen we bring forth a world of interpretation.”

Making further distinction between listening and hearing, Escheverria refers to the human ability to listen to silences. As an example, he suggests that silence following a request can be interpreted as a decline. He also suggests that humans listen to gestures, to body postures, and to movements because they ascribe meaning to them. Another example, the failure to make eye contact in conversation, may be interpreted as deceptiveness, disinterest, or unworthiness.
Listening as Storymaking

Escheverria emphasizes listening as action in his description of listeners as storymakers.

When we listen, we are not neutral and detached observers. We are reconstructing the actions of the speaker and inventing stories about why he/she said what he/she said (p. 12).

Listeners create stories, make interpretations, of what has been said and sometimes of what has not been said. Escheverria considers listening as an act of interpretation. His unconventional uses of listening as a transitive verb calls attention to listening as an active language process. His use of listening as a noun to refer to the interpretation made by a listener also calls our attention to a new perspective on listening. According to Escheverria's notion of listening, we listen words and we listen others. Our listenings are the meanings we make of what we experience verbally or nonverbally.

Listening, Knowledge, and Self

Recent research and literature has called attention to the interrelatedness of listening and women's ways of knowing (Luttrell, 1993; Belenky et al, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). In Women's Ways of Knowing, Belenky et al (1986) described "listening as a way of knowing"(p. 36). They further explained:

The tendency for women to ground their epistemological premises in metaphors suggesting speaking and listening is at odds with the visual metaphors (such as equating knowledge with illumination, knowing with seeing, and truth with light) . . . Unlike the eye, the ear requires closeness between subject and object. Unlike seeing, speaking and listening suggest dialogue and interaction (p. 18).
Women's ways of knowing are embedded in family, community, and work relationships (Luttrell, 1993).

Pinar (1992, 1975) illuminated the importance of the interaction with self as a source of knowledge. Self knowing precedes other ways of other knowledge:

One must be able to be with oneself before one can be with others. One must reflect on oneself, feel oneself, and develop a loving, caring intimate relationship with oneself (Pinar, 1975:378).

Other researchers also embraced notions of listening as an active, interpretive communication process (Fiumara, 1990: Levin, 1989). Levin (1989) claimed that personal growth and self-fulfillment was based upon the development of our capacity to listen. He suggested that dialogue requires "the capacity to be touched and moved by what one sees, and the capacity to listen carefully and with an open mind" (p. 2). Influenced by the writing of Heidegger, Levin (1989) distinguished four stages of self development in The Listening Self. Stage I ("Zugehörigkeit") is an a "pre-personal" and "pre-egoological" hearing (p. 46). The second stage (Gestell) is "hearing that is personal, adequately skilful in meeting the normal demands of interpersonal living" (p. 47). Levin described Stage III as a "way of living I am calling 'Self' ... an ongoing process of self-development, a structure of individuation creatively open to change" (p. 47). He referred to Stage IV (sas Horchen) as "hearkening" or "just listening... letting-go and letting-be." (p. 48), Levin contended that in order to achieve a just and democratic society, human beings must develop their capacity to listen.
Listening as Midwifery

Fiumara (1989) developed a notion of listening as midwifery, a notion that diametrically opposed passive receptivity. Listening was described as a maieutic [midwifery] process. The "maieutic" listener is one who brings forth meaning instead of receiving it.

In an over-restricted view of language . . . we could believe that we listen to someone because he is speaking, when originally he only spoke because someone consented to listen: maieutics (Fiumara, 1990:158).

Listening involves work and intention, the utmost concentration. Listening reawakens our "epistemic potential" (p. 83). Fiumara suggested that we may become "linguistically overwhelmed in proportion to our lack of listening awareness and ability" (p. 83). His warning is to remain vigilant so that we may hear without the fear of becoming the victim of what is said.

Listening and Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism refers to a "sociological tradition that traces its lineage to the Pragmatists, particularly John Dewey and George Herbert Mead (Becker & McCall, 1990:3). Symbolic interactists also trace their roots to the "Chicago School" and Robert E. Park, Herbert Blumer, Everett C. Hughes, and their students and successors. A symbolic interactionist world view posits that the capacity to interact symbolically is a fundamental condition of being human. "The ability to symbolize, to have culture, has made us what we are" (Richardson, 1990:26). A symbolic interactionist perspective asserts that: humans act toward the world based on subjective meanings; meanings arise
out of social interaction; and meanings are modified and shaped through an interpretive process of self-communication (Blumer, 1969; Wood, 1982; Becker & McCall, 1990).

Symbolic interactionists concern themselves with the creation of meaning and self through the use of symbols. A symbol is anything that represents actions, events, ideas, feelings, relationships, persons, processes, or objects. A symbol can be word, a diagram, a gesture, or an emblem that represents concrete and abstract aspects of our world. We use symbols to articulate our personal interpretations of events, situations, or people (Wood, 1982).

Wood (1982:6) contended that “we define symbolically our experiences and, in doing so, we construct the reality in which we live.” Our capacity to think and act symbolically enables us to order and make meaning of our experiences. In effect, we describe our reality and create our world with symbols. With symbols, we make sense of our past, our selves, and our relationships with others. Symbols play a critical role in coordinating present and future actions with others. We use symbols to articulate and negotiate meanings that emerge as we engage in social interactions and self-reflection.

Social interaction involves to, with, and for our own and others’ symbols is a critical aspect of social interaction. Pellowe (1986) contends that meaning and listening are intimately involved in the creation of ourselves.

[M]y being is the meanings I create, the meanings I create are me. To say that meaning arises in any other way than as me, is to deny my existence. To say that meaning arises in any other than as you . . . is to deny your existence (Pellowe, 1986:13).
As we listen to ourself and to others, we are creating meaning through social interaction. We shape and are shaped by the meanings we create.

Listening involves an awareness of our own symbols and their meanings, an openness to the symbols and meanings of others. Listening also requires a willingness to let go of the meanings that constitute the self that exists at a given moment in time. When we listen, we take a risk of being altered in social interaction (Maturana & Varela, 1987; Escheverria, 1990b). We risk the comfort of our old meanings that we have made from our selective way of seeing, hearing, and feeling (Wolvin & Coakley, 1992).

**Literacy: "Cultural Wisdom" and "Communicative Competence"**

A cultural perspective expands the notion of literacy beyond the mere acquisition of basic academic skills to the acquisition of "cultural wisdom, effective interpersonal communication skills, and a sense of loyalty, commitment, and identification with the goals of a cultural group" (Biggs, 1991:125). From this perspective, literacy is a communicative competence necessary in becoming a "member of a particular speech community and an established culture" (Purves, 1991:52).

A cultural notion of literacy is consistent with symbolic interactionism in suggesting that literacy involves competence in "manipulating symbols...that represent the values, beliefs, and norms of the culture...that incorporate the cultures representation of reality" (Ferdman, 1991:99). To become literate, we must learn the symbols and communication patterns, and develop our
symbolizing competence. This competence enables us to participate as members of a culture and create our own cultural identity (Heath, 1983; Ogbu, 1987; Akinasso, 1991).

A cultural perspective embraces a more comprehensive understanding of literacy as communicative competence in an established culture which includes:

. . . ways of perceiving, thinking, speaking, evaluating, and interacting that characterize a group of individuals and set them apart from others . . . a range of socially constructed practices, values, and competencies regarding reading and writing activities as well as certain ways of speaking (Akinasso, 1991:74).

While it does not explicitly address listening as part of the process of becoming literate, it creates an opportunity and a responsibility to examine the role of listening in becoming literate and creating cultural identity. This perspective raises questions about the absence of listening as a topic in literacy research. Those who approach literacy from a cultural perspective are aware of and sensitive to delicate and intimate relationships between cultural identity and literacy work. They recognize resistance to literacy by some minority cultures as a response to actual or perceived threats to cultural identity (Ogbu, 1987).

**Listening and Learning: Communication and Culture**

Human communication takes place in language, and we learn language primarily by listening. Therefore, it is largely through a process of listening that we become members of our culture. Communication and culture are dynamically and reciprocally interrelated. "Communication and culture reciprocally cause each other in an endless cycle of mutual causality,"
suggested Real (1989:40). By listening to and for patterns of speech (e.g.,
jargon, greetings, requests, jokes, chants, silences), rules (e.g., conversation
turn-taking, dress codes, etiquette, traffic regulations), and behaviors (e.g.,
saluting a commanding officer, driving on the right side of the road, caring for
children, asking for a date) we learn to become accepted members of particular
cultures. By listening we increase our competence in the explicit and implicit
knowledge of a culture. We listen to learn how to perform and interact within
our own culture.

Ethnography: Listening Culture

The aim of ethnography is to describe what members of a culture know
explicitly and implicitly about their culture (Spradley, 1980). As ethnography
seeks to explore, describe, and inscribe culture, listening plays an important
role in this process. Ethnographic research and listening seem an appropriate
match, a good fit. Listening, to a large extent, is what ethnography is all about.
Whether ethnographers are "talking culture" (Moerman, 1988) or "writing
culture" (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), exploring silence (Tannen & Saville-
Troike, 1985), or sulking (Gilmore, 1985), they are actively engaged in listening.

Listening is integral part of ethnography. Ethnographers are continually
listening. In fact, Clifford and Marcus (1986:12) make reference to the
"ethnographic ear." As participant observers and interviewers, they listen to
what members of particular cultures say and do to discover cultural knowledge
(Spradley, 1980). They also listen to the voices of other researchers. During
and after field research, ethnographers listen to themselves as they expand
fieldnotes and reflect in journals. When data collection is completed, they "re-listen" to massive amounts of data and inscribe what they have listened about a particular culture.

Richardson (1990) called attention to the importance of listening in his description of the ethnographer/informant relationship. He presented a notion of the ethnographer as the student who listens to and learns from the informant who teaches him/her the wisdom of another culture. Richardson suggested that ethnographers "purge" themselves of "Malinowskian primitive anthropology" or, in other words, accept informants and their culture on their terms (p. 25). When we do this, our informants appear clearly, distinctly, and ready to tell us:

... if we will but listen, to instruct us once again in the old, old lesson of being human. Maybe [they] can't tell us everything there is to know about [their] culture, but [they] can tell us something of the mystery of the human enterprise... All we need to do is to listen (Richardson, 1990:25, emphasis mine).

To listen in acceptance to the voices of informants is to listen to them as expert consultants of their culture.

Ethnography of Communication

The ethnography of communication has emerged relatively recently as a named field of inquiry. An exploration of the history of the field, its terminology, and the manner in which the name of the field has emerged, suggests an underlying assumption that "communication" is "speaking." Ethnography of communication was initially referred to, and to some extent is still referred to as ethnography of speaking.
Ethnography of speaking is a qualitative research methodology "directed toward the formulation of descriptive theories of speaking as a cultural system or as part of a cultural system" (Bauman & Sherzer, 1974:6). Ethnographies of speaking depart from the traditional western conception of a rule-governed language. The fundamental premise of this research is that the patterning of language, an organization of language that radically links the verbal and sociocultural conduct of speaking, extends far beyond laws of grammar to comprehend the use of language in social life. This research devotes itself to the "formulation of descriptive theories of speaking as a cultural system or part of a cultural system" (Bauman & Sherzer, 1974:6). Recognizing the absence of cultural description focused on speech behavior, this new field of inquiry devotes itself to the exploration and description of speech communities, language patterns, and communicative competence (these distinctions will be elaborated later).

Dell Hymes is attributed with "call[ing] into being" ethnography of speaking as a named field of inquiry with the publication in 1962 of "The Ethnography of Speaking" (Bauman & Sherzer, 1974). His essay, intended to stimulate and guide ethnographic research, merged themes and perspectives from anthropological, linguistic, and literary scholarship. Hymes emphasizes speaking as a "theoretically and practically crucial aspect of human social life" which he claimed had been missing both from linguistic descriptions and ethnographies. He simultaneously called attention to ethnography as "the
means of elucidating the patterns and functions of speaking in societies" (Bauman & Sherzer, 1974:3).

With much the same purpose in mind, Gumperz and Hymes replaced "speaking" with "communication" in their 1964 publication of the article, "The Ethnography of Communication," which further develops Hymes' original framework (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986). Over the next ten years a significant number of scholars conducted research on the ethnography of speaking and a definition of ethnography of speaking as a specific area of anthropological research began to emerge. By 1973, a significant amount of ethnographic literature on speaking was available and the first conference was held to present and discuss research findings. Bauman and Sherzer's (1974) published a compilation of this research entitled *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*.

Slightly more than a decade later, Gumperz and Hymes (1986) published *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*. Their goal was to integrate in a single volume the "major directions of research on the social basis of verbal communication" (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986: v). The title and introduction suggest a broader and more inclusive field of inquiry by proposing "the interactional approach to language behavior" as the "unifying theme" (p. 1). The focus is exclusively on speech; listening is not an entry in the subject index.

Gumperz and Hymes (1986) referred to language usage as what is said on a particular occasion and how it is phrased. These same researchers also
described communicative competence as what speakers need to know to communicate effectively in "culturally significant settings" (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986:vi). As they described it, the role of ethnographer was to deal with "speakers as members of communities" (p. vi). This research did not acknowledge the role of listening in language or communication, but assumes that communication is speaking. The use of such terminology as speech community, speech events, and speech acts to refer to the cultural context, situations, and units of observation also strongly suggest that listening is not an explicit concern for this research field.

Coulthard's (1977:32) early definition of speech community as "a group which shares both linguistic resources and rules for interaction and interpretation" is an opening to raise questions concerning listening as a part of interaction and interpretation. Hymes (1971) also created a space for listening as a topic for ethnography of communication when he indicates that speaking a particular language is not sufficient to qualify one as a member of a speech community. He pointed out that variation in rules of interaction and interpretation occurring within a single language places speakers in different speech communities.

Ethnographers of communication have not explicitly concerned themselves with listening. These researchers have accumulated "information and insight into verbal practices of human groups" and raised "new questions about the very place of speaking in human interaction" (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986:vi). Interestingly, they have scarcely research listening, the primary
means that members of speech communities learn language patterns and styles of speech. Researching "the social basis of verbal communication" has continued to be a major goal of ethnographies of communication; however, this field of research has not adequately addressed listening as an explicit research topic (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986:vii).

**Ethnography of Schooling**

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, anthropologists were conducting ethnographic research in education (Spindler & Spindler, 1982). Since then, ethnographic research conducted by anthropologists and educators has enriched and expanded our awareness and understanding of the social interactions that influence learning in school (Heath, 1978; Spindler & Spindler, 1982; Gilmore, 1985; Fishman, 1988).

Spindler (1982) distinguishes "ethnography of schooling" from a broader category of research, "educational ethnography."

"[E]ducational ethnography" refers to the study of any or all educational processes, whether related to a "school" or not. "Ethnography of schooling" is therefore a little narrower in that it refers to educational and enculturative processes that are related to schools and intentional schooling, though this concept leaves room for studies of playgrounds, play groups, peer groups, patterns of violence in schools, and other aspects of school-related life (Spindler, 1982:2).

Spindler further suggests that ethnographic training is significantly beneficial for those involved in schooling. The process of "doing ethnography" provides the opportunity to develop greater sensitivity to the process of learning and the perspectives of those engaged in the process.
Freire (1990) called attention to the importance of dialogue in education which he explained as an “act of creation . . . an encounter among men and women who name the world” (p. 71). He claimed that persons name and transform the world by speaking. Assuming a Western cultural philosophic position which has traditionally viewed listening as automatic, passive, and less socially relevant than speaking, Freire does not explicitly acknowledge the role of listening as “true education” (Escheverria, 1994, 1990; Fiumara, 1990; Purdy, 1989; McGregor & White, 1986).

Freire (1993) vehemently challenged the traditional role of educators, “to speak to the people about our own view of the world” and contended instead that educators must “dialogue with the people about their view and ours” (Freire, 1993:77). However, Freire did not acknowledge that, unless we listen, there will be no dialogue. We cannot dialogue with others to learn about their view of the world unless we listen to the voice. Additionally, unless others listen, we cannot tell them about our world. Dialogue involves mutual speaking and listening. Learning takes place through the dialogic social interactions between and among teachers and learners. Through dialogue teachers and learners create, share, and negotiate meanings.

**Intersecting Ethnography of Communication and Ethnography of Schooling**

Some researchers identify themselves as *ethnographers of communication* (Heath, 1983; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985; Gilmore, 1985)
and others as *ethnographers of schooling* (Spindler & Spindler, 1982). These overlapping fields of inquiry have opened up new areas of investigation for exploring the ways that literacy, communication, and culture are related. This study, situated at the intersection of these two fields, seeks to explore listening, a relatively unexplored topic, in either of these fields of research. An ethnography of listening in this adult literacy setting will explore the role of listening in communication and in the acquisition of literacy and culture.
CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:
ASKING NEW QUESTIONS AND EXPLORING NEW MEANINGS

Persons with different methodologies get different answers because they ask different questions and because they treat different events as data (Dance, 1982:3).

Chapter Three discusses ethnography and the appropriateness of this research methodology for investigating listening and for addressing the questions posed in this study. Quantitative researchers, which have dominated the field of listening for decades, have made valuable contributions to the field of listening. They have called attention to listening as a legitimate area of research and illuminated the value of this ubiquitous and obscured language art. While acknowledging the work of previous researchers, this study seeks neither to define, clarify, predict, or measure listening.

The fundamental questions raised in this research ask what listening means, how listening happens, and what function listening plays in becoming literate in a natural educational setting. The aim of this study is to explore adult learners' implicit and explicit knowledge of listening and to describe how listening happens from their points of view.

The setting is a writing class which is situated in a southern, inner-city adult learning center, Lakota Center. This study focuses on the class as a culture (Spindler, 1982). The members of the culture are African American women who were participants in a welfare reform program called Project Independence (PI). The study explores what women in the Writing Class knew,
explicitly and implicitly, about listening. In other words, a major goal included learning and describing women's "cultural wisdom" as it related to listening.

Ethnography offers an appropriate methodology to address the fundamental questions this study poses. As an ethnography of listening, this research seeks descriptions and socially-constructed meanings of listening rather than definitions, predictions, objective truths, or scientific facts about listening. As an ethnographer of listening, my goal is to discover what women in a particular classroom culture do, say, and make that involve listening (Spradley, 1980). Instead of dealing with input/output, correlations, variables, controlling hypotheses, statistical models, or computer programs to analyze data, I dialogued with women, explored their oral and written texts for emerging themes, and sought to uncover women's tacit and explicit knowledge regarding listening (Fishman, 1988).

This ethnography of listening describes aspects of a classroom culture and the particular behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and values of its members (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Becker, 1986; Spradley, 1980). Using transcripts, fieldnotes, and journals as data, I described an aspect of the cultural knowledge and communicative practices necessary to perform successfully as an accepted member of the Writing Class culture.

As a research methodology, ethnography provided a cluster of basic assumptions most compatible with the theoretical perspective and epistemological orientation to frame this study (Dance, 1982). Ethnography
provided flexible methods and methodology to ask and respond to the
questions this research posed. Shimahara (1988) stated:

[E]thnography is not a set of rigid rules shared by all anthropologists, but
a research perspective, assumptions about culture, and an
epistemological orientation that are adhered to by ethnographers (p. 79).

Ethnography offered a research perspective that did not require "a pretense of
knowing" (Fishman, 1988:7). This perspective was consistent with my research
assumptions and goals. As an ethnographer, I began this study genuinely
admitting, "I don't know what listening is here." From this position, I was open
to learn what listening meant and how it happened in the Writing Class
(Escheverria, 1990).

Research Strategy

Ethnography offered, but was not limited to, a method or "a set of
techniques for generating data" for this research (Dance, 1982:7). In this study,
I relied heavily upon three major ethnographic research strategies to address
the questions this study posed. These strategies included participant
observation, interviewing, and the collection of cultural artifacts (Spradley,

Selecting A Research Site: Lakota Center

Lakota Adult Learning Center is the site of an inner-city, adult literacy
program. Lakota was located in an area of the city known as North Rivers
Bend. Like many urban areas, North Rivers Bend had changed significantly
over the last several decades. The place, the people, and the times had
changed dramatically from what I remembered from my summer visit in 1962. The once predominately white, blue collar neighborhood had become a predominantly black, lower class neighborhood. Many of the quiet streets that I cruised as a teenager had become known locations of drug deals and other violent crime. Lakota Elementary School, a white school in the 1960s, was closed in the 1980s and reopened in the early 1990s as Lakota Adult Learning Center, a literacy program which served African American women.

Established in 1991, Lakota Center was the educational component of Project Independence. A major goal of PI was to reduce government financial assistance administered through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The program's slogan, "Breaking the Welfare Cycle," appeared on the brochures and literature distributed about the program. PI contracted with the local school system for the Lakota's staff and physical facility. Staff salaries, educational materials and equipment, and maintenance were entirely funded by PI.

Lakota's educational program, like many literacy programs, provided adult basic education (ABE), preparation for the General Educational Development (GED) testing, and enrichment for students who planned to enter vocational training or higher education. The center was opened year round and followed public school system holiday schedule. Lakota's enrollment varied from 65 to 135, but the daily attendance was generally much lower. Attendance and retention were problematic at Lakota as it was in most literacy centers.
Lakota Center staff, students, and curriculum differed significantly from the adult education programs in the area. The staff was larger than most literacy centers in the area. Lakota employed a project manager, six certified teachers, one secretary, and a janitor. Several consultants, including a social worker and a psychologist, were also contracted for instruction. No other adult learning center in the area had as many certified teachers.

Adult literacy programs are generally open to the public; however, only Project Independence participants enrolled at Lakota Center. The student population also differed from most adult literacy programs. With the exception of one black male and five white females, all of Lakota’s students were African American women who ranged from 16 to 60 years of age.

For most literacy programs, attendance is voluntary with the exception of court ordered attendance as parole or probation conditions. Attendance was compulsory at Lakota Center. Students were required to attend class 20 hours per week; however, there was an unspoken rule which was part of the cultural knowledge of Lakota Center: Sixteen is all you need. Those who failed to adhere to this rule were subject to sanctioning. Sanctioning meant temporary suspension from the program which included partial or total termination of welfare benefits.

Adult literacy programs generally have no restrictions on the length of time for a student to reach educational goals, which may or may not include earning a GED. In contrast, a Lakota student was required to make sufficient academic progress within an appropriate time frame as determined by the
student's case worker with input from her teacher. Two years was the maximum time ordinarily given to complete the program, regardless of a woman's initial academic ability. Academic ability and progress assessments were measured by scores women obtained on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Women who did not make sufficient progress during a two year period were sanctioned (temporarily suspended) or assigned to a different program that was intended for the less academically adept. Among the ladies, it was common knowledge that anyone assigned that program, which focused on janitorial training, was considered mentally handicapped.

In addition to AFDC assistance for housing (rent vouchers), food (food stamps), and health care (Medicaid cards), PI participants received funds for transportation and child care expenses. Transportation expenses were provided in the form of bus passes for women who had access to public transportation systems. Women who owned or borrowed a vehicle were reimbursed per mile. Women who carpooled were allowed so much per mile to pay drivers for fuel.

Women were reimbursed for childcare provided by an individual or a daycare facility. An on-site daycare program was located behind the main building in what was formerly a school cafeteria. The program provided child care for potty-trained pre-schoolers. Mothers who brought their children there were required to participate in a parenting program. The program included spending one hour daily in a support/discussion group that was facilitated by a certified, full-time social worker. A second hour, called Parent and Child...
Together [PAC] time, was a period of time for a mother and her child to work
and play together. PAC time included lessons that had been developed
around planned weekly thematic units.

Some women paid a family member or friend that they trusted to care for
their children. These women were reimbursed monthly for child care at a
specified hourly rate. Many of these women were reluctant to leave their
children with strangers because of their own childhood experiences with
physical and/or sexual abuse.

The Curriculum. Each woman was assigned to one of five self-
contained classrooms based upon her reading score on the TABE (Test of
Adult Basic Education). Women scoring at the fifth grade level or below were
assigned to one of two ABE classes where teachers provided materials and
instruction in basic reading and arithmetic. Women scoring above fifth grade
level in reading were assigned to one of three GED classes where they
prepared to take the GED examination. When students enrolled, they were
assigned to a regular teacher who provided language, social studies, science,
and mathematics instruction in a self-contained classroom setting. Students
from all five classes attended a writing class at least once during the week at
times designated by their regular teacher. Students and staff referred to this
class as "writing" or "Miz Sonders' class." The Writing Class, as I refer to it, is
the place where this study was focused.

The Writing Class. The Writing Class was more than a classroom; it
was a unique culture. It was a place where the lives and dialogues of a special
group of women overlapped and intersected. The Writing Class was defined by a group of women and the space and time they worked together to become more literate. In this classroom culture, women learned through dialogue. They listened and told stories, created and shared written texts, and learned new meanings and negotiated old ones. Women worked individually and collaboratively to complete the work necessary for becoming a literate member of the Writing Class culture.

Women at Lakota Center were either referred to as teachers or as ladies. Staff and students referred to women enrolled at the Center collectively as ladies. A brief paragraph written by one of the ladies illustrated the use of these labels. The following appeared on the cover of *Lakota Notes*, Lakota Center's bimonthly newsletter:

> We are a very unique group of young ladies, because in each of us there are many different talents, each one special in its own way. Therefore, we, as a unique group of young ladies, should learn how to respect each others' differences and similarities and learn how to work together as a team. When you or someone on your team is not able to function at her best, neither will the team be at its best. That is what we, as a unique group of young ladies, are all about!

Ladies distinguished themselves from Mr. Meaux, the project manager, Miss Lois, the secretary, and Mr. Drake, the custodian. The teachers were Miss Fanella, Miss Block, Miss "C," Miss "D," and "Miz Sonders." No one referred to teachers as ladies. Teachers occasionally referred to each other as "Miss" So-and-So, particularly in the presence of the ladies.

I was uncomfortable with the term ladies. Something in a teacher's tone of voice or the context in which she used the term sounded condescending at
first. In reflecting on my responses to what I heard, I realized that I had ascribed contradictory meanings to the term ladies which came from previous personal experiences of the word. One meaning emerged from a childhood experience ("You don't say black lady . . ."). The other meaning emerged from my recent exposure to feminist thought. Both experiences, which appear in Chapter One, illustrate the influence of my historical and personal backgrounds on what I listened and what meanings I ascribed to the term (Escheverria, 1990). These two experiences also suggest how what we listen changes over time.

To an outsider, the purpose of The Writing Class was to prepare students at Lakota Center for the written component of the GED examination which involved writing a coherent, well-organized, grammatically correct essay. The Writing Class is a composite of three classes taught once a week from 10 a.m. to noon and noon to 2 p.m. Eight to eighteen students, assigned by their regular teachers, attended each class. All ladies were required to attend class once each week, but they were allowed to attend more often.

When students at Lakota said they were "going to writing class," they were going to spend two hours writing, reading, speaking, and listening with Sophia Sonders, the writing teacher. In class, Sophia encouraged students to express themselves using both oral and written communication. She used open or guided discussions to set a context for class writing activities. Writing activities included essays, letters, poetry, and testimonies. Students shared
their work orally, included it in Lakota's bi-monthly newsletter, or kept their work privately in a writing folder.

The Women. Sophia, a journalism major, holds a Masters of Arts in Teaching. She was the only part-time instructor at Lakota Center. Like the other teachers, she was certified in adult education. In addition to her responsibilities as a writing instructor, she also supervised the preparation of a bi-monthly student newsletter, *Lakota Notes*. Sophia is African American, married, and in her mid-forties. She is concerned with related issues of cultural identity and resistance in literacy education. She also expresses concern for the representation and mis-representation of African Americans in the media.

Gaining Access to the Lakota Center

For this study, I relied most heavily on participant observations and interviews to explore what listening was and how it happened in the Writing Class (Spradley, 1980). I audiotaped interviews and more than a dozen classroom observations. Although taped classroom observations were not transcribed in their entirety, they were used to obtain language samples of women's classroom interactions and were also helpful in filling in gaps while expanding fieldnotes. Replaying and adjusting speed or volume sometimes allowed me to clarify words, phrases, or sounds that were unclear during an observation. Taped observations also allowed me to tune-in to peripheral sounds, conversations, and events that I had intentionally tuned-out in the classroom during focused observations.
Roles of the Researcher

I conducted research in a variety of roles at Lakota Center. Each role provided a different view of the center, the women, the Writing Class, and a different level of involvement a participant observer. While I moved from a visiting graduate student to a full-time researcher not only did my level of involvement change, but also my parking space.

"No one has a reserved parking place here," Mr. Meaux explained on my first visit to the center. He was very proud of and emphatic about Lakota's non-hierarchical, non-reserved parking arrangement. Staff and students parked in the large paved lot behind the center. Parking was on a first-come-first-served basis. Visitors parked in a smaller lot in the front of the main building. The lot was clearly marked "Visitors Only."

Visiting Graduate Student. I was simply a graduate student curious about an unusual name of a unique adult literacy program. I was also searching for a site for my dissertation research. In July 1993, I began as a detached observer with very limited knowledge and limited access to Lakota Center. After three visits there, I had met the project manager, the secretary, and two of the teachers. Mr. Meaux provided a guided tour of the center, a brief history and philosophy of the program, and permission to do research there.

Researcher/Reporter. Mr. Meaux formally introduced me to the staff in September, 1993. Until that time, I did not observe in individual classrooms or interview teachers or students according to his request. Between July and
September, I took photographs of the site and of the surrounding neighborhood. I talked to the secretary, the janitors, and found a strategic location to observe and listen. The black vinyl couch in the foyer became my listening post and my desk. I learned over time that this was a place where I could listen to the heartbeat and feel the pulse of Lakota Center.

The responsibilities of my assistantship included working with the Literacy Education Project (LEP) and writing articles for Litnet, the LEP newsletter. As a reporter for Litnet, I learned a lot about the center from insiders' and outsiders' perspectives. Lakota Center received local and national recognition for its innovative and unique adult education program. I had conversations and conducted interviews with teachers, students, the director of adult education, case managers, Project Independence directors, and even an assistant to the United States Secretary of Health and Human Resources.

Because interesting things were always happening at Lakota Center and I spent so much time there, I was generally assigned to or volunteered to write articles about the center. As a reporter for Litnet, I investigated not only happenings at the center but also PI and the Family Learning Center (FLC). The FLC was a day care facility on campus that was funded by several local organizations, agencies, three state universities, and in part by the Toyota Foundation. Lakota Center and the FLC were involved in a collaborative program that was recognized by the National Center for Family Literacy.
Well-known personalities were always showing up to evaluate the program or to celebrate special activities and special functions at the center. Some of these personalities included the governor, a nationally renowned family literacy scholar, and the president of Toyota North America. An assistant of U. S. Secretary of Health and Human Resources selected Lakota for a site visit to inquire about its participants' views on welfare reform. Interviewing individuals and observing special functions allowed me to learn more about the Center, its aims, and functions from the perspectives of several persons outside the center.

