

Rhetorical Listening

Debian Marty

Ratcliffe, K. (2006). *Rhetorical listening: Identification, gender, whiteness*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press. 248 pp. ISBN: 0-8093-2669-8. \$30.00.

Reviews of recent publications typically summarize an author's work and evaluate it on its own terms, its contributions to the field of study, and from the reviewer's perspective. Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* implicitly invites her audience to rethink the process, to move from re-viewing to rhetorical listening. This shift, as she describes it, goes beyond reading "simply for what we can agree with or challenge" to listening "for the exiled excess and [to] contemplate its relation to our culture and our selves" (p. 25). In brief, Ratcliffe's project aims to restore listening to parity with the other elements of rhetoric: reading, writing, and speaking. More broadly, she hopes to establish rhetorical listening as a means to revitalize ethical considerations in cross-cultural communication.

When we read to agree or disagree, Ratcliffe asserts, "we commonly employ dialogue as Hegelian dialectic wherein the posited thesis subsumes the acceptable aspects of the antithesis with the unacceptable excess being exiled from the dominant logic" (p. 24). This approach to dialogue often has disastrous consequences for cross-cultural communication, she maintains, for it acts to assimilate differences on the terms of the more powerful rhetors. This communicative co-optation can occur within the review genre, too. For example, a reviewer may assimilate a writer's work through the effort of "mastering-the-masterly-expression" of the author. In such a review, the author and reviewer are positioned metaphorically as dueling experts battling for authoritative honor. Survival is expressed through homage and wounds through hubris.

Whether communication occurs within a cross-cultural context, as Ratcliffe discusses, or within the review genre, to which her theory implicitly extends, Ratcliffe seeks to limit the dominant logic's ability to co-opt or silence differences. For this purpose, she aims to reinvigorate listening as a "trope for interpretive invention and as a code of cross-cultural conduct" (p. 1). When one listens rhetorically, she asserts, one makes a "conscious choice to assume an open stance in relation to any

Debian Marty is Associate Professor, Division of Humanities & Communication at California State University. Correspondence to: California State University, Monterey Bay, Seaside, California 93955-8001, USA. Email: debian_marty@csumb.edu.

person, text, or culture” in order to “foster conscious identifications that may, in turn, facilitate communication” (p. 26). This openness replaces assimilation as an ethical means of relating, particularly across cultural differences. To inhabit this open stance, rhetorical listening entails four moves: (1) promoting an understanding of self and other; (2) proceeding within an accountability logic; (3) locating identifications across commonalities and differences; and (4) analyzing claims as well as the cultural logics within which these claims function (p. 26).

To review through rhetorical listening, the reviewer shifts from competing for mastery to an open apprenticeship with the author. The first step in such an effort—promoting understanding of self and other—“means first, acknowledging the existence of [the other’s] discourse; second, listening for (un)conscious presences, absences, and unknowns; and third, consciously integrating this information into our world views and decision making” (p. 29). Unlike Krista Ratcliffe, who is situated professionally in rhetoric and composition, this reviewer is located primarily in the field of communication. While listening has occupied a more prominent role in speech communication, it nevertheless typically retains a lower status than speaking, as reading does to writing in rhetoric and composition studies. Reviewing through rhetorical listening encourages recognition of such different discursive locations and requires receptivity and conscious consideration.

This first move in rhetorical listening appears to be similar to the transition from multidisciplinary to interdisciplinary studies. In the former, a compositionist would have “this” to say on a particular subject and a communication scholar would have “that” to say on the same matter. Their pronouncements would be additive, without necessarily being interactive. In interdisciplinary studies, however, the views of the composition and communication professionals would interact, affecting each other and the subject matter through conscious integration. This willingness to interact openly so as to affect one another—in cross-cultural communication or in a review—requires an “accountability logic,” a willingness simultaneously to explain one’s perspective and to account for one’s positionality.

“Accountability logic,” explains Ratcliffe, “suggests an ethical imperative that, regardless of who is responsible for a current situation, asks us to recognize our privileges and nonprivileges and act accordingly” (pp. 31–32). The primary reason for grounding rhetorical listening in accountability logic is to overcome “guilt/blame logic which fosters dysfunctional silence” (p. 85). This dysfunctional silence permeates much cross-cultural communication in the form of “denial, defensiveness, and guilt/blame” (p. 88). Rather than retreat to these unproductive rhetorical stances, accountability logic requires listening audiences to consider and take responsibility for how we relate to different positions, in terms of both ideas and identities.

