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# Listening for Identity Beyond the Speech Event

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# Listening for Identity Beyond the Speech Event

## **Abstract**

### Background

A typical account of listening focuses on cognition, describing how a listener understands and reacts to the cognitive contents of a speaker's utterance. The articles in this issue move beyond a cognitive view, arguing that listening also involves moral, aesthetic and political aspects.

### Focus of Study

This article attends to all four dimensions, but focuses on the political. I argue that listening requires attention to the social identities inevitably communicated through speech. My account of "listening for identity" moves beyond typical approaches by construing listening as a collective, public process, not one located in an individual listener's mental states. To listen is to respond sensibly to others such that participants can build a coherent interaction. Once we adopt this pragmatic account of listening, we must acknowledge that listening requires attention to patterns beyond the event of listening itself. Some of the signs and behaviors that cohere to form an instance of listening depend for their meaning on patterns from outside the event of listening. In addition to arguing that we listen for identity, then, I also argue that we must "listen beyond the speech event."

### Setting

The case study presented in this article comes from a year long study of a ninth grade English and history class in an urban American school that served ethnically diverse working class children.

### Research Design

The research involved three years of ethnographic research in an urban American high school, one year of intensive ethnographic research in the classroom described, as well as discourse analyses of 50 hours of recorded conversation from this classroom.

### Conclusions

Speakers inevitably identify themselves and others when they talk, and this identification can only be successful if people listen and respond in appropriate ways. We certainly listen for the cognitive contents communicated by speech, but we also listen for the identities established through speech. The two central claims made in this article and illustrated by the case study are that we inevitably listen for identity and that listening requires attention to patterns beyond the speech event.

## **Disciplines**

Education

## **Comments**

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## Listening for Identity Beyond the Speech Event

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Stanton Wortham is the Judy and Howard Berkowitz Professor and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. His research applies techniques from linguistic anthropology to study interactional positioning and social identity development in classrooms. He is particularly interested in interrelations between the official curriculum and covert interactional patterns in classroom discourse. He has also studied interactional positioning in media discourse and autobiographical narrative. Publications include: *Narratives in Action* (Teachers College Press, 2001), *Education in the New Latino Diaspora* (Ablex, 2002; coedited with Enrique Murillo and Edmund Hamann), *Linguistic Anthropology of Education* (Praeger, 2003, coedited with Betsy Rymes), *Learning Identity* (Cambridge, 2006) and *Bullish on Uncertainty* (Cambridge, 2009, with Alexandra Michel). More information about his work can be found at <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/~stantonw>.

This article argues that listening inevitably involves attention to the social identities inevitably communicated through speech, exploring how one high school student was socially identified in a classroom across an academic year.

## Structured Abstract

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## Executive Summary

A typical account of listening focuses on cognition, describing how a listener understands and reacts to the cognitive contents of a speaker's utterance. The articles in this issue move beyond a cognitive view, arguing that listening has multiple dimensions. In addition to the important cognitive component, the articles collectively argue that listening also involves moral, aesthetic and political aspects. To listen (or not) involves moral choices, and listeners often attend to the moral implications of what they hear. Listening is an aesthetic act, and listeners create as well as receive meaning. Listening can also be a political act, as listeners attend to the social identities and political alignments communicated by others.

This article attends to all four dimensions, but I focus on the political. I argue that listening involves attention to the social identities inevitably communicated through speech. We cannot speak, except in brief cases, without communicating about our own and others' social identities and about our positions with respect to a set of socially recognized types. My account of listening for identity moves beyond typical approaches by construing listening as a collective, public process, not one located in an individual listener's mental states. To listen is to respond sensibly to others such that participants can build a coherent interaction. In practice, I argue, listening is responding to others in ways that make sense, with "making sense" understood as an interactional accomplishment. I do not propose this as the only useful account of listening. To listen might, for instance, be to infer the normatively expressed intentions of the speaker, or to experience an attentive subjective state, or to appear sympathetic and engaged. In this article, however, I adopt a consequentialist or pragmatic account of listening. We know that people have listened when their subsequent behavior indicates that they did in fact listen, when they and others are able to build an interactional trajectory that coheres with their response. Evidence of listening takes shape only as the responses and the acts responded to form a coherent event in which several acts come to make sense as a recognizable happening. Listening in this sense involves a set of behaviors, involving both the sign listened to and other signs that follow. Different types of listening—"good," "effective," "inadequate," etc.—can be defined by how different behaviors cohere (or not) with the utterance that was listened to and with other subsequent behavior.

Once we adopt this pragmatic account of listening, we must acknowledge that listening requires attention beyond the event of listening itself. Some of the signs and behaviors that cohere to form an instance of listening depend for their meaning on patterns from outside the event in which listening occurs. Thus we cannot listen only by attending to focal utterances, plus the other signs that follow these utterances in a discrete event of listening. Listening also requires that we attend to information, events, practices and other resources. The set of things that must cohere, in order for us to have been listening, includes things from other spatial and temporal locations. In addition to arguing that we listen for identity, then, I also argue that we "listen beyond the speech event" as we listen for the identities communicated through speech.

The article makes these arguments with reference to a case study drawn from one ninth grade English and history class in an urban American school that served ethnically diverse working class children. The research involved three years of ethnographic research in an urban American high school, one year of intensive ethnographic research in the classroom described, and discourse analyses of 50 hours of recorded conversation from this classroom. The analysis focuses on the emerging identity of one African American male student who was positioned as inappropriately silent and resistant.

The analysis of this case applies the two-part account of listening—listening as inevitably involving attention to social identities and as inevitably requiring attention to patterns beyond the speech event—to the political dimension of listening. Like all speakers, the teachers and students in this classroom inevitably identified themselves and others when they talked, and this identification was successful because others listened and responded in appropriate ways. They certainly listened for the cognitive contents communicated by speech, but they also listened for the identities established through speech. The case also shows how listening for identity depends on aesthetic judgments as well. Listening for identity cannot involve only the normative glossing of signs, using rules. Instead, it involves the poetic deployment of subsequent signs, and the aesthetic reading of patterns of signs, to see how a configuration of signs coheres and establishes some social identification as the most plausible.

