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Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness

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Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness.

Krista Ratcliffe. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2005. 225 pp.

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In her germinal book *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education*, Catherine Prendergast compellingly argues that literacy practices since the civil rights movement serve as crucial sites of struggle for the maintenance of White domination in the U.S. As I was rereading feminist scholar Krista Ratcliffe's recent monograph, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, in preparation to write this review, I thought of the ways in which Ratcliffe's utopic investigation of rhetorical listening as an interpretive invention complements Prendergast's in-depth historical study of the relationships between literacy, race relations, and educational policies. Yet perhaps more importantly, Ratcliffe also offers strategies that help educators address some of the most pressing issues facing those of us involved in or concerned with issues of literacy in the current *No Child Left Behind* era.

In the opening of *Rhetorical Listening*, Ratcliffe states that her project of theorizing the concept of rhetorical listening materialized as a reply to Jacqueline Jones Royster's question: "How do we translate listening into language and action, into the creation of an appropriate response?" Ratcliffe's study takes Royster's question seriously and works toward developing rhetorical listening as a "code of cross-cultural conduct" that may be employed by practitioners "in relation to any person, text, or culture" (1). *Rhetorical Listening* foregrounds the tropes of gender and whiteness through detailed analyses that show the paramount importance that the two categories play in constructing and shaping rhetorical acts and opportunities in U.S. discourses. Thus, similar to Prendergast's examination of the recent history of literacy and race and Ratcliffe's first book, *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions*, *Rhetorical Listening* participates in further challenging the bedrock of cultural assumptions that support dominant notions of gender and race and their relationship to literacy and communication.



Ratcliffe's conception of rhetorical listening builds on Kenneth Burke's paradigmatic notion that all successful persuasion is preceded by identification. It significantly expands Burke's theory of identification by underscoring the importance of establishing the "conscious identifications with gender and whiteness" (2). Ratcliffe views listening as a necessary move to improve dialogue among participants in situations where disparate power dynamics compromise the recognition integral to understanding between listeners and speakers (and readers and writers). Under Ratcliffe's attention, rhetorical listening develops into a tool that can enable people to participate responsibly in discourses without having to erase, collapse, or ignore commonalities or differences. Overall, the project of rhetorical listening maintains focus on "hear[ing] and see[ing] how our identities are always already grounded in our identifications, disidentifications, and nonidentifications" (171).

Rhetorical listening is defined as "a trope for interpretive invention and as a code of cross-cultural conduct" (17). Ratcliffe's use of "interpretive invention" signifies her grounding of the concept in both the western philosophical tradition of hermeneutics (interpretation) and rhetorical studies (invention), which highlights her overall conceptual understanding of language as metaphorical and always already socially-situated. This orientation is crucial to realizing the productive aspects of rhetorical listening "[a]s the performance of a person's conscious choice to assume an open stance in relation to any person, text, or culture," which is necessary for listeners to exercise their agency in order "to foster conscious identifications that may, in turn, facilitate communication" (26). Ratcliffe describes rhetorical listening as composed of four distinct moves that together encourage listeners to employ critical thinking skills while participating in communication:

- ✓ Promoting an *understanding* of self and other
- ✓ Proceeding within an *accountability* logic
- ✓ Locating identifications across *commonalities* and *differences*
- ✓ Analyzing *claims* as well as the *cultural logics* within which these claims function. (26)

Although Ratcliffe is well aware that these moves do not simplify or lessen the complex issues of identification (chapter two is dedicated to an in depth discussion of identification and how it relates to the important question of ethics), she does posit that the use of these moves "may foster understanding of intersecting gender and race identifications" so that communication becomes more productive for all. Moreover, she follows Adrienne Rich's advice that one must be willing to act even though there are always risks. Even with many dangers (and caveats) ahead, Ratcliffe fleshes out the possible uses of rhetorical listening by examining in detail three "tactics" and their sites: listening metonymically (public debates), eavesdropping (scholarly discourses), and listening pedagogically (classrooms).

One of the great strengths of *Rhetorical Listening* is Ratcliffe's clear and direct writing style, which serves to emphasize the author's commitment to explaining the intricacies of her erudite theory to a broad audience of readers. In all five of the book's chapters, specifically the first two, Ratcliffe methodically guides the reader through the major concepts of the book by painstakingly defining her terms, tracing out the



histories that produced the terms, and explaining the multiple cultural logics that have shaped each one. This attention to detail and clarity underscores one of the main objectives of the overall concept of rhetorical listening: in the end, it is a way for writers and speakers (readers and listeners also) to connect more effectively—and perhaps differently—with their audiences.

In an appendix, Ratcliffe includes teaching materials for a writing course to assist teacher-researchers and literacy workers with designing and implementing strategies of rhetorical listening for the purposes of examining the culturally-dominant tropes of gender and whiteness. Not only does the addition of selected lesson plans work to illustrate practically many of the theoretical discussions that attend the book's larger argument about rhetorical listening, but such an inclusion addresses my main concern with Ratcliffe's overall topic: the teaching materials may encourage literacy workers, writing center staff, advocates, graduate faculty, and graduate teaching assistants to take the time to engage more carefully with Ratcliffe's ideas. All too often feminist projects that concentrate on overlooked or ignored topics or practices that are socially-situated as women's issues—such as the historically feminized work of listening—are incorporated into the larger academic discourse neatly compartmentalized as feminist revisionary or reformist activities. Usually this means that the teacher-scholars and practitioners who will seriously take up Ratcliffe's invitation will be the academic feminists whose identities and experiences are most similar to the author's (female, white, tenured, middle-class, and mid-career). If this common result occurs, many of us will be missing an opportunity to apply rhetorical listening as an interpretative invention that has the propensity to negotiate the possible erasure of similarities and differences that often disrupt successful dialogue, cross-cultural and otherwise. Therefore, I encourage non-feminists and feminists alike to respond to Ratcliffe's invitation

Ratcliffe's ultimate goal for a theory of rhetorical listening is to "cultivate conscious identifications in ways that promote productive communication [on any topic], especially but not solely cross-culturally" (25). The process of rhetorical listening is not posited as a fool-proof solution for cultivating individual or collective agency; Ratcliffe readily acknowledges the difficulties that writer-speakers commonly encounter when participating in unfamiliar discourses or when personal agency is compromised by the structural limitations of unethical discourses. However, she argues that rhetorical listening and its tactics "may supplement agonistic rhetorical strategies by providing listeners (whether students or teachers or anyone else) possibilities for greater understanding and, at times, more effective and perhaps more ethical rhetorical conduct" (171). I think that those of us who take the time to engage with and reflect upon Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening* will be better prepared to undertake our own gender and race work in relation to our listening (speaking, writing, and reading) practices. In so doing, more of us will be able to accomplish the goal that novelist Toni Morrison describes in *Beloved*: "we and they may lay our stories alongside one another's."