This listening for how to relate is a “tactic of interpretive invention” (p. 93). It requires audiences to engage the unassimilated excesses of cross-cultural dialogues, to recognize the dysfunctional silences, and to go beyond conventional conclusions about agreement or disagreement towards generating “win-win propositions” (p. 95). Much of Ratcliffe’s work is devoted to theorizing this rhetorical paradigm shift, which explicitly invigorates the agency of audiences. No longer simply reactive

or rubber-stamping receptacles, those of us who listen have responsibility for what we hear and how we process communication in a variety of contexts. This paradigm shift is extremely valuable for sorting through some of the complexities of cross-cultural communication and for re-establishing listening as a significant rhetorical skill.

As is nearly always the case, however, the process of identification across commonalities and differences presents a conceptual and practical minefield in rhetoric. Ratcliffe recognizes the difficulty of this terrain, as she extends her theoretical exploration of rhetorical listening to the question of “troubled identifications” of race and gender. Significantly, she tries to clear some conceptual territory by defining identification, *qua* Diana Fuss, as “a question of *relation*, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside” (p. 61, emphasis in the original). This emphasis on relationship reinforces her earlier proposals for mutual understanding and accountability logic.

Ratcliffe hopes that the relational focus in rhetorical listening will elevate an audience’s attention to the “power plays and troubled identifications” (p. 66) in cross-cultural communication. To do so, she wants to give equal play to commonalities and differences in three contexts: public debates, rhetorical scholarship, and composition pedagogy.

The author and reviewer share more commonalities than differences when it comes to race and gender and to shared interests in gender, whiteness, and communication ethics. Interestingly, our white ancestors appear to have worked in the same underground railroad networks prior to the Civil War, hers in Indiana (p. 6) and mine across the state border in Michigan. We perhaps share gratification toward those abolitionist efforts and a sense of responsibility to uphold this heritage. We also have been deeply influenced by one scholar in particular, Dr. Jacqueline Jones Royster, who served on the reviewer’s interdisciplinary dissertation committee and whose work provides the impetus for Ratcliffe’s situating rhetorical listening as an ethical means for cross-cultural conduct (p. 17). Within these pivotal similarities among ideas and identities, one claim invites a deeper hearing.

In progressive composition and communication pedagogy, and in feminist and critical race theory, there is a long-standing dialogue about “student resistance.” Generally, this dialogue concerns itself with how teachers negotiate student acquiescence to hegemonic discourses in the classroom in an effort to inspire critical thinking and consciousness. Ratcliffe addresses this concept repeatedly throughout her text and most pointedly in her final chapter, “Listening Pedagogically: A Tactic for Listening to Classroom Resistance” (pp. 133–171). The concept of “student resistance” is perhaps one of the most troubled identifications in scholarship and pedagogy.

Briefly, student resistance has been used as conceptual shorthand for addressing the issues of communication conflict that emerge in discussions regarding diverse identities and ideas. Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening contributes significantly to an ongoing paradigm shift in classroom and cross-cultural dialogue, away from the most egregious forms of adversarial persuasion and towards a cooperative advocacy. The emphasis on listening serves a critical function in this reciprocal communication

process, helping to create the conditions for mutually reasonable and responsive dialogue. However, the cultural logic surrounding the discussion draws more on traditional rhetoric, with its foundational assumptions of adversarial and oppositional power struggles. For example, listening pedagogically is offered to students and teachers so that we may “recognize resistance, analyze it, and, when necessary, resist it” (p. 133).

However, communication conflict regarding diversity is difficult to reduce to a tug-of-war, right/wrong, either/or logic of resistance. Ratcliffe rightly recognizes that a variety of fears undergird resistance, yet nevertheless concludes that, in response, “teachers just need to be honest” and “just need to do the work” and “must accept failure” (p. 140). These exhortations build on the assertion that teachers and students must “question our defensiveness” (p. 106) and “if such questioning makes us more uncomfortable, so be it. In fact, good” (p. 34). Such resolve is understandable as it seeks to circumvent denial or demands for ease.

However, resisting resistance, even with profoundly good intentions, more probably results in an “eye for an eye” ethos than becomes a means for becoming more open and more willing to listen well. The fears and defensiveness generating conflicts in cross-cultural communication require another level of listening, beyond factual honesty. Composition and communication scholars need to build on the sturdy foundation of rhetorical listening and develop wise discernment, grounded in compassion and empathy.

Copyright of Review of Communication is the property of National Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.