

CHAPTER 4.

LISTENING TO RESEARCH  
AS A FEMINIST ETHOS OF  
REPRESENTATION

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*In this chapter, we explore how our research practices and methodological choices offer opportunities to embody a feminist ethos of responsible, strategic practice. Our inquiry takes place in two different research sites where we enact ethnographic and archival research methods. Contemplating our research practices, we promote an ethos of valuing multiple perspectives by examining the ideological lenses we use, acknowledging our different, sometimes conflicting, subject positions, and allowing those perspectives to shape our work. We seek to expand traditional conceptions of what counts as knowledge, data, and research as we strive to become more active rhetorical listeners. Our methodologies center on the needs of participants alongside our own, and we are committed to ongoing interrogation of cultural assumptions and biases, including, but not limited to, gender subjugation.*

In a 2000 issue of *JAC*, Michelle Ballif, D. Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford debated their views of feminism in a trilogy consisting of their alternating voices. Applying Jacques Derrida's term *différance* to their efforts to define feminist intervention, the authors argued that the differences feminists grapple with in unpacking meaning and intention, are sometimes non-negotiable. Yet by acknowledging difference as well as *différance*—a more interrogative, radical commitment to looking at difference—it may become possible to deconstruct and resist binaries, question the privileging of certain positions over others, and open up new spaces of meaning and practice. As Davis (2000) put it in one of

her entries, “I would suggest, in fact, that it is *only* in our difference—or, rather, our *différance*—that something like solidarity becomes possible” (p. 584). Ballif (2000) responded with the trilogy’s central question: “How do we listen for difference(s)? And how do we listen for *différance*” (p. 586)?

As feminist literacy researchers, we enter the conversation here. We are concerned with ethical practice in our research, our interactions with participants, and with our students. We present Ballif, Davis, and Mountford’s (2000) questions with our own spin: How can we responsibly and productively move toward solidarity as feminist researchers, even when differences (difference and *différance*) are not easily reconciled?

The trilogy provided a forum for investigating our research practices as intentional feminist acts in which we consciously choose to collaborate, weaving together our voices and perspectives. In our respective scholarship (Emma’s is archival and Lauren’s is ethnographic) we defer our own assumptions so that we can listen differently and thus understand the positions of our research participants with greater precision and compassion. In listening, we take interpretive cues from participants. Emma’s work on historic southern mill village literacy campaigns employs listening through researcher reflection. She steps back to attend not only to available artifacts but also to the silences that arise from the materials that are not documented in archival collections. Lauren introduces a developing project on military veterans’ literacy practices by concentrating on a pilot study of one student-veteran’s experiences. In the process of contemplating the data, she and the participant create knowledge together. Our approach echoes Gesa Kirsch’s (1999) assertion that “we must develop ethical guidelines to prompt serious and sustained consideration of those whose interests are served in any given research project, and what consequences may follow—especially for research participants—from the influence of those interests” (p. x). Methodological principles thus allow us to acknowledge the economy around the research site and the ways that we benefit from our work; we also hope that participants may draw benefits from their relationships with us. Lauren attempts to show this in her interactions with Lary, former Veterans Center director and student at her previous university; Emma demonstrates it in her explorations of which archival artifacts get saved and which ones do not. Our feminist ethos is informed by our relationships with participants, whether they are people we interact with in the present, or those whose experiences and writing are documented in the archives.

We are both literacy researchers, and as such, we are committed to working with participants to understand their reading and writing practices, and the practices of people in their communities, currently and historically. Throughout this chapter, when we speak of listening to participants or listening in the archives, we refer to our decision to pay precise, ongoing attention to our relationships

with participants and the community members we encounter in the research process as a significant feature of our methodology. Our focus on relationship is what Kirsch (1999) and other researchers refer to as a “politics of location” (p. x). This attention and care also impacts the ways in which we encounter our own readings of a situation or artifact, highlighting that our authority as feminist researchers is guided not only by what we see, but what may remain opaque in our work: the documents that may not have been saved for historical prosperity or the stories that require trust to hear. It is this commitment to participants that influences our methodological choices.

