Michelle Ballif, D. Diane Davis, Roxanne Mountford

Michelle: I was heartened by Kris’ and Eileen’s responses. They performed precisely what we called for: they attempted to listen to us—on our terms, the terms of our conversation.

Diane: They listened, they negotiated, and they looked for ways to keep the conversation going.

Michelle: Exactly. There were no quick dismissals, no “trashing,” no “my feminism is bigger and better and faster and stronger than your feminism.” And, as importantly, there was no—in Kris’ parlance—“I’m OK, you’re OK.” Rather, there was listening and then some interruptions—interruptions to be acknowledged and addressed.

Roxanne: If by “interruptions” you mean questions, then I completely agree with your characterization. Nedra Reynolds means something more like “disruption” by that term, and I certainly don’t see disruption in Kris’ and Eileen’s responses. I hear them walking along with us and carefully attending to our conversation in ways that I find remarkable and exciting.

Michelle: I certainly wouldn’t characterize their interruptions as negative. I agree that their questions are welcome additions to our conversation. They are interruptions insofar as they have broken the continuity of our “negotiation,” inserting themselves into the parlor. I took the term “interruption” from our trilogue, where we asserted that “although we feminists continually interrupt patriarchal discourses, we still remain resistant to any discursive disruption of our own discourse community”
Indeed, I used the term to echo Eileen, who said that we reconstituted the parlor as a place where “interruptions and differences are not smoothed over but heard, acknowledged, and addressed.” So, we will listen to Kris’ and Eileen’s “interruptions” in an attempt to negotiate them. Our reply to the responses, I’m guessing, will be an attempt to acknowledge, address, and attend to these interruptions—and thereby to perform an “ethics of criticism.”

**Diane:** Just to spotlight again the urgent need for an ethics of criticism, I want briefly to call attention to the article immediately following our trilogue. In that otherwise interesting essay, Albert Rouzie—without citing any sources or offering any support—systematically dismisses from consideration anyone doing Vitanza third sophistics:

> Extreme forms of ludic postmodernism in composition studies—such as Victor Vitanza’s “third sophistic rhetoric”—base their theories principally on Baudrillard’s concepts of seduction and hyper-reality, and promote ideas that challenge the existence of or at least any access to material realities, making activist intervention ineffective and, more seriously, making them complicitous with dominant hegemonic thought structures. (647)

Rouzie’s aim, in part, is to recuperate the concept of the “ludic,” but he wants first to separate out this “extremist” variety, which he then quickly dismisses. Michelle and I are obviously implicated here, but my intention is not to counter-trash; I only want to amplify this irresponsible indictment in order to call attention to the unacknowledged differend it indicates and to the lumping and dumping game it plays.

**Roxanne:** Rouzie believes that third sophistics eliminates the possibility of activism, a misunderstanding that I held before spending time carefully attending to you and to your oeuvre. In the “Trilogue,” Michelle argues that “the feminist community is a fictional body, a line drawn as a logical convenience, which, once drawn, constructs a dot-to-dot picture that ignores the abyss of difference that exists between each dot” (613). It seems to me that an ethical critic must attend to this abyss and must understand the nature of maps: that they are drawn in order to emphasize that beyond certain borders “here be monsters.” If Rouzie had paid better attention to your work, his theory of play would have been enriched considerably.
Michelle: Our trilogue attempted to address this cartographical move within the feminist community and to focus precisely on the line that demonsters the "real" feminist. We felt that there was much at stake in straining toward this limit, listening to it. However, Eileen, citing Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, suggests that we should focus "less on internal issues" of difference than on external issues such as corporatization and consumerism. Certainly, these are significant issues to attend to, but to do so at the expense of negotiating "monsters" presupposes once again that one knows the borders of feminism—and that they have already been drawn.

Diane: Exactly. The differend is at stake precisely when a limit is taken for granted, when it’s no longer doubted or questioned. Negotiation itself implies a limit-crossing: placing the supposed "inside" and "outside" into relation. In a rigorous sense, then, negotiation means negotiation with "monsters."

Michelle: I suspect, though, that Eileen’s concern has to do with the materiality of difference. If so, how can we negotiate her question about the materiality of listening? I’ll begin by responding that the materialities of our trilogue were various: we spoke in person (at the CCCC convention and again at the Feminisms and Rhetorics conference); we had online MOO conversations; we had phone conversations; and we had e-mail exchange after e-mail exchange. Granted, we had the privilege, the time, and the technological wherewithal to conduct our trilogue, which leads to Eileen’s question about what politics and economics make listening possible.