**Adjunct Instruction/Staff Development.** As a graduate assistant working with the LEP, I was assigned to two projects at the center: staff development with teachers and paraprofessionals and instruction in wordprocessing for students. Staff development involved meeting once a week with teachers and paraprofessionals to introduce whole language as a philosophy and participatory literacy education as an alternative approach to individualized instruction traditionally used in adult education. For two semesters, I met with the staff once a week for two hours. With another LEP staff member, I also co-facilitated three wordprocessing courses for women at the center.

**Volunteer Paraprofessional.** At the end of my first year of research at the Lakota Center, the three paraprofessionals were let go because of budget cuts by PI. While a very unfortunate loss for the students and staff, the cut opened up an opportunity for me to work several hours a day. During this time,
I assisted with various classroom tasks: checking students' work, tutoring, monitoring computer-assisted individualized instruction, or sometimes just being that authoritative body required to be in the classroom when a teacher was in a conference with a student's case manager.

As a volunteer paraprofessional, I worked more closely with students one-to-one, learned their names, and got to know them better. Likewise, students got to know me better. This volunteer work served several purposes in addition to providing another perspective to research listening. First, as a researcher I felt that I was giving back something, even though it was in a very small way, to the teachers and students for all that they had shared with me. In this role, it was easier to improve my rapport with students and to build trust. As a paraprofessional, I found myself in the midst of a space where boundaries between teacher and student blurred and overlapped. I felt very comfortable listening from there.

Substitute Teacher. My role as a paraprofessional ended abruptly when Mr. Meaux offered me an opportunity to substitute for approximately four weeks during the summer of 1994. His offer was not only a marvelous research opportunity, but also an answer to a prayer. I received fifteen dollars an hour for six hours a day. Ninety dollars was a welcomed miracle!

I had assumed that substituting would be a rather simple task based on my eighteen years teaching experience, my previous work in adult education, almost a year of research under my belt in a variety of researcher roles. Without being aware of it, I had become a bit arrogant about what I knew about
teaching and learning at Lakota Center. As it turned out, there was much more to learn. Substitute teaching was, by far, the most challenging, demanding, and enlightening research role I played.

I was not prepared for the drastic shift in my relationships with the ladies. As old habits of control returned for me, the distance between us grew. My responsibility to teach replaced my aim to learn. After a couple of days, I realized the tremendous energy it took to listen, respond, and attend to more than a dozen voices simultaneously making requests, asking questions, expecting immediate answers, and demanding my attention from 8:30 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. each day. The fifteen-minute morning break and 30-minute lunch break proved to be insufficient time to recharge my run-down batteries.

"Just Jennifer". One morning, I was duplicating materials for Sophia in the copy room that adjoins the secretary’s office. Miss Fanella came into Lois’s office to get a form. When she heard the sound of the copy machine, she asked who was in the copy room. Lois responded, “Oh, it’s just Jennifer.” At that moment I realized I had begun to assume a new role. I refer to this role as “Just Jennifer.” The role was neither permanent nor continuous, but it was certainly the most comfortable. In this role, I could participate fully or not at all. As women proceeded with the routine of literacy work, I could take part in discussions or become silent and invisible. In this role, I listened to women talk about delicate racial issues and express anger and resentment toward “white folks” without feeling that I was a target of their emotions. I was closest to the
women and closest to membership in the Writing Class when women allowed me to be "Just Jennifer."

Conducting Participant Observations

Conducting participant observations was similar in many ways to what I did when I encountered any unfamiliar social situation (Spradley, 1980). I felt like a stranger until I learned the tacit rules of behavior of the new culture I encountered at Lakota Center. Until I learned the appropriate language and communicative practices, I felt functionally illiterate. Careful observation and listening were required to learn what I need to know to perform successfully in this new situation.

The type of participant observations I conducted during this research varied according to my degree of involvement with women and in the literacy activities I observed. The degree of my involvement ranged along a continuum that Spradley (1980) described as nonparticipation, passive participation, moderate participation, active participation, and complete participation. My initial involvement as a participant observer was passive participation. There were two main reasons for this. First, Mr. Meaux requested that I not observe in classrooms or interview anyone until he formally introduced me to the staff. Secondly, establishing rapport with women took time. Women needed time to determine who I was and where I was "coming from" before they allowed me to listen to what they had to say. Some suspected I was a spy from the Office of Family Support. One woman accused me of being a reporter from National Geographic, because I made her feel like she was in a zoo.
I also participated in numerous events with the students and staff that took place outside of the classroom setting: the governor's visit to the site; a reception for the head of a foreign car manufacturing company that funded the program; a Christmas program; the graduation at a local high school of those students from the center who successfully completed their GED examinations; and a Thanksgiving dinner with one of the students and her family.

Research in the Writing Class began with grand tour observations as Spradley (1980) suggested. I participated minimally with women in the room and focused on descriptions of the overall setting. I noted recorded listening behaviors and noted the terminology women used when they talked about listening. A question which guided my inquiry was: What is happening here that involves listening? I participated more actively and conducted focused observations after selecting four key informants.

Spradley (1980) suggested that ethnographers observe several dimensions of social situations. The dimensions of the listening situation that I targeted for observation included:

- **space**, the physical place(s), distance between persons interacting, spatial positions or change of positions during interaction;

- **participants**, persons involved in interactions (age, sex, race height, size), dress, posture, body movements, gestures, voice quality and volume;

- **objects**, physical objects present (books, tables, chairs, television, computers, beepers); **acts**, single actions performed by participants (speaking, writing, eating, walking, singing, watching);

- **activity**, the set of related acts or actions (greetings, departing, invitations, arguments, "signifying," "playing the dozens," etc.).
event, a set of related activities that participants carry out (class, breaks, meals, office visits);

time, the sequencing of events taking place over time (length of an event, continuous or discrete intervals, patterns of occurrence);
goal, what participants are trying to accomplish; and

feeling, the emotions felt and expressed (as described by learners, instructors, other participants or inferred by the researcher).

I focused classroom observations on women's interactions in pairs and in small and large groups to discover particular patterns of listening behaviors and terminology used to refer to listening. Questions I used to guide my observations were: Who is listening to whom? What are they doing when they are listening? How do they speak and what do they say about listening?

The observations focused mainly on listening situations within the classroom setting. I conducted regular, three-hour observations on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday of each week. The three-hour time frame included 30 minutes prior to and following each two-hour class. The half-hour period before and after observations provided time to schedule interviews, ask questions, or clarify what I had observed. I expanded field notes after each observation to take full advantage of immediate recall. I also observed women's interactions in hallways, the snack area, the foyer, the secretary's office, parking lots, etc.

As the research proceeded, I began to arrive earlier to “just listen” (Levin, 1989:48). I listened to the latest happenings at the center and in North Rivers Bend as discussed in the secretary's office. Before class, I spent time with Sophia while she prepared the day's literacy activities or assembled the
latest newsletter. Ladies often came to class early for feedback on a writing project or to ask a pressing question. Sometimes, Sophia and I sat in silence both utilizing the quiet time to write or reflect. I usually wrote in my journal, or reviewed and expanded previous fieldnotes.

**Selecting Key Informants**

The criteria I used to select interviewees included: an interviewee's willingness to participate in audiotaped interviews (as evidenced by written consent), the length of time a woman participated in the program, length of time the woman anticipated being enrolled, and time available for interviews and observation. Guthrie and Hall (1984) suggested that key informants be knowledgeable about their culture, and articulate in their language, and competent in reporting their own behavior. I considered each suggestion when selecting four women as key informants.

**Conducting Interviews**

If you assume that humans interpret others' behavior and respond to those interpretations, you cannot limit yourself to observations of behavior in your research. If you do, you will be criticized as generating data that do not count as tests of your theory (Dance, 1982:9).

Interviews were important data sources. Some interviews were formal, planned, and structured; however many were informal, spontaneous, and flexible. Both yielded rich data about what listening was and how it happened in the Writing Class. During interviews, I gathered information about what women knew explicitly and implicitly about listening and simultaneously observed their patterns of listening behaviors.
Planned Interviews. I planned to conduct a series of three "in-depth, phenomenologically-based interviews" with four informants (Seidman, 1991:9). A basic assumption of in-depth interviewing research is that "the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience" (Seidman, 1991:4). Seidman suggested a five to seven days interval between each of three interviews which are conducted over a period of three to four weeks. This interview process provided time for interviewees to "mull over the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection between the two" (p. 14). The interview process also decreased the possibility of idiosyncratic interviews that may result from a "bad" day or mood. Adapting Seidman's process for planned interviews, I used the following framework.

Interview #1: Establishing Context. The purpose of this interview was to establish the context of each woman's listening experience and to focus on past listening experiences. In this interview, I invited each woman to tell about herself and her listening experiences in classroom settings up to the present time. The request that guided this interview was: "Thinking back upon times when you were young, tell me about some experiences that you remember vividly when you were listening to someone or someone was listening to you."

My intention was to elicit vivid and detailed descriptions of occasions which impacted each woman's life as she listened or was being listened to. I used questions such as "Can you tell me what you were thinking then when that happened?", "How you were feeling when that happened?", "What was happening around you at the time?" to probe more in-depth descriptions.
Interview #2: Eliciting Details of Listening Experiences. The purpose of this interview was to elicit concrete or explicit details of the women's present experiences of listening in the classroom. In this interview, I asked each woman to describe in detail of her own verbal and nonverbal behaviors when she listened. I asked for similar details of the behaviors she observed in others who were listening. Their descriptions revealed the criteria each woman used to conclude when someone was listening. The criteria included presence and absence of behaviors (speech, nonverbal gesturing, movement, and posture, etc.).

The request that guided the second interview was: "Tell me about some of your experiences in this class when you were listening or someone else was listening." (I did not want to exclude descriptions of experience involving listening to yourself or listening to others listening.) I used questions similar to those posed in Interview #1 to elicit more detailed descriptions of listening experiences.

Interview #3: Reflecting on the Meaning of Listening. The purpose of the third interview was to elicit "intellectual and emotional connections" between each woman's personal life and her work as a teacher or a student (Seidman, 1991:12). I invited each woman to consider how her previous listening experiences influenced her current understandings of listening. This interview was "a combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led the participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of their present experience" (Seidman, 1991:12). The aim of this interview was to
create an opportunity for each woman to reflect freely and openly about how she listened in the classroom, how she expected others to listen, and what her implicit and explicit assumptions were about listening.

I opened the third interview with:

You've told me about some of your experiences listening as a young girl, and then some your experiences listening in your writing class now. We've spent a lot of time together talking about what it means 'to listen.' Tell me what you think about listening now.

I asked additional questions to probe further into the women's current understandings: "Has anything changed about how you listen or decide when others are listening to you?" and "Do you have any new questions about listening?" Women responded to direct questions about how they knew a person was listening and provided explicit descriptions of listening behaviors. They also told stories about special listeners, early listening experiences, and listening experiences in previous school settings.

**Spontaneous Interviews.** I had planned to schedule all interviews on Wednesdays and Fridays one hour prior to classroom observations (8:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.). By the fall of 1994, I had conducted six interviews following this schedule; however, when three of the women I was interviewing left the center without notice, my plans were abruptly altered. Adding to my difficulties, Mr. Meaux asked me not to conduct interviews during class time. My time was limited to the fifteen-minute morning break, the half-hour lunch, before 8:30 a.m., and after 2:30 p.m. Few women were available before or after school. Morning breaks and lunch time were too short. Doris Ann and I met
immediately after school at her home so that she was at home when her children returned from school. Emelda and I met on week-ends and continued our conversations in-between those times through a journal that we shared.

Women's lives did not fit into my neatly-planned interview schedule. The one week interval between interviews was impossible with La Doi. We had completed two fascinating interviews before she left for the Thanksgiving holidays, but she did not return to Lakota until after the first of the year. She had no phone and was reluctant to tell me why she left. When she returned, however, she was ready for and excited about her last interview. With Sophia and Doris Ann, I remained relatively close to Seidman's suggested time frame. With La Doi and Emelda, I completed the interviews in whatever time frame evolved.

In addition to individual interviews, I conducted group interviews. Some of them were prearranged and others occurred spontaneously during observations in or out of the classroom setting. Gumperz and Hymes (1986) recommend that ethnographers concentrate on group interviews more frequently than individual interviews to generate natural speech.

Although it would seem difficult to induce people to speak normally while a tape recorder is operating, it has been found that when speakers are interviewed in groups the social obligations among members frequently lead them to disregard the recording instrument and to behave as if they were unobserved (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986:25).

In group interviews, I could introduce a topic, then step back to observe patterns of listening behaviors in women's interaction. I could also shift my level of participation from detached observer to full participant. I also probed
Further into topics that emerged in the natural flow of dialogue. Taking notes and writing verbatim speech was generally not as obvious in group interviews.

For a while, I had unlimited access to classrooms and students. Arranging the time and the space for interviews was a relatively simple task. Classroom #6 was convenient and available except during lunch and breaks. Teachers allowed ladies to meet with me during class time when they were unavailable before or after school. For example, La Doi and I conducted all of our interviews in Classroom #6, because she could not meet with me before or after school. Sophia's busy schedule at the center did not allow for lengthy interviews on campus. Most of Sophia's interviews took place at her home.

Before beginning my first interviews with Emelda and Doris Ann, Mr. Meaux asked me not to interview the ladies during class time. He expressed his concern about women's hesitancy to refuse to be interviewed. His other concern related to my interrupting their work. I inferred that someone had complained. His comment caused me to question whether I gave women room to decline my request for an interview. I became very concerned that I had imposed my research agenda on teachers and students. I had assumed, perhaps mistakenly, that women felt they were free to decline my requests for interviews. For several days, I made no attempt to arrange interviews. Finally, I began to arrange interviews at 7:30 a.m. or after 2:30 pm.

The new arrangements worked well with Doris Ann who was intent on minimizing the time it took for her to get a GED. She left the center at 12:30 p.m. each day. She chose to schedule interviews between between 12:30 p.m.
and 2:30 p.m. when her youngest son returned from school. We conducted all interviews in her home, which was less than five minutes from Lakota Center.

Interviews with Emelda were the most difficult to schedule. Because of her responsibilities for her two-year old son, she was not eager to conduct interviews before or after school. Mrs. Fanella allowed us to schedule several half-hour interviews in a semi-private corner of the classroom from 8:30 a.m to 9:00 a.m., because the thirty minutes of class was time allotted for reading the newspaper. A result of our limited face-to-face time together was more time spent writing and conversing in a listening journal. Emelda referred to our written dialogues as "write/talk."

Data Sources

Primary data sources for this study were transcripts of interviews and classroom dialogues and fieldnotes. Other data sources were my field journals, women's listening journals, videos, and listening artifacts. A local television station produced a five-minute clip of the Writing Class. The clip was made for an adult education graduate course at the university. Five other videos, filmed by either Mr. Meaux, one of the ladies, or me, were also sources of data for this study.

Transcriptions

Transcribing audio taped interviews and classroom dialogue was perhaps the most time-consuming and tedious part of my fieldwork, but also the most enlightening. Each one-hour interview took approximately six hours to transcribe. I included details of time, space, and women's personal
appearance, voice quality, and nonverbal behaviors during the interview. Capturing women’s meanings involved more than descriptions of the place, time, and circumstances surrounding the interview setting. I used transcription conventions of discourse analysis to mark pauses, show emphasis, overlapping speech, and phatic expressions (huh, uhuh, hummm, etc.). My aim was to reconstruct, as closely as possible, the context of the interview so that readers could “see and hear” the women and their words in order to understand their meanings.

A research goal was to present women’s meanings in their voices. Realizing that I could only approach, and not achieve, this goal, I elected strategies and techniques that brought me closest to my this goal. I described in detail the context and characteristics of women’s dialogue. Using the transcription conventions of discourse analysis, I represented pauses, interruptions, overlapping speech, tone, and non-verbal gesturing (Tannen, 1989; Heath, 1983; Coulthard, 1977). Articulating women’s meanings in their voices was a tedious and delicate task. Transcribing classroom dialogues and interviews brought me to question the possibility of producing verbatim speech.

I listened closely to women’s Black dialect and discovered that I was not able to produce in writing the sounds that I heard (Williams, 1992). Certain words like “wuz” for was, "listenin'” for listening, or “tawk” for talk were not difficult. I discovered that I did not have the linguistic competence in many cases to reproduce the sounds I heard. Reproducing the word with the conventional spelling would have been a simple task. It would have been much
simpler for me and for the reader to use hum instead of "hahm" or I’m instead of "ahm;" however, I wanted to capture the sounds that created the music of women's voices. These sounds were the background music that conveyed such rich meanings to me, the listener.

I attempted to write women's verbatim speech during the interviews to assist me with later transcriptions. My notes proved to be extremely valuable particularly when I was not able to begin transcribing tapes immediately; however, written notes sometimes contradicted what I listened on the audio tapes. Shifting voices to another time and another space sometimes altered what I heard. From my experiences with this shift in meaning, I became increasingly aware of how fragile meaning was. Women's words had not changed from the time I heard them in person to the time I had listened to the tape, but what I listened had.

Just as my voice often interrupted women's voices in person, my voice also interrupted them in print. For example, in listening to La Doi's interviews and class discussions, I became accustomed to her strong Black dialect. I observed myself anticipating certain pronunciations: "dey" [they], "deh" [the], "pazentin" [presenting], and "ahm" [I'm]. At times, I discovered that she had not pronounced a word in Black dialect, but I had written it that way.

Fieldnotes and Field Journal

I wrote fieldnotes in composition books that eventually became another appendage. My fieldnotes included detailed physical descriptions of people and places, the time, a nonverbal behavior. I included floor plans, placement of
furniture, and items on the wall. As often as possible, I expanded fieldnotes immediately following observations to take advantage of my immediate recall. I began fieldnotes noting the date, time, and generally something about my physical appearance and mood.

2-13-95
Monday
8:45 a.m.

Context: Cold weather, but dry. Wearing blue southwest print shirt, light blue jeans, denim work shirt as jacket, navy socks and white tennies. Ko-ko-peli earrings and dancers' necklace. Mood: self-doubtful, resigned about my capacity to listen, capacity to research—virtuosity at work in the collapsing of domains. On the verge of tears.

Sophia is at the computer, wearing the lovely pink skirt, purple overblouse, and mixed print scarf of orange, pink, purple, with gold threads throughout. I cussed and discussed my conversation last night on the phone. Communication is so complex. Sophia shared that she had observed times when she wondered why I was so indirect in some of my questions. I will learn more about that. I've asked her to stop and point out those times to me so that I can be aware...

I included personal information to become aware of any influence of my appearance and mood might have on my interactions with women or my interpretations of their words or actions. Seidman (1991) suggested that "People's behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them" (p. 10).

While driving home, I occasionally expanded fieldnotes using a tape recorder. I recorded descriptions of and reflections on observations. The transcription of these tapes were added to my fieldnotes. I also audiotaped numerous classes discussions. These transcriptions also became part of the ethnographic record. Replaying the tape assisted in recaling other dialogues.
or events that I missed while I had been focusing on a particular woman or event in the classroom.

At first, I included only observations and descriptions in fieldnotes. While struggling to separate my observations and reactions to them in separate journals, I discovered a method presented by Bogdan and Biklen (1992). The following excerpt from my expanded fieldnotes is an example of how I used observer comments:

9:50) **Interruption**
Mr. Drake [janitor] opened the door without a knock, poked in his smiling face, covered the room with one glance, a quick wave, and a snappy, "Hi, Jenny!"

Observer Comments: It's interesting to listen for either Miss Jennifer, Miss Jenny, Jenny, or Jen— He has never used my last name, and I have never used his first [name]. (Fieldnotes, 2-13-95)

Observer Comments provided a transition between fieldnotes and field journal. Recording observer comments allowed me to capture a question, a thought, or a reflection without interrupting my fieldnotes. The process was also time saving method for me.

**Listening Journals**

Listening journals were notebooks each woman had to record reflections, comments, or questions she had about listening. La Doi and Emelda were the only women who actively participated in the journaling process. Journal entries provided interesting insights into their beliefs about listening, and what they deemed appropriate listening behaviors. The journals were vehicles for me to continue dialogues with women when we were not able
to talk face-to-face. La Doi enjoyed writing and her style of writing was very conversational.

Emelda, who also loved to write, wrote extensively, but sporadically in her journal. Something unique about Emelda's journal was that it included a three-way dialogue. When Emelda began to develop a friendship with Debra, she invited her to join our conversations. First, Debra joined in our "talk" and then in our "write/talk" as she called our journaling. Journaling provided opportunities to have conversations with women whose time was often very limited.

**Video Tapes**

I acquired several video tapes of classroom activities and special events at Lakota Center. A local public broadcasting network produced a five-minute clip of the Writing Class that was aired on a telelearning graduate course in adult education. The other tapes were made by Lakota's staff or students or by me. Two graduation ceremonies, two Honor's Day programs, and a celebration of Black History Month program were filmed. One student shared with me a copy of one of the school events she recorded. The tape also included a party that she and friends had given a few weeks before. Video tapes were particularly valuable in observing women's nonverbal listening behaviors.

**Listening Artifacts**

Listening artifacts were what women made or used that related to or was evidence of listening. These artifacts included women's written texts, e.g., essays, letters, articles, poetry, and notes. Bulletin boards, newspaper
clippings, newsletters, school policies, music, and any other materials that reveal listening or listening behaviors were data sources.

**Data Analysis**

A fundamental premise of *ethnography of communication* is that patterns of language organize and link verbal and sociocultural conduct (Bauman & Sherzer, 1974). A major aim of this study was to discover these language patterns which relate to listening. Discovering these language patterns and linking them to verbal and sociocultural conduct required ongoing data analysis of fieldnotes, transcriptions, artifacts, and journals.

**Constant Comparative Analysis**

Constant comparative analysis was an ongoing, recursive process of analyzing data while conducting field research as opposed to delaying analysis until fieldwork is completed (Miles & Huberman, 1986). Ongoing analysis provided opportunities to shape and reshape direction, fine tune research strategies, and identify gaps in the research, e.g., develop new or more focused questions, or arrange additional interviews or observations for clarification. Constant comparative analysis increased the flexibility or fluidity of the research by allowing me to fit this ethnographic process to the women I was studying and research concerns that arose.

I transcribed interviews and expanded fieldnotes as promptly as possible to fully utilize immediate recall. During these processes, I designated a separate file to record themes and patterns of behaviors that emerged. Using wordprocessing, I copied segments of transcripts and fieldnotes in temporary
categories of emerging themes. Lines of transcription were numbered and superscripts referenced important segments of text within each interview transcription. I used a color coding system to identify listening behaviors, terminology used to refer to listening, and meanings women ascribed to listening. Color coding grouped data that responded to research questions about women's meanings and listening behaviors. Color coding also illuminated themes that emerged from the data.

**Writing the Ethnography**

Writing is intended as a communicative act between author and reader. Once a manuscript is released and goes public, however the meanings writers may think they have frozen into print may melt before the eyes of active readers (Van Maanen, 1988:25).

... my being is the meanings I create, the meanings I create are me. To say that meaning arises in any other way than as me, is to deny my existence. To say that meaning arises in any other way than as you [dear reader], is to deny your existence. Not knowing the myriad of meanings you have made which are you, how can I determine the meanings you make off for this? (Pellowe, 1986:14).

Writing this ethnography has been a painful, joyful, frustrating, and rewarding task. Facing the final task of articulating what I learned about one aspect of a classroom culture I researched for two years was an overwhelming experience. How do I begin? What do I include? What do I leave out. Women's voices echoed in my mind. Their poetic words and rich imagery swirled in my head. I wondered how I could possibly capture with my words what cultural knowledge they shared with me.

I recalled Doris Ann's words: "This paper's not big enough for what I be thinkin'." For two years, I collected photographs and drawings, audio-tapes and
video-tapes, essays and articles, letters and poems, transcriptions and
fieldnotes. All were momentos and souvenirs from my journey into another
culture. This was the precious data from which I constructed this ethnography.
Each item captured vibrant sounds, vivid images, intense emotions that were a
vital part of the Writing Class.

**Representing Women's Voices in Print**

We can never know how things and other people really are. We only
know how we observe them, or how we listen to them. And when we
listen to others we open ourselves by inventing stories about them based
on our observations. But these stories will always be our own stories
(Escheverria, 1990:17).

When I proposed this research, I believed that I could present verbatim
speech and allow readers to hear the voices of the women at Lakota Center by
using detailed descriptions of the setting, non-verbal gesturing, pauses, and
voice rhythm and pitch. I cited previous researchers who had experimented
with alternative ways of presenting data and positioning the researcher in the
ethnographic text (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988; Richardson,
1990). After spending hundreds of hours transcribing others' voices and my
own from dozens of audiotapes, I became doubtful about the possibility of
reproducing speech verbatim, quoting directly, or reporting speech. As Tannen
(1989) had suggested, reported speech (the speech of one reported by
another) is more appropriately referred to as *constructed dialogue*.

**Representing Voices in Time and Space.** Representing women's
voices in a written text was a challenging task. Distinguishing their voices
visually was significantly more difficult than distinguishing them auditorally. I reviewed numerous transcription conventions of a variety of researchers before selecting those determined simplest and best able to represent the important characteristics of the dialogue of women in this research (Williams, 1992; Tannen, 1989; Heath, 1978; Coulthard, 1977).

Traditional typographical conventions required for dissertation texts made the task even more difficult. Greater variation in fonts and text format would have assisted in the visual representation of overlapping dialogue, internal dialogue, and constructed dialogue (Tannen, 1989). Visually recreating interruptions, hesitations, incomplete words, and the fading in and fading out of voices was very difficult.

The act of transcribing oral description was an opportunity to experience the many layers of meaning involved in listening. As I struggled to present Sophia's words in a written format, I realized the difficulty of capturing the essence of what was spoken. Listening was work, particularly when one's goal was to transcribe what had been said, to authentically represent the speaker's voice authentically, and to accurately capture her meanings. Writing does not replicate saying. Reading does not replicate listening. Therefore, there can be a significant difference between speakers' meanings and readers' meanings.

In Appendix B, I attempted to distinguish typographically what I was able to distinguish auditorally from a professionally prepared video clip of the class.

One of my goals as an ethnographer was to represent women meanings in their own voice. Reproducing women's speech verbatim was one of the
steps toward this goal. Editing or revising women's words appeared to be in
direct opposition to what I hoped to accomplish. To alter women's words, in my
opinion, suggested that their speech was not "correct." At first, my decision to
reproduce women's words in Black dialect seemed a simple task. All I had to
do was type what I heard. When I began transcribing interviews and classroom
dialogues, I learned quickly how complex and difficult literal transcription was.
Certain words, even though spoken clearly, were sometimes difficult or
impossible for me to represent in written form. For example, in Black dialect,
"that" was between the Cajun pronunciation, "dat," and "rat" pronounced with
the French's rolling "r" sound. My limited background in phonetics did not
adequately prepare me to transcribe with linguistc precision what I actually
heard.

What is spoken and clearly understood is often unclear when translated
in written form. Spoken and written language have different language
conventions. Literal translations including pause makers, hesitations, and
paralingue (uhms, uhuhs, etc.) presented some problems. An example of this
was Sophia's reaction to the transcription of our first interview. She returned
before our second interview and seemed somewhat uneasy about it. She had
scratched through portions of the text and significantly revised others. Her
revisions included grammatical corrections, rephrasing and reordering
sentences, and inserting sentences for clarification. She asked me not to give
her copies of future interview transcriptions.
Seeing my literal transcription of her oral speech was not a positive experience for her. Instead, it appeared to have made her somewhat self-conscious of her speech. Seeing my voice in print before me was a very unnerving experience also. Every flaw was revealed: mispronunciations, run-on sentences, incomplete sentences, verb-subject disagreement. After reading many lengthy, spiraling questions, I began to question how any of my interviewees made sense of what I asked them. I cringed as I watched my voice interrupt, overlap and sometimes overwhelm the others' voices. I was embarrassed to hear my wimpy voice and read my syrupy words and wondered how women tolerated me.

An interesting aspect of literal transcription was that, on several occasions, I found myself unable to distinguish my voice from the voices of the other women. I had adopted several words, phrasings, and pronunciations that made my voice in print sound like the women I had interviewed.

**Using Narrative Form and First Person: Telling the Story**

Writing this ethnography in narrative style and in first person is consistent with and appropriate to the interactive nature of listening and ethnography. Both writing strategies allowed me to place myself more authentically in the text. I was an active participant as a listener and as an ethnographer. As a listener, I was a "story maker" who created meanings (Escheverria, 1990). As an ethnographer, I was a "storyteller" who inscribed those meanings (Richardson, 1990). The meanings and text I have created in this research have emerged from what I have listened.
I was very reluctant to use first person in this research because of my previous cultural knowledge concerning the "correct" rules of written language. In learning the wisdom of a literate culture, I had accepted, without question, that first person was inappropriate in a formal text. I had also learned that passive voice was also unacceptable. Referring to myself as "the ethnographer" was uncomfortable, particularly since a professor once informed me that "Jennifer, you know even when you finish this research you will not be an ethnographer." I was uncertain whether I had a right to refer to myself in this way.

In addition, Houston's (1992) warning to researchers of the communication of women from non-dominant cultures remained ever present in my mind. To earn the right to speak about the women in the Writing Class, I attempted to "follow them into their world" (p. 54). To place myself alongside the women in the Writing Class necessitated the use of first person. To speak about the women in this study, I present myself beside them in print in a manner that suggests how I experienced being beside them in person. I juxtaposed, overlapped, and interrupted women's voices with my own as we shared and negotiated our meanings in multi-layered dialogues.

I consider this ethnography a story of how women in Lakota's Writing Class listen and what meanings that have made of listening (Richardson, 1990). Distortions of women's voices and their meanings may occur because this ethnography ultimately emerges through my voice. Throughout this research, my aim has been to weave enough of my background and meanings
to provide readers with a context from which I listened and made meaning. The story I have made as a listener and the story I tell as an ethnography is a distillation of what I have learned from women at Lakota Center who agreed to teach me. I included women's speech and my listenings (reactions, interpretations, or reflections) as dialogue to represent my interactions with women and their texts.

Limitations of the Study

This study is designed to focus on the listening experiences of a teacher and the students in a writing class that is located in an urban adult literacy center. Population specifics (i.e., gender, race, and economic level) limit the translatability of research findings to more heterogeneous populations. The number of similar educational settings with minority, female, single-parent populations has increased since the creation of Project Independence in 1990, and this study will add to scholarship that is sensitive to and concerned with relationships between literacy acquisition and cultural identity in adult educational environments.