Like the trilogy authors and Kirsch, we are committed to “rhetorical listening” (Ratcliffe, 2005) and to understanding how listening can be channeled toward more ethical research practices. We are concerned with our own positions as feminist researchers and with the ways we interact with participants and students; thus, we aim to enact practices that tend to differences among others, while holding ourselves accountable for how our positions orient us as researchers. Although Ballif, Mountford, and Davis (2000) sometimes disagreed with one another about the responsibilities of feminists, they were in agreement that feminism is an “ethical way of being” (p. 611) and a politics. We agree. Feminist research is ethical and political work.

## **DEFINING A FEMINIST ETHOS OF REPRESENTATION AS RESPONSIBLE STRATEGIC PRACTICE**

Along with the researchers before us who were concerned with ethical representation in qualitative studies of writing, and especially with developing a feminist ethics of representation (see Kirsch (1999), *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research*, and Mortensen and Kirsch’s (1993/2003) collection, *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*), we define a feminist ethos of representation as a commitment to continually examining the ideological lenses we use, acknowledging our different (sometimes conflicting) subject positions, and allowing our research participants to shape the work itself. For example, Lauren, who has a background in literacy research, entered a world unknown to her when she decided to examine the writing practices of military personnel. The only way she could conduct her study was by deferring to participants’ and other informants’ expertise. She was, as many ethnographic researchers have described it, approaching the research as an outsider; she had to be led through the study by others’ greater knowledge. In letting participants lead, she does reflective work to recognize her own voice as it interacts with the voices of others. We find value in multiple perspectives, acknowledging both difference and *différance* in our interactions with research participants, and in relation to the topics we

pursue as our scholarship. One of the most significant turns in feminist methodological intervention has been the recognition of the researcher's influence on her research: the always-already presence of her shadow, which impacts all of the work we do to varying degrees. In different stages of our work, this shadow casts different shapes. But its presence as we collect and understand data, as well as when and how we present findings and contexts, can be telling.

This becomes clear in Emma's reflections on gaps in archival findings and how entering a research setting with certain goals in mind can sometimes make it harder to listen to what we actually find. Formulating research questions around company towns in North and South Carolina at the turn of the century primed Emma to seek working class voices that resisted industrial educational contexts. The available artifacts around this historical moment were limited by the material conditions of the archives where she worked, which consisted of primarily the writings of literacy sponsors, not learners. Her expectations of what she hoped to find made it difficult to maneuver with what she actually found. But by taking a step back and assessing her position in relation to the study, it was possible to reflect and remap. Stepping back and assessing are two strategies that are essential to our feminist ethos. In the space of reflection and pause, we become able to consider our goals and our interactions more mindfully.

We recognize similar goals in the work of our peers in this collection, especially in Megan Adams' (Chapter 1, this collection) reflections on the production of the Hollow documentary, and in Mariana Grohowski's (Chapter 2, this collection) research on the experiences of two women combat veterans. Adams and Grohowski consider the importance of reciprocity within research relationships as a feminist intervention, a point we highlight as well in our focus on relationship and mutual knowledge-making. We recognize in all of the chapters in this section a common theme of "the role of the ethical self" (Adams) as a feminist researcher. We all are concerned with researcher positionality as we listen intensively to our participants and as we continue to hold ourselves accountable (Johnston, Chapter 3) for our assumptions and the ideologies that "buoy" us (Rohan, Chapter 5).

We turn our attention toward our research methods to concentrate on how our methodological choices offer us opportunities to enact a feminist ethos of responsible, strategic practice. This inquiry takes place in the different research sites in which we enact ethnographic and archival research methods. We find it useful to think about these varied sites of our literacy studies as examples that illustrate the ways feminist methodologies stretch across different material spaces of meaning-making. By gathering varied methods within a common methodological frame, we consider the ways that feminist perspectives concretely impact our work. In particular, we emphasize lingering on relationships with

participants and communities, listening, and co-creating knowledge as three principles that guide us as feminist researchers.