My two central points—that we often listen for identity and that listening requires attention to patterns beyond the speech event—thus illustrate how listening has cognitive, political and aesthetic dimensions. My analyses also make clear that listening is a moral enterprise. When we listen for identity, we sometimes hear students getting identified as “unpromising” (as happened in this case study) and in other morally charged ways. Should teachers and students attend to the emotional and moral consequences of social identification in classrooms? If listening concerns who people are, in addition to being about academic ideas, do we have a moral obligation to attend to the consequences of such social identification? We can explore these and other important questions by studying how teachers and students listen for identity beyond the speech event.

A typical account of listening focuses on cognition, describing how a listener understands and reacts to the cognitive contents of a speaker's utterance. The articles in this issue move beyond a cognitive view, arguing that listening has multiple dimensions. In addition to the important cognitive component, the articles collectively argue that listening also involves moral, aesthetic and political aspects. To listen (or not) involves moral choices, and listeners often attend to the moral implications of what they hear (see the chapters by Rice and Burbules). Listening is an aesthetic act, and listeners create as well as receive meaning (see the chapters by Garrison, Haroutunian-Gordon and Waks). Listening can also be a political act, as listeners attend to the social identities and political alignments communicated by others.

This article attends to all four dimensions, but I focus on the political. I argue that listening involves attention to the social identities inevitably communicated through speech. We cannot speak, except in brief and degenerate cases, without communicating about our own and others' social identities and about our positions with respect to a set of socially recognized types. In order to understand the political implications of what we hear, however, we must also attend cognitively, morally and aesthetically. We must attend cognitively, because the choice of specific content often communicates something about identities. We must attend aesthetically, because people deploy signs in artful ways to signal identity and because listeners must creatively interpret signs of identity. We must listen morally, because social identification involves evaluation and because identifying another is a moral act. This article invokes all four dimensions to describe how listening for identity works, exploring how one high school student was socially identified in a classroom across an academic year.

My account of listening for identity moves beyond typical approaches by construing listening as a collective, public process, not one located in an individual listener's mental states. To listen is to respond sensibly to others such that participants can build a coherent interaction. In practice, I argue, listening is responding to others in ways that make sense, with "making sense" understood as an interactional accomplishment (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1976). I do not propose this as the only useful account of listening. To listen might, for instance, be to infer the normatively expressed intentions of the speaker, or to experience an attentive subjective state, or to appear sympathetic and engaged. Depending on our purposes and on the instances we are trying to explain, speaker intention, norms for expressing meaning, hearer subjective states and personal stance may all capture something of what we mean by "listening."

In this article, however, I adopt a consequentialist or pragmatic account of listening. We know that people have listened when their subsequent behavior indicates that they did in fact listen, when they and others are able to build an interactional trajectory that coheres with their response. Evidence of listening takes shape only as the responses and the acts responded to form a coherent event in which several acts come to make sense as a recognizable happening (Silverstein & Urban, 1996). Listening in this sense involves a set of behaviors, involving both the sign listened to and other signs that follow. Different types of listening—"good," "effective," "inadequate," etc.—can be defined by how different behaviors cohere (or not) with the utterance that was listened to and with other subsequent behavior.

Once we adopt this pragmatic account of listening, we must acknowledge that listening requires attention to patterns beyond the event of listening itself. Some of the

signs and behaviors that cohere to form an instance of listening depend for their meaning on patterns from outside the event of listening. Thus we cannot listen only by attending to focal utterances, plus the other signs that follow these utterances in a discrete event of listening. Listening also requires that we attend to information, events, practices and other resources outside the event of listening. The set of things that must cohere, in order for us to have been listening, includes things from other spatial and temporal locations. In addition to arguing that we listen for identity, then, I also argue that we “listen beyond the speech event.” I take up these two arguments in turn, following a brief introduction to the empirical case that I use throughout the chapter.

### *A Classroom Example*

Consider the following example, from a ninth grade English and history class in an urban American school that served ethnically diverse working class children. Much more extensive accounts of the classroom events described here can be found in Wortham (2006). On October 9, the class was discussing creation myths. In the segment below, the teacher (Mrs. Bailey, abbreviated as T/B) asks why goddesses are important in many creation myths. (The Appendix has a key to symbols and abbreviations.)

**T/B:** okay, gods and goddesses. why do we have goddesses?

**FST:** to help um the gods create the earth.

**CAN:** they know they need a woman, ah, they need a

5 woman.

**T/B:** they need a woman's touch? why?

**FST:** the basic needs, the basic needs

**T/B:** well, wait a second. we don't usually hear from

William. come on, William? why a woman's touch?

10 **WIL:** [4 unintelligible syllables]

**FSTs:** [1 second of laughter]

**T/B:** does that make sense to you?

**FSTs:** no.

At line 9 the teacher singles out William, an African American boy who rarely participated in class. Lines 8–13 contain several signs that might be socially identifying William. For example, Mrs. Bailey says that “we don't usually hear from William.” What would it mean to listen to this sign of identity?

We know that many American teachers value class participation. Having observed Mrs. Bailey's classes for more than a year, I know that she valued it highly. From the teacher's point of view, then, Mrs. Bailey's “we don't usually hear from William” apparently identifies him as inappropriately silent. It is possible, however, that “we don't usually hear from William” might identify him more positively. Willis (1981) portrays some male working-class students' “oppositional” behavior—like silence—as rational and even admirable. These boys recognize that the socioeconomic system is rigged against them and they refuse to play along with the sham of meritocracy. In resisting school they also affirm working-class values. From Willis' point of view, William's lack of class participation might identify him as resisting the racial and economic domination that can be reproduced in U.S. schools.