My age, teaching experience, educational status as a doctoral student, and/or my race may have initially been an inhibitor to gaining access to certain social situations (e.g., peer group conversation, faculty lounge discussions), gaining trust, and establishing rapport. Although preliminary visits and observations did not indicate that this was the case, I made constant efforts to demonstrate my sincerity, reliability, and competence as an observer-researcher. I reassured women that my role was not to evaluate their
academic competence or to report attendance or behavior to any authority. My race and my background did allow me to begin as an outsider with "new eyes" and "new ears" to observe and to listen for what is missed or taken for granted by an "insider," an accepted member of a culture. The descriptions that emerge from the study may not be translatable to co-educational settings but may raise new questions concerning the role of listening in literacy work in general.

A final limitation to this study has been the personal biases I brought to the research. I addressed this limitation by recording my personal reactions to informants, events, and activities in a field journal and as observer comments in fieldnotes and transcriptions. These reflections helped me to uncover beliefs and expectations regarding communication behaviors such as turn-taking, asking questions, and responding that influenced my observations and interpretations. I made concerted and persistent efforts to reveal my personal biases and tacit assumptions that may have biased or distorted my descriptions or interpretations.

**Ethical Issues**

Ethical issues were a major concern prior to and during this research project. These issues included confidentiality, authenticity, and authorship/ownership.

**Confidentiality**

To insure confidentiality and protect persons involved in this research, I used pseudonyms for the women, the center, the city, the streets, and any
other locations which might reveal the identities of individuals. I excluded any data or factual information that women requested or which was potentially detrimental to a woman. Some women at Lakota Center were escaping abusive situations and some women had criminal records. Public knowledge of this information exposed them and their families to personal danger.

**Authenticity**

I made my research purpose clear, orally and in writing, to the participants in this study. This research required spending a large amount of time with women in lengthy interview sessions, in participant observations, and in the dialogues of the listening journal. In our dialogues women often shared intimate personal stories. We spent time together inside and outside Lakota Center. I remained vigilant about our mutual expectations of continuing friendships when the research was complete.

Being authentic included being equally vulnerable as a researcher. In teaching me about listening, Sophia, La Doi, Emelda, and Doris Ann revealed intimate aspects of their lives. Our mutual vulnerability made possible the in-depth and intimate dialogues that revealed the richness of women’s meanings. Our mutual vulnerability created special relationships and trust that promoted our acceptance of each others differences.

**Authorship and Ownership**

Due to confidentiality concerns, I will not share authorship of this research with those who have made this text possible. Their time and effort make it possible to complete the final requirement of a degree that is both
financially and professionally rewarding. In turn, my knowledge and experience as a secondary mathematics teacher assisted them in their goal of obtaining a GED, a degree that has potential for providing greater occupational and financial opportunities for them.

Throughout my research, I was committed to treating each woman with dignity and respect as my teacher. I reminded myself continually that each woman was the author of legitimate meanings. One of my goals was for each woman to experience greater value of her own meanings as we discovered those meanings in our work together. Lastly, as we explored meanings of listening and listening behaviors, we discovered the multiplicity of both. We also uncovered personal assumptions which often blinded us to the many ways to listen and the many meanings of listening. Women often reported that they had experienced a greater appreciation for the diversity of listeners and the power of the act of listening.

Ultimately, I am the author of this text, but I am not the author of its meaning. As Pellowe so provocatively pointed out, writers and speakers are "the authors of expressions," but not the author of their meanings (Pellowe, 1986:10). Meanings live in people, not in words.

Meanings are not outside of people, and should not be objectified. Just as time is not... The hearer is responsible for the nature of the connection which s/he creates (Pellowe, 1986:13).

The information in this text, the words that are written here, are fixed and finite. The meanings which emerge are as diverse and numerous as those who read it and the space/time context from which they read.
I have had limited control of the final form in which this text appears. It has been shaped by the language conventions and social practices of an academic culture in which I have apparently developed "communicate competence" sufficient to perform successfully to become an accepted member.

Women and their meanings and my self and my meanings have been squeezed into a prescribed framework and format to achieve a specific purpose: to produce a document that will meet the final requirements to earn a Ph.D. I have become immensely frustrated and discouraged in the task of using written language to describe what is primarily an oral language process. Recognizing the limitation inherent in written language to express meaning and my own personal limitations in written language, I began to write about listening and what I learned from the women of Lakota Center. As I wrote, I found Pellowe's (1986) words consoling:

... my being is the meanings I create, the meanings I create are me. To say that meaning arises in any other way than as me, is to deny my existence. To say that meaning arises in any other way than as you [dear reader], is to deny your existence. Not knowing the myriad of meanings you have made which are you, how can I determine the meanings you make of/for this? (p. 13).

As an ethnographer, I am a listener and a storyteller (Richardson, 1990). With the women who agreed to teach me about one aspect of the Writing Class culture, I found truth in what Richardson (1990) had said about the role of the ethnographer. All I had to do was listen. As I listened and recorded, I remained mindful that:
We can never know how things and other people really are. We only know how we observe them, or how we listen to them. And when we listen to others we open ourselves by inventing stories about them based on our observations. But these stories will always be our own stories (Escheverria, 1990:17).

What follows is a story about listening—about special group of women who taught me about listening and how listening happens. The title of one of my favorite movies, "If You Could See What I Hear," describes my desire as an ethnographer. I wish I tell this story to you in person. If I could, I would show you photos that capture vivid images of the people and places that make up this study. I would show videos of women so you could see and hear them talking, writing, singing, dancing. My written words do not capture the sounds of women moving nor the emotionally charged voices I heard. I would play audiotaped interviews and class discussions so that you could hear not only words but intonations, hesitations, pitch and rhythm changes. I would read aloud from interview transcripts so you could hear some of the pauses, giggles, sighs, and hesitations that were critical to women's meanings.
CHAPTER FOUR

GETTING THERE: LISTENING TO THE SOUNDS AND VOICES OF LAKOTA CENTER

Chapter Four provides more information about the Lakota Center, its students, and the surrounding neighborhood. I used first person and narrative style to illuminate the interactive nature of listening and the dialogic nature of this study. Detailed descriptions of time, space, dialogue, and movements reveal the unique context and mood of the women and the center. The context and mood of Lakota Center significantly influenced women's listenings, the meanings they made of words and actions, both their own and others. My intention was to take readers with me to Lakota Center to experience in print what I experienced in person.

Listening, Time, and Space

Getting to Lakota Center took more time than I expected. My first appointment with Mr. Meaux was scheduled for 8:30 a.m. I was unaware that Lakota Center was only two miles from my home and planned to leave by 8:10 a.m. to allow ample time to get there. As I backed out of the driveway, the clock on the dash declared "8:12" and a female radio voice reminded me that "schools zones are in effect until nine."

I followed close behind a city bus that obediently crept through a school zone. The bus stalled just as it reached a green traffic light, and my car was trapped between the bus and a line of cars behind me. I was pondering my options to move when an old familiar song came on the radio:

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One fine day-ay, you'll look at me-ee and you will know our love was mi-int [meant] to be-ee. Wuh-uhn [one] fine da-ay, you're gonna want me for your gir-rl. . .

The music of the 60s and the voices of the Chiffons singing "One Fine Day" triggered memories of a long ago summer and my first visit to North Rivers Bend. In seconds, three decades vanished and I was back in 1962. Shelia, my best friends in ninth grade, and I were "cruising" a busy expressway in her grandmother's gold Rambler. The windows were rolled down and the radio was blaring. We were talking, listening, and boppin to beat. The melody and lyrics fueled our teenage fantasy of findin a true love. I remembered Danny Young, a secret love, driving his faded canary-yellow Willis down Tucumseh Street and felt butterflies in my stomach. The music had magically, but temporarily, altered my time and space.

Grinding gears and smelly diesel exhaust brought me back suddenly to 1993 and the time was 8:30 a.m. Since I was late, I passed the bus quickly and cautiously fudged through the next school zone. With the good fortune of making the next two green traffic lights, I was merging with the northbound morning traffic by 8:34. Faint echoes of the music still lingered as I rushed down the interstate.

Before I reached the second exit, a screaming siren ruptured the rhythm and silenced lyrics of another song from the 60s. When I saw blue lights flashing in my rearview mirror, I stopped breathing momentarily. The speedometer, invisible to me a few seconds before, appeared suddenly.
"Sixty, oh no!" I thought. Seconds later, I heard the loud swish of an accelerating V-8 engine that raced past me. A tense-faced officer in a large white sedan gripped his steering wheel with both hands and wove skillfully through the traffic ahead. The piercing sound of his siren faded as he maneuvered around growling tractor-trailers, whispering luxury sedans, and coughing clunkers. The flashing image disappeared as man and machine vanished down an exit.

The incident reminded me of friends' comments about North Rivers Bend. "That's not a good area of town . . . It's a dangerous place to be . . . Why did you pick THAT part of town?" they warned me when I mentioned I was going there. I did my best to dismiss their well-intentioned warnings. Local newspapers, radio stations, and television regularly reported stories and statistics of violent crime and drug activities in the North River Bend.

A green rectangular sign across the interstate informed me that I was almost there: "Exit 7B, Lakota Street, 1/2 mile." It was 8:42 a.m. and I was late. I accelerated into the right lane and sped down the exit ramp. Faded jeans, T-shirts, and dull-colored towels hung along a chain link fence that served as a clothesline and a boundary between the interstate and a row of small houses in various stages of deterioration.

Five women walked toward the intersection of the exit ramp and Lakota Street. Their slow, rhythmic movements along the sidewalk that sprawled under the arching overpass created striking contrast to speed of interstate traffic overhead. Their dark skin and brightly colored clothing showed up
distinctly against a dull gray industrial landscape where giant cylindrical stacks coughed and spewed streams of white, cloud-like vapors into the blue morning sky.

As the women drew nearer, I noticed that three used many gestures when they talked. The other women walked in silence with their heads lowered as they slowly placed one foot in front of the other. "They must be late too," I thought, and then felt a bit envious of their peaceful and unhurried demeanor. Suddenly, I heard a loud popping sound that came from nearby. "Gunfire!" I thought instinctively. Then I saw a green early model truck several yards ahead on the right. The driver, a middle-aged man in tattered clothing, stepped out the rusty pickup to view his tires. He shook his head and threw up both arms at the sight of a tire, flat under the load of household furniture and appliances. I felt foolish about my overreaction, then realized how listening to my friends and the media about North Rivers Bend had influenced my interpretation and reaction to what I heard. I was relieved to discover the harmless source of an initially frightening sound.

I turned onto Lakota Street. On the immediate right was a red brick building with a sign in the front yard that read: "Amazing Grace Fellowship Church." A beige brick house trimmed in bright turquoise was located on the adjacent well-kept lot. The shattered front windows and charred eaves suggested a recent fire. Across the street in a small front yard, grass grew tall under and around a dilapidated, tireless vehicle. Blackness peaked through broken and missing asbestos squares that attempted to cover the tar paper that
was wrapping the house. Black burglar bars trimmed on each window.

"One block on the left," I said, recalling Mr. Meaux's directions. On my left, I saw a large rust-colored brick building. "Lakota School" was clearly visible in large Old English letters above an arching portal. Above the name which had been etched cream-colored concrete, was a four-foot coat of arms. "At last," I thought, "Lakota Center!"

The sparsely-landscaped and well-kept campus sprawled across a city block enclosed by a four-foot chain link fence. Student and staff parked in a spacious lot located at the rear of the campus. Visitors parked in a smaller front parking lot. Four streets framed the rectangular campus. Each street reached deeply into a neighborhood where drive-by shootings, armed robberies, drug deals, and murders were commonplace occurrences.

I drove into the visitor's lot and parked beside the only car there, a brown and bronze early model station wagon. Before opening my car door, I felt the "bomp and thump" of bass bursting through the open windows of the driverless vehicle. I moved closer to the vibrating vehicle and listened curiously to fragments of lyrics:

... If you niggas want some funk ... That's the shit I'm talking 'bout ... cut when a muthafucka's tryin' to get ... shit gotta be handled in order to get paid ... as the niggas start to block, I can ketchem all at once ...  

I glanced through the driver's window and saw, just below the passenger's head rest, a tiny head bobbing and twisting to the rhythm of blaring rap. A young girl, approximately four or five years of age, was bopping and bouncing to the beat.
Her rhythmic movements were proof she was listening to the melody, but I could not tell whether she was actually listening to the lyrics.

I walked away slowly debating whether to do anything about the child alone in the idling vehicle. I reluctantly decided to move on. When I reached the front steps of the center, I continued to feel faint vibrations of the bass, but I could no longer distinguish the lyrics. I paused at the front doors to read the bold red letters on two signs that were posted on the steel double door:

NOTICE
NO ADMITTANCE
WITHOUT PASS
FROM OFFICE

WATCH
YOUR . . .

Before I had not completely read the text, the right door flung open and a casually-dressed young man strutted silently past me. He swung his arms rhythmically and stepped lightly. Intrigued by his gait, I turned to watch him bop unhurriedly down the front steps as he made his way to the station wagon. He got into his vehicle, shut the door, and steered the huffing vehicle out the parking lot. I watched the wagon jerk its way into the street with the child standing and moving to the music. I turned, opened the door, and stepped inside the foyer. The door shut behind me with a loud click.

The Sounds and Voices of Lakota Center

"Good morning. May I help you?" said the secretary when I appeared in the doorway. "Oh, fine, but a little late this morning," I responded, "My name is
Jennifer Falls. Is Mr. Meaux in?" "Yes, he's in his office. Please have a seat," she said and quickly returned to her paper work. "Rushing to wait," I thought realizing how futile my morning rush had been. I sat on the old black vinyl couch in Lakota's spacious foyer and watched the five women I had seen earlier enter the building. Three glanced my way. The other two walked passed me without saying a word or glancing my way. The small group splintered in opposite directions when they reached the hallway. Three women strolled into the east wing while two plodded into the west wing. Perhaps these women had the right idea about time. They arrived without a hassle. I had hurried up to wait.

While I waited for Mr. Meaux, I decided to begin my first "real" field notes. I reached into zippered compartments of an old video camera case for a pen and my fieldnotes which were packed among two recorders, spare batteries, and extra audio tapes. In the silence and stillness surrounding me, I began to listen to myself more than anyone else: What do I do now? What do I write down? What's important? How do I begin? What now? I took a deep breath to reduce my growing anxiety as I leaned back against the cool blackness of textured vinyl. To interrupt my internal dialogue, I asked myself a question of a more ethnographic nature, "What's happening here that involves listening?" I recalled something Spradley had said about ethnography beginning with "an assumption of ignorance" (1980:4). "That ought to be easy," I thought not realizing how difficult "assuming ignorance" would actually be.
The secretary's telephone interrupted my intrapersonal dialogue. After two rings, the secretary responded cheerfully, "Good morning, Lakota Center." After a brief silence, she said, "One moment please." With her listener on hold, she walked briskly across the foyer to Mr. Meaux's office. Touching the doorframe lightly with one hand, she leaned forward to proclaim in a professional tone, "Barry, Dr. Rivera on line one. Ms. Falls is here." Without looking up from his paperwork, Mr. Meaux reached for the phone and responded graciously while he dialed, "Thanks, Lois. I'll be right with her."

Suddenly the sound of shuffling feet and women's voices captured my attention. The voices grew louder as more than a dozen female figures paraded across a 15-foot opening where the hall and foyer intersected. Women walked in singles, pairs, and triples toward the east wing of the building. I heard muffled words in women's blurred, overlapping dialogues:

- Ahm outta language . . . Praise the Lord! . . . Ahm in readin' now . . .

A heavy middle-aged woman praised the Lord for his blessings while she gripped her most recent TABE test score sheet with both hands. A few feet behind her, a young, petite woman was cursing the "muthafucka" who was "cheating on" her. Walking behind, a heavyset woman expressed her disappointment over the possibility of sharing a classmate's lunch.

Mr. Meaux stepped out of his office and stood at the edge of the hallway. He smiled and said, "Good morning, Miss Falls. I'll be right with you." His arms
were crossed and resting on his chest while he surveyed the group of ladies moving down the corridor. "Good morning, ladies," he greeted as they passed. Some women returned his greetings with a nod or smile. Others passed silently with only a quick glance his way. Some women, involved in their conversations, appeared oblivious to his presence.

As women filed passed me, some nodded, some smiled, and a few glanced my way to say, "Good morning." Others stared stoically or glared suspiciously, speaking silently with their eyes, "What is she doing here?" I steadily grew more uncomfortable and self-conscious under their observation. I reflected this in my fieldnotes that evening:

What are they thinking about me while I'm sitting here taking notes? Do they think I'm a spy investigating welfare fraud? Should I interact or just sit quietly? Mr. Meaux asked me not to interview anyone or observe in individual classes until he formally introduced me at a staff meeting. What do I say if they talk to me first? (Fieldnotes, September, 1993).

Being on the outside was uncomfortable and frightening. In fear and discomfort, I realized that my ignorance had excluded me. Neither fluent in the language nor competent in the social practices of the culture surrounding me, I was culturally illiterate among the unfamiliar faces, voices, sights, and sounds I observed. My cultural ignorance prevented me from participating. As nameless bodies filed past me, I wondered "Who will be my teacher?"

Listening to Voices in Print

Some days students stop by the wall to read. Other times, one might observe a student invite a teacher to read. Visitors too linger along the long corridor where students have placed their work: newsletter articles, journal pieces, responsive writings to music, business letters, poetry,
autobiographical writings, short narratives, success stories, summaries, and resumes (Sophia, Interview #2).

When the hallway cleared, Mr. Meaux and I chatted briefly before he returned to his office. After that, I decided to explore the quiet and empty corridor. I found women's literacy work displayed along either side of the hallway. Taped on the walls were brightly colored posters that provided attractive backgrounds for women's poems, essays, photographs, and other artwork. On both sides of me, women's texts awaited to be read. Their voices hoped to be heard.

As I moved slowly down the hall viewing and reading the literacy artifacts before me, I wondered about the author, poet, and/or artist of each. Powerful messages emerged from the images and texts women had created. "The Struggle is Within," a title for one of the posters, was arranged in a nonlinear fashion across the top center of one colorful collage poster. Each word of the title was handwritten on a different colored piece of construction paper. Various words, phrases, and pictures from magazines were scattered randomly about the poster. In the upper left-hand corner, "BE" appeared in bold white print against a green rectangular background. It was the largest word on the entire collage. Pasted next to it in bright red letters was the phrase: "THE ONE WITH A STRONG CHARACTER." I whispered aloud the expanded message, "The struggle is within. Be the one with a strong character."

Sprinkled about the remaining white space, the author had pasted clips of lovely black models and a variety of words and phrases: "Can You Make It?"
"Dreams For Sale," "Fighting the Power," "Understanding," "Educating Attitudes," "It's Better With. . ." and "God." In the bottom left-hand corner, she had placed a black image of Africa and signed her name below it.

My attention shifted to a bright red poster on the opposite side of the hall. A poem entitled "Woman of Pride" was printed on blue paper and pasted in the center of the poster. I read silently:

- She has no certain look, or certain color,
  But she has a way of standing out among the others.

- She maintains a sense of dignity and respect,
  She is one woman society cannot reject.

- She doesn't give up when the chips are down,
  She can and she will stand her ground

- She won't let anyone tell her she can't be a success,
  She won't only finish a task, she'll do her best.

- Her dreams will be fulfilled, she takes it all in stride,
  She has the highest aspirations, she is a WOMAN OF PRIDE

Below the poem, the poet had placed a xeroxed copy of a photograph of herself. From the photograph, she looked directly and confidently at her audience. Round eye glasses rested across the crown of long, straightened hair which she parted down the middle.

I moved on to the east wing of the main building where Classrooms #1, #2, and #3 were located. There was another poster, handwritten with black, green, and red markers, which read: "Our Beautiful Black Children Need to See Themselves in Books." Written below in smaller print was the author's request:
"Check out books at the Public Library. Black Bookstores: Our Story, Reflections."

The bright, primary colors of another piece of literacy work drew me further down the corridor. I moved closer to examine it. The title "How Do I See Myself as A Woman Ready for The Future," had been printed on green construction paper and placed in the center of a white poster. Numerous colorful magazine clippings surrounded the black-on-green title. The picture of a young, light-skinned African-American woman was located in the lower right corner of the poster. The woman, who wore a brown Native American dress, held lovingly in her arms a half-nude infant. The woman's long natural locks fell like a shawl over the child's shoulders while he leaned his tiny head against her chest. His ebony eyes and pouting lips said to me, "I'm afraid, Mamma. Who is that?"

Evidence of women's literacy work was abundant outside the walls of each classroom. Rich listening artifacts lined the corridors. Texts, posters, poetry, photographs, essays, letters, and artwork expressed in writing what women had listened and wanted others to listen. Women claimed space for their voices in written dialogues just as they had earlier in oral dialogues.

"What's on Your Mind?: Reading the Writing on the Wall"

A 20-foot sheet of newspaper print had been placed on a wall outside Classroom #3. A title, "What's On Your Mind," made with large red cut-out letters, was centered at the top of approximately 60 square feet of spacious
white space. The title was an invitation for women to express themselves in written language. Names, messages, comments, and brief poems appeared in a variety of colors and handwritings.

Josette got her GED . . . Math is on my mind . . . William's on my mind . . . I'm going all the way to get my GED . . . Rose finished language . . . All things are possible with God . . .

The more I read, the more curious I grew about the women behind the words. "What does she look like? How old is she? Why did she leave school?" I wondered. I had no faces for the names I read — no bodies for the voices I heard.

I slid slowly toward the end of the hall and lingered over the vast text before me. Suddenly a door clicked and a tall middle-aged woman walked out of Classroom #1. On her way out, she stopped and read for a few moments before she pulled a pen from her back pocket. After selecting a space among the multitude of handwritten messages, she inserted "Carla passed her Math test." She stood back a moment to view what she had written, then replaced her pen in her pocket. I said, "Congratulations." She turned toward me. Her momentary puzzled look faded into a smile, then she explained, "No, not me. Carla." She added "Go girl!" above her message and "by Glenda W" below before walking away.

At the end of the hallway, small silver numbers nailed to dark oak door frames distinguished Classroom #1, Classroom #2, and Classroom #3 in the east wing of the building. Moving closer, I recognized four words taped on the three-foot wall space separating the doorways of Classrooms #1 and #2. I
read them silently, "Speaking, reading, writing, and listening." The words, cut roughly from red construction paper, were arranged in a nonlinear fashion like most things I had observed.

Muffled voices penetrated the closed door of Classroom #2, but frosted glass panes inhibited any viewing of the room. The door of Classroom #1 was also closed; however, through two clear glass panes, I saw a petite, light-skinned African-American woman standing in the front center of the room. I assumed she was the teacher because she stood in the front room and wore professional attire. Approximately a dozen women were sitting in groups of two to four at each of the six attractive, light-colored oak tables which were arranged in an asymmetrical pattern. Several women were watching the teacher's graceful gestures which accompanied her speech. Two women were writing feverishly with their eyes focused on the notebooks in front of them. A woman beside them was sitting with her back toward the teacher. Another woman stared blankly into space while two women on her right chatted with each other.

Suddenly, women began to move about, pushing chairs away from tables, making their way to the door. I checked my watch and was surprised that I had spent almost an hour in the hall. Behind me, the door of Classroom #3 clicked open. A flood of bodies suddenly poured out of each of the rooms. I quickly stepped back against the wall to avoid being swept away by the female deluge. I watched curiously as voices and bodies converged in the hallway like
a mighty river, then splintered off in different directions like small streams into the office, restroom, breakroom, or outside.

I decided to walk outside the building where women were gathering in small groups of two to six. Most of them were smoking, and a few were eating. I had walked about twenty feet when suddenly, a very dark, very loud woman leaped in front of me. I was shocked by the unexpected invasion of my personal space. The woman sounded angry and began shouting something about an article she had read in the newspaper. "Are you one of those white teachers they're talkin' about that won't teach our kids?" she demanded. I was momentarily speechless. Several feet behind her four women watched the two of us closely while they whispered and grinned. They were apparently enjoying the scene.

The loud woman posted herself silently in front of me with both hands cocked on her hips and looked me straight in the eyes. She was listening and so was I. Her nonverbal language loudly and clearly demanded an immediate response. I had none. "What's happening here?" I asked myself as a matter of survival, not ethnographic exploration. My knee caps quivered, while I tried desperately to maintain my composure and calm more obvious body parts. My mind raced for an appropriate verbal response. With great difficulty I managed to speak slowly and calmly, "Do you have a copy of that article? I haven't read it, but it sounds very interesting." The woman's grimace melted immediately into a large, warm smile. She reached out her hand and said, "Hi, I'm Jackie." I exhaled and extended a rather shaky right hand and smiled. With a sigh of
relief and weak knees, I replied, "Hi, I'm Jennifer." I learned that what Jackie had done was called "gettin' in y' face."

Jackie was my first teacher and this lesson was only the first of many to learn. Jackie taught me that: "You don't whisper what's important. You shout it." She taught me first hand, what bell hooks wrote about in Talking Back. In black culture, loudness and close proximity are not necessarily confrontational strategies (Kochman, 1981). Being loud and moving in close are also involvement strategies. Women's "loud talk" had multiple meanings and served multiple purposes. Loud talk emphasized and engaged. My new knowledge allowed me listen to Jackie in a new way; I was able to ascribe new meanings to her words and to respond differently to her actions. I no longer assumed a defensive stance when she said loudly, "Hey, what y' doin' here?!" The loud deep voice that once threatened me, became a greeting and an invitation. I gradually became more open and less fearful not only with Jackie, but with other "loud" black women I met.

Jackie also challenged me with many questions. Her questions were candid and direct. She often inquired about delicate racial and personal issues. On one occasion, while I was helping a few ladies in the computer room, Jackie walked over and asked, "Jennifa, why is it when a white woman gits hit in the head in a movie she falls out dead and a black woman don't?" Two women standing beside her smiled and waited anxiously for my response. "I don't know. I've never noticed that," I said, then inquired about the name of the movie she had seen, but had never heard of it. After listening to her, I had a
new question to ask: "Are abuses of black women and of white women portrayed differently in the movies or in other media?"

One day Jackie asked, "Jennifa, you got a man?" Being divorced and unattached, I had quick and simple answer for her. "No," I responded, but wondered where the conversation was going. Jackie inquired further, "You got a friend?" Something in the tone of her voice, or perhaps it was the ordering of her two questions, lead me to infer that she meant a male friend. Not knowing the distinction between having a man and having a friend, I asked, "How do you know when you 'have a man'?" Jackie looked at me and giggled, then said matter-of-factly, "Well, it jes depends on how much time he spends with you and how much money he spends on you. So, Jennafa, you have one?" We both laughed. I never answered and she never asked again.

I discovered that having an answer was becoming less important than being free to ask a question. Listening involved trust. Listening was giving permission to ask and providing safe space to answer. Jackie and I had to trust each other to explore our often diverse perspectives, to share our opinions, and to negotiate certain meanings. I became surprisingly more comfortable with each new question. Jackie's questions were the first of many questions to come from other women. Many of these questions which altered my view of the world, welfare, black women, and myself.

During the following year, I learned much more about Lakota Center and the women who attended. Staff and students referred to the student body as "the ladies." Individual students were "one of the ladies," but they were
never called "a lady." I discovered asking about personal information like names, number of children, or where you were from was intrusive. The Who's-ya-mamma-who's-ya-daddy communication ritual that was acceptable in my native culture was not acceptable at Lakota Center. When I asked personal questions, we used nonverbal gestures that I learned to listen as "Get outta ma business, woman!" There was a positive outcome for my communication faux pas; however, I did know more names than any of the ladies. I knew almost as many names as the secretary did. Ironically, women were impressed when I remembered their names.

Since they seldom used names, ladies most often addressed each other "girl" or "woman." For example, "Hey, girl, you be stickin' today" was a complement. It meant "Girl, you be lookin' good today." I learned not to listen to "mess," gossip intended to "bring you down." "Messy women" were loud-talking, hostile women who had "bad attitudes." These women congregated most often in designated smoking areas outside the building. Women who were messy resisted literacy work. They spend most of their energies intimidating other women and generating "bad moods."

After one year at Lakota Center, I recognized many voices and understand many new expressions. When Geraldine said, "Donh be messin' wit me today, Miss Falls," I knew she was telling me that she was either sick or in a bad mood. She was also requesting that I not take her lack of participation, silence, or anger personally. "Ahm not gonna do this math stuff!" was Vivian's
deep and determined voice asking for attention and assistance in completing a difficult math problem.

**Listening Behaviors: “Listening to Listening”**

During the first few months of grand tour observations at Lakota, patterns of listening behaviors began to "emerge and unfold" beautifully just as many qualitative researchers had said. The behaviors I observed and recorded, however, were strikingly similar to my own or those prescribed and described by predominantly white, Anglo experts in the field of listening (Wolvin & Coakley, 1992; Fitch-Hauser & Hughes, 1988; Gilbert, 1988; Watson & Barker, 1984). Ongoing analysis revealed categories that paralleled my own expectations of listeners: eye contact, pauses for turn taking, verbal responses, and nonverbal responses. I was unaware of how much my assumptions about listening, expectations of listeners, and research on the topic had been determining what I observed.

My research bias became apparent when I observed several women whom I had concluded were not listening. "What are they doing or not doing that makes me say they are not listening?" I began to ask. Women whom I believed were usually not listening were those who failed to make eye contact with a speaker. One woman was silent with her back to a speaker while another turned away talking. Several were engaged in various activities, i.e., talking to someone else, reading, writing, drawing, or painting their nails.

As I recorded observations of "non-listeners," I realized that as an ethnographer my listening behaviors included: writing fieldnotes, sketching...
room arrangements, adjusting my tape recorder, changing cassette tapes, or moving to a more strategic position to observe. I wrote and listened at the same time. I listened many times without eye contact. Transcriptions were filled with my own "uhmm," "Yeah," "Oh," and "Ok" woven with the voices of women. My voice interrupted and overlapped women's voices as I asked questions and repeated or rephrased what I heard for clarification. In the classroom, I sometimes turned to a woman near me to ask a question or to make a comment about what was happening in the room.

I recalled many times I had reprimanded a student for "not listening" when s/he may have been doing the same thing. I wondered how many times I had erroneously declared an objective truth about a student in my class. "You aren't listening!" I said automatically so many times when I observed a student looking away or not producing the type of response I expected. I had been drawing from my own personal background and my own cultural knowledge to determine whether they were listening. For nearly a half century, I had accumulated a fine list of criterion behaviors for listening. What I observed and called listening came from what I had learned by listening to members of my white Cajun culture or by reading the research of primarily Anglo researchers.

To avoid imposing my own meaning of listening upon women's meanings and limiting my observation, I focused on the behaviors women reported as listening. Reported behaviors revealed women's explicit knowledge of listening and their expectations of listeners. They reported specific behaviors
orally (interviews and conversations) and in writing (questionnaires, journals, and other written texts) as criteria for determining when someone was listening.