## LINGERING ON RELATIONSHIPS

To begin conversations about what feminist methodological approaches add to our research, we concentrate on the value of lingering together with participants in ethnography, archival work, and among the communities in which we engage. Feminists have taken on these relationships in *Composition and Rhetoric*, emphasizing the push to co-create knowledge with those who are the subjects of our work. Cynthia Selfe (2016) argues that as researchers, we can envision ourselves as “partner[s] in knowing and learning” alongside our participants with whom we “enter into a deep collaboration.” To do this work together, we need to slow down and pause. The research process becomes one in which we “write or compose *with* and not *about*.” When we pause and reflect with participants, we create a different space for invention.

To move through the process of co-creation, we have found it necessary to reflect on our own sense of ethos: as writers, researchers, and agents interacting with communities. If our goal is to temper the sense of expertise that is assumed within the researcher-participant relationship to enact a feminist methodology, where do we locate our authority? Further, how do we honor what specialized knowledge we do have through our interactions? Sophia Villenas (2000) provides insight into these tensions in her article, which examines feminist methodologies in anthropological ethnography. In particular, Villenas (2000), whose project explores her own struggles against the “exotic” in the anthropological gaze, points out that when researchers name “for other women what constitutes oppression and emancipation, there is no room for redefinitions of feminisms and womanisms that do not fit the experience of an almost grand narrative of ‘feminist’ living” (p. 80). When, as researchers, we enter a context with preconceived definitions of what constitutes resistance, or any other experience, we narrow the scope of what counts in our findings, valuing our own authority over the perceptions of those we study. The focus on some aspects of participant experience at the expense of others reifies the women, men, and children our work seeks to understand, “by privileging some life histories (those that showed resistance) over others” (p. 80-81). While scholars must always make choices as to what data and artifacts are shared in their work, we suggest that these choices are enhanced when we look beyond our own academic training and theoretical lenses to build knowledge from the ground up.

Royster and Kirsch’s (2012) *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Directions for Rhetoric, Literacy, and Composition Studies* provides analytic tools and methods

that further the practice of co-creating knowledge to address cultivating research relationships. This occurs when researchers prioritize “strategic contemplation” and mindfulness as a feminist ethos of practice to formulate research questions, collect data and artifacts, and represent individuals and communities. Royster and Kirsch (2012) coined the term *strategic contemplation* to “reclaim a genre of research and scholarship traditionally associated with processes of meditation, introspection, and reflection. . . Building on critical imagination, this strategy suggests that researchers might *linger* deliberately inside of their research tasks as they investigate their topics and sources. . . .” (p. 84-85, our emphasis). We are mindful that all researchers enter into relationships with the subjects of their work, and we value the time necessary to cultivate such interactions. Ethical practices, then, may be measured by reflecting on these relationships as well as on the methods we employ to address how they may benefit one party at the expense of the other (see Kirsch (1999) *Ethical Dilemmas*). As we articulate an exigence for explicitly *feminist* scholarship, the relationship between the researcher and the researched continues to be a fruitful site for interrogation.

## LISTENING

As we linger, we listen. It is the process of listening as a contemplative practice that makes our work feminist. Our focus is on how literacy research, even when not seemingly related to feminist concerns, engages feminist methodologies. For example, Lauren discusses her pilot study with a man who had a career in the military, a subject that may not appear feminist at first. The research subject need not be explicitly about gender or gender issues; the defining of feminist methodologies occurs through larger practices of meaning-making. The practice of feminist methodology is an ontological one; it relates to the ways in which we conceptualize research questions worth exploring and how we assign value to data or artifacts.