Once a sign like this has been uttered, its potential implications are in play—William may be getting identified as inappropriately uninvolved, as appropriately resistant, or in other ways. At the moment of utterance, the sign’s meaning has not yet been established. Both participants and analysts must attend to the components of the utterance and to other signs that co-occur with it in order to interpret its meaning. Note, for instance, that Mrs. Bailey says “*we* don’t usually hear from William.” Her “*we*” seems to mean “*we* others in the classroom,” a group that probably includes other students as well as the two teachers, but not William himself. Mrs. Bailey’s use of the pronouns “*we*” and “*you*” presupposes a set of classroom identities and positions: There is a core group including at least the teachers and the two girls who speak at line 14, and probably also other students who regularly participate in class. William is excluded from this group.

Note also that, at line 9, after urging William to “come on” and participate, Mrs. Bailey restates her question as “why a woman’s touch.” Given that these students are adolescents, and interested in intimate relations, Mrs. Bailey might be teasing William with this way of putting the question. “Woman’s touch” might be a double entendre, presupposing not only the importance of goddesses in myths but also the sexual touching that a woman might do, perhaps to someone like William. The teacher thus seems to be teasing William, perhaps to entice him into joining the conversation.

These two additional components of Mrs. Bailey’s utterance both support the first interpretation of William’s identity given above. If Mrs. Bailey were expressing sympathy for and admiring William’s silence, as a student resisting oppression, she probably would not have separated him off from herself and the core group of students by

opposing “we” to “you.” Nor would she have teased William by mentioning “a woman’s touch.” Given these additional signs of identity in Mrs. Bailey’s utterance, she is more likely identifying him as inappropriately silent—although, if she is teasing, she is not condemning him but inviting him to change his stance.

What a speaker like Mrs. Bailey says, however, normally does not suffice to establish the meaning of an utterance. Signs in subsequent utterances might lead listeners to interpret the utterance differently, and we must examine how subsequent utterances construe the focal one (Garfinkel, 1967; Silverstein, 1992). In the segment above, for instance, several female students laugh at line 11. This laughter probably indicates that these students heard Mrs. Bailey to be teasing William. The students could have gasped or commented on the inappropriateness of her utterance. By laughing they indicate that they heard Mrs. Bailey as teasing, and other listeners infer that “we don’t usually hear from William” probably did not identify William as someone resisting exploitation. Mrs. Bailey’s subsequent comment at line 12 positions the students who participate in class as part of “we,” as members of the core group. Her comment also positions those students as empowered to judge the response William gives at line 10. Two girls then act like authority figures in line 13, claiming that William’s answer does not make sense. By responding as if they were the referents of “you” at line 12, and by accepting the teacher’s invitation to judge William’s utterance, the girls act as if the teacher has identified William as inappropriately silent.

Although each of these signs of identity could be interpreted differently, the combination of Mrs. Bailey’s various comments—“we don’t usually hear from William,” the pronouns “we” and “you” that position William outside the core group of teachers

and students and the question about “a woman’s touch”—plus the students’ responses to these comments, cast William’s failure to participate as inappropriate. Rather than being sympathetic to William’s reserve in class, the teacher seems to indicate that he is inappropriately excluding himself from the core group of students who contribute.

Listening, then, involves more than attending to the discrete contents of an utterance. Attending only to “we don’t usually hear from William” and interpreting it as a tacit criticism of William’s failure to participate in class—if subsequent comments had instead established Mrs. Bailey’s comment either as praise for William’s resistance or as shockingly insensitive—would have constituted a failure to listen. Listeners must attend to individual signs in the context of other signs, both those used by the person speaking and those used by others in response. Listening requires attention to patterns of signs that together support an interpretation of what the signs of identity mean. Like individual signs, of course, patterns of signs can also be reinterpreted, and we will need substantially more evidence to make firm conclusions about William’s identity in this classroom. Nonetheless, we can usefully construe listening as attention to patterns of relevant signs, as those signs come collectively to support an interpretation of what a focal utterance meant.

### ***Listening for Identity***

Although listening for the cognitive content communicated by speech may be the paradigmatic case of listening, we listen across many modalities and functions. Haroutunian-Gordon (1998) suggests that listening to music may share some features with listening for referential meaning. We also attend to signs in the environment and to nonverbal actions in ways that resemble listening. Even when we focus on language use,

listening involves more than attention to referential meaning. Halliday (1978) and others have described how speech has multiple, often interdependent functions. In addition to referring and predicating, speakers always interactionally position and socially identify themselves and others. Speakers inevitably communicate things about what types of people they and others are, even when their conversation focuses on cognitive content.

Languages grammatically encode information about identity, and listeners attend to these. Participant deictic systems, for instance, often convey information about the identities of speaker and the hearer. Second person pronouns like French *tu* and *vous* not only refer to the addressee but also communicate about the relationship that exists between interlocutors. Other languages have more complex honorific systems that communicate about the social identities of speakers, hearers and referents (Agha, 1994). Speakers of all languages, including those like English that are relatively poor in grammatical categories that routinely signal social identity, interactionally position and socially identify themselves and others in almost every utterance. Despite the importance of grammatical categories in some cases, indexical signs do most of the work in signaling social identities (Silverstein, 1992).

Bakhtin (1935/1981) presents a theory of how speakers inevitably communicate social identities and take evaluative stances toward those identities. We can extend his account to describe how people listen for identity. Bakhtin argues that all words are “rented” from the collective. Others have used every word available, and many words have the “taste” of the socially identifiable group(s) of speakers that characteristically use them. When any speaker uses the word, others hear the “echoes” of those prior speakers. Speakers often communicate social identities by choosing a word associated with some

group. When referring to a lawyer, for instance, a speaker must choose from among the set of terms that includes “attorney,” “lawyer,” “ambulance chaser” and others. The referring term communicates something about the social identity of the group being referred to and something about the speaker’s attitude toward that group. Bakhtin also argues that, in addition to assigning others “voices” as recognizable types of people, speakers inevitably “ventriloquate” those voices—taking their own stance on the social types they evoke through word choice (Wortham, 2001). Thus speakers take a social position and identify themselves at the same time as they socially identify the people they talk about. When sycophants call lawyers “attorneys,” for instance, they identify lawyers as high status professionals, they identify themselves as educated people who know the high status term and they evaluate lawyers as deserving respectful treatment.