Roxanne: I think it is a terrific question. I have more than twenty drafts of our paper on my hard drive (and now eleven drafts of this response!) and countless e-mails. This work takes time, access to e-mail, and the ability to pay the telephone bills when written negotiation fails. These are economic issues. But there is another way in which economy is at work here. Lonni Pearce, whose insightful seminar paper I mention in the "Trilogue," connects Lyotard’s critique of capitalist notions of time with our students’ unwillingness to engage each other on important social matters. If our underlying belief is that “time is money,” for example, are we likely to make time to negotiate a differend? In this way, economics plays a role not only in the time we have, but also in how we use that time. I don’t have answers here, but I do encourage others to explore further these material/ideological obstacles to listening.
Michelle: I need someone to help me “stay on the question” (as Kris says) about the materiality and the economics of listening. Since I am not a Marxist to the core, my concern is not in the materiality and the modalities of it all, but in how we negotiated this “Trilogue,” which—I must say, Eileen—did become a “very tight space” on occasion given all the misunderstandings, the hurt feelings, and the confusions that were produced in the process. The majority of the “negotiations” are in fact invisible to the JAC reader. Perhaps, we should have let it all hang out, so to speak, to really perform the process.

Diane: Well, at one point we did semi-seriously consider publishing the “Trilogue” with an appendix containing the e-mail transactions that went into its production. That’s where the real action went down. That’s where negotiations got going, stalled, and at times failed. That’s where we came together and occasionally had to log off, walk away, and cool down. The trilogue happened, though, not (only) because we had the economic means to log on, but because we were all interested in negotiating—it seemed to us to be a worthwhile project.

Roxanne: You raise an important point here, Diane. What makes feminists (or anyone) become interested in negotiating? In your response, Eileen, you point out our social connection to one another. You write that although the specific set of social relations between the participants are not named, the linkages are implied: “Ballif, Davis, and Mountford are white women in tenure-track jobs in English departments where they specialize in rhetoric; they belong to roughly the same graduate school cohort; they are clearly familiar with one another’s work as is evident through cross-citations and friendly interactions and criticisms.” It is certainly true that we are all white, are close in age, have tenure-track jobs, and graduated within a few years of one another. Yet, such similarities did not guarantee this negotiation.

Diane: That seemed a bit too easy for me, too. I’m not sure I agree with you, Eileen, that the personal acquaintanceship, collegiality, and familiarity with commonly-held bodies of scholarship made it easier for the three of us to negotiate. In a certain way, our frequently mistaken assumptions about one another’s investments and motivations, as well as our very different interpretations of the “same” texts, made (and makes) listening even more difficult for us (“us”) than it would be if we did not “know” each other—that is, if there were not an identified (and adored) image of
the other at stake, waiting to be shattered in the listening. Of course, I don’t say this in order to dismiss your point that there are indeed material and economic factors and power differentials that figure into listening’s conditions of possibility. But I think that teasing out differences and differends is always incredibly difficult and that the process is not necessarily facilitated by friendship—maybe by safety, but not by friendship. It’s often easier (or at least less painful) for me to hear the differend at play in discussions or arguments with those I don’t think I “know” than it is with a friend or lover.

**Roxanne:** The safety issue is something I’d like to explore. We met in the portals of the CCCC and RSA conventions originally, because of an encounter in the feminist parlor, a moment in which I witnessed Diane and Michelle being trashed in what Kris describes as “the divide-and-conquer feminist two-step.” The conversation has lasted now for six years, and listening has never been an easy project for me, for us. Yet, we have “stayed on the question,” to repeat Kris’ wonderful phrase. Why? In the trilogue, there is an important moment when Diane “outs” us all as sluts, by which she means that we have connected with each other through talk about sex and resistance to stereotypes of women who enjoy doing so (616). We talked about how risky it might be to put such a comment in the trilogue (it isn’t scholarly; it invites gossip), but we were hoping to illustrate a point about listening: that a willingness to negotiate the hard questions has something to do with recognizing similarity in the midst of difference, and difference in the midst of similarity.