Thus, in this chapter, we take up the methodologies we employ and how we approach our research, rather than the gender(s) of the research participant(s) or the topic(s) of the research. We map the landscapes in which we research, evaluating and re-evaluating our positions as we consider our findings. We emphasize the claims of feminist rhetoricians Cheryl Glenn and Jessica Enoch (2010), that amongst historical researchers and other scholars, “the issue is not so much [that] we approach various groups of people or archival collections but why we approach various groups of people or archival collections [and] how we work to understand and honor their perspectives, their experiences” (p. 24). Our work as feminist literacy researchers, therefore, depends upon our willingness to identify and recognize how our motivations for doing feminist work impact the people

and archives we study. Our work also depends upon our willingness to continually question our methodologies in relation to our participants and to be open to revising our approaches based on their needs and interests.

## CO-CREATING KNOWLEDGE

The primary way in which we address knowledge formation and ethics will likely feel familiar to most researchers who have read or practiced feminist methodologies. We strive to co-create knowledge with our participants, and to practice rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe, 1999; 2005) and strategic contemplation (Royster & Kirsch, 2012), through sharing our writing with the communities we study and in community outreach. These interactions between researcher and participant constitute what Lauren calls *mutual contemplation* (Rosenberg 2015, p. 57), recognizing and encouraging the presence of others in the act of strategic contemplation, as we seek input from knowledge and experience beyond our own in how we work through data. For Lauren's work, this action manifests in direct interactions with participants; for Emma, it is more a matter of reflection and reevaluation as she considers the relationships between literacy sponsors and women workers. Our projects combine to enrich conceptions of what we can achieve when we actively listen.

We turn now to two examples of how we linger, listen, and co-create knowledge. In the following sections, we look at how we are accountable as researchers, first when we engage in rhetorical listening and mutual meaning-making in Lauren's ethnographic literacy research. We continue to trace the methodological principles of our feminist ethos in Emma's work, as we look for new spaces for invention when we encounter *archival silences*. Between these two approaches to studying literacy sponsorship and usage, we hope to illuminate not only what is gained by feminist methodological practices, but also why these tactics are so important.

## LAUREN: MUTUAL CONTEMPLATION

As researchers, we have a responsibility, as Royster insists (1996), to foreground our participants' rendering of their experiences over our expectations of them. That same commitment can inform our approach to gathering, interpreting, and reporting on data. In *Rhetorical Listening*, Ratcliffe (2005) develops the concept of listening as deliberate, conscious action. Listening requires that the researcher/teacher/interlocutor pay close attention to the speaker's subjectivity. It also requires that the listener be willing to interrogate her own positions, privileges, and biases. A rhetorical listener attempts to delay interpretation and judgment, choosing in-

stead to stay with the words of others, and to contemplate them without immediate action. In this way, in our overlapping roles of researcher, teacher, and feminist, we can work towards listening to the words of others on their terms, rather than appropriating their narratives to serve our purposes. A component of rhetorical listening, in my view, is mindful awareness, which Royster and Kirsch (2012) attribute to responsible research practice. I believe, however, that contemplative practice necessitates dedicated collaboration between researcher and participants. It is not enough for the researcher to tend to her own ethical concerns; participants also engage in strategic contemplation of their experiences when they join in the research process. Thus, my goal as a researcher is for participants to “linger deliberately” (Royster & Kirsch 2012, 84) along with me during the formal data collection and when we speak informally.

In *The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners* (Rosenberg 2015), I introduced the concept of mutual contemplation as a co-interpretive act. Mutual contemplation involves researcher and participants joining together, not only to interpret data, but also to reflect on the situation of the study and how it affects participants. Sometimes the process of mutual contemplation requires that one refrain from activity by lingering, listening, and suspending a response. Interactions between researcher and participant, conversations in which the researcher remains open to adjusting the terms of the study and the analysis based on participants’ expertise, rely on their perspective and reflecting together as a co-interpretive act. Such collaboration necessitates that the researcher yield the position of expert and allow participants’ knowledge to guide the study at times. At other times, it is through prolonged discussion that participant and researcher make decisions in collaboration.