In order for speech to accomplish this sort of social identification, people must be listening to the signs that accomplish identification. This is not necessarily conscious and calculating, with speakers attending to data, calculating probabilities and drawing rational conclusions. It more often resembles the bodily orientation described by phenomenologists (Csordas, 1994). Just as we move our bodies in coordinated ways—adjusting so as not to run into an approaching pedestrian as we walk down the street, or dancing with a partner—we react to the social identification done by others in conversation. We can bring some of this embodied action into awareness, but we most often react subconsciously. Despite being socially coordinated, such social identification is not always harmonious. We often struggle with others over identities and positions. But these struggles are coordinated, as we listen for and react to the signs that indicate how our interlocutors are positioning themselves.

William, his classmates and his teachers socially identified themselves and each other in classroom discussions across the year, and they listened to the social identities that were enacted. These ninth-grade students were enrolled in an English class in an urban American school, taught by “Mrs. Bailey” and “Mr. Smith.” The school was ethnically mixed, about half African American and one-quarter Latino, with smaller numbers of European American and Asian American students. Students in the focal class were mostly African American. Gender was particularly salient in this class. Mrs. Bailey sometimes acted as if the boys were not taking advantage of the opportunities school provided. The core group of vocal girls who dominated discussion was more consistent and more strident. They excluded the boys from discussions and treated them as unpromising and unintelligent. Wortham (2006) extensively describes the models of gender and cross-gender interactions in this classroom.

Mrs. Bailey refers to the difference between boys and girls in the following segment, from November 30, in which she defines “discrimination” as unjust treatment based on irrelevant characteristics.

75     **T/B:** okay, that’s one meaning of discrimination. I look and  
I see differences. I see Gary is white, and, and Eugene is  
black and I discriminate against Eugene because he’s black.  
or I see that Katina is a girl and- and William is a boy and I  
discriminate against William because he’s a boy and girls  
80     are much easier to deal with.

Mrs. Bailey reiterates her beliefs about girls and boys at lines 79–80: “girls are much easier to deal with,” probably meaning that they cooperate with teachers. While making

this point, she singles out William as the example of a boy who is less easy to deal with. She also singles out Gary and Eugene, but as examples of their race and not their gender.

For Mrs. Bailey and most of the vocal girls in the room, the typical boy was “unpromising”—uncooperative, unintelligent and unlikely to succeed. Wortham (2006) argues that it is no accident Mrs. Bailey selects William as the example of how boys are harder to deal with. William became the prototypical unpromising boy in this classroom. The discussion that occurred on November 30 shows how this happened. The following analysis of this discussion shows how students and teachers listen for identity and how listening involves patterns of signs that emerge across an interaction.

In this class session the teachers introduced a less common sense of “discrimination,” meaning ‘discernment,’ not ‘illegitimate bias.’ The text, from the *Upanishads*, has two main characters. One shows discrimination (in the positive sense) by selecting a worthy goal and maintaining self-control on the way to reaching that goal. The other lacks self-control. As the text says, “He who lacks discrimination, whose mind is unsteady and whose heart is impure, never reaches the goal.” While discussing this text, teachers and students identified William himself, comparing him to the character who lacks self-control.

Early in the discussion Mrs. Bailey noted that “self-control” is a category on some report cards, and she used this as an example to explore the concepts of self-control and discrimination described in the text. One of the girls nominated William as an example of a student who failed to behave in elementary school, and Mrs. Bailey asked him why he he got a bad grade in self-control.

155 **WIL:** talking too much.

**T/B:** you played around too much.

**CAS:** and he talked too much.

**T/B:** talk too much.

**WIL:** she talked too much.

160 **FSTs:** [1 second of giggling]

**T/B:** Cassandra talked too much.

**FST:** no:

William emerges here as the central character in an example, with his past self exhibiting a lack of self-control by talking in class. The teacher makes an analogy between William's past behavior and the "undiscriminating" youth portrayed in the *Upanishads*. This example comes to have implications for William's own identity, as characterizations of him as "undisciplined" in the example spill over into characterizations of William himself in the present. I have shown elsewhere how examples that include participants themselves as characters in the example often facilitate this sort of leakage from curricular content into social identification (Wortham, 2003; 2006).

As Mrs. Bailey and the girls continued to discuss this example, they made it hard for William to avoid being identified as an unpromising student. Cassandra described how William used to bother her in class:

**CAS:** only time I talked when he bothered me. he sat right in front of me, and he always turned around, and talked.

165 **WIL:** °never said anything°

**FSTs:** [2 seconds of overlapping chatter]

**FST:** the poor thing

**FSTs:** [1 second of laughter]

**T/B:** why- why did the teacher say that was bad?

170 **CAN:** cause maybe

**WIL:** she [4 unintelligible syllables]

**T/B:** there's-

**FST:** because he couldn't control it.

**FST:** because he was doing something that he wasn't

175 supposed to be doing.

**T/B:** what was he supposed to be doing? [instead of=

**FST:** [sitting.

**T/B:** =bothering Cassandra.

**CAS:** doing his work.

180 **FST:** doing his work and paying attention to his teacher.

**T/B:** okay, so when he: (1.0) instead of doing his work

decided to turn around and bother Cassandra, then he

wasn't controlling himself. why'd you do that William?

**FSTs:** [1 second of laughter]

185 **CAN:** because he wanted to be bad.

**T/B:** oh, I don't think that William wanted to be bad. why,

why did you turn around and bother her?

