Review of Rhetorical listening: Identification, gender, whiteness

Stacey Sowards, University of Texas at El Paso

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ARGUMENTATION AND ADVOCACY
47 (Summer 2010): 55–61

BOOK REVIEWS


The art of listening has been long forgotten in the study and teaching of rhetoric, according to Krista Ratcliffe in her 2005 book on rhetorical listening. Historically, the spoken word has played a significant role in conveying ideas, but Ratcliffe contends contemporary U.S. American culture has become dependent on the visual, such as images, reading, and writing. The role of listening, however, has not figured prominently in either contemporary or historical western thought. Ratcliffe’s book on rhetorical listening offers insights about the value and possibilities for listening through identifications, disidentifications, and non-identifications. Ratcliffe’s primary examples of listening in public debate, scholarly discourse, and pedagogy are of particular interest to argumentation scholars. Given the number of controversial issues related to race and gender in contemporary U.S. American culture, Rhetorical Listening is also important for discussing these race- and gender-based topics. Examples such as the discourse surrounding the 2008 bids of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for president of the United States, the 2009 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., beer summit with President Obama, the 2010 controversy over the firing of Shirley Sherrod at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the controversy over the Islamic cultural center in New York City, and Dr. Laura Schlessinger’s use of race-based slurs on her radio program are just a few recent controversies that illustrate the continued relevance of Ratcliffe’s book.

Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as “a trope for interpretative invention and as a code of cross-cultural conduct . . . [which] signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (p. 1). To illustrate what she means by this definition, she focuses on gender and race cultural logics to explore how we might invoke listening to create better cross-cultural relationships. She argues that we can use understandings of identification from Kenneth Burke, Diana Fuss, and others to establish a definition of rhetorical listening that emphasizes identification through commonalities and differences. In the introduction and first chapter, Ratcliffe explains the difficulties of simultaneously focusing on similarities and differences, especially in the context of discussing race and gender. Specifically, understanding whiteness in U.S. American culture can lead to dysfunctional conversations based on our lack of accountability and sense of history in such discussions. Ratcliffe outlines the complicated nature of understanding both gender and race in historical contexts, and how that past informs our present meanings. She proposes that we use rhetorical listening as a way to engage metonymically the coexistence of differing ideas. According to Ratcliffe, rhetorical listening functions as a trope for understanding self and other, developing a sense of accountability, and establishing identifications across similarities and differences.

In the second chapter, Ratcliffe defines identification, using the works of Sigmund Freud, Kenneth Burke, Diana Fuss, and Judith Butler. Freudian identification is the interaction of the ego/id and self/other, whereas for Burke, identification is a “place where conscious and unconscious rhetorical exchanges transpire” (p. 49) or a place to develop consubstantiality, or common ground. Using Fuss’s work, Ratcliffe describes identification as a “place where
the boundaries between the personal and the political become inexplicably and irrevocably intertwined, where the ‘detour through the other that defines a self’ occurs” (p. 49, quoting Fuss). The problem that Ratcliffe sees in these understandings of identification is that they emphasize or focus on the similarities rather than differences that exist between people, texts, and cultures. Understanding identification metaphorically, that is, to focus on the similarities, erases or minimizes important differences especially in gender and race discussions, according to Ratcliffe.

Rather than using metaphor to explore identifications in rhetorical listening, Ratcliffe proposes that we use metonym instead. A metonymic approach to identification and rhetorical listening focuses on the places where identification does not seem to exist, or what Ratcliffe calls disidentifications and non-identifications. Disidentification refers to “an identification that has already been made and denied in the unconscious” (Fuss citing Judith Butler, p. 62). In this sense, disidentification requires a focused and conscious effort to rhetorically listen because of the potential implications of refusing or denying identification with another person, text, or culture. Non-identification signifies a place where identification does not necessarily occur, but rather exists as a gap or contradiction in discourse. Ratcliffe calls non-identification a “margin between”...[that] provide[s] a place of pause, a place of reflection, a place that invites people to admit gaps exist. Admissions of gaps may take the form of “I don’t know you,” “I don’t know what I don’t know about you,” or even “I don’t know that I don’t know that you exist”—whether that you is a person, place, thing, or idea. In some cases, rhetorical listening in the place of non-identification may precede new identifications; in other cases it enables us to revisit former identifications and disidentifications. (p. 73)

Metonym, because of its focus on non-identifications, creates places for productive rhetorical listening. Rhetorical listening then, is the process of engaging in an ethical stance in which “a listener must be imagined with an agency that enables him or her to choose to act ethically, either by listening and/or by acting upon that listening... given this agency, listeners must be provided with a lexicon and tactics for listening and acting upon their listening” (p. 76).