Before heading into a full-scale study of the writing practices of veterans while they are in military service and when they shift into civilian settings such as the university, I conducted a pilot of one student-veteran, Lawrence Schmitz, as a test of my research methods and questions. Lary straddled two roles in the university where I taught and where my study was situated: he was a student-veteran and he directed the Veterans Center. As the Veterans Center Coordinator, he was often in a position of advocating for others and speaking as the front person for his office. Lary was also a writing minor who wanted to use writing to examine his experiences in the Navy. In his various roles in the university, he was a literacy sponsor, as was I. Besides being a student who was sponsored by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, Lary acted as a sponsor of other veterans like himself. He was simultaneously sponsored by, and a sponsor within, the university (see Brandt, 1998). Our conversations were informed by the multiple ways that we viewed situations from our various perspectives as employees of the university (Lary and me); staff, student, veteran (Lary); faculty,



researcher, and military outsider (me). Our mutual contemplation sometimes involved Lary explaining military culture to me, me asking for feedback on my study design, or us looking together at passages in Lary's interview transcript where I noticed intriguing patterns. We lingered together over the data, making meaning through our interaction.

One such example of our collaboration and mutual contemplation is apparent in a conversation we had during an interview in which I asked Lary whether he wanted a pseudonym for my project. Having worked with vulnerable populations of adult learners before, I assumed that Lary would be best protected if he were to disguise himself. He disagreed, insisting that he wanted to use his real name so that he could be a resource for veterans. He was adamant in claiming that he was not vulnerable as an interview subject, and therefore, that he wanted his name to be used. In this way, he illustrated his simultaneous roles as sponsor and sponsored, and he made it clear that he wished for me to understand him differently. Here is how I heard him:

If somebody reads my name and they know who I am or they hear of me, . . . it might give them the strength to say something down the line that they want to say . . . I want to be able to make sure that veterans feel free to share what their feelings are and that's valid. I don't want veterans to feel like they don't have a story to share. I want to make sure the people—vets—feel like they can speak out and say what they feel, and that it's not marginalized in any way, 'cause that's not fair . . . . And by using your real name, or using my real name, I feel like by doing that I put that out there and give people a kind of, a strength. (L. Schmitz, personal communication, January 24, 2014)

By listening to Lary's comments, I realized why it is more valuable to him to reveal rather than conceal himself. He helped me to see how disclosure helps him claim authority for his own experiences. In doing so, he also used his personal disclosure as a model for other vets, which his comments made apparent. When Lary and I discussed his decisions about self-representation, in and outside of the context of the interview, we considered issues such as naming, representation, and disclosure from various angles. His perspectives influenced mine and vice versa. Together, we engaged in mutual contemplation and co-creation of knowledge.

After I interviewed Lary, we interpreted his responses. My larger study took shape out of this ongoing conversation, a conversation in which Lary was an expert, and I "stood under" him (Ratcliffe, 2005) from my position as a faculty member

who had no military experience yet who was rhetorically listening. Lary explained that whatever research I planned on doing with veterans was useful to him too because of his commitment to helping veterans assimilate into civilian life. Working with veterans *is* his life, Lary said emphatically on numerous occasions. If he could help with my work, it also helped with his personal and professional mission. We made plans to work together in creating my larger study, guided by his perspective. We intended to continue to collaborate on its design, selection of participants, and interpretation of data. His knowledge influenced my study design.

In our collaboration, there was always a bit of a power differential, however, and Lary was certainly aware that his participation would advance my research. But he also reminded me that our conversations were significant to our university and his office, to students like him, and ultimately, to how the Veterans' Center could offer greater agency to the students we serve. As a professor in the university where he was a student, and as a researcher who is interested in veterans' writing practices, I was also in a position to turn this conversation to both our advantages as we cultivated our research relationship. Lary was both consultant and collaborator. I assisted Lary by bringing the concerns of student-veterans into more public venues. I used my position as a sponsor of the university to encourage a space for more genres and contexts for writing to become part of the academic conversation. With each meeting to discuss the study, our questions became increasingly complex, and we both became better able to probe them more deeply. This was the mutual contemplation that I sought with Lary, a process in which we were continually questioning and interpreting together. The commitment we made to linger in relationship, listen, and co-create knowledge exemplified the kind of feminist intervention Emma and I advocate.