**WIL:** °I didn't have nothing else to do°

**T/B:** you didn't have [anything else to do?

190 **T/S:** [umm-

**CAS:** probably for attention.

After Cassandra describes his disruptive behavior at lines 163–164, William objects at line 165 that he did not say anything. But Mrs. Bailey and the girls ignore this and keep referring to him in the third person, as an object of discussion. At line 169 Mrs. Bailey treats Cassandra’s account as accurate, presupposing that William did in fact bother Cassandra. She goes on to explore William’s behavior as an example of “bad,” undiscriminating behavior. Then at line 173 a female student suggests that William “couldn’t control it.” The teachers and girls then discuss how William’s lack of self-control undermined the goals that a good student would have had. Like the character in the *Upanishads*, William failed to pursue worthy goals because he lacked self-control. Cassandra becomes an authoritative commentator on William’s actions (and, at line 191, on his motivations) as they discuss William’s shortcomings.

The teacher and students produce and listen to a complex set of signs as they identify William here. Mrs. Bailey and the students characterize William’s past behavior extensively, identifying him as a bad student who interfered with Cassandra’s ability to learn. No single utterance fully identifies William in this way. His identity is constructed by several people across many utterances, using signs of identity that buttress each other. The girls show that they are listening by responding to the teacher’s comments and to each other in ways that further identify William as lacking self-control. By building on others’ comments, the girls thus listen for and help create William’s identity as an unpromising boy. William shows that he is listening when he denies the girls’ implications, but no one listens to him.

As the discussion continues, the teacher and the girls make William's position more uncomfortable by discussing his motivation for bothering Cassandra.

**T/B:** can anyone tell me why William was bothering Cassandra?

**FST:** attention.

**TYI:** he probably liked her.

210 **T/B:** he liked her?

**FST:** no

**STS:** [1 second of laughter]

**T/B:** okay, so his liking her might have done what?

**FST:** caused [the trouble.

215 **FST:** [[6 unintelligible syllables]

**FST:** got him uncontrolled. he couldn't help himself.

**FSTs:** [1 second of laughter]

**T/B:** he couldn't help himself. he liked Cassandra so much that he couldn't help himself.

At line 209 Tyisha suggests that William bothered Cassandra because he liked her.

Another girl makes the teasing even more pointed at line 216 by speculating that William was in the grip of urges such that "he couldn't help himself." This suggests sexual desire, and it is immediately followed by laughter from several female students. Mrs. Bailey aligns herself with the girls by repeating the comment at line 218. The class is still discussing the example of William and Cassandra in order to explore the curricular

concepts of self-control and discrimination, but the girls and Mrs. Bailey also tease William here about his alleged desire for Cassandra.

So far they have been talking about William's past behavior. Despite their teasing, perhaps the teacher and the girls are not establishing anything significant about William in the present. Subsequent conversation, however, shows that Mrs. Bailey and the girls go beyond teasing William about past actions to teasing him about his current identity. Like the character in the text, William fails to discriminate worthy from unworthy goals when he resists participating in Mrs. Bailey's class. William's indiscriminating behavior, then and now, distracts him from worthy academic goals, and they imply that this behavior will keep him from succeeding in school and later life. Thus William himself begins to be identified as unintelligent and unlikely to succeed.

310 **T/B:** and, where are- did  
the teacher hope William was eventually going to go?

**FST:** high school.

**FST:** tsss [hissing sound produced by one student]

**T/B:** and from high school?

315 **FST:** coll[ege?

**KAT:** [probably college

**T/B:** and from college?

**CAN:** grad school.

**FSTs:** [5 seconds of laughter]

Many of these students plan to attend college and graduate school, but the female students' extended laughter at line 319 seems to indicate that they do not expect William to accomplish that.

This laughter by itself might not have had serious implications for William's identity. Similar laughter occurred a minute later, however.

**T/B:** so, it was distracting  
you from where you wanted to be [and, yet, you did it, =

345 **CAS:** [yep

**FSTs:** [giggle

**T/B:** =didn't you? why do you suppose you did  
that, William?

**FSTs:** [2 seconds of laughter]

**FST:** you have to have a reason.

350 **FSTs:** [1 second of laughter]

**FST:** °no self-control.°

**FST:** °no self-control.°

**T/B:** do you- do you- do you think that when William's  
thirty, in law school

355 **FST:** in law school?

**FSTs:** [1 second of laughter]

**T/B:** and Cassandra is thirty and in law school, °yeah,  
they had to work a few years and that kind of stuff,° and  
the two of you are in law school, and William is sitting in

360 front of Cassandra, he's gonna to turn around and start  
bothering her in the lecture?

At lines 351–352, two girls again characterize William as lacking self-control. Mrs. Bailey also imagines William doing inappropriate things in class.

In addition to reinforcing the image of William disobeying classroom rules, Mrs. Bailey also raises the topic of graduate school here. At lines 353–354 she imagines William in law school. This again elicits laughter from the girls. The laughter might presuppose that William has little chance of making it to law school. It is possible that Mrs. Bailey imagined William in law school in order to counter the girls' laughter about William in graduate school at line 319 above. We could interpret her comments about William in law school as implying: When William is in law school, and he may get there, he will be more mature and will not punch Cassandra. But her comments could also imply: We all know that William does in fact punch Cassandra and others, and that he is a generally unsuccessful student, so it is unlikely that he will make it to law school. With their laughter and teasing of William, the girls support the latter interpretation. Given my observations in the class and my conversations with her, I believe that the teacher intended the former. She did tease William at times, and his reluctance to participate in class frustrated her, but she also tried to reach him throughout the year. Nonetheless, as described further in the next section, vocal students often identified William as unpromising, both on November 30 and across the year.

This example of William lacking self-control shows teachers and students listening for identity. Mrs. Bailey and her students had an academic discussion in which they probably learned something about the curricular concept of “discrimination.” At the

same time they identified William as an unpromising student. They did not accomplish this social identification through only one or two utterances. Instead, they used many mutually presupposing signs to establish William's social identity. In building this set of signs, Mrs. Bailey and the students listened to the implications that their talk had for his identity and they developed these implications through subsequent comments that collectively identified William as an unpromising boy.