**Diane:** I actually meant physical safety. But I do agree with you, Roxanne, if what you mean by “similarity” and “difference” is something like what Levinas and Blanchot call a relation without relation: where there is a relation inasmuch as an encounter takes place and something is shared, but simultaneously there is no relation inasmuch as this other remains absolutely Other, radically inappropriable. I don’t think a willingness to negotiate depends on what usually goes by the name “friendship,” but I do think it depends on the sense that something is shared—and what “we” share is precisely this radical inability to commune, to be-One or to be-at-One, with ourselves or with others. The desire/need to negotiate is a function of the fact that “we” share finitude, “the infinite lack of an infinite identity,” as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it (xxviii). And negotiations slam to a stop, as Avital Ronell observes, the instant finitude gets “infinitized” (Finitude’s 4)
Roxanne: I agree, although you know I believe that the surprise of even everyday “sharings” can begin to build these relations, even across a gulf of difference. (I am, after all, the material girl of this triad.) When you mentioned “safety,” I was thinking of a rigorous generosity that friends sometimes offer one another. I have been reading Derrida’s *Politics of Friendship*, and I have been taken by the following words by Blanchot on the ethics of friendship:

We have to renounce knowing those to whom we are bound by something essential; I want to say, we should welcome them in the relation to the unknown in which they welcome us, us too, in our remoteness. Friendship, this relation without dependence, without episode, into which, however, the utter simplicity of life enters, implies the recognition of a common strangeness which does not allow us to speak of our friends, but only to speak to them, not to make of them a theme of conversations (or articles), but the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even in the greatest familiarity, an infinite distance, this fundamental separation from out of which that which separates becomes relation. (qtd. in Derrida 294).

This ethic of preserving a sense of distance “even in the greatest familiarity” as well as allowing “the utter simplicity of life” to enter even at moments of “infinite distance” is needed not only for negotiations among friends, but also for negotiations among strangers.

Michelle: This relates to one of Eileen’s other “interruptions.” When does one not listen? How does one know when to listen and when to walk away?

Diane: This is an important one. Eileen, I found your description of the tensions at the abortion clinic in Milwaukee very moving, and I thought you managed very well to bring into focus the fact that listening, in some situations, can be seriously risky. No doubt about it: walking away (if you can get away) can be the most affirmative response available when you’re faced with a hostile other who’s intent on physical violence—or on textual violence, for that matter. In “Talks,” Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, for example, urges Lyotard to stop wasting exegetical energy on Habermas, who at that time had indicated a clear preference for trashing over conversing. What made negotiation impossible in that case, Ronell observes in “The *Differences* of Man,” was not the “static” or the interference that the need to listen inevitably implies; rather, it was “the published refusal” on Habermas’ part, “to show the minimal decency that consists
in making a connection” (261-62). Repeatedly responding to one who would rather fight than listen, as Ronell notes, only encourages “the degradation of differend into gang wars” (262).

I do think, however, that one can continue to work at unsettling the terms of the differend even when empirical negotiation is not possible. One can affirm, that is, the “distance and alterity, the discontinuity of a dialogue with an other” that dictates the imperative to listen in the first place (Ronnell, “Differends” 265). Listening is necessary only because there is an originary and uncloseable distance between the “I” and the Other. And listening itself does not and cannot close this distance; it can only attend to it—but this is a lot; this is enormous. To listen is to turn toward the Other, toward the incomprehensible, which is also to acknowledge that immediacy is not available to “us.” The very need to listen exposes a shared but absolutely inappropriable between-us space. So it may be (and this is what I was trying to suggest in the “Trilogue”) that listening, as a goal, has less to do with hearing what the other says than with hearing that the Other speaks as Other—fragile, unassimilable, finite. In this sense, listening itself suggests a primary ethics and enacts an ethico-politics, one that seems to me as necessary at the barricades as it is in academe.

Michelle: The notion that listening has less to do with hearing what than with hearing that the Other speaks as Other is a nice distinction, Diane. I suspect, though, that this distinction would, in Kris’ world/words, make her wonder whether you were even on the same “planet” as she. That is (and I risk misunderstanding Eileen and Kris here), on this planet, in this “real” world, it does matter that pro-choice or pro-life advocates hear what the other is saying—otherwise, how can policy and legislation be voted on or enacted? And to further challenge you à la Kris and Eileen (I’m trying to listen on their terms), is the Habermas/Lyotard breakdown really comparable—in terms of what is at stake—to the abortion discussions? It is analogous insofar as there is in both cases a “published refusal” to “show the minimal decency that consists in making a connection.”