I distributed several dozen questionnaires to teachers and students in the late fall of 1993. The questionnaire elicited concise written descriptions of listening. By Christmas, I had accumulated slightly more than a dozen complete forms. According to the women, the most frequent listening behaviors were: "looking at me," "not talking," and "paying attention." Women reported, in writing, that they knew a person was listening when:

- When people are listening to you they respond in many ways by answering, laughter, or eye contact.
- They look at me, gesture or make verbal sounds that signify they hear me.
- They look at me, lean forward sometimes. Other times his eyes dart about when he is anxious to make a point. His face sometimes shows how I feel.
- By the subject we have talked on and they take heed to the things concerning them.

Making eye contact and responding, verbally or nonverbally, were the most frequently reported criteria women considered evidence of listening.
The questionnaire also asked women to tell how they knew someone was NOT listening. The responses indicated additional information. The following are examples of women's descriptions of nonlisteners:

... are talking, looking in space and not asking any questions.
... start another conversation, walk away or simply ignore me.

They don't look at me.

I know they're not listening when they look away or act listless.

When a person is not listening to you they don't respond at all.

... they may ask are you talking to me. What did you say. People can be easily distracted.

There's little or no eye contact ... body language indicating non-involvement ... a shoulder turned in a manner that excludes ... rushed or not interested.

I have to repeat it to get a reaction. Never get a word in to say anything.

Women's descriptions of nonlistening behaviors were often the opposite of those they described as listening behaviors. These descriptions were a confirmation of what their expectations were of a listener. For example, failure to make eye contact ("looking in space," "look[ing] away"), a criteria for non-listening, affirmed eye contact ("looking at me") as a listening behavior. Failure to respond (i.e., "don't respond at all," "non-involvement"), common indicators of non-listening, verified responding ("answering," "commenting," "responding correctly") as criterion behaviors.

In addition to identifying listening behaviors, the questionnaires helped me to find key informants. Several women returned questionnaires in person
and indicated their interest in exploring the topic further with me. "You know, I never thought about this before," women often commented, "That's something to think about." These comments were openings for me to ask them for an interview. Even brief, one-shot interviews added insight to what listening meant and how it happened.

This was how Sophia Sonders, the teacher I least expected to participate, became one of the key informants of this study. She had rarely spoken to me, or made eye contact with me during the only two staff development meetings. I was distanced by what I interpreted as her aloofness. She appeared to have neither time, interest, nor inclination to interact with me. Her in-depth responses to the questionnaire were not only surprising, but intriguing. They were an indication that she had spent considerable time and effort to write them. Extending beyond the space I had provided for each question, Sophia wrote in the margins and on the back of the questionnaire.

The following excerpts caught my attention:

When someone listens to me, I feel valued. I feel the listener is taking time out to think about what I am saying, to analyze it, and give feedback—actively participate in the transaction. When someone is listening, I make an extra effort to be clear . . .

When my husband listens, he gives very intense eye contact. He leans forward sometimes. Other times, his eyes dart about. But then, he is also anxious to make a point of his own. His face sometimes shows how I feel . . .

When someone doesn't listen to me, I feel hurt. Sometimes, the occasion serves as a reminder to ME about how others feel when I'm not being a good listener—just half listening. Sometimes, I feel like I want to disappear [when] a person isn't listening . . .
When someone isn’t listening] There’s little or no eye contact. Some body language might indicate non-involvement in the conversation. A shoulder might be turned in a manner that excludes rather than includes. They might seem distracted, rushed or not interested...

My husband and my best girlfriend listen to me most. But lately, I probably listen to myself most, but then, I suppose this is a different kind of listening. I listen to what I tell myself daily. I listen to the conversation I have with myself and the quiet times with myself. I listen to what’s happening—inside—in my head, my heart.

I don’t know [who listens to me least]. I guess I’ve stopped talking to them—whomever they are.

I highlighted particular sections: "His face sometimes shows how I feel," "I probably listen to myself most," "I listen to what’s happening—inside—in my head, my heart." I began to suspect she might be more interested than I had previously assumed. I was anxious, but determined, to arrange at least one conversation with her to hear more about her thoughts about listening.

A little more than a month after arriving at Lakota Center, I had an unexpected opportunity to talk with Sophia. Our dialogue that day was the beginning of our relationship as teacher and learner, ethnographer and key informant. On a Friday afternoon, all the teachers were preparing their classrooms for Monday’s visit from the governor. I brought my camera to take pictures and “participate” as I observed the preparations. Kathleen Block, another teacher, had generously invited me to "come and go" in her class at anytime. She was extremely friendly and warm, and I felt very comfortable with her. I expected that she would be a key informant. Kathleen freely shared information about Lakota, its literacy program, and the ladies.
While Kathleen and I measured and cut a long sheet of bulletin board paper, Sophia appeared unexpectedly in the doorway. She offered to help us, and Kathleen gladly accepted. Sophia and I exchanged only brief ritual hello's and smiles. I remained quiet while they chatted. The three of us stretched the fifteen-foot freshly cut brown paper that was intended as the background for a bulletin board that almost covered the entire back wall of the classroom. With Sophia was standing on a stool holding up one end while I stood on a counter top, straddling a sink, and holding the opposite end. Kathleen stood on the floor lifting the draping sheet of paper at its center. She started laughing when she realized that the stapler we needed to secure the paper was on her desk on the opposite side of the room.

Our laughter brought "Miss C," the teacher next door, to investigate. She retrieved the stapler for us. When we had secured the bulletin board paper, I stepped down onto a chair nearest the sink. Sophia moved quickly to steady the chair for me. She moved toward the door, but turned back to say, "If you get tired of doing the same thing and want to come over, I have some things you could read." I was surprised by her invitation because she had said so little to me before that time. Both of her actions were unexpected. I reflected that evening in my fieldnotes:

Sophia appears to be a keen observer and concerned about the welfare of others. Until I stood next to her, I hadn't realized how much shorter she was than me. Her presence is much taller than her actual height. Her speech and movements have congruent rhythms—soft, smooth, efficient, and directed . . . she appears to avoid eye contact. I interpreted this as "unfriendly" and "uninterested" at first . . .
In our first conversation today, Sophia appeared quite different from my original impression of her. Today she seemed very interested and very friendly. In fact she revealed quite a lot about herself in our brief conversation. I learned that she has no children, she is married, and grew up in a small community about an hour’s drive of Lakota Center.

She shared some of her concerns about teaching. She seems somehow different from the rest of the instructors and paraprofessionals. It is almost as though she doesn't fit in. When I look at her, she seems so vulnerable at times, her eyes almost sheepish. Yet when she speaks, she speaks with power and confidence (fieldnotes, October, 1993).

Our conversation was the first of many conversations to follow. We spent numerous hours together in class, on the phone, in interviews, on an out-of-state trip to the International Listening Association Conference, in church services, and also through letters, notes, and poetry we exchanged. As I listened, I learned about Sophia, the Writing Class, the women in it.

I focused my observations in the four of the regular classes the first year. I knew very little about the Writing Class except that all the ladies were required to go once a week. Although women worked on the mechanics of writing in regular classes, the Writing Class focused specifically on preparing them for the writing component of the GED. I discovered that the texts and posters in the corridor were products of women’s literacy work in the Writing Class. I heard the ladies talk about “goin’ to writin’.” Some of them were very resistant to being there while others were eager to go. While observing women in the process of getting there, going to the Writing Class, I met three other women who became key informants.
Time for Writin’": Going to the Writing Class

We are a very unique group of young ladies, because in each of us there are many different talents, each one special in its own way. Therefore, we, as a unique group of young ladies, should learn how to respect each others' differences and similarities and learn how to work together as a team. When you or someone on your team is not able to function at her best, neither will the team be at its best. That is what we, as a unique group of young ladies, are all about! (Doris Ann, Lakota Notes).

Classroom #7, "Miz Fanella's," was located on the far end of Lakota's west wing. The class was very similar to the other four "regular" classes at Lakota. More than a dozen women of various sizes, shapes, and ages sat in small groups around light oak work tables. Their chairs were dark blue office-style chairs made of heavy-duty plastic. The contoured backs and seats were padded in a matching blue fabric. The large, black casters on the legs allowed women to move freely from table to table.

The replacement of the original metal folding chairs with the new chairs illustrated what can happen when someone listens. Mr. Meaux, the project manager, told me the following story about the chairs:

I had watched this older woman carry a pillow to class every day for a week. One day, I stopped to ask her about it. She told me that the chairs were so hard they hurt her back. She said, "Mista Meaux doze chairs hurts ma back." She also said she had trouble getting out of chairs because when she pushed away from the table, the chair folded up with her. She almost fell one day. . . . Well, I had money left in the budget for furniture and equipment so I searched through the office furniture catalog until I found these. She doesn't bring her pillow anymore.

Mr. Meaux explained that his decision was the result of listening to what the woman had to say. In a brief moment, he learned how uncomfortable and
dangerous the old chairs had been. His action was evidence that he had listened.

At a table nearest the door, Emelda, the youngest woman at the Center, worked feverishly on an essay entitled, "My Mother, My Inspiration." She paused for a moment, lifted her eyes from the handwritten text and glanced at a large, round school clock located on the back wall. From its white round face, bold black numbers silently declared, "Nine-fifty-five."

"Timef'writin', MizFanella," Emelda announced urgently without a pause between her words. Her deep, rapid voice interrupted more than a dozen women who had been relatively quiet, still, and busy with their literacy work. Her voice was a signal for more than half the class to "move on" to the Writing Class. A loud thunder rose in the room as three heavy women pushed chairs away from the tables. Quick clicking caster sounds revealed the location and relative weights of two much smaller women sitting on the opposite side of the room. One woman slapped a language book shut and stomped out the room mumbling something about always being told what to do. Another woman carefully closed and folded a crinkled and unruly newspaper, stepped quietly toward the door, and disappeared down the hallway without a word.

Mrs. Fanella, who was sitting beside a student at the back table, placed her hand on the math workbook in front of them. She looked up and said, "OK, ladies, time for writing." "Time for writing," she repeated in a light musical tone. Standing and looking around the room, she reminded the women as they left, "Don't forget to come back for your lunch before I lock the door."
Emelda was eager to go to writing class and quickly gathered loose pages of her rough draft. She slipped the papers inside a bright blue spiral notebook on which she had etched several flowers and "Emelda + Dennis," "E loves D," "D loves E," and "Love is all you need" in black ink. As she stood to leave, she exchanged a smile and wink with Mrs. Fanella. Then, chatting and stepping in sync with a classmate, Emelda quickly moved her lively youthful body toward the door.

At an adjacent table Lena, one of the oldest women in the classroom, dashed for the door, waiting for no one. Lena took advantage of every opportunity to leave the classroom. She hated writing and desperately needed to "grab a smoke." Like most other smokers, she detoured outside the main building to get to writing class, located in the east wing. Once outside the building, Lena reduced her rapid rhythm. She walked slowly and smoked quickly to inhale as much nicotine-filled smoke as possible. Schooling was very stressful for Lena. "A cigarette," she explained, "calms ma nerves." To return to school after two decades and be told she was reading "below third grade level" was threatening and stressful. Smoking was one way she used to "make it through" the day.

While other women began to leave the room, Doris Ann, a robust women in her thirties, remained seated. She folded her elbows and rested them on the table. She looked up at her teacher and whispered, "Do I HAVTA go, Miz Fanella?" Mrs. Fanella responded reassuringly, "We'll finish up those fractions when you get back, Doris Ann." With a look of disappointment, Doris Ann
slowly slipped her notebook inside a math workbook, reluctantly pushed her chair from the table, and strolled toward the door.

As Doris Ann left the room, Mrs. Fanella walked to a table in the back of the room. Three women, who were sitting at the table, were working on their individual lessons. The two women, who were sitting beside each other, were talking to each other while they worked. While their eyes focused on separate texts, their voices connected in a dialogue that wove two unrelated topics: fractions and O. J. Simpson's trial.

"Daz not how it's done. You suppoze t' flip ova d' second numba," said the younger woman, who pointed out a division error to her classmate. Wrinkling her brow and scrutinizing a math problem, the older woman said, "Hmmm." "Y'think they gonna indict O. J.??" the younger woman asked as her classmate erased the problem from the page in front of her. Without lifting her eyes, the older student shrugged her shoulders and blew eraser fragments from her notebook page. "OK, now you gotta multiply," the younger woman continued. Without a word, the older woman wrote: "1/2 X 3/5 = 3/10." "Yeah, dat's it," the younger woman said smiling proudly. The women made eye contact briefly, then returned quietly to their individual tasks.

Across the table, a third woman was absorbed in her own work and not involved in the conversation. Resting both elbows on the smooth, light oak table top, she held up a language workbook with both hands. Her body was motionless while her eyes scanned the text before her. She glanced at the notebook laying near her right elbow and picked up a pencil beside it. After
recording her one-letter multiple-choice response, she returned immediately to
the text she temporarily held with one hand.

"La Doi, it's time for writing class," Mrs. Fanella said placing one hand on
the woman's left shoulder. Startled by the touch, La Doi allowed the language
book fall flat on the table top. She quickly pushed her chair away from the table
and looked questioningly at Mrs. Fanella who was standing on her left. La Doi
cupped her hand to her right ear and tilted the right facing Mrs. Fanella. "It's
time to go to Ms. Sonders'," Mrs. Fanella repeated in response to La Doi's
nonverbal request. La Doi focused first on Mrs. Fanella's lips as she spoke,
and then she looked around the half-empty room. "Oh, it's time to go to Miz
Sonders," she said somewhat surprised. Without another word, she picked up
her notebook, held it against her chest with one hand, slung her purse strap
over her shoulder, and walked quickly out the door. As she stepped through
the door, the hands of the clock read 10:05 a.m.

During the first year at Lakota Center, I had observed the diversity of
women's ways of listening within each class setting. I had been intrigued by
Sophia's descriptions of listening and the listening styles of La Doi, Emelda,
and Doris Ann. By the fall of 1994, I had focused my research in the Writing
Class. Sophia, La Doi, Emelda, and Doris Ann became key informants as a
result of mutual interests in and ongoing dialogues about listening.

The Writing Class: A Dynamic Classroom Culture

Each cultural world operates according to its own internal dynamic, its
own principles, and its own laws—written and unwritten. Even time and
space are unique to each culture (Hall & Hall, 1990:3).
The Writing Class had its own internal dynamic, laws, and principles. The Writing Class was a complex classroom culture. The women of this culture shared values, beliefs, and symbols that enabled them to create and negotiate meanings and to share time and space. Classroom #1 was the specific space and 10:00 a.m. to noon was the precise time designated for the Writing Class. Staff and students referred to this space and time as “writing” or “Ms. Sonders’.” A precise, linear, and sequential schedule existed on paper, but the internal dynamics of the Writing Class defied this fixed and rigid structure. The class began when the first one of the ladies arrived and ended when the last one left. The class took place where women gathered to write, talk, speak, and listen. The women generally met in Classroom #1, but occasionally moved into the hallways to discuss special displays on the walls. The class sometimes moved to the computer lab to complete essays, make journal entries, or perform their poetry for an honor’s program. After returning to their “regular class,” women often continued the work they had begun, individually or collectively, in the Writing Class.

Classroom #1 was one of the three classrooms located in the east, L-shaped wing of Lakota Center. The spacious 24 X 20 foot classroom had 12-foot ceilings and off-white tile floors. Two rows of fluorescent lights hung from a patched celotex ceiling that often sprinkled white fragments on the floor, tables, and students’ papers. In the center of the ceiling, a large heating unit hissed loudly on cold days, muffling the voices of the women in the room.
Black chalkboards covered most of the wall space on either side of the doorway. The bulletin boards across the top and on either side of the chalkboards were covered with bright yellow paper and were filled with students' poetry, essays, and photographs. A mantle-like shelf above each chalkboard held several ebony-colored African sculptures and a variety of baskets. Magazine articles, African artwork, and students' artwork covered much of the remaining space on the ivory-colored walls.

On sunny days, morning light filtered into the room through a half-dozen six-foot windows on the east wall. Aging pale green Venetian blinds partially concealed black iron burglar bars that had been bolted to each window. Five walnut study carrels that were adjoined lined the windowed wall. Three carrels held various classroom materials such as audio/video individualized instructional equipment, tape recorders, and student folders that are arranged in stacks and labeled names of full-time teachers. A single shelf connected the five carrels and supported a variety of small plants in rust-colored clay pots. The carrel farthest from the door was Sophia's literacy work space. Beyond the her work space was a teacher's desk where she stored papers, books, and magazines she incorporated in her lessons. Students' essays and papers that were in various stages of development were stacked in a manner that appeared, at first, to be haphazard.

Like all of Lakota's classes, the number of women who attended the Writing Class varied from day to day and week to week. Absenteeism, completion of GED, withdrawal from the program, "sanctioning" (removal from
the program by Social Services), or a transferal to another educational program were reasons for variation in class size. Providing sufficient "personal space" for private journal writing, group discussions, pre-writing activities, and large and small group activities were important to Sophia Sonders. Sophia conducted classes with as few as two students and as many as twenty-five. She described the situation this way: "Part of the craziness of figuring this [personal space] is that numbers [of students] have changed from eight people to eighteen."

The physical arrangement of women and materials were neither linear, sequential, nor symmetrical. Furniture, posters, and artwork were asymmetrically arranged and nonlinearly organized. Women's literacy work was not linear, sequential, or symmetrical. They did not develop "communicative competence" in neat rows and columns. They did not learn the wisdom of the Writing Class culture within a precise, predetermined curriculum. Rigid detailed lesson plans were not part of literacy work in the Writing Class.

Many women resented being coerced into returning to school. Some were grateful for an opportunity to return to school. Some had only been out of school a year or more, while others had been away for decades. A few women had a high school diploma. A few of those performed at elementary grade levels in some academic areas.

Many women were also resistant to going to "writing." Initially, some were hostile and resentful. Regardless of attitude, age, or academic ability, however, each woman was initially apprehensive about entering the Writing
Class for the first time. First days were often filled with anxiety, confusion, and fear. New ladies generally listened and observed carefully and attempted to be inconspicuous in the classroom. The following vignette describes a typical first-day experience in the Writing Class.

First Days in the Writing Class

A young woman who appeared to be in her late teens walked slowly into the room and selected the first available empty chair. She quietly slid the chair away from the table and sat quickly without making eye contact with anyone in the room. She glanced cautiously around the room and stole glimpses of other women who were moving about the room signing-in, retrieving writing folders and journals from the study carrels, and situating themselves at one of the five work tables.

Like a detached observer, the young woman sat "alone" with three other women at a table nearest the door. Asking no questions and volunteering no information, she was almost invisible between the cacophony and parade of bodies that filled the classroom. The young woman smiled at me timidly and looked down as I approached her table. "Are you a new student?" I asked. "Yes," she responded in a soft voice with her eyes still focused on the blank page in front of her. "Well, welcome to the class." I said and moved on to the back of the room.

Before I had time to sit down, Viola, a 35-year-old mother of four, announced proudly above the noise in the room, "Today's my one-year anniversary." Viola's announcement triggered a chain of spontaneous
responses from a number of her classmates: "Mine is April 16," "I got here September 13th," "It'll be three years March 8th," "I remembra it was a Wednesday."

Animated discussions evolved from Viola's comment as women exchanged "first day" experiences at the center. Women's voices interrupted and overlapped each other as women cited the day, month, and even day of the week of their first day at Lakota; however, Carina just listened and observed without saying a word.

Sophia, the teacher, used the naturally evolving dialogues to transition into a writing activity. "Ok, ladies. Ladies!" she said loudly, waving her hand. In an attempt to be seen and heard, she spoke louder, "I'd like for us to take a few minutes to write about YOUR first day at Lakota Center. What was it like? How did it feel? What were you thinking?" After a few giggles, some Oh-Miz-Sonders-complaints, grimaces, and other semi-covert expressions of resistance, the room became silent, and women began to write. Some wrote feverishly without lifting their eyes or pencils from their paper. Others stared off into space without a pencil in hand. Some women wrote one or two sentences, and then looked away pensively or conversed with someone sitting nearby.

After about 15 minutes, Sophia asked for a volunteer "to share." Viola was first. From the paper she later shared with me, she read:

April 4, 1994 I walk in the door at [Lakota] I felt like a stranger in a strange place, I didn't know anyone I just felt like I was lost here, I didn't know what I was against how I was going to fit in, I was --nervous, shaking, and everything
When Viola finished reading, some women began to raise their hands to volunteer.

With her back to Sophia, La Doi raised her hand and without looking up began to read immediately:

My First Day at Lakota Adult Learning Center Learning Center Was a day that I will never forget May 25-1994. I walked into class & I met my teacher Ms. Cole, She introduced me to the class of ladies. I was a little nerves, I look and seen two lady's that I already knew, this made me feel calm, I seen one of my old neighbors, I said I will not worry now, (to myself) Sherry Lynn, is in here she will "back me up."

Like Viola, La Doi gave me what she had written.

Emelda began to read next. "My first day at Lakota was April 18, 1994. I was very nervous and shy. Because I thought I wouldn't fit in with the other ladies because I was so young." Emelda, who was seventeen, had left school in the eighth grade. She was fourteen and pregnant.

Several women read what they had written in class. After class, some gave me copies what they wrote. The following are two of the texts I received including personal information I knew about each woman:

I came here Nov. 14, 1994. I felt out of place, I seen so many younger people then me Plus I didn't know a soul here (Cathy 45 years old, left school in 9th grade).

The first day I walk in at [Lakota] i looked around and said why everybody looking at me so strange. They was looking at me saying well here come another animal to the cage (Wanda, 25 years old, left school in 8th grade).

Some women sat silently and watched as women read proudly what they had written.
The new student in class did not read the lengthy text she had written, but to my surprise approached me after class with the paper in her hand. She smiled, turned her eyes away ever so slightly and said, "You wanna read mine?" Completely surprised, I accepted it graciously and read it silently as she looked on. She entitled her text "How my life was at Lakota." This is what it said:

Hi, my name is Carina Jones, I would like to tell you about my life at Lakota school; When I first went to Lakota I didn't know anyone there. I walked through the doors and started to think to myself, "Well here it goes, I'm entering the building and I don't see anybody yet." really I didn't know where to go or what to do. because it's not like when I went to Rosewood school [another adult learning center]. so when I walked into the office, and talked to the secretary, Mrs. Lois, and before I knew it I was attending school at lakota. So then she took me to the classroom in Mrs. Fanella's class, everyone was looking at me. I was looking like, "I wonder if my clothes are messed up, or if my hair is messed up, or if they were just looking to check me out."

I was sort of shaky. Well that day ended. Well then I stared having medical problems, and it affected me from going to school, so I dropped out. I stayed home for a while looked for a job. I finally found one. Then my medical problems interfered again. and I end up getting fired. So now I decided to go back to school. I talked to my worker, Mrs. Smith, and I told her I wanted to get back in school, so now here I am back at lakota, and I figured that, "O.K. everything's gonna be alright" on 8-1-95 the day I return to school, I all of a sudden get nervous. I go to Lakota and get back in, and it's the same way as it was before, everyone's looking, but I held my head up high and ignored that problem and did what I was supposed to do to get back in school and get my G.E.D. and know I'm alright I'm all in.

Maybe someday I'll start talking to people and making friends, cause I sort of shy anyway. Well, that's the end of my story about, "My life at Lakota".

Carina Jones

Whether they had been away from school only a couple of years or a couple of decades, women expressed feelings of fear and anxiety. Regardless of their
attitude toward the program, their age, or the last grade completed before leaving school, each woman expressed her apprehension about returning to school. Women's discomfort centered most often around their concerns about not fitting in or feeling like a stranger or outsider.

By mid February 1995, I felt as comfortable in the Writing Class as I did in my old jeans, T-shirt, and tennis shoes. I had been privately gloating over what I considered to be one of my greatest research accomplishments. I was mistaken for one of the ladies. This happened after a team building workshop that was presented by Mrs. Brown, a dynamic, black social worker. In the workshop, Mrs. Brown addressed issues of communications among black women and explored a pervasive distrust and inherent hostility embedded in black women's interactions. She referred to the problematic situation as women's relationship with "the other woman." Using a variety of fonts, she shared her poetic representation of this relationship:

the other woman

I take one look at you and I am angry.
Angry that you exist.

Yet I do not exist without you.
(But I try)

I never thought of you in light of me
only thought of you as threat ning...

What if....
What if I saw you
What if I saw you as extension?
Would I love you then?
Maybe not.
how can I love you when I do not love me?

save me...you are the only One on this side of heaven who can.

Mrs. Brown closed the workshop with, "We must learn to look at another woman with respect. Each of us is another woman to another woman."

On my way out of the computer lab, I shared with Mrs. Brown how much I had enjoyed the workshop. She responded, "Now, I want to hear from you when you get your GED." Overhearing her remarks, Sophia stepped in immediately and explained, "Oh, Jennifer isn't a student. She's from the university and doing research here." Mrs. Brown raised her eyebrows, opened eyes wide, and began to apologize for the mistake. I stumbled for words to express my gratitude for what she considered a mistake. What she interpreted as an insult to me was, perhaps, the best compliment I had received in years. Ironically only two days after being mistaken for one of the ladies, I had a completely opposite experience. The following describes this experience.

When I arrived for class, Sophia was setting up a video for a pre-writing activity. Ladies sauntered into the classroom as usual. Some were silent and some were chatting. Few paid attention to Sophia or the large television set and stand in the front of the room. Women sat at their respective tables and passed around the sign-in sheet. The sign-in sheet logged women's time in the
Writing Class; however, since women most signed in and signed out simultaneously, the record was seldom an accurate account of instructional time.

"Good morning, ladies. How are you today?" Sophia said smiling as she carefully observed the women as they entered the room. Some women smiled and returned a routine "Fine" as they walked past her. Other women continued their dialogues with each other without acknowledging Sophia's greeting. Before everyone was seated, Sophia began the directions for the day's lessons. "OK, ladies, let's get started. Today we're going to see a video. I want you to listen carefully and take notes. Then we are going to discuss it."

Her directions set the context and plan for the class. As she backed away with the remote control, she continued, "We're going to see a program I recorded last night. It concerns welfare reform. We'll talk about it and then I'll ask you to write about it. If something goes by too fast -- we can play it back."

At first the women quietly focused on the VCR monitor where a black woman newscaster introduced to the program. Watching for signs of listening, I was distracted by something I remembered Sophia had shared with me about "black folks on TV." I listened to the echos of her voice: "When I was little, I remember someone would say, 'Black folks on TV!' Folks would scramble in front of the TV set and watch black folks. You didn't see that very often."

None of the ladies appeared surprised to see a black woman on the screen. I was curious about the newscaster's personal opinions about welfare, the woman behind the words. Her rather sterile delivery apparently was not a
call which elicited a response from her audience. Women listened motionlessly and emotionlessly, at first. They listened to the expressionless delivery of a black woman on TV.

After a few minutes, I noticed several woman grimacing and I heard mumbling and side talk. Sophia scanned the room, listened for what was being said, and watched the ladies shift and fidget in their chairs. She called out above the rumbling voices, "Do we need to stop?" Her single voice was lost among the cacophony.

Suddenly, Margaret, a woman in her thirties, raised herself from her chair and leaned forward across the table to speak. Her black sleeveless crop-top revealed her well-defined biceps. Her deep powerful voice expressed her emotion-filled opinion. "Hell, they ain't tawkin' 'bout reform. They tawkin' about terminatin' benefits," she declared as she raised her arm and looked out around the room. "Not til after y' 7th child," a younger woman sitting on her left said without so much as a glance toward Margaret.

"Ladies. Ladies! Let's stop here for a moment," Sophia requested in a gentle, but authoritative tone. She moved quickly to the chalkboard ready to convert speech into print. "Let's discuss this, one at a time," she suggested as she wrote two headings on the board: "Massachusetts" and "Philadelphia." She reminded me of a musical conductor shaping and blending the sounds of diverse instruments into a beautiful concerto.

"Look! Ladies, LADIES, LADIES!!" Sophia demanded. "Look, find one sentence you want to make." While she spoke, she wrote on the left side.
Nicole, a student who had been in the class for some time, was wrinkling her brow and tilting her head in a manner that suggested she was confused. While Sophia re-explained to the class what she wanted them to do, Margaret turned to Nicole and pointed to what Sophia had written on the board as she paraphrased Sophia's instructions, "Write your opinion about what you feel about Massachusetts or Philadelphia." Nicole appeared slightly less confused.

As Sophia stepped lightly around the room, she invited the students to share what they wrote. "Ok, who wants to share their sentence?" Her eyes flash around the room searching for a response. She was listening for a "Yes" "Ok" "I'll take a chance" either in verbal or nonverbal forms.

Weeda raised her hand. Sophia made eye contact as she said, "Weeda, you'll share yours with us?" Weeda proceeded with a strong powerful statement of her opinion about the proposed welfare reform plans. While she was talking, Nicole began writing feverishly. Her eyes remained focused on her paper and her words flowed continuously from her pen. She appeared oblivious to the voices in the room.

"Anyone else?" Sophia inquired as she leaned forward. She made brief eye contact with each woman at the table. "Will someone else share?" she inquired, then listened for a response. Lifting her paper from the table ever so slightly, Veronica began reading in a soft, confident tone, "I feel the people in the congress should come talk to the people ON welfare about it." Her tone
carried no hint of anger, resentment, or blame. Smooth words—smooth tones—
matter of fact. The meaning it conveyed to me was: It's reasonable that if
people want to know about welfare, the obvious place to learn is to listen to
people who are experiencing it.

Terri boldly interjected, "I feel they should put down their pencils and
come over here to see!" Veronica responded in the same even, calm tone, "It's
not the people from Louisiana that have the worst plans." Terri's anger and
frustration contrasted sharply with Veronica's calm opinion about an illogical
and unjust process of government.

Sophia leaned her body forward into the conversation, "Because of child
care and transportation?" she asked, slowly nodding her head in a manner that
seemed ask for an expansion of what it was that she saw happening in the
Louisiana program that warranted such an assessment. A head nod from
Veronica completed the line of dialogue. "Who else has a sentence. I want to
see a sentence!" Sophia called out as she panned the female audience. She
was asking the ladies to share aloud, yet her words implied a visual response.

Standing with her back to the chalkboard and one hand gently touching
Chrystal's shoulder, Sophia peered out over Chrystal's head to the class,
"Sylvia?" From the opposite side of the room, Sylvia looked up from the text
she had created, the written articulation of a meaning she constructed while
listening to the video and the discussion concerning it. Sophia stood beside
Chrystal and bent over to look directly into her face. While Sylvia sat silently
confused whether Sophia was asking her to read or not, Chrystal's body
flinched. "Who me?" Chrystal inquired looking confused. "Yes," Sophia responded distinctly, "I would like for YOU to read it. Would you mind?" "Oh," Chrystal shifted to a more comfortably in her chair. "Oh. Ok," she said a bit hesitantly, "Alright." Shifting her body into a more comfortable and perhaps grounded position, she began to read in a distinct and matter-of-fact tone what she had written. I have included in brackets what I was listening while she read.