Lary offered to collaborate with me as a co-investigator, which meant that he would have a designated role in interpreting data. Together we made plans for the upcoming study; we designed a postcard that would be used as a tool for recruiting participants. Lary planned to distribute and collect the cards as incoming student-veterans toured the Veterans Center during their orientation, and he and I would then review the pool of volunteers. And yet, I end this section with a sad sigh. Suddenly and without warning, Lary's life changed course, and I learned that he left the university and relocated to a different part of the country. I was unhappy to lose my collaborator, but curious too because this was a moment when my research changed direction. Such is the case when working with people on issues pertaining to their lives; things happen that are out of our and their control, and their changes steer the research. While I can still rely on the knowledge Lary and I co-created and the contributions he made to the project, I have to sit back and reassess. I let the situation wash over me as I consider what it would mean for this research to go differently. Subsequently, however, other

veterans (faculty, retired officers, and students) approached me with their stories of military literacy and their views of writing. Despite my disappointment at losing Lary, their voices took hold of the project and informed what I knew, what we came to know together, as we engaged in new acts of mutual contemplation.

## **EMMA: ARCHIVAL SILENCE**

My research in the archives provided the opportunity to develop my own practices of lingering in relationships, listening, and co-creating knowledge in ways similar to, as well as quite different from, those Lauren has described. While Lauren's work guides us into conversation and mutual meaning-making with participants, my work grapples with the archival silences that studying marginalized populations often produce. Thus, my feminist intervention requires attention to what is said through available artifacts and what is not said; it is a process of accretion in which I use what I know to gesture towards what I don't know. Paying attention to gaps in the archives emphasizes how I understand what I hear, bringing to question how my expectations impact what I find.

In particular, my research addressed mill literacy sponsorship within the historic cotton mill villages of North and South Carolina that targeted women during the early twentieth century. These company towns were often unincorporated spaces, where mills typically owned the land and physical structures on it, providing housing, recreational opportunities, and educational facilities for factory workers and their families. As some companies (though certainly not all) directly invested in the infrastructure making up the daily lives of workers, they set up an exchange from which they expected greater worker efficiency and loyalty (Parker, 1910). Literacy learning was a resource mills offered to draw families into industrial labor and to improve their social and cultural class, without changing their economic class.

I was interested in studying the mill-sanctioned literacies specifically available to adult women and the ways these learners "assimilated to," "appropriated," or "rejected" (Donehower, 2003, p. 349-352) the accompanying relationships. Since my work focused on historical contexts, the necessity of cultivating a feminist ethos that forwarded rhetorical listening and co-creating knowledge was challenging. While accounts of mill workers from 1880-1920 existed within public circulation, there were few, if any, produced by workers themselves. And even fewer stemmed from the direct experiences of women workers in the Southern US. Trying to uncover these absent voices seemed like a perfect formula for an archival project. But seeking artifacts produced by literacy learners during the turn of the century was a job that required more time and resources than were available. Instead of the accounts of learners, the archives I visited surrounded

me with documents produced primarily by literacy sponsors within these contexts: mill owners and women and men, called welfare workers, who directed and facilitated literacy distribution. For this reason, the research I hoped might illuminate the experiences of working class women, merely recounted the perceptions of the literacy sponsors who taught them; there was silence where I had hoped to access the voices of women impacted by mill educational campaigns.

My charge was to reimagine the landscape before me. Royster and Kirsch's (2012) concepts of critical imagination and strategic contemplation offer a helpful framework in which researchers "imagin[e] the contexts for practices; speculat[e] about conversations with the people whom they are studying . . . and tak[e] into account the impacts and consequences of these embodiments. . . ." (pgs. 84-85). The limitations of my findings, which only accessed the sponsor side of the equation, left me with the conundrum of how to work with groups "whose values and worldview we may not share" (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 36), at least at first contact. Instead of co-creating knowledge through conversation with worker voices, I had to make meaning using what was available in the archives. While Lauren and Lary could linger in relationship, I lingered in silence.