### ***Listening Beyond the Speech Event***

Just this one event, however, did not establish William's identity as the prototypical unpromising boy, for two reasons. First, any analysis of what this discussion meant depends on information from outside the event itself. In my analysis I have drawn on ethnographic information about students' behavior across the year and on analyses of other classroom events. William could be identified on November 30 as a prototypical unpromising boy only because teacher and students had in earlier discussions established the model of "unpromising boys." If Mrs. Bailey had not consistently treated boys and girls differently, if the vocal girls had not followed her lead and reminded the boys about their inferiority and if teachers and students had not allowed this to solidify into a habitual model of "promising girls and unpromising boys," their comments about William "out of control" would have meant something different. Wortham (2006) provides extensive analyses of how the gendered model of identity emerged in this classroom and how William did in fact become the prototypical unpromising boy.

Second, social identity is not normally established in one event. As I have argued elsewhere, following Dreier (2000), social identification occurs across trajectories of events (Wortham, 2005). Just as a sign at the moment of utterance could mean many

things, the social position established for an individual in one event could contribute to various trajectories of identification across events. Just as the meaning of a sign depends on how that sign gets recontextualized by subsequent signs, a person's social identity emerges across events as subsequent events recontextualize earlier ones. When Mrs. Bailey and the girls made those comments about William in law school, they might simply have been teasing. If their teasing had enticed him to participate more after November 30, and if he had become a more successful student, they could perhaps have had a laugh about it afterwards. Events further along William's trajectory of identification could have changed his social identity in the classroom. Unfortunately, this did not happen.

Trajectories of identification across events depend on but cannot be reduced to broader sociohistorical patterns. Over the last several decades in the United States, girls have overtaken boys in many areas. Girls receive better grades, outperform boys on standardized tests, drop out less and graduate from college at higher rates (Sum & Harrington, et al., 2003). Although sexism persists and disadvantages girls in various ways (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), boys face increasing challenges (Newkirk, 2002) and their academic performance shows it. Teachers' and students' gendered expectations for school success and the gender gap in school performance have been documented for both minority and majority youth (Lopez, 2003). In addition, popular culture presents boys as less academically successful and as more susceptible to violence and antisocial behavior, and presents the stereotype that school success is unmasculine (Pottorff, Phelps-Zientarski, & Skovera, 1996). Ethnographic studies have shown how such models filter

down to teachers and students who sometimes believe boys are less likely to work hard and succeed (Honora, 2003; Wortham, 2006).

This common model of young male identity—as uninterested in school, less likely to succeed and prone to antisocial behavior—is about both gender and race, because it is disproportionately applied to African American boys (Jordan & Cooper, 2003). Ferguson describes how black boys are more often disciplined in school, labeled as “at risk” and as “failures.” She argues that school rules “seem to be specifically designed to control, manage and channel the ‘natural’ behavior of boys [and black boys in particular], who are said to be more physical, aggressive, sexual. Girls are believed to be more naturally agreeable, tractable, and able to tolerate the controlled atmosphere” (Ferguson, 2000). This model of black boys at school fits with stereotypes of black men as aggressive, violent, overly concerned with respect and irresponsible fathers (Anderson, 1999; Gadsden, Wortham, & Turner, 2003; Nightingale, 1993). Because this model of black male student identity is prevalent, it would be relatively easy for teachers and students to presuppose that black males like William resist school and are unlikely to succeed.

Other models of black male identity are also available, however. There are many successful black athletes and musicians and increasing numbers of black professionals, as well as heroic figures like DuBois, King, Ellison and Washington. William could have been identified using categories from these other available models. In order to explain why some sociohistorical models were used to identify William, we need to look at more local constraints that also played a role. In this classroom, a somewhat classroom-specific model of identity emerged across the year. This was the model of “promising girls and unpromising boys” described above (see also Wortham, 2006). This local

model shaped William's trajectory of identification because it inclined these teachers and students to hear comments about William with the model of "unpromising boy" in mind.

Listening for identity, then, requires that we listen to patterns that extend beyond the event of listening itself—attending to other events along a trajectory (like various conversations in Mrs. Bailey's classroom over the academic year) and attending to both local and sociohistorical models of identity. Listeners must draw on information from outside the event in order to interpret a sign of identity. Teachers and students had to know that the emerging local model of promising girls and unpromising boys, plus sociohistorical beliefs about boys as increasingly "resistant," were relevant to interpreting the comments about William on November 30 and other days.

I will illustrate William's trajectory of identification by describing one more event. See Wortham (2006) for analyses of others. The most powerful events of identification were examples in which students and teachers drew categories of identity from the curriculum and applied them to his hypothetical character, then transferred these categories onto William himself (as with the lack of "self-control" on November 30). Together with the girls' and teachers' disparaging comments about him, and their interactional positioning of him as unpromising, such examples identified William as resistant, unintelligent and unlikely to succeed. William became an example again on April 12 while the class was discussing *The Pearl*, a short story by John Steinbeck. In the story an indigenous person named Kino finds a valuable pearl. He brings it to the Europeans who control commerce and they offer him 1,000 pesos. This is a large amount of money for Kino, but not for the Europeans. He suspects that they are cheating him.

The story and the classroom discussion explore whether Kino should be content with the offer or whether he should make a dangerous journey to sell the pearl for a better price.

Toward the end of the discussion, Mrs. Bailey and the students discuss whether Kino and disadvantaged people like him should be content with low status or whether they should work to change it. The teacher asks William whether he is content.