I find this situation ridiculous [She's talking about welfare reform]. If we have to come to school as a part of this government-funded program. [Which one of the two programs is she speaking about Massachusetts or Philadelphia.] Why must we be observed [Oh-oh, is she talking about me?] as if we are on display at a zoo while this white woman takes notes? [Oh, shit!] This feels like a being on national geographic.

Chrystal looked at me when she finished. Her verbal and nonverbal language said to me, "I do not want you here. I have not given my permission for you to be observing me." Because of my listening (what I understood Chrystal to say), I immediately moved to a position "outside" the classroom culture. What had seemed like a secure "insider's" position had suddenly shifted. My attire (T-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes) certainly had not set me apart. I suspected that my "whiteness" and/or my failure to participate had done so.

In that moment, I revisited the whole idea of the ethics and ethnographic research. I was listening and recording women's words, dialogue, and actions. I was very focused on recording the events and happenings, recording data; however, I had lost sight of the women who were new and did not know me. I had taken for granted I was "on the inside." I was suddenly very present and
aware of this woman. She was indignant and rightly so. "What do I do now?" I asked myself in desperation.

The room became silent as the other women in the room tuned-in sensing the tension even without hearing the words. Taking some responsibility for the mislistening, different meanings we made, Sophia interjected "Ohhhh, you don't know Jennifer. I'm sorry. I just assumed that everyone knew her. She has been here over a year and a half doing research on listening."

Terri interrupted, "Oh yeah, we all know her. She's always takin' notes and askin' questions. She's alright." Chrystal looked my way, but appeared to be still skeptical about my presence and my actions.

"Jennifer, would you like to explain a little about what you are doing to Chrystal, and are there any other ladies who do not know Jennifer?" Caught up in the experience, I saw very little around me. I don't know if anyone else in the room responded. All I saw was Chrystal and the look on her face. She had taken a risk to speak what was true for her and she was perhaps now a bit embarrassed. Lord knows what I actually said. I can't really remember. All I remember is my intention was to share with her as briefly as possible, my topic and intention, and to convey to her an apology, an acknowledgment of her honesty, and an acceptance of her actions.

"I apologize," she said. "That isn't necessary, " I thought as she began to repeat her apology. I was the one who needed to apologize. Although I did so immediately, I could not recall what words I actually articulated. In my journal that evening, I reflected on my experience:
Today's experience was so ironic compared to Monday when I was mistaken for a student working on my GED. It felt good to be included or to consider that on some level, to some persons, I might BE INCLUDED. Isn't that what learning culture is about? Know enough to be an accepted part. Are we ever completely accepted in a culture? I see some of women here that appear more distanced from each other than they are from me. No, acceptance is not the answer. What does make one accepted?

Chrystal had taught me a valuable lesson: Being inside the Writing Class culture is a temporary position.

In Chapter Four, I described Lakota Center, the surrounding neighborhood, and I presented the Writing Class as a unique classroom culture. The chapter included descriptions of the women, the space, the time, and "internal dynamics" that defined this dynamic culture. A major goal of this chapter was to create a context for understanding women's words, their meanings, and their actions. Within the confines of a printed text, I wanted readers to hear the loud and the soft, the bold and the timid, the angry and the playful voices that filled the hallways and classrooms of Lakota Center with the dynamic sounds of women's literacy work. Another goal was to create images of the women as the listened and moved in and out of Lakota Center and the Writing Class. I briefly introduced Sophia, La Doi, Emelda, and Doris Ann, the women who were the four key informants of this research.

In the Chapter Five, I describe each of these four women in greater detail. I present the stories each woman told about their childhood listening experiences, special listeners in their lives, and their listening experiences at
home and at school. From the stories women told emerged the meanings they made of listening and the behaviors they associated with listening.
CHAPTER FIVE

"BEIN' THERE": LISTENING IN THE WRITING CLASS

Chapter Five presents four women's meanings of listening and the behaviors they associated with listening. I described the four key informants, Sophia, La Doi, Emelda, and Doris Ann, the women who allowed me "to follow" them closely into their world of communication. These women taught me what listening meant and how it happened. I presented women's stories of childhood listening experiences, special listeners, and their listening experiences create a context for understanding these women's words and their ways of listening. I closed the chapter with a vignette which represents women's diverse ways of listening and the role of listening in women's literacy work in the Writing Class, work that can only be described as dynamically interactive.

Listening to Personal Stories: "The She Behind the Words"

People listen differently to what is said according to their personal history of experiences . . . The same poem, the same sentences, the same words, read to all of them at the same time, brings forth different images, different recollections, different worlds to each of them (Escheverria, 1990:21).

. . . blacks often probe beyond a given statement to find out where a person is "coming from," in order to clarify the meaning and value of a particular behavior or attitude (Kochman, 1981:23).

Women's explicit and tacit knowledge of listening emerged from the stories they told about listening and being listened to at home and in school, stories of special listeners in their lives, and stories about their listening in the Writing Class. The stories are taken from transcriptions of interviews and

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classroom interactions. I retell the stories as I heard them, in Black dialect or Standard English, in complete sentences or otherwise. I have attempted to represent meanings in each woman's own voice. When possible, I represented sounds, pauses, repetitions, interruptions, and overlaps as I heard them. It is important to note that printed dialogue does not replicate oral dialogue. Nonverbal gestures and vocal expressions often altered meanings of straight texts; therefore, they are often included within the text.

The four women I worked with most closely in the research were Sophia, La Doi, Emelda, and Doris Ann. Although these women shared similar historical backgrounds, i.e., African ancestry and a southern African American discourse, each woman's meanings of listening and patterns of listening behaviors were shaped and colored by their unique personal history, or lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). Each woman's personal background influenced what she listened, how she listened, and also how she expected others to listen (Escheverria, 1990). Knowing where a woman was "coming from" was essential in listening with understanding for the meanings she shared.

The ladies often spoke about the meaning "behind" a person's words. Sophia spoke of listening to the "she behind the words" and explained that listening involved discovering meanings that were hidden in women's spoken or written words. To know the "she behind the words," included listening for implicit meanings women could not or would not articulate explicitly.
Listening to Sophia

Allowing her body to become, itself, a medium, an instrument, for the resonance of sound, the musician can hear sounds, fields of sound, choirs of sound, that the rest of us will never hear (Levin, 1989:84).

Sophia Sonders, a petite, bright-skinned African American woman, was born in 1950 in a small town that was about an hour's drive from Lakota Center. In addition to her southern, African American discourse, Sophia is also influenced by her Native American background. Sophia received an undergraduate degree in journalism at a local university and, in 1991, a Master of Arts in Teaching at a northern university. She completed her certification in adult education while working at Lakota Center.

In addition to her responsibilities as the writing instructor, Sophia also edited and supervised the bi-monthly student newsletter, Lakota Notes. She also administered the TABE test and coordinated numerous performance programs and student activities at the center. In and out of Lakota Center, Sophia was committed to promoting greater awareness, understanding, and appreciation for African American culture and social justice. She and John, her husband, lived a couple of miles from Lakota Center near the university where he recently retired from his professorship in the Department of Fine Arts.

An Interview with Sophia

My phone rang at 7:15 a.m. on a cool, sunny November Saturday. Sophia asked if I was interested in meeting at her house at 8:00 a.m. for an interview. We had canceled several interviews previously, so I agreed immediately. Within ten minutes I was dashing out of the door with my
research bag and untied tennis shoes. Sophia met me at the door. "Come in," she said, smiling while she held the door open. Her soft, relaxed voice and slow, rhythmic movements made me aware of my own rapid breathing and rapid voice and movements.

Water was boiling on the stove and two cups were ready with instant coffee. "So how are you?" she asked as she watched herself slowly pour the boiling liquid into two mugs. "Just rushing, as usual. It'll feel good to sit and relax with a cup of coffee," I responded with a deep sigh. We had both dressed casually in leggings, knit tops, and tennis shoes—no make-up or styled hair.

We moved into her spacious den and sat on the cool, cream-colored linoleum floor and leaned against the couch that was several feet from patio doors. Gold pleated drapes partially restricted the morning sunlight, as we sipped our coffee, chatted, and looked out over the back yard. As we slowly spread out our individual materials for the interview, light golden sheers danced in a cool breeze that pushing gently through a patio screen and brushed lightly over our stacks of papers. Between us we had two mugs of coffee, Sophia's loose-leaf paper notes, my fieldnotes, two tape recorders, and two copies of interview #1 transcripts.

The ability to communicate clearly was a major concern for Sophia most of her life. Her intention "to have as clear communication with other people as I can" began long before she joined me in a quest to understand what it means to listen. Sophia had recognized long ago that listening was a critical part of communicating clearly. The process of our interviews and her reflections prior
to and following them was an opportunity to focus on listening and to observe herself and others as listeners.

In our interview, Sophia talked about listening to herself, a reflective and creative process. For Sophia, this listening was both a struggle and a pleasure. She explained, "Listening to myself is sometimes like the volcanoes—sometimes like the breeze. I let both be. And sometimes I try to manage them." She often expressed her thoughts, emotions, and meanings poetically. Sophia described "words needing to be said, needing to be written." Her poem "Some Words" vividly expressed vividly the work involved in listening to herself and writing poetry.

Some Words

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<td>and</td>
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Sophia described words resisting articulation and "conspiring to never become poems." At other times, she listened to images that "haunt and barricade" her, holding her captive. Despite her desires "to have voice" and give "shape" to her meanings through poetry, Sophia spent much of her life not listening to
herself. She described the avoidance of her own voice as a lifelong process of "killing poems."

Listening to La Doi

I met La Doi on the first day I substituted in Mrs. Fanella's class. She was talking with one of the other ladies as she walked into the room. La Doi was surprised to see me instead of Mrs. Fanella, but smiled warmly and said, "Good morning." She was wearing tight-fitting black jeans and a snug waist-length, silver-studded matching denim jacket. Her attire accentuated her petite, youthful figure. La Doi was barely five feet tall, but her perfect posture and petite frame made her appear taller. Her hair, pulled back in a puffy ponytail atop her head, revealed her flawless, caramel complexion. Two large looped earrings, one silver and one gold, dangled from each ear. I guessed her to be in her late twenties or early thirties, but I had underestimated her age by approximately fifteen-years.

After her warm greeting, La Doi walked briskly to a table near the chalkboard, placed her purse and notebook on the table top, and retrieved a brightly colored language workbook from a bookshelf near the window. She returned to the table, sat down, and began working immediately. With her elbows resting on the smooth, light oak table top, she gripped a thin, language skills workbook with both hands. Her body was motionless. Only her eyes moved slowly left to right, from word to word. La Doi focused her attention solely on the academic task at hand.
Her eyes seldom left the text she held in front of her even when recording an answer in her notebook. She would glance at the notebook near her right elbow, place the pencil on the next numbered line, then return to the text she held with left hand. With her eyes still on the workbook, she wrote a one-letter response on the page. She appeared oblivious to the conversations around her. "What a focused listener," I thought, "I must find out how she does that!"

**An Interview with La Doi**

My first interview with La Doi was unplanned. I had arrived earlier than usual to give La Doi a listening journal and to arrange the most convenient time for our first interview. La Doi was seated at one of the 25 carrels that lined three walls of Lakota's spacious and state-of-the-art computer lab. The lab, formerly an elementary school auditorium, had been remodeled and equipped with the latest computer-assisted individualized instruction for reading, language, math, science, and social studies.

La Doi was leaning slightly forward with her eyes focused intently on the computer screen in front of her. With large black headphones cupping her ears and the sides of the carrel blocking her view, she seemed oblivious to the occasional outbursts of laughter, frustration, or playfulness that ruptured the steady hum and whispers. Dozens of women were working together at tables which were arranged in neat rows and columns. I stood beside her for several minutes and observed as she read silently from the computer screen. Her eyes
moved slowly from left to right following the written dialogue from *The Diary of Ann Frank*. In order to not disturb the ladies sitting on either side of her, I stooped, touched her left shoulder gently, and whispered, "Good morning, La Doi." "Oh!" she exclaimed in a startled voice. She turned around and looked directly at my lips. When I began to speak, she turned her right cheek toward me and pointed to her right ear. I read her gesture as a nonverbal request to repeat what I had said, but direct my words to her right ear. I realized then that she had a hearing impairment.

I moved immediately to her right side. With my lips almost touching her ear, I whispered an apology for startling her. She asked me to repeat again. I spoke loudly this time. We exchanged routine *how-are-you's* and then I gave her the listening journal I had bought for her. Then I explained, "What I'm basically looking for in this research is what it means to listen?" What I meant was, "As you write in your journal, please consider this question: What does it mean to listen? We can talk about this during our first interview." La Doi focused intently on my face as I continued, "So I'll jot this down right here." As I wrote the questions on the first page of the journal, I began to repeat my previous questions. Before I finished the question, La Doi interrupted me excitedly, "Ok, I think listening, to me, means learnin'."

I was not expecting the flood of rich data that poured from her lips. "My God, my recorder, my notebook!" I said to myself as I fumbled through my research bag for pen, recorder, and field notebook. "OK, listening means learning" I said slowly as I wrote rapidly. In my panic, I failed to probe further.
what "listening means leamin'." Instead, I asked La Doi to write about listening in her journal so we could discuss it in our first interview. I also asked her to consider another question for her journal writing: How can you tell when someone is listening to you? "Just be thinking about that," I explained, "We will talk about what listening means in the interview." La Doi immediately interjected, "I can tell you right now."

La Doi was ready to tell me immediately what she knew about listening, but I was not ready to listen. I suddenly remembered some of my mother-in-law's words of wisdom. "Never trust a weak point!" she always told me. With that thought in mind, I grabbed my pen and notebook and quickly requested La Doi's permission to audiotape our conversation. She accepted and I started listening and writing.

"How did you say that again?" I asked. I intended to review my previous question about how she knew when someone was listening. Before I completed the question; however, La Doi had paraphrased it for me. "How do I know someone is listening?" she said, then she immediately answered:

They will look me straight into my eyes, they'll even look at the movement of my lips, also they're keeping tabs if the person's really payin' attention and THEN whatever the conversation IS you can come BACK to that same person ask 'em different QUESTIONS if they give you the PROPPA answers you KNOW that person WAS listenin' . . . when they ask a question . . . about whatever conversation you have, you can tell. You can DEFinitely tell if the person has been listenin' 'cause you know the proppa answer already y'SELF.

And in school you can always tell in the classroom. I can tell if somebody is, because if the teacher's talkin', alotta times now, for mySELF, when I'm not listenin' to Miz Fanella, I'll keep writin'. My mind is focusin' on what my assignment, y'know, I could be all in a book,
Detecting the Sequence, and if this book is interestin' to me I'll keep on with that assignment and I can hear Miz Fanella's VOICE, but I'm not listenin' to what she's-, y'know, to what she's sayin'. Now when I'm listen' to Miz Fanella, I'll STOP. You're goin' to stop whatEVER you are doin' and focus diRECTLY on whatEVER the speaker or the teacher or the person is sayin'. And this is true.

La Doi always managed to say a lot in a short period of time. Although, I conducted only two formal interviews with La Doi, our informal conversations with her many insights into listening.

La Doi also taught me about listening through her reflections in her listening journal. Her first journal entry was dated November 2, 1994. The following was taken from that entry:

Dear Jennifer,

How are you this morning Well I sure do hope, I am doing and feeling great. This morning I am focoused on Listening while sitting her in class. I can listen to the pages being turned, laugh's, also gum-popping. The chairs here have rollers on the legs of them I can listen to the rollers as they make sounds, also the squeal of the door as it closes. listening, to me, this morning can be an art, This Morning on my way to school I was listening to the conversation of parents and their children, they were all talking about the holiday season; and, the wonderful things; that, they are all planing for Thanksgiving, and Christmas really they helped me gather some good ideas. I really do think listening is an important, and main Quality in life. Listen is also a smart thing to do, I must add, I will listen as long as my hearing organ's fuction, because now I do relize the importance of listening, I'm working on my GED and since I have been listening, I'm really learning a great deal; also, gathering very important information. Information I can use to help myself, children and other's that don't take the Art of listening serious. Well, Jennifer, I hope you can get something out of my writing to you I really did enjoy taking this time out to corresponding you these lines on listening.

Your sincerly,
La Doi

La Doi enjoyed writing in her journal. I enjoyed dialoguing with her in this manner. We had interesting conversations in writing.

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La Doi also enjoyed reading aloud what she had written. "I wanna read dis letta t' ya SO BAD", she said, excited for me to listen to what she had written. "Jennafa," she said. She chuckled nervously, cleared her throat, and began to read. I transcribed the following from the audiotape of the interview:

Dear Jennafa, how are you on this beautiful mornin'? Feeling great I sure do hope. I am feelin' very healthy. I am correspondin' in these few lines JUST to tell you about how you and I also EV'RYONE (pause, takes off glasses). Aw, ok, excuse me. You and I, also evr'one, that can HEAR. How we can aPPRECIATE the act of listenin'. Jes KNOW that listenin' is the beginnin' of knowledge. Ev'ry mornin' I aWAKE. I listen to the birds communicate. Also at home I can listen to television, radio which give infamation and MUSIC. THESE things are the vices [voices] which is GREAT to listen to. Den at school I gain LOTS of infamation, dat is imPORtant that I can use, in de near fewcha. My instructa, Miss Dyer, is GREAT! I really listen to her. She gives me PLENTY, infamation I can use on passin' ma GED tess. I also listen to ministas dey give LIFE SAVIN' infamation, that is SO IMPORTANT, I can use and apply it to ma ev'ryday livin'. Listenin' is one of the most required purposes, if you don't listen, you can be assured dat things will be chaotic in your life, style. So let's jus keep listenin' and gainin' knowledge. Then we can have a healthy and prosperous life. Yours sincerely, La Doi.

There was variation in the words La Doi wrote, the words she read, and the words I listened. See Appendix C for one of La Doi's journal entries in her handwriting.

Listening to Emelda

"Gogetmafolder," Emelda called out loudly from about six feet away. At first, I had no idea what she had said. I tried to replay what I heard at a slower speed in an attempt to separate sounds I heard into meaningful units. I asked her to repeat what she said. "Go. Get. Ma. Folder," she repeated with emphasis in a slow, mechanical tone. "Oh," I said a bit surprised by her
demanding tone. "Now that sounds like a command. Is it?" I continued.

"That's an indicative sentence with a period at the end," she responded playfully, proudly displaying what she learned about sentences and punctuation. "That's an indicative sentence with a period at the end," I repeated as though replaying at 33 1/3 rpm's what was spoken at 78 rpms. Realizing what she said, I smiled and replied, "Alright, that's great! Where do you keep your folder." Her loud and rapid voice sounded like machine gun fire. Emelda had a deep, coarse voice, and she seldom paused between words. It was very difficult to distinguish her individual words.

This incident I described occurred in June, 1994 when I was substituting for Mrs. Fanella. Judging from her physical appearance, I assumed Emelda was in her early twenties. Because of this assumption, I considered her classroom behavior rather immature for that age. Emelda spent class time drawing, coloring, talking, or laughing. Her behaviors suddenly changed; however, when I asked the class to select topics for a research project. Without a moment's hesitation, Emelda declared in a loud raspy voice, "I wanna write about teenage pregnancy." She repeated emphatically, "I wanna write about that!" Within moments, she had pulled out a notebook and began writing before listening to any of the instructions I gave the class. For three days, Emelda wrote feverishly, totally absorbed in her autobiographical research. She asked for my assistance several times. She was eager to read each new section to me for my approval.
Her written voice was easier to follow than her spoken voice. Like La Doi, Emelda loved to write and to read aloud to someone else. She enjoyed reading her poems, letters, or essays for someone to listen. "Here, I wrote this poem; I want you to read it," Emelda had demanded many times. "I want to write about my life," she said with determination. She was pointing proudly to a sheet of pink construction paper on which she had drawn and colored several flowers. Her drawing was the cover for an autobiography she had begun. Behind the cover was a neatly handwritten table of contents and a dozen numbered blank pages. "It's gonna be twenty-five pages," she declared confidently.

I learned about Emelda in a short time. I learned about her family from reading what she wrote and listening what she said. Emelda was 17 years old, the youngest woman at Lakota Center, and also the youngest in a family of ten children. Like most of the women at Lakota Center, Emelda left school early because she was pregnant. In her words, she left school because "I wuz too shamed to go back to school." She was fourteen and in the seventh grade when she became pregnant. When she was barely fifteen years of age, she had a son whom she named Junior.

Excerpts from her research project appeared in an article she wrote in the Writing Class. She entitled the article "Self Pride Keeps Student Going Strong!" The following is what appeared in Lakota Notes, the center's newsletter:

I am very PROUD of myself because I didn't think I had the COURAGE to come back to school. The toughes part of returning to school was my getting over wanting to sleep all day and hang out with my friends. Son, I realized that my education was most important in my life.
At this time, I'm SERIOUS about my goals. I want to go all the way and make my life better. School is the most important thing happening in my life at this point. I have to GIVE THANKS to my mom for helping me. Because with all the fussing and sticking by my side, she really gave me the courage to go on in life.

THANK GOD for my son, for being in my life, because he is my GET UP AND GO POWER. When I look at him, I know that he's my responsibility. That thought makes me go on with my education, accomplishing my goals for a better life for my son and myself.

Without my education, I'm nobody. With my education, I'm all I can be. Having my education is IMPORTANT TO ME. It will help me to get a nice job and become an independent woman of the 90's.

I am going all the way with my head high, sayin' I CAN MAKE IT. Nothing can stop me, nor get in my way. Getting my GED is like getting a pot of gold. I've finally got the opportunity, and I'm going FORWARD in my life.

I had considered asking Emelda to take part in the research because her bold and candid comments fascinated me. I was interested what she knew about listening, but was hesitant about interviewing her for several reasons. She was very open and eager to talk; however, her rapid, compressed speech was often impossible to understand. I was concerned about obtaining parental consent from her mother. I was also unsure how Emelda would remain at the center; therefore, I decided not to interview her. I had already spent too many hours conducting interviews, transcribing tapes, and observing women who disappeared a short time later.

However, Emelda did become a key informant because she demanded to be one. Before I could ask her, she insisted on participating in my research. It was a cold wet December morning, when Emelda met me at the back door of the center with a serious look on her face. "I wanna do that listening thing," she demanded as she stood with her arms crossed and her feet apart. "I want to
write in one of those books you been givin' people," she informed me. Her enthusiasm and determination were very persuasive. She left no room for "No."

I brought a journal and gave it to her the next day.

The more Emelda revealed about listening, the more she revealed about herself. As I learned more about her, the classroom behaviors that I initially judged as somewhat disruptive began to make sense. Emelda was the youngest of ten children and often found it difficult, if not impossible at times, to get attention from her family. To get attention in the classroom, she often teased or joked with other women. She loved to laugh and to make others laugh. When she wasn't laughing, giggling, or making others do likewise, Emelda drew pictures or colored them with Mrs. Fanella's felt-tipped markers. I was unsuccessful in my repeated requests for her to complete the work she had been assigned by Mrs. Fanella. She always nodded and said "OK," and then simply continued with her own agenda. Because of her constant social interactions with other students and her incessant drawing, I had judged her as off-task and lacking self-discipline. Writing was a way of getting attention. Emelda's writing was her way to get others to listen.

An Interview with Emelda

Before I could interview Emelda, I needed written consent from Selenia Gray, Emelda's mother. We made arrangements around Selenia's work schedule and decided on the following Saturday afternoon. Emelda called me around noon to say the her mother was on her way home. She gave the directions to her house, and I it rather easily. Several people were sitting on
the small front porch when I arrived. After I introduced myself, one of Emelda's sisters opened the door and told me to "Go on in. Emelda's inside."

Emelda greeted me in the living room with a big smile and her typical hardy laughter. She introduced me to Junior, her two year old son. Next, she showed me her bedroom, which was adjacent to kitchen. As soon as we walked through the curtained door, Emelda proudly pointed out her desk, bookshelves, and a new typewriter that her mother had bought recently. After the brief tour, we moved back to the living room to wait for Selenia, Emelda's mother.

While we were sitting on the couch, Emelda tried to buckled Junior's tiny, new sandals. "Be still, Junior," she said impatiently as he giggled and squirmed playfully on the floor. "She's just a child herself," I thought. I wondered how I might have managed as a mother at that age.

I was writing descriptions of some of women at Lakota when Emelda telephoned. While we waited for Selenia, I decided to ask her how she would describe herself to someone else. She responded immediately:

If I was to describe myself, I'd say, "She is five-five and wears glasses. She likes to talk, draw, and write." That's what I want to know about somebody, what their hobbies is, what they like to do, their personality. Really though, the first thing I'd say about myself is "She wears glasses." Then I guess I'd say ma race. "She's black, her skin is dark. She not too skinny, not too fat. She stout." Yeah, I'd say I'm stout.

Emelda smiled mischievously, then gave me a "once over." Next, she volunteered her description of me: "You're about six-one and like to talk a lot." I was surprised by her over estimate of my height. She was an inch taller than I
was. "What about my skin color?" I inquired. "Hmmm, white, I guess," she replied. She paused a moment, cocked her head to one side, and then remarked, "Miz Sonders, she's sorta bright, sorta dark."

Our conversation ended when Selenia arrived. Emelda introduced me as her "teacher." "How ironic," I thought, "Emelda was the teacher!" I described the interview process and the classroom observations to Selenia. I also mentioned the listening journal and described the process of confidentiality. Selenia had no questions, and she quickly signed the consent form without reading it. Emelda wanted me to take a few photographs of she and her family. We joined the friends and family on the porch where she proudly introduced her family and friends. The interview was brief, but I learned a lot about Emelda and her family that day.

Listening to Doris Ann

Most of the time I understand what you are sayin'. I don't look to the left or look to the right—my mind is focused on my GED (Doris Ann, January, 1995).

Doris Ann was a stout woman in her early thirties. She moved slowly and gracefully. Her voice was smooth and flowing. The first time I saw her was early in January, 1995. She was wearing a purple top with brightly colored flowers painted across it. "Doris Ann, how are you feeling today?" Sophia asked her. I quickly wrote "Doris Ann" among the five other names placed in roughly sketched seating chart. Each woman's name located her position around the table at which they were seated.

Sophia watched and nodded as Doris Ann continued, "Your parent is constantly telling you how to-, how to cook." "How to cook you mean-?" asked Sophia in a sort of fill-in-the-blank tone leaving a space for Doris Ann to further explain. Doris Ann paused and closed her eyes. Sheila utilized the pause as an opportunity to explain what Doris Ann meant, "Like she say--it may seem strange--She is sayin', 'Who we are is shaped by our parents'." Doris Ann opened her eyes and added, "I call it perpetrate."

Sophia posed another question to the small group, "Is it a struggle to be who we are?" The questioned triggered an immediate flurry of comments. The women's voices produced rich texts of vibrant, overlapping dialogues:

I found that with myself, I don't have to do what Mom wants... Have you found that to be so?... Are you saying that in a negative way? I'm sayin' it both ways... In the 11th grade, I wanted draftin' and woodworkin', ma mamma thought I was actin' like a man... She said her mamma want her to do the opposite, I got one like that... You make me get rowdy... I want to be an electrician...

Doris Ann remained quiet while Sophia, Sheila, Shaletta, Cynthia, and Katrina engaged in back and forth dialogue.
Sophia watched closely and listened carefully to each interaction. Doris Ann focused silently on the math text in front of her, while on her right, Shelia and Shaletta were actively engaged in a discussion about love. Sheila began her next turn of the conversation, "Love keeps-." "No score of wrong," Doris inserted without looking up from a math problem. Her words captured Sophia's attention although she had been watching and listening to Katrina and Cynthia's conversation. Sophia turned to Doris Ann and added, "As adults we need to clearly know that people who genuinely love us are willing to let us be who we are."

Katrina responded from the other side of the table, "You gotta dig."

Turning again to Katrina, Sophia inserted, "DIG, DIG, DIG!" Then matching Katrina's Black dialect, Sophia added, "It want do no good if you don't know who you are." Doris Ann raised her head, looked directly at her teacher, and responded, "I know who I am." "I hear your opinions. I listen. I respect," she added matter-of-factly.

Sophia stopped the discussion abruptly, checked the wall clock, and said, "Let's stop here. Alright, ladies, the paper is done. Now write!" She walked quickly to the chalkboard and enclosed in quotes: The Struggle to be Me. She turned around and instructed the women to "write for five minutes."

The room was silent as Sophia walked around the table "eavesdropping" (as she called it) on texts in progress.

When the last woman placed her pencil on the table, Sophia asked, "Somebody want to share?" After a brief silence, Doris Ann, who had nothing
written on her paper, responded, "I already tawked about it." Without a response, Sophia turned to Shelia, "You want to?" "Huh?," Shelia asked. "You care to?" Sophia restated in another way. "Read?" Shelia asked. When Sophia nodded, Sheila read her three sentences that closed with: "What's behind me is over."

"I be better at expressin' it than writin," Doris Ann said returning to Sophia's initial request that she share. "The paper's not big enough for what I be thinkin'," Doris Ann explained.

"It's easier to say it that write it," is what I understood Doris Ann to be saying. I understood where she was coming from; I had been struggling to write academic papers, to say in writing what was so much easier to speak about. I was intrigued by Doris Ann's "non-traditional" listening behaviors, i.e., her lack of eye contact and her involvement in other activities while she listened. I decided to ask her for an interview; however, she received a phone call and left before class ended.

The next day, I had the good fortune to meet her again. This meeting took place at the Office of Family Services. Several of the ladies had suggested that I apply for "stamps" [food stamps]. My limited time and excessive pride had prevented me from following their suggestions. After refusing another assistantship, my financial situation deteriorated steadily. When I realized that I might not only eat a lot better, but I might share in a common experience, I decided to apply.
Nervous, but hopeful, I entered the spacious waiting room of the Office of Family Services and walked to a reception area in the back of the room. Behind the counter, a middle-aged receptionist was conversing with an office mate. "Excuse me," I said. She made no response or eye contact. I cleared my throat and repeated, "Excuse me, Ma'am. I would like to apply..." Without looking up, she handed me a packet of papers and said in a mechanical voice, "Have a seat please."

There were more than a hundred gray vinyl chairs arranged neatly in rows and columns. After finding a vacant seat near the wall, I began to read the tiny print of one of the forms I had been handed. While deciding whether to write above or below the pale blue lines, I heard names called out: "Jones," "Smith," "Washington," "Alexander."

Scanning the sea of faces around the room, I saw old, young, Asian, African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic males and females. Many of them sat stoically while small children climbed up and down on the chairs beside them. A variety of notices and public announcements were posted on the walls. One of them announced a $500 fine for "falsifying paternity." Another notice warned readers of a $5,000 fine and a possible five-year prison term for falsifying income information. "Is declaring income more important than declaring paternity?" I wondered in dismay.