Encountering silence led me to return to Ratcliffe's (1999) use of listening "as a trope for interpretive invention" (p. 196). Ratcliffe positions listeners as questioning "a system of discourse within which a culture reasons and derives its truths" (p. 204). To perform this act, we must acknowledge the systems at play that influence our own discourses as well as those informing the texts and participants with whom we work. Researchers inhabit spaces where ideologies come together and where they part. As we listen, we take in information and we make meaning while considering the interplay of our own voices, logics, expectations, and hopes in relation with the complex texts we encounter. We pause and listen to hear the harmonies, but we also seek meaning in the hidden and "discordant notes" (Ratcliffe, 1999, p. 203). Lingered allows us to evaluate and re-evaluate, to use strategic contemplation and critical imagination, and to re-map artifacts to consider how and where we are distributing value in the documents available.

It was disheartening and frustrating to encounter archival silence. But the structures of archival projects are notoriously fluid (Hayden, 2016); while we often enter the archives looking for one thing, we might serendipitously find another. At first glance, the texts produced by welfare workers who taught literacy in the mill villages did not provide access to literacy learning as encountered by women living and working there. On the contrary, they seemed to take me further from my starting point. There were no narratives produced by learners that revealed their processes of learning company sponsored literacies, and in fact, the voices of learners were obscured altogether. Many training materials for literacy teachers appeared to simply rewrite the stereotypes of rural and Appala-

chian women workers circulating during this time period, as the example below illustrates. In addition, the texts only vaguely referenced literacy learning at all, giving me more direct access to cooking and sewing classrooms than ones where reading and writing were centralized.

Grappling with archival silences encouraged me to consider documented artifacts in new ways, striving to understand the “systems of discourse” represented (Ratcliffe, 1999) in order to change how we take meaning from what we find. For example, the bulk of my documents relating to mill literacy campaigns came from the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) of the U.S.A.’s Records at Smith College. These records recounted the organization’s work during the early twentieth century in mill villages that incorporated the literacy learning campaigns I hoped to study; though as I learned, they were often embedded in classes on other domestic skills (cookery, hygiene, sewing, and so forth). In this way, welfare work economically sponsored by the mill industry was two-pronged: On the one hand, it enacted social conservatism by promoting gendered, raced, and classed identities through women’s domestic roles. On the other hand, it embodied progressive social change by expanding the boundaries of women’s involvement in early social work as well as the educational opportunities (even if limited) for working-class women. Female welfare workers held complicated social positions; for this reason, I struggled—and still struggle—to understand and to stand under their sponsorship work and navigate the discourses around it.

The literacy events I was able to locate were depicted in occasional photographs of women reading or in the publication of a cookery textbook that circulated in classes taught by the YWCA. Instead of lesson plans for reading classes, I had cookery books that served as primers, prompting me to consider more broadly how I understood literacy in my artifacts. Further, these documents, in conversation with the Association’s institutional records, reoriented me in my research questions towards the goals of sponsors, including modernizing the lives of learners. The excerpt that follows illustrates a training document used by sponsoring organizations, which sets the ideological framework to support company welfare practices. “The Work of the YWCA in the Cotton Mill Villages of the South,” published in 1909 and archived in the YWCA files at Smith College, describes laborers in Greenville, SC to prepare welfare workers (called “secretaries” within the organization) for the community where they would teach. People living in the mill village are presented as “ante-Revolutionary backwoodsm[e]n” whose “lives were harsh and narrow,” full of “superstition, suspicion, and stern religion” (“The Work,” 1909, p. 2). The document goes on to claim: “Just as the mountains hold back streams, so for generations they have held back a splendid people from the advantages of civ-

ilization. Gross ignorance has intensified suspicion, superstition, and strange ideas about religion” (p. 2). The cultural logics in this text reflect narratives well known and well documented in historical portrayals of the Appalachian region. The trope of the ignorant, yet “splendid” mountaineer highlights difference between mainstream and mill families, and the passage itself marks these differences as reasons why dominant discourses were thought necessary to help workers reclaim the “advantages of civilization.”