**T/B:** William. William, what's the problem? what, what complicates that question for you, William? (2.0)

1260 **FSTs:** [3 seconds of chatter]

**T/B:** William are you content? shhh. William are you content? are you happy with what you have at the moment?

Most students in the class have argued that Kino should not be content with his low status and that he should not accept the Europeans' low price. Mrs. Bailey's response at line 1258 indicates that William must have said or done something that the teacher found inappropriate. She then presents William himself as an example by asking whether he is content. By examining William's level of contentment perhaps the class can explore, by analogy, whether Kino should have been content. Mrs. Bailey uses the example both to discipline William—he did something inappropriate, and so she makes him an example—and to draw the class back to the question of whether Kino should have been content.

This example also tacitly opens the question of whether William himself is like Kino. Is he disadvantaged? Does he struggle enough to overcome disadvantage? As students and teachers continue discussing the example, these questions become more explicit.

Mrs. Bailey continues to pursue William as an example.

**T/B:** do you want other things?

1265 **FSTs:** [1 second of laughter]

**T/B:** (hh) okay, can we, can we do something besides nod  
your head up and down.

**FST:** (hh)

**T/B:** okay you're not content with what you get, you want

1270 other things. (1.0) does that make you greedy?

**FST:** no

**WIL:** no.

**T/B:** why not?

**WIL:** °I don't know°

1275 **T/B:** you don't know?

**FST:** cause it's good.

**T/B:** are you gonna work for these other things?

**WIL:** yeah.

This example both advances the academic discussion and identifies William. By discussing William as an example, the class can explore Kino's predicament and the curricular question of whether oppressed people should accept their social position or fight against it. The example may also have implications for William's identity because he may or may not be content with his position both in the classroom and in society. Thus the category of "being content," drawn from the curriculum, could be used to explore whether William is content with his own position.

William does not respond verbally to Mrs. Bailey's question at line 1264, but we can infer from lines 1266–1267 that he nods. One female student laughs at line 1268, thus acting as if Mrs. Bailey has been teasing William. The teacher may have been teasing, either in an attempt to involve William or to play to the audience of girls. In any case, she then goes back to the academic issue at lines 1269–1270, asking whether William's lack of contentment—and by analogy Kino's refusal to accept the 1,000 pesos for his pearl—is greedy. She is using a pedagogical strategy, forcing William to defend one of two apparently undesirable positions. If he says he is content she may accuse him of complacency, but if he says he is not content she accuses him of greed. The teacher probably wants William to elaborate his position and make an argument about the curricular issue. William might argue, for example, that his lack of contentment stemmed not from greed but from a desire to overcome social disadvantage. Mrs. Bailey pursued this pedagogical strategy often, with many students, and often with success.

At line 1277 Mrs. Bailey introduces the idea of “working” to get what one wants. This fits with the curricular issue as she has formulated it: if you are not content, but willing to work to overcome your problems, you are not merely greedy. When Kino rejected the 1,000 peso offer he might have been working to overcome injustice or holding out for a fair deal instead of being greedy. But the idea of “working” to attain things that would make you content might be relevant to William's own identity also. The teachers' main complaint about William is that he does not work and is content to sit and say nothing. So Mrs. Bailey may also be asking him, tacitly, whether he is willing to work in school for what he wants. Thus Mrs. Bailey may be using the curricular categories of “being content” and “working” in order to point out that William should

stop being silent and work harder in the classroom. These implications for William's own identity are still merely potential. Other signs of identity soon presuppose William's own failure to work hard, however, and the implications for William's own identity become more robust.

Mrs. Bailey then asks William what he might be willing to work for.

**T/B:** name something that you want. (4.0)

**MRC:** a brain.

**FSTs:** [4 seconds of laughter and chatter]

1285 **T/B:** William, name one thing you want.

**WIL:** a car

**T/B:** you want a car. okay. do want a beat up old jalopy?

**FSTs:** [1 second of laughter]

**T/B:** what kind of car do you want? (9.0) find a car. a

1290 1975 Chevy?

**FSTs:** [1 second of laughter]

**FST:** no, a big car.

**T/B:** he doesn't have a car at the moment. I'll give you the

'75 Chevy, are you gonna be content?

1295 **FST:** I would

**MRC:** I would

**T/B:** it starts, it starts when the weather isn't rainy and it

isn't cold.

**FSTs:** [3 second of laughter]

1300 **T/B:** and you can't really drive it at night because the  
lights won't stay on? [FSTs continue to laugh] and you can  
be, be, but what you've always wanted is a car?

...

**JAS:** he said he wanted a car, he didn't say he wanted a  
1315 working car.

**FSTs and T/B:** [1 second of laughter]

**JAS:** he just said he wanted a car.

**T/B:** tomorrow, I can get you one of those cars, that, you  
know, has the four wheels and no engine

1320 **FSTs:** [2 seconds of laughter and chatter]

At line 1283 Maurice teases William, claiming that he wants “a brain.” Many other students show that they get the joke, by laughing. Mrs. Bailey returns to the example and William answers earnestly at line 1286 that he would like a car. Mrs. Bailey pursues William's idea, in order to explore the idea of being “content.” She asks what kind of car he wants at line 1289, but she gets no response.

When William does not answer, Mrs. Bailey proposes an undesirable old Chevy for him. Her example of the Chevy is analogous to Kino's story: William's being content with the old car would be like Kino accepting the Europeans' low offer. The example also presupposes something about William's identity. Mrs. Bailey imagines an old, cheap car for William. She goes on to characterize it as seriously defective at lines 1297–1301 and 1318–1319. Mrs. Bailey is joking—successfully, as shown by students' laughter at lines 1299 and 1320. But imagining William with such a lousy car may also

help identify William himself, as a fool who would end up with such a “piece of junk.” At lines 1314–1315 Jasmine follows Mrs. Bailey and uses the example to tease William, saying “he said he wanted a car, he didn’t say he wanted a working car” and positioning William as a sucker who got what he asked for without realizing his mistake. They are talking about the hypothetical example, of course. But characterizing William as a fool and a sucker nonetheless reinforces his identity as unpromising.