When I turned away from the notices, I was surprised to see Doris Ann enter the room. I waved my hands to get her attention and motioned with my hands, "There's a chair right here." Doris Ann looked puzzled as she walked
toward me. After a quick introduction (since she did not know who I was), I mentioned her interesting comment she made in class about speaking and writing ("I be better at expressin' it than writtin' it . . . The paper's not big enough for what I be thinkin'.") She was surprised and pleased that I had listened and remembered. "Really?" she said smiling.

After briefly describing what I was doing at Lakota Center, I asked her for an interview. She agreed without hesitation. Before we could schedule a time or place, a female voice announced, "Miss Morton." Doris Ann stood quickly and walked toward the reception area. "I'll talk to you at school next week, O.K.?" I called out. Doris Ann smiled, nodded, and then disappeared through a wide doorway. I tapped my notebook lightly with my fist, "Yeah! This trip has been worthwhile already!"

An Interview with Doris Ann

A week later, Doris Ann and I agreed to meet for an interview at her home. On a cold wet January afternoon, we met in the foyer. An all-morning rain was becoming an all-day rain. Inches of water covered the sidewalks and ground surrounding the center. Sharing Doris Ann's large umbrella, we hurried out to the back parking lot, dodging mud puddles. We drove to the visitors parking lot to tell her husband that she would be riding home with me. "Honey, go on home. I'm comin'," Doris Ann ordered gently. Her husband was a fragile-looking man who appeared to be much older than Doris Ann. In an almost childlike manner, he nodded and responded, "Ok, Doris Ann."
It was raining so hard when we drove away that I could hardly see tail lights in front of me. The windshield wipers made little difference as sheets of rain blurred my view. Doris Ann's calm reassuring voice directed me down Boardwalk Boulevard, "Now get on ova in the right line when you can. Just a minute. Ok, now it's clear." After I veered slowly to the right, she said, "Now we gonna turn just after the tracks." When I felt and heard a muffled bump-bump, bump-bump, I knew that we had made it safely across the railroad tracks. "Here we are. Now turn right here. That's it on the left," she said, and we were there.

The front yard looked like a small pond. Doris Ann guided me across 2 X 4 planks that served as a bridge to the front steps. She opened the door and we both rushed in to be warm and out of the rain. Doris Ann put away her jacket and I noticed she wore beige knit pants and a long sleeve, a rayon shirt that reached below her thighs. I sat on the brown shag carpet in the living room carpet. When she returned, she sat on the floor and leaned against the rust-colored velour couch that hid a portion of a rainforest mural on the wall.

Childhood Listening Experiences

In our first interview, I asked each woman to recall a vivid listening experience from her childhood and to describe in detail what she was doing, how she was feeling, and what she was thinking at the time. Women's stories about listening and being listened to centered around home and school. Their stories set contexts for the meanings of listening that unfolded during the
course of subsequent interviews and observations. The accumulated stories revealed how significantly early listening experiences influenced how women listened, what they listened, and to whom they listened.

**Sophia Listens**

Sophia described early listening experiences at home and at school which were often unpleasant and sometimes painful. In telling her stories, she included detailed descriptions and vivid imagery. She reconstructed multilayered dialogue that graphically recreated scenes of disappointing interactions with adults at home and at school.

**Sophia's Listening At Home.** Sophia's concerns about "communicating clearly" emerged at a very early age. Many of these concerns developed as a result of verbal interactions with her mother who had a hearing impairment. Sophia described her mother, the nature of their dialogues, and the experience of listening to her mother:

... I was going to mention something about Mom. My mother was hard of hearing and there were other things that made the whole experience of conversation different. With Mamma, you had to repeat things and she was a more, a timid person. I didn't talk to my mother a whole bunch because her voice didn't carry... because she seemed uncertain and tentative and she WAS... as a kid I had to go places with her -- business places, pay bills and all of this... I'd translate. She hated asking people to repeat... what they had to say.

Sophia explained that translating for her mother was a laborious task. She had to listen closely in order to articulate clearly for others what her mother wanted to say. Translating for her mother required patience, time, and energy. As a
young girl, Sophia preferred spending that time and energy on more enjoyable activities.

Sophia's mother often mispronounced words because of her hearing loss. Sophia gave an example of one her mother's commonly mispronounced words:

I just saw there were words that she mispronounced. She would say, *Naz-I* for Nazi . . . I don't know whether she said it that way because that's what she heard or whether she pronounced it that way because that's what she saw.

While her mother's mispronunciations embarrassed and frustrated Sophia, she learned to be more patient and tolerant. In time, she "found out that . . . it was what she heard and what she gave us."

Interestingly, while Sophia related the story about her mother's mispronunciation, she recalled her own similar experience. She interrupted herself to relate another story about an experience which helped her to better understand where her mother was "coming from." She reconstructed the dialogue of her interaction with an unidentified person:

I was forty, when . . . I was explaining something to someone and, and saying *It was cross tires.*
[She said,]
You mean, cross ties?
I said,
*I don't know. Those THINGS!* This [cross tires] is what I heard people say, and this is what I said.

Her own experience of mispronouncing words shifted Sophia's perception of her mother. Her experience brought her closer to where her mother was
"coming from" allowing her to identify with her mother's communicative experience.

Sophia perceived her mother as a timid woman and expressed disappointment and occasional anger over her mother's lack of assertiveness. Her mother's hearing loss contributed significantly to her timid behaviors and appearance; however, Sophia described her father as a verbally abusive alcoholic. She also described what is was like to listen to her father and how this influenced her communications with others:

I guess my most negative experience was my father's yelling, it just comes out very strong, the way I react to that when I see parents yelling at their children . . . I get upset.

From her experience, Sophia became more sensitive to "loud talk" and verbally abusive interactions, particularly those involving children. She also learned ways to deal with unpleasant verbal interactions. Two of these were talking back and tuning out. She chuckled as she told me about how she talked back and tuned out:

Oh! Well, let's see . . . Dad was aware that I was tuning him out . . . but then, it got better, in a way where he wasn't aware. And it worked out fine for MY purposes. I don't know, I guess I'd tell someone to go to hell under my breath, so to speak, and it wouldn't really matter too much if they heard or not
What'd you say? (chuckle)
You know, there was just too much to deal with and . . . I didn't have a whole bunch of respect for a lot of adults. The examples just were not there.

When Sophia talked back, she was the most important listener for her words. What she had to say carried such importance that she was willing to risk negative consequences to say it.
In an unpleasant situation, Sophia tuned out the speakers. *Tuning out* was Sophia's way of making others disappear. She explained:

... there are things I understand better about that now too. But at the time it was like,

*Oh, I don't know, she [Mamma] doesn't seem to know . . . what she's doin'*(chuckle). You know . . . *if this guy's yelling at her all the- [time]*

and so you make judgements and . . . you're maybe eight years old you say,

*He's not yelling at me like this any more* (chuckle).

you know, or you let him yell and you just tune-him-out, which was-

(she suddenly recalled a poem)

God, this is from another poem, about deciding not to cry. And with, with daddy's beatings, and um . . . and when people talk so-, I made an analogy to flowing past the ceiling off into the clouds and, just being so far away . . . I remember a time when he was saying pretty much,

*Stubborn!*

or whatever . . . it was HARD I don't know, DEFENDING my mother and TAKING my stand and not, be bold and, and lot of different things, but I guess relative to listening, that was kind of this effect.

Sophia used poetry to expressed many experiences and emotions that related to her communications with others and with herself. The following poem is one that she shared with me:

I AM LOUD.
My voice
born dis
eased.
And I
will not
quiet
your
ill
ease.
Chance
forgetting.
I scream.

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She described what she meant in her poem: "If I'm too quiet and too accommodating, I fear that I will forget my pain and be lulled to sleep." She closed her explanation poetically: "A voice born in trouble needs to work itself out. The search is mine."

**Sophia's Listening in School.** Sophia's communications with adults in school were no less disappointing or disillusioning than her communications at home. First, she described what is was like to listen as an elementary student in a Catholic school, then as a high school student in a recently desegregated public school.

... this woman, Sr. Fidelis, took me in front of a CLASS. She had me in front of the class, and she gave me a PADDLING, and um, I don't know what-the-hell that was about (chuckle) and it was like, you know,

*These people are really CRAZY! They, they're, they're about the same as what some of the ones I living with* (laughing).

Um, there was a thing that, further confirmed some things to do with POVERTY for me as a child. To do with being BLACK, to do with living "behind the tracks." I mean I, I don't know what, what the thing was. I was an example? Or I talked back to Sister? And I probably did most of that.

I didn't have a whole bunch of respect for a lot of adults. The examples just were not there. And so these authorities outside of that, it was about the same, I mean, to some extent. I guess most of the nuns were OK, but Sr. Gilbert stands out because of some PROBLEM. And that's unfortunate, but I suppose... that sometimes, if you're in a certain situation as a kid and you're trying to explain why you don't have your homework, or, like today maybe kids are explaining that somebody was fighting, or is selling crack, or the house was burning down, or there was a fire, or a beating, and the teacher is saying,

*Hell, I don't want to hear anymore!*  
No, they would be saying,

*I don't want to hear any more excuses.*

You immediately cut off. Your experience is kind of cut, sliced and you take a position out of self survival, you know preservation with THESE people and THEIR perception of YOUR reality and what your reality is... I just remember trying to explain something. It seems they didn't want to hear it and, I don't know how else to say it.
Well, these folks had their own agendas. They had their own perception of what they were to do, what they were doing. And they had their ideas about who was "behind the tracks" and who was "in front of the tracks." They had their ideas about who had lower tuition, assisted tuition, or something. I don't know what they called it then, but poverty meant SOMETHING. I don't know what-the-hell it meant, but it was certainly something negative. And then if you're not paying the (laughing) assisted tuition because Dad was drinking, there was an additional kind of connotation that goes with that. And it spilled over to the children . . . the same way you do it now, body language, lack of eye contact or eye contact. And what kind is it? Is it gentle and caring? Or is it the kind that DISMISSES you? . . . just a lack of ATTENTION or even, attention that was not balanced. I don't know,

You're doing all that Latin stuff and I'm trying to figure out
(laughing)-
You know, trying to figure,

How these folks gonna get some FOOD in this house?
or something. You know and these STATUES and all of this. These WHITE prayer books and you gotta round up these beads and white shoes and . . . all of a sudden you, you become holy and you do your hands (motioning the sign of the cross). This guy comes down and you kiss his ring and all of this carryin' on

Why don't they come by my house (laughing) and see if they can talk to these people?
So it, I don't know, you know, with listening there was just so many messages. The church had its agenda, the school had its. As a child in my situation, I had to figure out what mine was going to be.

Sophia's high school experiences were somewhat different, but also generally negative. She was one of the first black students who integrated the "white high school" in her hometown in 1966. She described what it was like "transferring to the all-white school":

. . . the TIME surrounding all of that-, see it- I don't know how to explain it, but the TIME the ERA was HEIGHTENED listening. I mean for EVERYBODY . . . You're listening for signs of improvement your listening for, "Nigger!" . . . listening too for your parents, their interpretations of what's happening . . . There were twelve that year. The first year twelve decided to volunteer to go. . . . There was a feeling of being listened to LESS . . . it wasn't a NEGATIVE experience. I mean, there was TENSION . . . people moving from a dining room table if you sat down . . . people spitting in a water fountain . . . your realization
that a lot of what they were learning and a lot of the equipment was different... it was nice when somebody said something, pleasant, but by that time it didn't matter too much what anybody said. I mean, not to say that it DIDN'T matter at ALL, but in a BIG way, it DIDN'T matter. I'd had enough practice with other folks to just, I guess, make a whole segment of the population disappear, in a manner of speaking... it has to do with wondering if something is real, like you know a question of How much of myself do I put into this thing? How important is this thing?

Whether it is what someone says, what someone does, somebody's INTERPRETATION of a thing... but you know based on experiences BEFORE. If I thought I couldn't trust PARENTAL guidance and instruction because it was SHAKY then certainly Whatever THESE people are saying is probably even less important and MORE unclear.

As Sophia continued her description of high school, she mentioned the Estelle Simmses and Gretchen Gettys, daughters of the "liberals" who supported the integration of Connersville High.

So Estelle's father was a doctor and we went to their house... there was a group of us, and they sent the priest back and called him a communist and closed our place (giggling). They said we were having "strange happenings" But... there were ideas about TOKENISM, and there was a CONSTANT wondering. This is some of the DANGER of all of this, whether... it was good. It was kinda neat and a hip-thing for white kids to have a BLACK FRIEND or a BLACK SOMETHING or SOMETHING. I don't know what the hell you call it, the situation (we both giggle). And so it was like, you know,

I'll go swim in the pool but, shit, I don't trust this shit! you know,

I don't know about this.

but,

Ye::ah! I'll go! (laughing)

You know what I'm saying? So... this EXPERIENCE... is what a lot of folks don't understand about. It's not that you're continuously talkin' about slavery, slavery, slavery, but you get this BUILT-IN-DISTRUST,

You can't be WHO you MIGHT have been! If you didn't have this STUFF to deal with.

So you're suspecting EVERYthing,

Well is it this or is it this? A parent told me THIS, but well, somebody said this ONCE, but-
Sophia described frustration that blacks experience in communication that “the white can take for granted.” She explained:

. . . there’s this CONSTANT, MATCHING-UP-THINGS where the white can take it for granted, to a good extent that, I don’t know (deep sigh), that folks are gonna act on your good behalf. . . And so when we listen. It’s-

Well maybe they will, maybe they won’t- (giggling) Who knows? We’ll wait and see. Uh, probably won’t.

And so there’s this constant referencing through history of what you know,

Why should we expect anything to be different? (Chuckling) Well, if you look back this happened and this happened and this happened and so if we calculate it all up (pointing to different spaces on the floor) we see that, someone says THIS, and this is now they COULD change and miracles DO happen, but statistics seem to point to that it doesn’t probably vary.

And Black folk’s ALWAYS havin’ to do that! (Whispering). White people take it for granted that, I mean, they’re NOT having to do it. It’s taken for granted, this figuring out and measuring. I don’t know that’s why some people goin’ CRAZY.

For Sophia, listening involved “figuring out and measuring” the meanings of others which was often a frustrating experience for “Black folks.” In high school, she continued listening to figure out the meanings and to measure the authenticity of others voices. As an adult, Sophia viewed listening from a broader perspective and her understanding of listening greatly increased. Her childhood listening experiences, however, continued to influence her meanings and expectations of listeners, both herself and others.

La Doi Listens

Unlike the stories of Sophia’s early listening experiences, La Doi’s stories focused on pleasurable childhood listening experiences at home and at
school. In her rich and expressive Black dialect, she told stories about listening and about being listened.

**La Doi’s Listening at Home.** La Doi enjoyed telling about listening. In a gentle whisper, she began a story about listening to her grandmother who had come for an overnight visit.

I can remembah her hahmin’ [humming] at five a clock in the mownin’. The house ‘ud be REAL quiet. She was like about 70 years old. Ev’rybody be sleep at five a clock in the mownin’. Usually when deh house quiet. And she’d be in her bedroom I could hear her hahm from her bedroom.

And I remembah listenin’ to my granmutha hahm these pretty songs. And y’know, hahmin’, it relaxed me. It really relaxed me. I have a gran’baby. She is eight months and when I be, y’know pacifyin’ her, tryin’ to get her to go to sleep, I hahm to her. I think of a lullaby and I sing it softly and then I hahm. I ketch maself hahmin’. It worked on me, yeah, so I be able to work it on my granbaby.

Listening to her grandmother humming was a relaxing experience, but also a learning experience. La Doi learned how to get her own granddaughter to sleep.

**La Doi’s Listening in School.** La Doi was excited to tell about a listening experience in elementary school. She brought her written recollections of the event to our first interview to “read” it aloud to me. This is what I listened and transcribed:

Ok, I’ll tell you about one time I experienced listenin’... Yes, I was the sixth grade and my teacher name was Peggy Thompson. And she brought this abbum [album] to school and the name of the abbum if I can remember was “The Creation.” Ok. And from listenin’ t’ dat, ok, like I said, um, ok I’m gonna tell you like this. The class was real quiet. All of my classmates, our teacher was sittin’ at her desk, each one of us was sittin’ at OUR desk. She put this abbum on this record player (I recognized the word from the context clue) which with this big round disk I can remember.
So the abbum started playin'. The man that was TALKIN', ON the abbum, he was, you know, tellin' us, he was explainin' about the CREATION. He was tellin' about the earth, mostly from what I gathered from this, it was how deh earth was FORMED because he was sayin', how deh wahda [water] 'n deh earth was without form and how deh wahda covered the earth, and . . . I remember hearin' THUNDER roll. His voice was umm-, he had a CALM voice, but it was DIRECT and it was BOLD to me. Because the way he was pazentin' it . . . it just makes you VERY interested t'know what he was tellin', how it was happenin'.

And the class was real quiet and ev'rabody there, even the teacher. ALL of us was real quiet, the class was silent, all we could hear was his pazentin of the creation. Ok, and I can also remember the atmosphere. It was a wonderful feelin', y'know. I was real calm, I was real relaxed, the atmosphere seemed like it was a beautiful day and I looked out the window and I could see the sun shinin', it was just a beautiful day . . . you could hear some on the abbum. I could hear from listenin' those sounds of wahda. Y'know like waves? I could hear sounds of wahda.

And I think um, that's about it as far as I can remember but I DO wish that I could hear that abbum again, and I wish that I could contact that teacha so I could play tha' abbum 'cause . . . it's STILL a interest to me y'know just from listen' to that abbum.

Even after 34 years, La Doi's recollection of the incident was a vivid and pleasurable re-listening experience.

**Emelda Listens**

The nature of Emelda's stories of her childhood listening experiences differed from Sophia's and La Doi's in several ways. First, because Emelda was seventeen, the stories she told involved recent experiences. Sophia and La Doi, both in their 40s related stories in a more distant past. While Sophia's stories were about unpleasant experiences and La Doi's about pleasant ones, Emelda's stories were not clearly one or the other.

**Emelda's Listening at Home.** Instead of relating a story about a specific event at home, Emelda gave a general description of listening at home:
... when I was young ... I was quiet. I neva tawked that much. I neva hardly sade- like I'm talk[ing now] ... I was LONELY. When I was young, I had no girls to play wid. My mutha had ten chilren. She had eight boys and two girls. My utha sista she way older 'n me. And she'd go out and have fun. I was livin' by ma sista and ma mamma. And then it was jes borin'. My life was jes-, BORIN'. I wuz YOUNG and I ... had no FUN! Didn't go outside and jes stayed stuck inside ev'ryday til this older MAN, olda 'n me, that TAWKED to me ev'ryday and I'd see 'im ev'ryday and I had somebody to tawk to.

I was embarrast of my voice because my voice heavy. And I tawk fass. I was embarrast of all of this. I didn't like it with ma glasses people would call you 4-eyes, but as I go round, I'd rather go around with ma glasses then to go around ... not bein' able to see ... I use to be shamed a ma voice I didn't really want to say nuttin I really didn't wanna talk cause when I talk, ma voice sound like ... like a frog in ma throat and ma voice get REAL deep and when I talk, it just sound SO loud I be embarrassed. Ma mamma's do deh same thing. Her voice get REAL deep and we sound just alike.

She felt isolated from family members who were too busy with their own lives to take time to listen; however, she also isolated herself. Because of her shame and embarrassment over her voice and appearance, Emelda did not permit others to listen.

**Emelda's Listening in School.** According to Emelda, she rarely interacted with other children at school. Her infrequent interactions were generally with boys.

... When I was goin' to middle school and element'ry, I NEVA, open my mouth, I neva tawked dat way. I use to write. I didn't really write down what I had to say because I was a quiet person. ... scared to let things come out. I didn't show my ability ... I'd go to school ev'ry day and I was a good girl. I had good grades. I had A's and B's and C's. I had good grades when I was comin' through school. And so I had good grades and little boyfriends. I was like a TOMboy. I was to maself. I used to play in the classroom by maself, nobody to help me y'know. I was like by maself. I never played wit' no girls. I would play wit' boys. They treated me like I was one o' them, like I was a boy too. I had ma hair cut real low in a curl. I had long purdy hair but I always keep it curled up when it stretch out, cause it be short. I never wore a skirt, I never
wore a dress, I never wore girl socks. I always wore pants and shirts. I like clothes hang off me like I'm doin' now. . . . I let clothes hang off me like otha boys do. Wore a hat on ma hade. I wouldn't wear the shoes, I wouldn't wear the socks. I wouldn't wear mine 'cause I had pretty girl clothes. But I jus' couldn't wear 'em 'cause dey wudn't me.

I enjoyed school very much, but I wasn't listenin' as WELL as I was supposed to been listenin'. But, it was alright, it was like, at dat time you thought about BOYS no matter what you was suppose to be doin' . . . My hade, I donh know, my head just-, it wudn't right. But I was listening, I was doin' writin' in class, I had a A in English . . . as I got older, I didn't know I had the ability to write. I didn't know I could write as good. I can write better than I can draw.

Writing was a way Emelda could articulate her voice without being ashamed of the quality of her spoken voice. She also used writing to elicit the listening of others. Writing was a way of speaking without revealing the qualities of her voice which were embarrassing to her. Her writing was a request for others to "listen" to her.

Doris Ann Listens

Like Sophia, Doris Ann told stories which included vivid imagery and rich reconstructions of dialogue:

Doris Ann's Listening at Home. Doris Ann's story was about a song and a conversation she had with her mother about it.

There's one paticula thing. I had never really been to church, to say, belongin' to any church. I been to different churches with ma granmutha, but ma mutha wuz tellin' me one day. Well, she wuz singin' this song I asked her, I say Mamma I say, cuz she didn't go to church, and I asked her, I say Mamma, do you uh know any gospel songs?
I always wanted to sing and mosta deh time ma voice gets mixed up, but I asked her, I said, Mamma do you know any gospel songs or anything?
And ma mutha told me about this song, "I Went to Heaven." That's the name of it. And she didn't go to stay, it was jis- this is the words to it:
I went to heaven and I didn't go to stay... (Doris Ann hummed, using the rhythm to help her recall the lyrics.)... I went to heaven-

She didn't MEAN to stay but she stayed all day and she looked around heaven y'know it wuz jes sumpin' like-, when she tole me that I started tryin' to imagine heaven, tryin' t' pitchur maself IN HEAVEN, and, bein' dead but NOT dead because I knew when I'm listenin' to what she's sayin' about

I went to heaven and I didn't go to stay. Ma SOUL got HAPPY I stayed all day.

And I'm tryin' to pitchur maself up in heaven and ma soul jes being so overwhelming happy. And I was a LITTLE girl. Oh, let me see, I had to be about 10 or 11 at the time. And I could see maself in heaven, being happy and, it got to a point where she said

I went to heaven-, I went to h-hmm- I didn't go- h-hm- I stayed there all day (mumbling earlier words using the rhythm to assist her memory again). If you get to heaven before I do, tell Mamma ah'm comin' home too.

So now I'm pitchurin' maself and by now ma HEART is jes-

Oh, Lord, please donh take ma mamma.

Cause that's meanin' to me that ma mutha had gone on before me and so to me, those words right there made an impact on my life. That's why I believe my Christian life is the way it is now, because it made a difference in me.

If I went to heaven I'm not there to stay, bein' in a mind that if for any reason sumthin' wuz to happen to me and I was between time, I guess that's what you would call it... my mind probably was focusin' on

I'm here but I'm not here to stay. But I got to tell these people WHY I'm here, that Doris Ann's comin'.

So to let them know I saw her, or whoever it may be. So to me it meant

Git my life in order.

And from then on, at age 13, I was saved, 'cause I was so afraid of dyin' and not bein' able to be in HEAVEN, and SEE ma mamma or see ma sister and brother and tell 'em that ah'm comin' on too. And we couldn't be in two places at one time so I think that- I can rememba that jis like it happened yestaday and that is what made me get a closer walk with God- get a WALK with Him! I didn't even KNOW that there wuz a god. I knew about God but it didn't LISTEN... to use my imagination of God. At that time it just made me use my imagination and then realize that there IS a God.

Doris Ann's Listening in School. Doris Ann, like Emelda, did not share a specific early school experience. To elicit some description of what it
was like for her to listen in school as a child, I asked her what the teacher meant when she said, "Doris Ann, listen!" She replied without hesitation:

To pay attention, to clear ma mind of anything else that may be runnin' through ma mind, to grasp JUST THIS PART of whatever it wuz that she wuz tellin' me. To me that dudn't always work, but (chuckling) but that's what I got out of it--what she MEANT- her meaning of it.

I asked Doris Ann to describe what actions she performed when she would listen in the classroom. She closed her eyes, paused briefly, and then explained how she listened:

Uhmm, alright, it depends on what position I was in. If I was turned around y'know, not correctly in my desk, I would turn correctly around and I would forget about whatever previous conversation- or anything that I was thinkin' ABOUT, and just focus, an' try an' PITCHUR, what it is that she is tryin' to give ME- to get an idea of her words . . . That's what it wuz for me . . . in order for me to I say more to listen with ma MIND, as well as my ears- to hear. I try to pitchurize whatever it wuz that she wuz sayin'.

She gave an illustration of how she listened in class. As she began, she looked at me and said, "Let's jis talk about colors. Let's say, if she was tellin' me she seen this big GREEN field with two BROWN owls." Doris Ann closed her eyes as she continued with her description of how she listened:

In ma mind I'm HEARING her and in ma MIND I'm tryin' to place maself in a big green field so basically I'm probably comin' up with the SAME in ma mind, the same pitchur that she achully was at. So ah'm tryin' to be on the same wavelength with her- being there in ma mind where she wuz.

When I asked Doris Ann whether she remembered teachers in school listening to her, she shook her head and responded:

Uh uh. I really can't say that because I wasn't one who would say the things that mattered to me. I don't think I shared it with ma teachers or anything, so I don't think I really gave them the opportunity.
She had concluded that her teachers did not listen because she did not give them an opportunity to do so. While she was in school, she did not share things that really mattered to her with her teachers.

**Special Listeners**

Sophia, La Doi, Emelda, and Doris Ann expressed the importance of having someone to listen to them. Without hesitation, each woman identified at least one person she considered a special listener. Special listeners were always someone women deeply cared for and someone whom they knew, with certainty, cared deeply for them. Special listeners shared two things which were very precious to each woman — their time and their space. Each woman revealed intimate details of her life as she shared her story of a special listener. The following are women's accounts of their special listeners.

**Sophia's Special Listeners.** Sophia expressed an early desire to be heard, to have a space for her voice:

I needed someone to LISTEN to me. There was a lot I had to say. And there needed be a special person, a KIND of person, a kind of listener to do this listening.

There were two special listeners in Sophia's life: her Aunt Alma and her husband John. According to Sophia, Aunt Alma made her feel as though she were the "the only person there." She explained:

My Aunt Alma, we've had a lot of conversations always. I loved, LOVE her so much. I figure it had to do with listening, HER listening. I just got the FEELING that I was the only person there. She had six children, she worked, she had a family to raise. But if someone interrupted, she let them KNOW that she was having a TALK [with me] . . . if someone interrupted she let them KNOW that. She was having a TALK and it was
SPECIAL and she expected to continue TALKING and you didn't need to interrupt,

*Go away! Don't interrupt!*

Sophia often walked to Aunt Alma's house when she needed someone to listen. She counted on Aunt Alma to *be there* for her, to take time and make a space for Sophia. "Aunt Alma was special. Our talks were special. Her listening was special," she explained.

John's way of listening was also special and something that attracted Sophia to him twenty years ago. His listening to her created a space for her voice. She felt safe speaking with him about what was important to her.

According to Sophia,

*He's a WONDERFUL listener . . . He knows something about it [listening] and I've known this for twenty years. It's one of the things, probably the MAJOR thing that attracted me to him when I needed someone to LISTEN (she chuckles) to me. There was a lot that I had to say. And there needed be a special person, a KIND of person, a kind of listener to do this listening . . . When [John] listens, he gives very intense eye contact. He leans forward sometimes. Other times, his eyes dart about. But then, he is also anxious to make a point of his own. His face sometimes shows how I feel . . .

Sophia chuckled while described part of a Saturday morning conversation that lasted several hours:

So when John and I were talking just recently . . . . He would say something like

*Wow, I've done a whole day's work listening.*

If I'd say,

*Oh, why don't we go to a movie now. Why don't we even have lunch.*

He'd say,

*Girl, I'm tired now.*

I said,

*Tired from what?*

So he-

*I've been TALKING to you for THREE hours.*
Y'know I never knew EXACTLY what he meant by that. And since you and I have progressed in OUR conversations, they connected with the intensity of some of John's and my conversations... I was like, 

Ohhh... This is wh- ohhh. This is what he means!

It's just that your BRAIN gets tired and your BODY gets tired if you're really involved in active listening, where you're trying to stay with the party... I get that feeling

Stay with them. Allow yourself to go where they go.

It's something about being grounded. There were conversations that John and I would have and I knew I was grounding myself to be able to hear what he had to say. Because what he had to say was, going to be said in a way that was the BEST way he PROBABLY could SAY it. However, it would cause me to-, my body to want to react, and yet I had to maintain an equilibrium that would make it POSSIBLE to listen to him.

There was something that he had to say. And in doing that, I knew that he had been doing the same thing for me, probably. It seemed easier for him. I mean, from MY perspective. Then I said, 

Well, THIS is what the man means when he says he's tired!

Sophia expressed her increased awareness of the dynamics of listening and her appreciation of the energy expended by committed listeners.

La Doi's Special Listener. La Doi responded without hesitation when I asked who listened to her most in her life. "My mutha! She did!" she said emphatically, "She listened to EV'RYTHING I sed. She really did! She listened!" In her bold, direct voice, she described her mother as a special listener:

I would go to her, and she would really listen to me. And I don't care what the matta wuz. It could be sumpin unnecessary. She wud still listen. And when sumpin' DID happen, and I seen it, I'd go to her wid it. She'd say,

I know dis chile tellin' me (laughing) deh truth about what's goin' on.