The final three chapters of Ratcliffe’s book describe three areas in which rhetorical listening might be productive: public discussions, academic discourse, and pedagogy. In chapter three, she uses as an example an exchange between two prominent feminist scholars, Mary Daly and Audre Lorde, who seemed to disagree about the representation of African women in Daly’s book, Gyn/ecology. Although Mary Daly passed away in January 2010, the seeming bitterness of the exchange between Daly and Lorde is prevalent in other discourses on the intersectionality of race, gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality; this exchange and Ratcliffe’s analysis serve as an excellent example for those writing and speaking about such intersectionalities. Ratcliffe contends that their exchange created a dysfunctional silence through using negative terms, masking commonalities and differences among women, and employing language of denial, defensiveness, and guilt/blame. The ensuing silence that followed their exchange is just one example of public discourse about race and gender that obscures ideologies about race and gender in our discourses. Rhetorical listening might be used to counter this dysfunctional silence through the engagement of terms, recognition of similarities and differences, and logics of accountability. One of Ratcliffe’s more important points is that we need to move away from right/wrong and either/or type arguments, meaning that both sides of an argument might be valid or originate from different cultural logics that are difficult to compare.
According to Ratcliffe, scholarly discourses also result in similar silences, as she documents in chapter four. She explores how academicians might listen in on conversations in various disciplines, using the concept of eavesdropping. Rather than signifying a “busybodiness,” Ratcliffe defines eavesdropping as listening by “choosing to stand outside . . . in an uncomfortable position . . . on the border of knowing and not knowing . . . granting others the inside position . . . listening to learn” (pp. 104–5). A major concern for Ratcliffe is that as scholars we need to take into account how history influences our present, or what she calls “the then-that-is-now,” using Heidegger’s concept of circling through time (pp. 107–8), and Toni Morrison’s concept of rememory that “signifies the embodied circling of time via identifications and disidentifications” (p. 109). In essence, Ratcliffe contends that we can and should eavesdrop on scholarly discourses to better understand ourselves and others. We can also eavesdrop on ourselves, “and then act upon our hearings” (p. 131).

In the final chapter, Ratcliffe connects rhetorical listening to pedagogy, in that professors can learn from their students through listening to their perspectives, and also can become better teachers by hearing how their students participate in certain kinds of discourses. Specifically, she addresses how students (and teachers) resist discussions about race and gender through denial, dismissal, defensiveness, non-productive guilt, and adherence to gender/color blind ideals (p. 138–9). She provides several suggestions for listening to these types of resistance and responding in ways that foster more productive discussions, paper assignments, and self-reflections. The appendix of the book includes course activities for discussing and writing about whiteness that many professors may find useful.

In sum, Ratcliffe’s book offers a rich and interesting discussion about identifications, disidentifications, and non-identifications in rhetorical listening. She addresses a concept that has been little explored in rhetorical or argumentation studies, and clearly warrants further investigation both academically and pedagogically. The strengths of the book include its well-developed explanation of identification and its connection to rhetorical listening, emphasizing a metonymic approach that emphasizes both commonalities and differences, and the recognition in discourses of gaps, contradictions, and places of non-identification. Ratcliffe’s examples facilitate understanding of how rhetorical listening might be used in argument, discourse, and pedagogy, particularly to understand contemporary controversies related to race, gender, class, and ethnicity.

STACEY K. SOWARDS
University of Texas at El Paso


*Apprehension and Argument: Ancient Theories of Starting Points for Knowledge* surveys what author Miira Tuominen views as the *arché* (principles or “starting points”) upon which *epistémé* (knowledge) was built in Plato, Aristotle and in Hellenistic philosophy. Tuominen sees her main contribution to the existing literature as drawing attention to two co-existing perspectives concerning the starting points of knowledge in ancient Greek sources: 1) the “point of view of argumentation,” and 2) psychological theories concerning perception and cognition (p. 4). Tuominen has a strong appreciation for the extent to which knowledge, in ancient times, was defined as the product of philosophical debate, and spends much of the book surveying the ground rules Aristotle, Plato and others have set up to govern the kinds