The discussion of William’s junk car may also presuppose something about the consequences of William’s classroom behavior. The teachers and students know people who drive old, malfunctioning cars: unfortunate inner-city residents who have low-paying jobs or do not work. Most dropped out of school, and that helps explain their low socioeconomic status. By describing his refusal to participate in class as inappropriate, and by identifying William across several classes as an unpromising boy, the teachers suggest that he may be on his way to failing out of school. Describing him as a hypothetical owner of a junk car may also preview his fate, if he continues to be an unpromising student. Mrs. Bailey’s question about whether he is content thus might also be asking whether he will continue to resist working in school. If he does, he could end up among the group of people who drive junk cars.

Thus students’ and teachers’ discussion of William as “content” uses the analogy between William and Kino in order to reinforce his identity as an unpromising student. William acts as if he is content to stay at the bottom of the class, refusing to participate in school. The other students have said that Kino should refuse his low station in life and work hard to find something better. Many of the other students act this way by working hard in school, but William does not. The example allows Mrs. Bailey and the girls to

point this out, tacitly, as they use the concepts of “being content” and not “working hard” to identify William himself.

This example of William as content with mediocrity illustrates three points. First, it shows again how listeners must attend to complex patterns of signs in order to hear the social identification being accomplished in classroom talk. Listening for identity requires attention to sets of mutually-reinforcing signs that contextualize each other as having communicated about one of various possible identities. Second, it provides further evidence that William was in fact identified as an unpromising boy across the year in Mrs. Bailey’s classroom. Third, it shows how identity emerges across a trajectory of events, as subsequent events recontextualize earlier ones as having established some social identity for participants. Any individual event, like the discussion of *The Pearl* or the one about the *Upanishads*, could be interpreted in several ways. But the recurrence of events in which teachers and students positioned William as unintelligent and unlikely to succeed created a robust trajectory of identification and established a durable social identity for William, as an unpromising boy.

### ***Conclusions***

We can construe listening as a publicly visible practice, defining it as responding to an utterance in ways that cohere with other behaviors to establish the utterance as having had a given meaning. One can defend alternative conceptualizations of listening, but this construal illuminates some interesting aspects. One potential weakness of this construal is the indeterminacy that it introduces. If we define listening in terms of robust norms of expression, discrete speaker intentions and/or recognizable subjective states of the hearer, we can often make more definite judgments about whether someone has

listened. In some contexts and for some purposes, such definite judgments are important. But real listeners do often confront indeterminacy, and conceptualizing listening as the public practice of contributing to coherent events may help us understand this indeterminacy better.

Following Garfinkel (1967) and Silverstein (1992), I have argued that signs of identity only come to have clear meaning when subsequent utterances treat prior ones as if they have meant something recognizable. We successfully listen to a sign of identity only as we attend to subsequent signs that recontextualize the focal sign such that the sign comes to have a more definite meaning. I have also argued that listening for identity requires attention beyond the speech event. As we listen both to focal utterances and to subsequent ones that recontextualize them, we must attend to models of identity and other patterns from both local and broader sociohistorical contexts. In William's case, for instance, relevant models included sociohistorical models of "resistant" boys that have emerged over decades as well as the more classroom-specific model of "unpromising" boys that Mrs. Bailey and the girls developed over several months. In order to hear signs of identity, listeners must understand how those signs index models of identity and habitual practices that extend beyond the event of listening.

I have applied this account of listening—as a public process that requires attention to patterns beyond the speech event—to the political dimension of listening, focusing on "listening for identity." Speakers inevitably identify themselves and others when they talk, and this identification can only be successful if people listen and respond in appropriate ways. We certainly listen for the cognitive contents communicated by speech, but we also listen for the identities established through speech. The example of

William has shown that listening to cognitive content can be deeply woven into listening for identity. Teachers and students in this classroom used categories from the curriculum, like “lacking discrimination” and “being content” with low status, to establish William’s social identity. In order to contribute coherently to these discussions they had to listen simultaneously for cognitive content, for identity and for interrelations between the two.

Listening for identity is also aesthetic. As Rice argues in her article, rules do not suffice to describe how we listen. I have argued similarly that listening for identity cannot involve only the normative glossing of signs, using rules. Instead, it involves the poetic deployment of subsequent signs, and the aesthetic reading of patterns of signs, to see how a configuration of signs coheres and establishes some social identification as the most plausible. Listening for identity is creative both because of the interpretive acts required to appreciate poetic configurations of signs and because listeners’ subsequent behaviors can themselves contribute to these configurations and sometimes change the meaning communicated by a sign of identity.

My two central points—that we often listen for identity and that listening requires attention to patterns beyond the speech event—thus illustrate how listening has cognitive, political and aesthetic dimensions. My analyses also make clear that listening is a moral enterprise. When we listen for identity, we sometimes hear students like William getting identified as “unpromising boys” and in other morally charged ways. Should teachers and students attend to the emotional and moral consequences of social identification in classrooms? If listening concerns who people are, in addition to being about academic ideas, do we have a moral obligation to attend to the consequences of such social

identification? We can explore these and other important moral questions by studying how teachers and students listen for identity beyond the speech event.

## Appendix A: Abbreviations of Names

Mrs. Bailey	T/B
Candace	CAN
Cassandra	CAS
Jasmine	JAS
Katie	KAT
Maurice	MRC
Tyisha	TYI
William	WIL
Unidentified Female Student	FST
Unidentified Male Student	MST
Unidentified Students	STS

## Appendix B: Transcription Conventions

'_'	abrupt breaks or stops
'?'	rising intonation
'!	falling intonation
'_'	(underline) stress
(1.0)	silences, timed to the nearest second
'['	indicates simultaneous talk by two speakers, with one utterance represented on top of the other and the moment of overlap marked by left brackets
'='	interruption or next utterance following immediately, or continuous talk represented on separate lines because of need to represent overlapping comment on intervening line
'[...]'	transcriber comment
':'	elongated vowel
'° ... °'	segment quieter than surrounding talk
','	pause or breath without marked intonation
'(hh)'	laughter breaking into words while speaking

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