Y'know, tellin' ev'rythang. And she REALLY wud listen to me. And lotta my sistas and bruthas, they wudunt CARE about ma- y'know, about a lot of stuff. But I wud always be the one runnin' to her tellin' her, y'know, tellin' her certain thangs. And she really did! She listened to me. Ma mutha, she was a good listener too.
She would stop. She could be washin', she could be- I could see myself and her right now. She'd be- they had this old type ringer washin' machine. She would be takin' clothes outta deh machine, stickin' 'em thru dat ringa and if I would come in by dat washin' machine and be tellin' her sumpin, she'll put dat clothes back down in dat machine there to keep washin'. And she would stop, to listen. She really would! A lotta time- I remember one time, she was- my mamma was SICK IN DE BADE. And had jes had a baby her las'- her second before her las' baby. I was like about 8 years old, sumpin like dat. And I went to her bade, I had SEEN sumpin. And I wanted ma mamma to see it. Ma mamma was sick she- they had just came home from deh hospital, and some company had leff our house. She'd been home I'd say 'bout a day or two, sumpin' like dat. And uh, some company came ova, and when the company left, I went in dat room and I say

_Ma, git up! Git up!_

She didn't move. And I KNEW she was listenin' to me, because she was lookin' at me in ma eyes. She didn't wanna git up cause she was feelin' bad, y'know. I knew she was listenin'. I sed,

_Ma, git up and come SEE dis! Git up!_

I kep' askin' her I musta asked her about three or four times. And she was a Christian lady and she would say

_Lord, let me git up and go see what dis chile done._

Cause she didn't feel good since she jes got back havin' dat baby. She was weak at deh time. But I HAD to let ma mamma see what I SEEN cause I know dis was sumpin' STRANGE. I didn't SEE this ev'ryday in our HOME. And when I went and got Mamma and showed Mamma what I SEEN, she said

_Umph_

And she had to git up and do what she had to do, to uh, eliminate what I showed her. She listened to me she always did. And I was a child . . . yeah, and I was curious about wh-, I was always a kinda curious chile about different SIGHTS. Y'know, and if I saw it, and it didn't look right to me, and it seemed strange, I would always go to her, would always go to ma mamma. Instead a lotta chilren can't do dat dese days. She was always der for me, she WOULD listen to me. Whateva the situation was. Even when I needed eye glasses.

I needed eye glasses when I was in the third, the fourth grade. I couldn't see dat-, see like dat (pointing to a chalkboard in the room) opposite my desk and that chalkboard. She useta write things on dat board for me to copy. I couldn't SEE it, and I stopped writin'. I kep' tellin' Mamma, I sed,

_Mamma, I can't see deh BOARD._
La Doi reached over and touched my elbow to emphasize what she had said and to insure my attention for what she was about to say.

Still present in the past, she continued her next sentence with a present tense verb:

She's got money but deh money still was limited, y'know. She had cash, y'know. Deddy made it, enough money to cova ev'rythang, but these GLASSES jes wuz somethin' else and Mamma kep puttin' it off thinkin', y'know, that I could wait. I could but I start bringin' lower GRADES home that's when she- she was listenin'! See what I'm sayin'? She was listenin' to me I'm tellin' her I need those EYE glasses. And to PROVE to her (La Doi flipped pages of her journal) I had to like- my grades started start lowerin' and das when she say

Well, now I know this chile can bring me good grades- better grades then this. She must really do-

She probably thought I wanted glasses cause I'd be

Mamma, ma frien' in ma class, she has her eye-

Now she thought I wanted glasses cause, my otha friends had glasses. Yeah, but she listened and she-I guess she just, didn't believe me but I know she was definitely- like I'm sayin', she would LISTEN! She was listenin'. And afta I brought dem grades, home that lowered, she sed

Well, yeah. She's not jes tellin' me this.

Cause a lotta time I would tell Mamma how bad I wanted 'em and it was kinna un-necessary. And she couldn't afford it y'know, because she had eight- seven otha children, and ev'rythang ma friends eva got I WANTED it, and I couldn't git ev'rythang Sheila had cause she wuz the onliest CHILE y'see?

Placing her hand lightly under her chin, she said "Yea:::ah." She turned her head away, paused, and exhaled. I wrote rapidly to capture her words and describe her actions in my notes. She smiled and looked back at me, and I realized that she might consider that I was not listening. She had just told me her mother "stopped everything" to listen to her. I kept writing but looked up from my notes to say, "I wish I could write as fast as I can hear." "Uhuh" she said with a smile. I knew she that she knew I was listening.
Emelda's Special Listeners. When Emelda was a 7th grader, she discovered someone special to listen to her. Her relationship with this person changed her life significantly.

And then it was jes borin', my life was jes-, BORIN'... I wuz YOUNG and I had no FUN! Didn't go outside and jes stayed stuck inside ev'ryday til this older MAN, older than me, that TAWKED to me ev'ryday and I'd see 'im ev'ryday... I had somebody to tawk to so, I figured dat, if he tawked to me then I could share my life with him. And then go on on with my life. As I think about this man, he's special to me, ma baby's fatha... And I wuz jus'- I wuz fourteen. When I see dis man, I thought he wuz fourteen (she counted on her fingers)... he wuz 22... he came ova der, he was sitting down beside me and he was tawkin' to me, so... We was TAWKIN'. We just tawkin'. Y'know how you tawk, and he ask me some questions he say

*Why ev'ry time I come here, why you neva say nuthin'? Why you so quiet? The othas be laughin' and playin' and you be sittin' on d' couch, eitha readin' a book or watchin' TV?*

That's what I'd be doin. I be watchin' TV or doin' somethin' unusual or washin' dishes or somethin' like dat, I be in ma room.

So he decide to come and sit beside me and play wit' me and I be tawkin' to him and ev'rythang. And then he say,

*Finally, you talk. I git a chance to hear you speak.*

And he say,

*You got a purty voice.*

He say,

*I bet you shame o' y' voice.*

I say

*How do you know?*

So he-

*I jus' know it.*

And so he's tawkin' t' me ev'ry day and ev'ry day I was use t' seein' him. He seein' me ev'ry day, I seein' him ev'ryday and I fell in love wit' him. I was jus' so much in love wit' him, dat nobody could tell me that nuthin' was wrong that he would do.

*Finally, I was walkin' to d' sto'. I neva walked t' d' sto' 'cause I wuz scared to walk t' d' sto'... I wuz afraid somethin' would happen. He would take me t' d' sto' and buy me things. 'Yeah, walk t' d' sto'. I'd go ride in his car, but Mamma neva know, that I like him... I couldn't go to her and tell her that I liked him 'cause she wudn't approve... I was too young. I was 14 he was 22.*

He didn't take advantage of me at all. He didn't push me into nuttin' dat I didn't wanna do. But we went together for almost three
years before I had a baby wit' him... well, not really three years... it wuz three years, but it wuz a year before I went to bed wit' him. 'Cause it wuz like, he wuz jus' like a big brutha t' me. Somebody dat I looked up t' and I was jus' SO much in love wit' him...

And he walked me t' school one day. He wudn't shame o' me. He liked me. Ev'rybody met him,

_He too ol' f' you._

I say,

_No he ain't. He's ma boyfriend. He say I'm his girlfriend._

So as things go along and... I got pregnant... and he stay by ma side t' a lil' while. We wuz togetha for a good lil' while... we got along perty good. And he did a lotta right, but then afterwards, I wuz young and didn't know nuttin'. Y'know a man, how dey wanna go wit' one woman but he said he had t' leave. But all d' time I'm knowin' dat. It took me a LONG time to git ova 'im. It took me to reelize that, he wudnant neva gonna be here no mo'.

Emelda described how difficult it was to accept that she, her child, and his father would not be "spending their lives together." She explained that the man whom she had trusted with her voice and her body had been incarcerated for "dealin' drugs." Because she considered her child's relationship with his father very important, she took her son to visit his father in jail. She expressed no animosity toward him when she explained:

_As I think about this man, he's special to me, ma baby's fatha... I can't neva HATE him becuze... Ma baby look jus' like 'im, his face, whole body made like ma baby. So I jus' can't jus' throw him away out ma life 'cuz I got a baby that reelize [realizes] him._

Although she now has another man, her son's father remains a special person in her life.

_Since her pregnancy Emelda came to realize that her mother has also been a special listener. When Selenia Gray discovered her daughter was pregnant, she listened empathetically because of her own experience of teenage pregnancy. In Emelda's words, "She was upset wit' me b'cuz she had_
made the same mistake . . . She was sixteen though . . . she tawked to me and tole me that, 'Ev'rybody makes mistakes'."

Emelda wrote an essay that expressed how important it was to her for her mother to listen:

Emelda Gray
220-word essay
"My Inspiration, My Mother"

Selenia Gray who has had a great influence on my life. She has been there for me when no one else hasn't. She makes me feel good inside. Sometimes I get angry at her. When she tells me something true about life. I don't won't to believe what she is telling me. But, then I realize I have to face the fact of reality. She is a very intelligent person, with a sense of humor. When I open my eyes every morning. I give thanks to the lord for letting my mother be there when I need her. I have had some difficult times in life and the only person I could turn to was her. My mother is like a sister and a mom to me. Because when I have a problem I can always turn to her. And she is always there for me. My mom and I are not exactly alike, but we have a lot of things in common. The most important thing is that we are able to set down and talk to each other about our situations, and our goals toward life. My goal is to get my G.E.D. and to finish school. And all I need is some love and attention from my mom. And for her to lean by my side at all times. I thing of my mom as my success, and inspiration. And I won't her to believe in me and have hope that I'm going to make it no matter how hard it is, to acheive my goals. As I sit in my room and my mom listens to me carefully, I say mom I love you for a reason, Because you have been a mother and a father to me and stayed by my side through thick and thin. Mom you are my inspiration and the love of my life.

Doris Ann's Special Listener. Doris Ann's special listener was not a person any other woman that I interviewed had mentioned. Without a moments hesitation, she revealed her best listener was:

My brotha. Ma mutha was there but I think ma brutha actually LISTENED. He FELT . . . in a lotta ways, he felt whatever my emotions wuz. I think he felt and actually carried [my emotions] becuze when we would talk, he would express his anger, or . . . he would rejoice as
though he wuz actually be a part of whatever had taken place in ma life, or y'know encourage me. I knew that it- I felt that it came from his heart. . . If he said he wuz gone do sumthin', he tried to do it. So, to me, dat made me feel that [he was listening], his actions. And he would ask me-, he wanted to find all the details. He could go into depths tryin' to find out,

Well, maybe you makin' a hasty decision or maybe it wudunt like you think . . .

or whateva. So he really did a lot of analyzin' things that I would say. He would analyze 'em and that made me KNOW that he wuz listenin' because if not, he didn't say anything. But he actually, he would ask me to make sure,

Well, maybe you jus sayin' this and don't know. Maybe it's not like you thinkin' or how you feel . . .

It was portions that he asked me back to let me know that he wuz actually on the same wave length. And now, when I look back on then, I do- it makes me feel even CLOSA to ma brutha . . . because of those little things like that, y'know, us able to talk and listen to one another, and it just made us closa . . . If he really needs something or if I really need something, I know he's there, he knows I'm here . . .

Doris Ann's relationship with her older sister was much different from her relationship with her brother. She and her sister grew up in separate households. She explained that "because we didn't stay togetha when she was younga . . . we didn't get a chance to bond." The little time they spent together prevented her sister from "listening to me or me being able to tell her ma problems."

Doris Ann concluded that listening was vital in close personal relationships. As she described it, "Listening made ma brutha and I close, but it [closeness] couldn't be there with ma sista 'cause she was neva there to listen, or to share with me." Being closse, spending time together in the same place, was an integral part of listening.
Summary of Special Listeners

Each woman expressed the importance having someone to listen to her and, without hesitation, she identified and described at least one special listener in her life. In every case, there was a strong emotional attachment with the listener. Listener considered caring and were also cared for by the women who described them. Women described special listeners as physically present and also willing to stop any activity in which they were engaged in order to listen. Listeners were relatives or significant others whom women described as being there for them.

Women's Listenings

Meaning is created by an individual's sense of his or her connections to a space-time percept . . . Meanings are not outside of people, and should not be objectified. Just as time is not outside of people and should not be objectified . . . The hearer is responsible for the nature of the connection which s/he creates (Pellowe, 1986:10-13).

Each woman described listening from her own unique perspective. Individual women's perspectives were influenced by their historical backgrounds and their personal experiences. Although similar themes ran through the meanings they made of listening, women's words, phrasings, or pronunciations set their meanings apart from the meanings of others. A woman's early listening experiences at home and at school influenced her understandings of listening and the special words or phrases she used to describe what listening meant to her. Individual meanings were as unique as the women, their voices, and their stories which they shared through oral or written texts, in conventional English or Black Dialect.
Sophia's Listening: "A Spiritual Exchange"

For Sophia, listening was a complex process that involved much more than merely hearing spoken words. Her poetic voice described listening with vivid imagery and rich metaphors. She stated:

Listening is a spiritual exchange, interaction—or it has the potential to be so. It is, of course, physical. Listening can have its own movement, motion—just like a dance. Listening can be chaotic like a storm, rumbling like a volcano. It can be . . . tranquil like a sea breeze (Sophia, 1994).

Sophia conceptualized listening as a holistic communicative process. Listening involved the spirit ("spiritual exchange"), the body ("physical"), and emotions ("chaotic . . . tranquil"). She illuminated the dynamic nature of listening with her choice of such words as "exchange," "interaction," "movement," "dance," "rumbling."

Through this spiritual exchange, Sophia was able to know the ladies on a deeper level. She explained, "I listen for the student's spirit, their essence, her essence, the SHE behind the words, the gestures, the phrases, the voices of women students." Sophia listened vigilantly with an expectation of finding meaning beyond what was said.

In the Writing Class, Sophia considered listening a way "to figure out the dynamics of students' interactions" and to promote "better interaction" among the ladies. Her purpose was "to find out something to help us reach our goal." Their goal (hers and the ladies), she explained was to "help people feel more HU-MAN . . . feel listened to . . . feel valued." Sophia saw her role in literacy
work as a facilitator who helped the ladies "figure out their MEANINGS and their LIVES."

Sophia encouraged listening, speaking, reading, and writing between and among the ladies as ways of exploring and discovering their own and others' meanings. Exploration often involved classroom discussions that centered around current and relevant issues in women's lives, e.g., children, men, family relations, welfare, race, and work. Women, who seldom spoke openly about such issues, sometimes wrote freely about them. Sophia's work helped each one to articulate her own meanings. She encouraged the ladies to share aloud what they had written "in your own voice," because some asked others to read their text aloud for them. Her emphasis, however, was on having the ladies "bring forth" what they had to say for themselves even if they did not read it aloud. Listening to their own voices, spoken or written, was her primary concern. Listening was a fundamental part of learning to value one's own and others' voices.

Sophia wanted to create an informal, non-threatening learning environment for the ladies. Her arrangement of physical space was symbolic of the intellectual and emotional space she wanted. Her nonlinear asymmetrical arrangement of furniture was intended to maximize women's opportunities for dialogue and visual contact. Sophia kept a large open space in the center of the classroom. The space was symbolic of an opening for women to speak. Sophia encouraged the ladies to share meanings, to read out loud, to speak out loudly and clearly, and to listen closely to other women doing the same.
Listening, Writing, and Healing. Sophia considered listening and writing healing processes. Healing was part of the literacy work to be done in the Writing Class. Her constant striving to communicate clearly was due to a passionate commitment to healing and being healed. Sophia perceived her own writing as part of this healing process. She shared with the ladies how listening and writing could bring healing for many of the wounds that they had experienced. Sophia found healing of painful personal life experiences by listening to others' voices (written and oral) and being listened to herself (in person and in print).

All of the ladies were mothers; therefore, pregnancy, children, childbirth, and child rearing were often topics of classroom discussions or subjects of written texts. Initially, Sophia found listening to their experiences difficult and sometimes painful, because her own miscarriages and a still birth were slow wounds to heal for her.

She related an experience with a student who wrote about the death of a child:

Over the years, to one extent I've talked a lot about having had miscarriages and a still birth, and on the other hand, some of the conversations really have been superficial. When the first student mentioned, um, well I had students write about, some experience and I don't know why I just thought that it would be happy experiences. And I was really taken aback when read one of the papers with a student. The student had written about the death of her child and it made me scared at first. At the same time I was aware of the need to listen to her. I mean she brought it up for a reason. Certainly I could connect because of my own experience. It was just an awareness there, a connection as far as the listening is concerned. Recently when that occurred, with a year having passed, it was easier [for me] because it was—less of a surprise.
As Sophia reflected upon her own experiences through poetry and engaged in conversations with students, her the memories became less painful. She reported:

\[ \ldots \text{and then conversation or listening to myself?} \ldots \text{Between the first experience and the most recent experience with a student [about the death of a child]} \ldots \text{I've written more about, I've written more about my OWN experience I LISTEN TO MYSELF TO KNOW THAT, to know that I need to write more about that and I TALK more about it, I SHARED it more with students.} \]

Through her personal experiences of being listened to and not being listened to, Sophia realized the importance of listening in human relationships. Listening to the ladies became a vehicle for Sophia's own healing as well as her students' healing.

Sophia's poetry, vividly expressed aspects of her lived experience and the emotions those experiences evoked. In "I Figured" she interwove creative yearnings to give birth and to write poetry describing struggle and loss in processes.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I figured the yearning} \\
\text{would just go away} \\
\text{when time enough passed}  \\
\text{and given little attention} \\
\text{the words and images} \\
\text{would} \\
\text{pass} \\
\text{painless} \\
\text{bloodless} \\
\text{secretion} \\
\text{from the body} \\
\text{like the first seed.} \\
\text{suspicious.}
\end{align*}
\]
I vowed indifference
to poems miscarried/baby
born

still

I figured the yearning
would just go away
when time enough passed
and given little attention.

Sophia's listening was more than a passive, receptive human communication process. Listening was a spiritual exchange which involved a exploring and discovering one's self and the essence of an other. Listening required energy, time, and patience. "Listening is work!" claimed Sophia. Listening is healing; listeners are "healers."

La Doi's Listening: "Listenin' is Learnin'. Listening is the beginning of knowledge."

... listenin' to me is learnin' and if it's sumpin foolish, I don't want to listen to it. I want to listen to somethin' that intrests me and I can LEARN from it. I can USE it for MYself, I can do good. I can y'know send it on, pass it on to others where they were listenin' and they can use it too. That way everyone be gathrin' knowledge...So ah'm sayin' that so this listenin' is learnin', it's knowledge (La Doi, interview).

La Doi considered listening to her teachers to be crucial when it "is pertainin' to what I will have to have to pass on the GED." Although she was very capable of locating and reading the meanings of words inscribed in dictionaries, she believed that listening to her teacher was an essential part of learning new meanings.

La Doi related an incident when she listened and was given a new meaning for an old word:
I really listen to her [my teacher]. She gives me plenty information I can use on passin' ma GED test. Ok, as of now, she gave me about, I'd say ova about- close t' 200 words. And some a deze words are big words and deze words, dat is ON dis liss, d' vocabulary lis', is pertainin' to what I will have to have to pass on the GED. So some a d' words, ok, I give you one word yesterday I had a PROBLEM wid. And it's a common word, RES-ER-VATION. Ok, I looked up rezavation in d' dictionary. Ok, dis is d' way I got information. At least, no I didn't look it up, Ms. Fanella looked it up, ok, on the word list, it was a SENTENCE. Ok, afta I DEFINE deze words I hav- they hav- ona sheet, I have to fill in d' blank, uh dat goes into d' sentence. A WHOLE list of words and I hafta choose d' RIGHT word dat goes into de sentence. So d' sentence say dat,

I have, my res-er-vations fer, mista-

It was like, dis minista, was a type of person that they didn't want, dat d' people didn't want y'know, f' dare church. So I hadda problem with the word reservation, I always thought rezavation was lack if you go to a motel, you want dis paticula motel room, dat dis room would be reserved, so you would say

I have dis room. Dis reservation is f', Mista, Williams.

And dats alwez what I thought reservation means, to set aside. Afta listenin' to ma instructa, she tol' me dat, reza-vation meant dat, also a PERSON, you- it could be a PERSON. And if you don't want dis person to hav-, to be president, you could say

I have reservations, for this president.

It was b'cause she didn't WANT dis presi- dis patikala, party dat was runnin' f' president. She had reservations that she didn't WANT him to BE president. So by listenin' to HER I understood dat resevation also was p'tainin' to you didn't want dis patickala person to have this patickala position. And by listenin' I learnt that, I got knowledge of that.

Rezavation has more than ONE meaninin'.

In an enthusiastic voice, La Doi summarized her new learning and expressed her interest in discovering a new meanings: "I thought dat was intrestin', I really thought dat was intrestin'."

When La Doi concluded her story, I tried to summarize and clarify what I had listened, my meanings of what she said. The following excerpt from the transcriptions of our conversation includes transcription conventions I used to visually represent the complex overlappings and interweavings of mine (J) and La Doi's (LD) voices:
J: So by listening to other people, you can learn new meanings/new meanin's/ for words./ Knowledge. Yeah?

LD: /new meanin's/ Knowledge. I use the word knowledge,/ /Ah- it really was knowledge to me/

J: /Yeah/ So listening is a way to gain knowledge/ /Alright!/ 

LD: /Right/ /Yes, it is! Listenin' is the BEGININ' of knowledge.

Through our dialogue, we shaped and re-shaped meaning together. Our interrupting and overlapping voices brought forth La Doi’s special meaning:

Listening is the beginning of knowledge.

La Doi considered listening to be, not only the beginning of academic knowledge, but also the beginning of our knowledge other human beings. She explained the value of listening and learning about others:

... when I was in d' state o' California, I had a friend and ma friend was goin' thru a lotta crisis. Y'know, trials and tribulations. And I ask his sista, I say

I dunno what's wrong wit' him!

She say

Well, La Doi-

She say

You donh know! You wuz RAISED by y' mutha AND y' fatha. He has had a problem! He wuz neva [1st: has neva been] raised by his mutha and his fatha and that took- See I was neva raised by ma mutha and fatha, I can identify, what his problem is. Because I wasn't raised by ma mutha and fatha.

She say

You can't identify. I mean you are like illiterate t', the fact of what he is goin' through due to d' fact dat you haven't experenced what he HAS experenced.

And she identified it. And by me listenin' to her, it gave me the knowledge to deal wit' what I was dealin' wit' him. You see? Dat's listenin'. All dat come from listenin'. And I really did listen to her.

People donh uh, understand. Dey donh understand d' problem, y'know, of what could be bein' pasented a lotta times. We are illiterate,
illiterate t' dat fact. But if we would listen and sometime you might have to seek infamam by goin' to otha people and dey can identify through experence and listenin' to what this otha patickula purpose- uh person, y'know is experencin' and den how dis person is actin'. It can help us to deal wit' society itself! . . .

So I thought I would brang dat out because I thought dat wuz kinda important. 'Cause you know we dealin' wit' people ev'ryday, ev'ryday.

La Doi meanings emphasized the role of listening in becoming academically and socially literate. Her perspective reflected an understanding of socially constructed meanings and current notions of literacy as communicative competence and individual and cultural knowledge.

**Emelda's Listening: Accepting My Voice**

Emelda was very self-conscious of her voice when she was young, and she allowed few people to listen to her. In Emelda's words, the father of her child "helped me with ma talkin'" which suggested to her that he cared deeply for her. By listening to her, he gave her his time and attention, something that was a great need for this lonely young girl. Because he listened he became a very special person in her life, the father of her child. This man was so special although he dealt in drugs, had other women, and was put in prison, she still would have married him at the age of 14.

He, he, he ain't made well today but he helped me alot wit ma talkin'. I was um, embarrassed of my voice because my voice heavy. And I talk fast I was embarrassed of all of this. I didn't like it with ma glasses people would call you 4-eyes, but as I go round, I'd rather go around with ma glasses then to go around in the glass (squinting her eyes) the rest of my life, not bein' able to see. I rather use ma voice than to stay in my voice and not talk. I'd rather use ma voice and use ma abilities. I rather use ma voice, as it coming out. I use to be shamed a ma voice I didn't really want to say nuttin I really didn't wanna talk cause when I talk, ma voice sound like- in the beginning of March or April ma voice get REAL.
REALLY DEEP (Emelda deepens her voice to demonstrate). It like, like a frog in ma throat and ma voice get REAL deep and when I talk, it just sound SO loud I be I be embarrassed.

For Emelda, listening meant "I had somebody to talk to so... I could share my life with him. Listening meant loving and accepting.

Doris Ann's Listening: "Pitchulizin' Sayin'"

Doris Ann described listening more than an auditory experience.

Listening was also a visual experience. Listening involved intense focusing on what was being said. When a teacher said, "Doris Ann, I want you to listen," Doris Ann understood this to mean:

To pay attention, to clear ma mind of anything else that may be runnin' through ma mind, to grasp JUST THIS PART of whatever it wuz that she was tellin' me. To me that didn't always work, (chuckling) but that's what I got out of it—what she MEANT- her meaning of it. . . . What did I do when I wuz listenin'? Ummm, alright it depends on what position I wuz in. If I wuz turned around y'know, not correctly in my desk, I would turn correctly around and I would forgit about whatever previous conversation-, or anything that I was thinkin' ABOUT, and to just focus, an' try an' PITCHUR, what it is that she is tryin' to give ME— to get an idea of her words. . . . That's what it wuz for me. . . . to listen with ma MIND, as well as my ears, to hear. I try to pitchurlize whatever it wuz that she wuz sayin'. . . . Let's jis talk about colors. Let's say, if she was tellin' me she seen this big GREEN field with two BROWN owls. In ma mind I'm HEARING her and in ma MIND I'm tryin' to place maself in a big green field so basically I'm probably comin' up with the SAME in ma mind, the same pichur that she achully was at. So ah'm tryin' to be on the same wavelength with her- being there in ma mind where she wuz.

I asked Doris Ann what she did to "pay attention" and remain focused in the classroom, She explained:

In Ms. Sonders' class? . . . I pop ma gum, and I jes tune out and I listens. . . . I listens to just about everything that's bein' sade, uuhuh. And things that I feel, of importance to me, I'll comment on. Other things, if it don't directly apply to me, I kinda jes.. tune it out.
Doris Ann was a focused listener; she was not easily distracted. She was able to stay "on task" despite talking or noise around her. In an interview, she explained how she dealt with distractions:

... if there's excessive rowl [in the classroom]. ... it really doesn't bother me. Uhuh, I pop ma gum, and I jes tune out and I listens, that is all I hear, that's why I really- and I pitchur maself in other schools y'know reglar schools, y'know I could of tole you a lot a things y'know, y'know all kinda stuff goin' der evrythang. People throwin' paper all d'time in the garbage can at reglar school, but here, like I said it's basically jis tawkin' and that's ma way, of of y'know keepin' maself on- I try to have a one-track mind, in school. And that keeps me with ma focus on just what I'm tryin' to say, I will- I'll go way out in left field, I really will.

Doris Ann shifted smoothly from classroom to home to illustrate the difference between focused and unfocused listening. For Doris Ann, it was a matter of having her "guard up or down."

I'm thinking it's just like sometimes you can let y' guards down, like at home y'know, I let ma guard down, wit ma thinking and listenin', I hear ma children in the back screamin' ma name (laughing) and it's like Ok, she's not in no harm, no danger of nothin' happenin' to 'er. Let me read what I'm readin' or let me do whateva I wuz doin' and tune her out, or tune him out, 'cause they really didn't want anythang.

But I KNOW when it's a urgent or serious call or somethin' I know that too by the tone.

For Doris Ann, "tuning-out" and "letting ma guard down" was a manner of hearing without listening which involved a decision to attend or not to attend. She was confident in her ability to "know when it's a urgent or serious call, by the tone." In effect, Doris Ann tuned-out words while she listened for tones which indicated the urgency of a call.
She returned to the issue of listening in the Writing Class and to how relevance of what is being said determined whether she listened:

... and that's basically the way it is in school. I can hear jist about ev'ry conversation that goes on, but if it's-, like I say, if it doesn't concern me DIRECTLY or some infamation, something I can- y'know, like I say, filter it out. What to commment on, what not to comment on, I hear jist about all of it. And if it doesn't apply to me I pop my gum and go on.

Doris Ann was a very competent and focused listener. When what was being said was either relevant or interesting, Doris Ann chose to listen.

By dialoguing with Sophia, La Doi, Emelda, and Doris Ann, I learned what these four women knew implicitly and explicitly about listening. In their stories, poetry, and rich descriptions of listening and listeners, I discovered common themes as well as unique differences. The diversity of their meanings and their ways of listening were significantly influenced by their historical backgrounds and personal life experiences.

**Listening, Moving, and Music: Going All the Way**

Chapter Five concludes with a vignette of that illustrates women's listening and women's literacy work at Lakota Center—dynamically interactive. In the following scene, women rehearsed a song for an Honor's Day program choral performance. The song, entitled "I'm Going All the Way," was recorded by The Sounds of Blackness.

"I'm Going All the Way." I listened and observed as seven women rehearsed for the center's Honor's Day Program, *A Celebration of African Culture*. The women stood in the front of the classroom and warmed up their voices. As they chatted, giggled, and sang introductory lyrics, two women in

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the back of the room adjusted the rhythm of the melody and the volume of a keyboard. Between the two groups were a dozen women who sat at tables. Most were busy talking, reading, and/or writing. A hum of women's voices filled the room. The voices blurred and blended with the lyrics.

From the back of the room, Miss Cramer, a fair skinned woman with long, straight blonde hair struggled to be heard, "This is the Lakota choir for the 1995 Awards Program." "You did a great job," acknowledged Kathleen Block, the teacher/choir director/teacher from the opposite side of the room. Laughter, yeh's and amen's filled the room as women's call-and-responses acknowledged their listening.

"This is Lakota choir for 1995. The title of this song is 'We're Going All The Way',' Kathleen repeated loudly. A brief hush fell over the room, before it was broken by a few introductory notes from the keyboard. "It's still draggin' just a little bit," Jackie, commented from the choir. "Can you play any faster?" Ms. Cramer asked meekly as she stood beside the keyboard. The choir clapped out the beat while the woman at the keyboard continued to make adjustments.

Jackie stopped clapping and turned to the woman standing on her right. "Do you sing in church?" she asked. The woman nodded. "Well, ack like ya in church," Jackie said jokingly, and turned to face the center of the room. Jackie spread her arms over the room as if she were a minister in church. She began to address the women in the room like the members of her congregation, "All you sinners-" Before finishing her statement, she turned back to the choir.
Motioning with her hands, she invited them to join in. "We gonna pray for 'em," she laughed and then quickly turned back to the audience. Giggling women across the room joined in her hearty laughter.

Jackie stopped laughing suddenly, as she made eye contact with one woman in the audience. The woman was smiling and shaking her head. Jackie pointed to her and said playfully, "Uhmm, got a sista ova dare, you know what ahm talkin' about." Jackie winked and resumed her deep, hearty laughter. Women's voices blended and blurred, interrupting and overlapping each other amidst the laughter.

Suddenly, a new voice rose above the crowded. Breaking from the rhythm of women's laughter, Dekeisha, a young woman in her early twenties, began to sing. She held one hand to her ear while read from the handwritten lyrics: "My determination is what keeps me strong. Oh yeah, believe in myself like neva before. Faith is the key that-

"Oh, you jes come by t' visit," Jackie called again to the same "sista" in the audience. The music resumed and Jackie commented, "Oh, yeah, that's betta!" Ms. Cramer lark called out once again, "Y'all ready?" The choir clapped, swayed, and began to sing:

Whatever it takes to make it, I'm goin' all the way. I may be down sometimes, but I won't be down alwaays. Whatever it takes to make it, I'm goin' all the way. I may be down sometimes, but I won't be down alwaays.