Diane: I should have noted, first of all, that the backdrop for the Habermas-Lyotard differend was the Nazi nightmare, which everyone was scrambling to come to terms with, to find a way to conceptualize. How could this have happened? What made it possible? How can we prevent it from happening again? That’s about as real-world as it gets. But second, I want to reiterate that I’m talking about a kind of primary ethico-
politics—"primary" meaning only that it comes first. It does not institute a "positive" politics or policy, but it does expose the between-us space or the "limit" on which communication and community take place. And any (positive) politics that aims to align itself with community—and not simply with a mythology or a social economy, as Nancy puts it—would have to arise from and ultimately return to this limit, and so to its own perpetual negotiation: its unworking and its reworking (81).

Michelle: I would add that this ethico-political practice requires an ethico-political rhetoric rather than political discourse. This means (as we said in the trilogue) that Diane and I envision feminism as a way of being rather than a politics. This way of being would, of course, influence politics: it just wouldn't be in the service of it. This ethico-political practice, as I was attempting to describe it in the trilogue, is a means of exhibiting this "decency," of making a connection, of exhibiting an ethos of "coming together."

Eileen asks, "What are the actual and potential intersections between the arenas in which intellectuals and scholars theorize a post-phallogocentric and post-androcentric world and the arenas in which activists and advocates work to address issues like rape, domestic violence, and reproductive rights?" For me, the intersection is this: intellectuals and scholars can theorize and seduce student subjectivities to embrace the world with an ethico-political practice, to learn to listen by coming together in "writing," to learn to listen that the other speaks as other; in so doing, we will transform how "being together" is practiced and understood—in so doing, rape will lose its currency, for example, as we suggested before. At the same time, activists and advocates will practice similar negotiation strategies. I do not see the intersection as an either/or proposition.

Eileen and Kris ask how to avoid the binary between theorist and activist, between cultural feminist and ludic feminist. We could avoid the binary by refusing to categorize feminism, by refusing to define a feminist (or, worse, a "real" feminist—only last month, the Chronicle of Higher Education published an article that asked: "Are There Any Real Feminists in Academe?"). Classical rhetoric, of course, tells us that until we reach stasis at the level of definition, we cannot move forward to discuss issues of policy. I disagree. An ethico-political rhetorical theory (in contradistinction to classical rhetoric as political discourse) suggests that one can. Although Kris notes that Diane, Roxanne, and I achieve stasis at the level of conjecture—that is, we agree that there is a problem, that there is a post-
patriarchal/post-phallogocentric "there" (well, actually, I'd argue that it isn't a place or a there, but a way of being)—we resist stasis at the level of definition. To do so seems futile at best and violent at worst because definitions cannot account for irreconcilable differences—demonstrated, as Diane reminds us, insofar as feminists don't recognize themselves in the other's description.

Diane: Or in the other's labels. I really appreciated your up-front acknowledgment, Kris, that you're more theoretically aligned with Roxanne than with Michelle or me, and I'm grateful to you for nevertheless engaging our ideas and positions carefully. I wasn't crazy about getting strapped with the label, "ludic," though. Despite your admirable attempt to rescript that term, I still felt trapped by it, trapped on the wrong side of a preexisting dichotomy—and trapped, once again, with Michelle. Though we didn't set out specifically to demonstrate the differences in our work, Michelle and I were pleased (and relieved) that these differences did show up so well in the trilogue. We are very close theoretically: we draw from a similar "base" of texts and thinkers, and we both associate ourselves with "third sophistic rhetorics"—and I obviously admire Michelle's work very much. But as the trilogue so clearly (if accidentally) displayed, we imagine our similar "task" in quite different terms. So I was disappointed when those differences got de-emphasized again. You are a very careful and respectful negotiator, and you seemed to try several times to hedge the boundaries of your labeling system, even explicitly noting once that there are differences between Michelle and me. Clearly, you were not playing the lumping-dumping game. But—and this is my point—despite your rigorous effort to keep the differences alive, the ludic label seemed to work behind your back to wipe them out again.