While working through documents like this one, co-creation of knowledge was difficult to enact because there was no dialogue. Instead, I was left to look at artifacts—archival, primary, and secondary—around the context; I lingered and cultivated a relationship with the archives and the abstract (and sometimes the physical) place and space where my research was rooted. In this way, my research required exploration beyond the physical (and sometimes digital) walls of the archives and my feminist ethos was built on more than just reporting on what I found. My artifacts did not alleviate the silence of mill women; instead they amplified the voices around the gap.

Although I could imagine the conversations between mill women and welfare workers, I knew from informal interviews with women and men still active in mill communities that women’s responses were far more complex than anything I could comfortably represent at the time. To listen to—and represent—institutionalized discourses, as well as the silences, I had to be honest about my expectations and my desires as a researcher and to embrace the opportunity to morph my research questions rather than try to force a story. As Lauren’s experience with Lary incorporates the need to embrace changes in a study that result from elements beyond our control, my intervention became less about showing women’s resistance to mill sponsored literacies (which is what I had expected) and more about using methodological practices like lingering to find meanings embedded in artifacts and the silences around them. These practices opened a space to co-create knowledge as I stepped back from my ideological biases to expand how I understood archival findings.

## CONTINUING TO LISTEN

Over time, as we sit with our research, our interpretations deepen and we continue the knowledge-making process. As our studies evolve, conclude, and begin again, we strive to conduct our work in ways that allow us to understand where our biases cast shadows on how we interact with participants and their stories. We counter these tendencies through our ongoing commitment to collaborate with, and be informed by, the voices of those we research. Equally important, as we enact a feminist ethos in our methodologies, we pursue ways to reorient our

thinking to cultivate more equitable, mutual, and ethical relationships with the individuals and artifacts with which we engage.

In this chapter, we have articulated a feminist ethos of representation informed by three principles: lingering on relationships with participants, listening, and co-creating knowledge. We have demonstrated the ideals to which we attempt to hold ourselves as we interact with participants and data and as we assess our studies. In conclusion, we consider how the challenges we have faced in these studies have affected us as researchers. We continue to question our positions of authority and how that authority comes into play in our scholarship. Both of us have recounted experiences when the research did not go as expected. In Lauren's case, her main participant who was also a collaborator became unavailable. In Emma's case, the study led toward different artifacts than those she hoped to encounter; her findings steered her towards a population with which she was at odds.

Our examples certainly highlight the disappointment of the researcher. These moments we recount are not ones when the projects failed, but they are situations in which we did not control the study. We were left with surprises that forced us to question our purposes. Could we remain true to the feminist ethical principles with which we identified? For example, how might Emma continue to learn from the artifacts she found in the archives, even when they pointed to the missionary sponsorship she opposed? We ask ourselves how these moments can be productive and how our methodologies can bend to accommodate them.

We have argued for the significance of sitting back and reassessing, of refraining from judgment, of lingering in silence. We have tried to listen carefully to what Ratcliffe (1999) calls the "discordant notes" (p. 203) and not to stubbornly resist them. Our experiences as feminist literacy researchers illustrate that the kind of radical listening and co-creation of knowledge we propose is not easily enacted. Yet we have used this chapter as an opportunity to demonstrate how we have responded to the disappointments and surprises that affect us and our methodologies. As Ballif (2000) asked in our introduction: "How do we listen for difference(s)? And how do we listen for *différance*" (p. 586)? We are reminded that the feminist ethos we work for demands a difficult and ongoing commitment to understanding the discourses and experiences of others, as well as a willingness to interrogate ourselves.

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