Dekeisha steeped forward from the other members of the choir. She wore a loose, white polo shirt and long, denim shorts partially camouflaged her stocky,
youthful body. Her voice was powerful. Her lovely, dark face was framed by
dangling, beaded braids. She avoided direct eye contact with the women
watching her. She looked, instead, above her audience as she sang in a
powerful, slightly trembling voice:

    I've had some problems, heartaches and pain. Tryin' to find the
    answers, I've been rackin' my brains. Oh, but, as I thought about it, it
    began to come clear. To get maself together and go on from he:::re.

The chorus joined in as Dekeisha stepped back, blending her body and voice in
the six woman background. Swaying and clapping synchronously, the seven-
woman chorus continued in unison:

    Whatever it takes to make it, I'm goin' all the way. I may be down
    sometimes, but I won't be down always.

Dekeisha stepped forward again, swaying left and right, testifying in song:

    Now I know better. It's time to move on. My determination is what
    keeps me strong. Believe in maself, like never before. Faith is the key
    that unlocks the do:::or.

Other women in the room joined in. Some women clapped, some sang, but
others watched silently and still. Several continued reading and writing while
they sang. The choir concluded in formulaic verse:

    Don't you give up
    Don't you give out
    Don't you give in
    Hold on to your goal!
    Don't you give up
    Don't you give out
    Don't you give in
    Hold on to your goal!
    Keep pressin' on
    Keep pressin' on
    Keep pressin' on
    Keep pressin' on!
The music and voices ended abruptly. After a brief silence, applause and excited voices filled the room: "Yeah . . . All right! . . . Go head, girl! . . . Keep pressin' on!"

I watched and listened intently, noting which women were listening. Obviously women who clapped their hands, sang, or moved to music were listening. I was uncertain about some women who continued to read and to write. Then I realized that had been writing notes and looking around, and I was listening. I could not clap while recording what I observed. I had not been clapping or singing, but I had been moving to the music. I was listening. Our responses differed, but each listened in our own way.

Slowly, I began to realize that women often talked about listening and literacy work in terms of movement. In their oral and written dialogues, the transcriptions of interviews and classroom interactions, women repeatedly spoke about "comin' from," "gettin' there," "bein' there," and "movin' on." In the Chapter Six, I discussed these as common themes that emerged from the data presented in Chapters Four and Five.
CHAPTER SIX
LISTENING, MOVING, AND BECOMING LITERATE: MAKING SENSE OF LISTENING

In Chapter Six, I summarized the aims of this ethnography and reviewed the research questions that guided this study. I discussed the implications of these findings for adult literacy education and made recommendations for future research.

Aims of an Ethnography of Listening

The purpose of this research was to explore the phenomenon of listening in the context of adult literacy education. In order to make sense of listening, I spent two years in a southern inner-city adult learning center investigating black women's "world of communication" (Hall, 1990). My goal as a researcher was to tell what listening meant from the points of view of black women in an adult literacy academic setting and to describe patterns of listening behaviors that these women associated with listening.

The questions that guided this study were:

1. What meanings do women ascribe to listening?
2. What behaviors do women associate with listening?
3. How do women listen?
4. What is the role of listening in women's literacy work?

By embracing notions of literacy as "cultural wisdom" and "communicative competence," this study approached listening as one aspect of cultural knowledge to explore with members of a particular classroom culture,
the Writing Class (Purves & Jennings, 1991; Spindler, 1982). Ethnography provided the methodology and methods to accomplish the goals of this research: to study listening in the natural setting, to discover what listening was for a particular group of adult learners, and to determine interrelationships of listening and women’s literacy work.

**Findings**

A culture is expressed (or constituted) only by the actions and words of its members and must be interpreted by, not given to, a fieldworker. To portray culture requires the fieldworker to hear, to see, and, most important for our purposes, to write of what was presumably witnessed and understood during a stay in the field. Culture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation (Van Maanen, 1988:3).

Making sense of listening involved making visible a ubiquitous, but obscure aspect of the Writing Class culture. I examined women’s words, actions, and written compositions which related to listening to learn what women knew implicitly and explicitly about listening (Van Maanen, 1988; Spradley, 1980). Meanings and patterns of behaviors emerged from the data I collected. Inscribing what women knew and what I learned was an arduous task. Doris Ann’s words describe it well: "This paper ain't big enough for what I be thinkin'." The following findings are a distillation of what the women taught me about listening and the interrelatedness of their listening and literacy work. I discussed the findings as they responded to the research questions:

**The Meanings Women Ascribed to Listening**

Women illuminated different aspects of listening based upon their personal experiences of listening as a child and as an adult. There were
common themes, however, that ran through their meanings. Listening involved taking risks. Women seldom referred to listening as separate and apart from speaking, reading, or writing. Regardless of women's backgrounds, they considered listening as work.

**Listening and Becoming Literate Involved Taking Risks.** Becoming literate in the Writing Class was a risk. Women risked being an unaccepted outsider in their own culture. They risked alienating family or friends who were less literate or who did not support their academic endeavors. They risked viewing their own language and communicative practices as inferior to accepted Standard English. Women risked "sounding white" or "acting white" in order to receive that piece of paper [a GED] that, as they were told, would open windows of opportunity. Becoming literate and independent of welfare was also frightening, because, in some cases, welfare had been a way of life for three generations of women. Women also risked physical danger to themselves and their children. During winter months, women often left their homes and children before daylight and walked through some of the most dangerous areas of the city to get there. Some walked all the way and others walked to a bus stop. Neither mode of transportation was considered safe.

**Listening was not a Discrete Language Process.** Literacy was not merely reading and writing; literacy involved language, communication, and culture. Women did not perceive language or communication as isolated processes. Instead, they perceived them as overlapping and interrelated.
Their actions and terminology revealed the blurred boundaries between the basic language arts of literacy: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Women spoke with and listened to other women while completing a variety of literacy activities, e.g., writing essays, revising letters, completing worksheets on tense, number, and verb-subject agreement, working math problems, or completing vocabulary lists. Women increased reading and writing competencies by reading and listening to their own and others' texts silently or aloud.

Women listened and read for context clues, main ideas, and incorrect grammar; however, meaning transcended written text and spoken word. Women read, wrote, spoke, and listened, individually and collaboratively in journals, letters, and essays, searching for the "she behind the words," the meaning outside the text, and their own meanings. Women routinely interrupted and overlapped each other's voice as they expressed comments and opinions. Women acknowledged and supported each other with lively call-and-responses such as: Go girl!, Go 'head!, Thank you! They also attacked each other with complex verbal skill capable of rendering even the most well-educated or literate person confused and defenseless.

Many voices clamored and scrambled to articulate meanings in person and in print while others were silent and still, obscured amidst the cacophony of voices surrounding them. Listening involved "sorting and sifting" one's own voice and meanings from the voices and meanings of others. Listening to
herself was an essential reflective process and a fundamental part a woman's literacy work. Part of women's listening was ascribing meaning to what was read, written, and spoken in the Writing Class. By listening to herself, a woman found her own voice and learned to value her own meanings.

**Listening is Work.** Like literacy, listening was also work. Listening required time and effort. Listening served a primary function in women's social interactions, the means by which they created, shared, and negotiated meanings. Each woman began her literacy work by listening to teachers and texts and to other women and herself.

Listening preceded and proceeded simultaneously with the traditional literacy activities, reading and writing. In the Writing Class, literacy work engaged women not only in the development of written language competence, but also in the development of oral language competence. Becoming literate involved vigilant listening and keen observation to "learn the wisdom" of the Writing Class culture. As a woman listened, she became more literate and she "moved" from current academic skills to "higher levels." In addition, she moved from her family and inner-city community.

Sophia, La Doi, Emelda, and Doris Ann shared meanings of listening that were as unique as the sound of their voices. Each one's words, phrasings, and voice tones and rhythms created special meanings that represent the "she behind the words." Sophia considered listening hard work, healing, and a spiritual exchange. By combining these meanings, she was committed to listen
(“staying with”) the ladies to listen in order to experience healing for their spirits and emotions. La Doi considered listening as the beginning of knowing. Listening for La Doi was synonymous with learning. For Emelda, listening meant that someone cared. Doris Ann's Ann's listening as a visualization of speaking set her meanings apart from the other women.

**Women Had Different Ways of Listening and Different Expectations of Listeners**

Women sometimes listened in ways that were not only different from other women, but also different from the ways the expected others to listen. The ways that women listened, however, were significantly influenced by their historical background and personal histories. The personal space involved, eye contact made, or type of responses made varied somewhat from woman to woman.

**A Woman Listened With and To Her Body.** Literacy and listening were complex, multi-faceted, and intimately related processes that women viewed holistically. Listening was not the same as hearing to the women in the Writing Class. Doris Ann illustrated specific distinctions between listening and hearing. She described how her husband listened to the sounds of a diesel engine with the ears of a mechanic. A mechanic makes sense of those sounds, while she merely heard them as sound without meaning. She also described the difference between listening to her children and hearing them. She heard her children's voices without listening for the words. When listening to her children, she often vigilantly screened the sounds for tones that indicated urgency.
Just as other researchers have suggested, listening was more than an auditory process (Escheverria, 1990; Fiumara, 1990). As supported by Levin's (1989) work, women listened with their entire bodies and described listening as a multisensory process. Doris Ann, a very visual woman, described listening as "pitchulizing saying." When she listened, she experienced more than the sounds of the words of a speaker. She experienced vivid images that she created from the words of another person. La Doi listened with her body. She moved into the personal space of others to see their lips and to view their speech. Sophia described listening as a "spiritual exchange." Her references to listening for the "she behind the words" suggested a listening that goes beyond what was heard or spoken. Listening for the woman behind the words was how Sophia discovered what she called the "essence of the other woman."

Women spoke with their bodies and listened with their bodies. With a shoulder turned, a sigh, a look away, a downward gaze, a stare, or sustained direct eye contact, women conveyed powerful messages to each other. Women were highly skilled in reading other women or listening to their body talk.

Women also listened to their own bodies. Women often determined time by hunger pangs or fatigue. They listened to their body responses to threatening situations and responded in the ways that were either acceptable or unacceptable in their culture. Women listened to the anger that rose in their bodies when they were challenged to a verbal duel. They listened to "mess"
and identified "messy women" by the sounds of their voices, how they moved, and where they positioned themselves in the classroom or on the campus.

Sophia listened to many different conversations at one time. She often reminded me of a switchboard operator who plugged back and forth into numerous conversations. Her own creative inner-voice often interrupted her listening of others as others’ words triggered emerging poems. La Doi’s listening was more narrow and focused. She watched speakers’ lips and remained close to speakers in order to listen. Her hearing impairment was a factor in both of these ways of listening. Her hearing impairment was a significant influence in how La Doi listened. Emelda also maintained intense eye contact and close proximity when she listened. Unlike La Doi, Emelda loudly interrupted speakers at any time. Doris Ann sometimes looked away when she was listening intently. Listening to herself as she spoke, she sometimes looked away, usually up to the right. Doris Ann also made gentle direct eye contact with others. She did this particularly when she was interested in what was being said and when she sensed that the speaker needed her to listen.

The Role(s) of Listening in Women’s Literacy Work

Listening was a fundamental part of women’s literacy work in the Writing Class. Becoming literate began with listening. By listening to teachers, listening to other women, listening to texts, and listening to themselves, woman "learned the wisdom" (Biggs, 1991) and developed “communicative
competence" (Purves, 1991) necessary to become an accepted member of the Writing Class culture. Literacy was more than an academic accomplishment in the Writing Class. It was a social achievement (Scribner, 1986:8). In addition to developing reading and writing abilities, becoming literate in the Writing Class meant becoming an accepted member of a unique classroom culture (Ferdman, 1991).

Listening and Literacy were dynamic and recursive processes related to movement. The interrelatedness of listening and literacy was illuminated by women's metaphorical references to listening and literacy in terms of movement. Movement was a pervasive theme that ran through the women's stories, dialogues, and descriptions of listening. Listening to women's stories about special listeners, early listening experiences, and listening experiences in school, I discovered many references to "coming from" and "being there." Becoming literate was described in terms of "moving," "moving on," "getting there," "going all the way." Women spoke of academic progress as "moving up" and "testing out" and described themselves as "being in" reading, math, or language.

In the Writing Class, women's listening and literacy work followed a recursive cycle that included the following stages: gettin' there, bein' there, and movin' on. These three stages, like many aspects of the Writing Class culture, were neither discrete nor distinct. Their boundaries blended and blurred as they interrupted and overlapped each other, like the voices of the women who moved through them (See Appendix D).
Gettin' there. Gettin' there, one of the listening/literacy cycle, was not a simple task. Gettin' there was the process of women moving from the comfort of current meanings and understandings within their cultural community in North Rivers Bend to the new and unfamiliar of culture of the Writing Class. Whether it was new meanings or new pronunciations of words, the use of new punctuation or verb tenses, or different gestures and communication strategies, a woman had to be willing to move in order to listen and become more literate. She moved away from the her language and many of the people and places where she had once felt comfortable and secure. Moving involved a willingness to relocate physically (e.g., home to school, regular class to the Writing Class), linguistically (Black dialect to Standard English), and epistemologically (less literate to literate).

In one of our phone conversations, Sophia read one of her poems. The poem describes the movement of listening and literacy work. As she read, I listened and transcribed simultaneously. Sophia indicated the punctuation and spacings so that I could see as well as hear her meanings. She spoke and I listened. She read and I wrote:

Following not imposing
Leads me
Where I want to go
Without knowing

The way
Nor sure of how.

Losing my head,
All I've learned
Or thought I knew
Unbalances me
Sets me teetering, topsy-turvy
Going a little crazy

The proper state
For finding answers
To loose some again.

Together we created and shared meanings and experiences of the dynamic processes of listening and literacy.

To listen and become more literate, women moved from their own language and cultural location. A fundamental part of gettin' there was knowing where a woman was coming from. Knowledge of where a woman came from was essential in understanding the meaning in and behind her words. Socially, knowing where she's comin' from meant knowing a speaker's intentions (sincere, sarcastic, etc.) or understanding the speaker's experience because you've been there yourself. Knowing where another woman was coming from was a weapon or a tool used when listening. With this knowledge, a woman could destroy or build trust with other women. Allowing other women to know where you were coming from meant having the courage to become vulnerable to others. Where a woman was coming from included her background, her intentions and motivations, and/or her life experiences.

When Sophia referred to this listening, she referred to it as listening for the "she behind the words." Woman often said to another woman to whom she had been listening, "I know where you're coming from." This indicated not only that she had been listening, but she had listened with understanding.
Knowing where a woman was “coming from” also referred to her academic position. For example, in an academic sense, where a woman came from was the grade-level at which she was initially assessed to be functioning in reading, math, and language. A woman was described as “getting there” when she had moved from her initial grade-level to a higher grade-level. Knowing where a woman was coming from meant several things: knowing her background, her life experiences, her agendas (intentions or motives), and/or her academic abilities and achievements.

“Getting with yourself” was an expression Sophia used to describe a reflective state she considered important for women to reach before beginning reading or writing activities. Sophia considered listening as part of the pre-writing process in the classroom.

With the writing, I talked with them some about, I don’t say listening to them. I don’t use the word listening, but I like to talk about having the writing come out of you. You need to...take the time to...go back and, in fact, listen to yourself in order to do that, I’ve talked about...the need for the student to get with yourself is how I put it, I’m aware of the kind of, we’ll call it listening, getting with yourself, that need be done before you might be able to write something.

An important part of the literacy work in the Writing Class was for women to express themselves to discover themselves.

Sophia was passionately committed to facilitating self-discovery. Initially, many women resisted the inner journey of listening to themselves and articulating what they listened either in oral or written form. Some of their resistance was due to painful recollections and the guilt and the shame associated with experiences such as failing school, getting pregnant, or
neglecting children. Alcoholism, verbal abuse, and/or physical abuse were also experiences that women were reluctant to reflect upon, speak about, or write about.

Women who were determined to reach their academic goals spoke repeatedly of "goin' all the way." Women who were "goin' all the way" were the women who worked hard to make progress, academically or socially. They were certain that they would be "gettin' there." While listening to the women rehearse the song, *I'm Going All the Way*, that they performed later at an Honor's Day program, I realized its appropriateness as a theme song for the women at Lakota Center.

How far a woman had to go was dependent upon where she was "comin' from." A woman's historical (cultural, ethnic, etc.), personal, and academic backgrounds significantly influenced where she was *comin' from*. Her academic background, measured by the TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) and labeled as a grade level, was the designated place from which she moved. *Moving* was essential for women to continue at Lakota. Those who did not move (or make sufficient academic progress) were not allowed to remain.

**Bein' There.** *Bein' there* was the second stage of the Listening/Literacy Cycle. *Bein' there* was the physical, emotional, spiritual, or cognitive position of a woman who was listening. Being there physically in time and space was an important part of listening which Sophia, La Doi, Emelda, and Doris Ann emphasized in their descriptions of special listeners. Although women used the
phrase *gettin' there* to indicate a process of listening that approached understanding, *bein' there* meant sharing in another person's meanings and/or emotions. Women invariably described good listeners as persons who were *there* for them.

For Sophia, it was Aunt Alma who was always there and available for their special talks. Doris Ann described her brother as *bein' there* physically and as *bein' there* emotionally when she was growing up. In her words, "he carried ma emotions." According to Doris Ann, he felt what she was feeling as he listened. Emelda and La Doi described the security and specialness they experienced with their mothers who were always *there* for them.

**Movin' On.** The third stage of the Listening/Literacy Cycle was *movin' on*. This stage was often as much work as *gettin' there*. Women who *moved on* left once again a comfortable position inside the Writing Class culture to move outside. "Outside" was often physically threatening because of the violence surrounding North Rivers Bend. "Outside" was emotionally threatening for women who were entering into the world of work, unemployment, or a new academic setting to further their education. *Moving on* meant letting go of welfare benefits that, in some cases, had been a way of life for three generations. *Moving on* also meant letting go of old beliefs and meanings which had kept them stuck in feelings of worthlessness, resignation, and resentment.

Each of the four women in this research "came from" a different place; therefore, each listened from her own unique position based upon her life.
experiences. La Doi, Emelda, and Doris Ann left school and had children before receiving a high school diploma, while Sophia earned a master's degree. Women did share common aspects of their background. Women's historical backgrounds were similar. They were African American women who were reared in the South. La Doi lived in California for several years. Sophia had relatives in Michigan and lived there for several years. Neither Emelda or Doris Ann lived outside of North Rivers Bend.

Many women moved on after listening, learning, discovering new meanings, and created new selves. Doris Ann received a GED in May, 1994 and completed the requirements for certification as nurse's assistant. She is currently employed with a local home health company. Emelda left Lakota Center before completing GED, but completed her work at a nearby adult learning center. She is now enrolled in a computer program in a local vocational technical school.

La Doi moved on (left Lakota Center) without a GED. The secretary said that she heard La Doi was enrolled in a job training program. Sophia remains at Lakota Center, but she has moved on as well. She publishes a newsletter for women entitled Street Poets for Christ. With Mrs. Brown, who is a social worker, Sophia co-facilitates Praying Women, a focus group for women's emerging spirituality.

Limitations of the Study

The following is a discussion of limitations of this study. Two areas of concern that are discussed include (1) bias based on race, gender, and
class of the researcher, and (2) the homogenous nature of the group of women studied.

**A White, Middle-Class Female Perspective**

The findings of this study are the interpretations of a white female researcher who explored listening as one aspect of black women's communication. Researchers have expressed concern about white female researchers who investigate the communications of women in nondominant cultures (Houston, 1992; Lugones & Spelman, 1983). A major concern is that the communication experiences of the women of nondominant cultures will be lost among the communication experiences of white, middle class women.

Houston (1992) called researchers' attention to the importance of earning the right to speak about women of a different culture. To earn this right, she claimed, we must learn who other women are "as they communicate in their own ethnic cultural contexts, their world, not simply ours" (p. 55). Lugones (Lugones & Spelman, 1983) also advised feminists scholars who wish to speak for women of another culture to "follow" them into *their* world, not only by reading and detached observations, but also by being there with them, physically and emotionally. Houston (1992) urged feminist researchers to "allow the experiences of women different from us—our mutual experiences of one another—to reshape our theories and redirect our research" (p. 55). She advocated that authentic research be accomplished through our direct, not vicarious, experiences with other women.
My own historical background and personal history will always be influenced what I listen, what I observe, and how I make sense of the world. I cannot escape the fact that the findings of this research are the interpretations of a southern white female researcher who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s: however, my culture provided new eyes and new ears to observe and listen for subtleties of behaviors and shades of meanings in unfamiliar terminology that may have been less obvious to a black researcher, man or woman.

While I conducted this research, many aspects of my life paralleled the experiences of the women in the Writing Class. Like the women in the Writing Class, I also struggled to become more literate. Learning the wisdom of and developing communicative competence in a university culture was a frightening experience. My fears of writing and of revealing my meanings were not significantly different from the fears that many women at Lakota Center reported. We all risked being assessed as insufficiently literate and/or communicatively incompetent in a predominantly white male academic culture. Our financial situations were not significantly different while I conducted this research.

There were also important differences in our circumstances. I had chosen to return to school. Many of the ladies did not consider attending Lakota a choice. While schooling temporarily depleted my finances, school temporarily improved the ladies’ finances. Being a white and middle-class woman, I had more choices. Some of my personal experiences during this research were, at times, quite uncomfortable; however, they brought me closer
to understanding where the women were coming from. My research background in listening and in ethnographic research increased my capacity to listen and speak about the communications of women in a nondominant culture. With an "ethnographic ear" (Clifford & Marcus, 1982:12), I was able to listen as a student and to learn from the women of wisdom who agreed to teach me what they knew explicitly and implicitly about listening (Richardson, 1990). As an ethnographer, I observed, participated, and followed women in their world of communication through direct, not vicarious, relationships.

Generalizability of Findings

The findings of this study are not generalizable over all adult literacy populations. The participants in this study were black women who had at least one child and who were participants in a welfare reform program. In more traditional adult literacy programs, attendance is voluntary, and adult learners are not limited in the length of time that they may attend. The ladies at Lakota Center were required to attend class for a minimum of 20 hours per week, and the length of time they were allowed to be enrolled was limited. Project Independence's enrollment policy was interpreted and enforced by each woman's case manager who worked in collaboration with her teacher and Mr. Meaux.

The findings of this study reflect many of the research findings regarding women's communications (Borisoff & Hahn, 1993; Rakow, 1992; Pearson, Turner, & Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Tannen, 1989, 1990) and of the
communications of African Americans (Haskins & Butts, 1993; Heath, 1983; Gilmore, 1985; Houston, 1981; Kochman, 1981). However, these findings may not be appropriately generalizable to more heterogeneous populations because they reflect only black women’s listening in a unique adult literacy classroom culture.

**Listening is Not a Clearly Defined Concept or Directly Observable Language Act**

Listening is not a clearly defined concept or directly observable language act. When treated as a separate language phenomenon, listening was less directly observable than speaking, writing, or reading. We can see writing in written texts. We can hear speaking in articulated sounds. When it is performed aloud, reading can be observed in much the same way, in sounds articulated by the reader. We may not directly observe silent reading, but we can observe certain reading behaviors (eyes following text, fingers pointing to words, note taking, etc.) and infer that reading is taking place. We can observe and sometimes hear readers. Although we sometimes hear, we do not directly observe reading. We observe reading artifacts and the behaviors commonly associated with reading. In much the same way, we can observe listeners, but we must rely on listening artifacts and those behaviors we associate with listening to infer the process of listening. The behaviors associated with the act of listening may differ significantly from culture to culture. Listening behaviors are influenced by the cultural background and personal experience of the listener. Listening, like the cultural knowledge, is revealed in and inferred.
from the subtleties of the sayings, doings, and makings of a culture (Spradley, 1980).

Implications, Recommendations, and Reflections

Summaries, recommendations, implications, and/or personal reflections are suggested alternatives to formal conclusions for qualitative research (Wolcott, 1990). Therefore, in order to be consistent with the theoretical perspective and epistemological orientation of this study, I close this ethnography with Implications, Recommendations, and Reflections.

This research found that women in the Writing Class shared multiple meanings of listening and diverse patterns of listening behaviors. Women's meanings and behaviors were significantly influenced by their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. Overall, women described listening as a holistic communicative process. They did not make clear distinctions between reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Women often interchanged terminology for the basic language arts. Women read other women. They listened to what authors said in the texts.

Women's descriptions of listening were consistent with much of the literature and research reviewed for this study (Escheverria, 1990; Levin, 1989; Tannen, 1989; Levin, 1989; Fiumara, 1990). For example, Doris Ann spoke of listeners as "pulling out" what she had difficulty saying. Her description is consistent with Fiumara's notion of listening as a maieutic or midwifery process. Sophia's reference to listening as a "willingness to die" also reflected Fiumara's
The findings of this study reflect other research on the communications patterns in black culture (Haskins & Butts, 1993; Gilmore, 1985; Heath, 1983; Kochman, 1981). The involvement strategies of black women were highly interactive and involved. Their voices overlapped and interrupted each other naturally. These findings have important implications for the development of curriculum and instruction for adult learners, particularly black women. It is imperative for adult literacy educators to become aware of the diversity in women's ways of listening as they create curriculum and plan instructional strategies for adult learners from nondominant cultures.

Women's meanings, like their voices were beautifully unique. Each woman's individual listening behaviors reflected her preferred style of listening and the senses involved in her listening (e.g., visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, etc.). Black women's listenings, the meanings they ascribed to listening and the behaviors they associated with listening, were powerfully poetic. Black women's listenings and literacy work challenged Western cultural assumptions that listening is a passive and less socially relevant communicative process than speaking, reading, or writing. The women's meanings, like their voices and their bodies, defied the rigid boundaries of time and space of a traditional adult literacy curriculum.

Exploring black women's ways of listening was a more intimate journey that I expected. Listening to women from a culture I grew up beside, but not
with, provided me a new perspective from which to view black women's world of communication. As I drive to work, I now look for familiar faces at the bus stops and along sidewalks. I wonder about the women I knew briefly who have now moved on with their lives. What these women taught me has significantly altered how I view black women, literacy, and listening.
REFERENCES


### APPENDIX A

**Transcription Conventions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>oPINion</td>
<td>Caps indicate emphatic stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>..</td>
<td>pause longer than end of a sentence (&gt;2 second)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . .</td>
<td>ellipsis, parts omitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\speech</td>
<td>Marks the beginning and ending of overlapping speech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Ex.**

J: Ok, so by askin' a question in her class/for you meant/

DA: /to me/ /uhuh/

J: that/ you were listening.

DA: / I was listenin'.

| bold | key words or phrases |
| : | elongated sound (Ex. "Yea:::h!") |
| - | word or phrase terminated abruptly before completion. |
| () | parenthetical information, i.e., non-verbal gesturing, movements, sounds, voice quality. Ex. Y' doin' one thang (chuckling) and then you expect (chuckling) the class to FINISH what you're THINKIN'. |
| [] | text editing or author's comments Ex. "she was pazentin [presenting]..." |
| . | omission of letter(s) Ex. "Y'know, I didn't want t' go." |

| indented italics | constructed dialogue or reported speech of another person Ex. You're doin' something else then she says, **Oh, no, that's alright. No, that's not what I meant. That's not what I said.** |

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Dear

Thank you for considering to participate in this research on listening. Although we have previously talked about this research project, this letter is intended to document in writing the purpose of the project, what your participation involves, and the issue of confidentiality. If you choose to be a part of this study, you may discontinue your participation at any time. Your participation is completely voluntary.

Purpose of the Project: I am conducting this listening research project to fulfill the requirements of a doctoral program in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Louisiana State University. Upon successful completion of this research, I will receive a Ph. D. degree.

In this study, I am interested in what "listening" means to you, how you know when someone is listening, what you do when you are listening, and the role listening plays in your education. I am focusing this research in your writing class, so I am also interested in how you listen, what you listen to, and how others listen in class.

Confidentiality: Your name will not be used in this study in order to insure complete confidentiality. I will be using a pseudonym (you may select this name yourself) whenever I make reference to you or information from informal conversations, interviews, class observations, or written documents you have shared with me.

I will often use direct quotes from you; therefore, if you have any reservations about particular information you have shared, please feel free to discuss them with me. I am interested in any questions or concerns you may have during the course of this study, about the research or your role as a participant. Feel free to contact me by leaving a message with the school secretary or calling me at my home, 336-4937.

Thank you again for sharing your time, knowledge, and your experiences of listening. I look forward to your participation in this research. It will certainly enrich my understanding of listening, the role it plays in learning and in teachers and students classroom interactions.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Falls, doctoral candidate
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Louisiana State University

Signature____________________________________Date___
Dear Jennifer,

How are you this morning? I hope you are doing well and feeling great.

This morning I was focused on listening. While sitting here in class, I can listen to pages being turned, laughter, also some popping, the chairs here have runners on the bottom so I can listen to the runners as they make sounds, also the sound of the door as it closes. Listening to me this morning can be an art. This morning on my way to school I was listening to the conversation of parents and their children, they were all talking about the holiday season, and the wonderful things they are all planning for Christmas. Have teachers really helped me gather some good ideas.

I really do think listening is an important, and main quality of life. Listen is also a skill that to do, I must admit, I will listen as long as my hearing organs
Fiction, because now I do realize the importance of listening. I'm working on my TED and since I have been listening, I'm really learning a great deal. Also, gathering very important information. I can use to help myself, children and others that don't take the art of listening seriously. Well, listener, I hope you can get some thing out of my writing to you. I really did enjoy taking this time out to corresponding you these lines on listening.

Yours sincerely,
The Dai
APPENDIX D

The Listening/Literacy Cycle

Bein' There
Gettin' There
Movin' On
Comin' From

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VITA

Jennifer Ann Falls received a bachelor of science degree in Mathematics Education in 1970 from the University of Southwestern Louisiana. She received a masters of arts degree in Psychology in 1988 from McNeese State University. In December 1996, she will receive a doctor of philosophy degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Louisiana State University.

From 1970 to 1989, Jennifer taught mathematics in a public junior high school and several public high schools in Louisiana. She was employed as a school psychologist from 1989 to 1991. As a graduate student in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction from 1991 to 1994, she worked as a teaching assistant in the mathematics education program and research assistant with the Louisiana State University Literacy Education project. In 1992, she completed course work and training in ontological design with Escheverria and received certification in ontological coaching.

Jennifer is a state mathematics supervisor with the Louisiana Department of Education. She is involved in the Louisiana State Content Standards Project which has incorporated listening in the development of English/Language Arts and Foreign Language Content Standards. Jennifer is also involved in a variety of state literacy education projects. She is a member of the International Listening Association, the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the Louisiana Association of Supervisors of Mathematics, the Louisiana Association of Teachers of Mathematics, and the Louisiana Association of State Supervisors.

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DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Jennifer Ann Falls

Major Field: Curriculum and Instruction

Title of Dissertation: Black Women's Listening: An Ethnography of Listening in a Southern Inner-City Adult Learning Center

Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination: October 9, 1996