Roxanne: I wondered how you both felt about Kris calling you "ludic feminists." Actually, I felt a bit uncomfortable being labeled a "cultural feminist." In The Poisonwood Bible, Barbara Kingsolver's characters live beyond the usefulness of the grand narratives that take them to Africa. I sometimes feel as though I am one of those characters, living in the spaces left behind when the grand narratives fall apart. I feel comfortable in neither category, although I recognize the momentary usefulness of such work for readers. Kris is helping readers to engage older arguments that have been played out endlessly between postmodern feminists and cultural feminists, arguments that ultimately motivate our "Trilogue." It
is not unlike that moment in the “Trilogue” when Michelle reacts to my bringing up the question of rape, listening “across time” to another conversation she had had with another feminist (606-07). My question—“What about rape?”—is a classic, and to deal with it, all three of us ended up acknowledging the larger debate while trying to hold true to our own. So while it is unsettling to be filtered through these lenses, I think it is an inevitable and valuable part of the process.

Michelle: I acknowledge that there is a “momentary usefulness” for categories (I just invoked the categories “classical rhetorical practice” and “ethico-political rhetorical practice” to make a point). However, categories, as I tried to argue in the trilogue, set up one to hear similarities, not differences (well, actually, they allow one to hear both similarities and differences, but not that which exceeds these). Diane points this out: that although Kris acknowledges that Diane and I have our differences, they get “underheard” by the force of the categorical understanding. So, I’d like to return to the question about the relationship between listening and pre-understanding. Kris argues that listening does “not stipulate understanding” as foundational; yet, Kris begins her response with the admission that it was “impossible to separate the trilogue and The Poisonwood Bible in [her] mind” (and it was impossible to separate the trilogue from the binary “ludic” versus “cultural” feminist). That is, her situatedness, her pre-understanding, was foundational—insofar as it regulated the terms of the “understanding” of what we were triloguing about. As I have argued before, one often “hears” not what the other is saying but what resonates with what one has previously heard. And, further, to return to Diane’s distinction between the “what” and the “that,” a “listening” that doesn’t demand “understanding” would listen to the limits: one would strain to hear the limit of what was hearable. This, as I suggested in the trilogue, was the difference between listening for differences and listening for différence. But I’m “both ears,” Kris, and I’m eager to “stay on this question” with you.

Roxanne: Such a straining is a kind of foundational ethics—a treatment for the symptom of trashing that is part of our phallogocentric dis-ease. Derrida writes that “friendship begins prior to friendship” (291). Similarly, prior to negotiation, there is a stance of listening. We hope that this stance will be one that acknowledges the problem of the differend and affirms the freedom and fundamental equality of the Other.
**Diane:** I can't accept the notion of the Other’s “equality” unless it’s an equality or equity that’s not based on the calculation of equivalence, as Derrida suggests (64). Listening for *différance* involves affirming the radically dissymmetrical experience of the Other, and because this listening can be self-shattering, it also involves a willingness to sacrifice the self for the sake of the Other.

**Roxanne:** Yes, that is exactly what I mean. So in the spirit of this ethics, I invite others to join us in the parlor and on the front lines to carry on this conversation. Thank you, Kris and Eileen, for your challenging questions and careful attention to our words. Where we have failed to listen to you, please keep writing.

*University of Georgia*
*Athens, Georgia*

*University of Iowa*
*Iowa City, Iowa*

*University of Arizona*
*Tucson, Arizona*

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The Ironies of Ethos

Deborah H. Holdstein

It is intriguing to reflect on and to write about Michael Bernard-Donals’ compelling essay during what, as it happens, are the Days of Awe, or the High Holy Days, in the Jewish tradition. This time of contemplation and reconciliation provides an appropriate and appropriately complex set of contexts for Bernard-Donals’ thinking; it also serves as the context for my own particular and highly vested interest in his subject. As the only child of survivors of the Shoah (who were the only members of their respective families to have survived), I am compelled not only by the tragic history of my family and people but also by my religious tradition to be concerned with issues of justice and ethics. My work in rhetoric and composition echoes this commitment, with my professional involvement in the field having accorded this privilege of a more public forum than I might otherwise have deserved.

Bernard-Donals’ well-argued and useful essay raises any number of considerations regarding the ethos of testimony—about the Holocaust or any other ultimately unthinkable, indescribable series of events. But it also raises an interesting question about the term *ethos* itself. I am first struck, in fact, by the necessary irony—or perhaps the paradox—of our describing any form of experience related to the Holocaust through the otherwise rhetorically appropriate yet evocative term *ethos*. Isn’t it ironic that we have only a Greek term by which to discuss a Jewish or Hebraic context for ethos? Certainly, ethos can represent qualities we as rhetori-