Unquiet Gestures: Thoughts on a Productive Rhetoric(s) of Silence

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In “Silence: A Rhetorical Art for Resisting Discipline(s),” Cheryl Glenn tells us that “to imagine a rhetoric of silence might seem peculiar, given the western tendency to overvalue speech and speaking” (263). Yet, she argues, silences often hold great value in communicating ideas that can further conversation as well as shift the flow of conversation around issues of individual and societal importance. Rather than identifying silences as “lone” rhetorical acts, Glenn considers how tactical uses of silence affect the very ways in which we listen to speech and construct meaning. Silences, both broken and unbroken, carry different—and sometimes more empowering—messages to an audience than speech acts that overlook the significance of silence or that ignore silence altogether.
Much of what Glenn explores in her essay (which might be read as a continuation of her ambitious study of silences in *the* history of rhetoric in *Rhetoric Retold*, as well as a preview of an alternative view of rhetoric to be offered in *Unspoken*) is intriguing. Thus, I begin this response to Glenn’s essay by addressing several points that I find to be most timely and relevant to our field as we continue to work on the inclusion of “new and ‘other’ rhetorics” (Glenn, “Silence” 261). Next, I present an institutional context that both draws on and problematizes a rhetoric of silence as theorized by Glenn. I then offer some questions and comments that might further our discussions about and reflections on silence as a strategic art.

**New and Other Rhetorics**

Silence, like any other form of communication, must be interpreted within the perimeters of a specific context. Glenn asserts that though the purpose of her essay is to illustrate silence as a “specifically feminist rhetorical art, often one of resistance,” she does not “see speech as always masculine or powerful, nor . . . silence as always feminist—let alone always successful” (262). Such a statement effectively addresses the problem of establishing a speech/silence dichotomy in which one method of expression reigns over another. Further, Glenn sees no value in flipping the terms, relegating silence to a higher position than speech, opposing “good” feminist discourse to “bad” masculine discourse. Rather, Glenn’s call to view silence as a means to an “invitational rhetoric,” as theorized by Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin, acknowledges that speech, silence, and an array of other communication gestures can be viewed as complementary, and necessary, counterparts, making communication more meaningful and accessible to involved parties. While Glenn asserts that the inclusion of alternative rhetorics does affect *the* traditional history of rhetoric (additions, after all, require the establishment of new spaces and new perspectives on the rhetorics that already exist), such revisions need not be offered as oppositional.

Throughout her essay, Glenn reminds readers that “silence is an absence with a function,” and the options for functionality are many (263). In the cases of imposed and chosen silences that Glenn provides, the rhetorical context and larger discursive practices surrounding specific silences help to establish their interpreted functions, most importantly as productive or unproductive communicative acts. Productive silences, I gather from Glenn’s argument, are those that ultimately increase participation (albeit often through alternative means) in discourse, especially by
those who have been marginalized and whose experiences and concerns have been discounted, whereas unproductive silences close down communication, imposing boundaries between those whose views may be heard and respected and those whose views are deemed unworthy or disruptive. Silence, as a rhetorical art, must be strategically timed and placed (that is, kairotic) to serve a productive rather than unproductive function. In the example of the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, silences at various points in the hearing process, including periods preceding and following the actual hearings, are interpreted by Glenn as serving diverse functions. For instance, the private silence that Hill maintains for many years after enduring harassment from Clarence Thomas serves a two-fold purpose: to protect her from becoming a public spectacle and to maintain the very silence that is dictated by the institutional structure within which she works (264). When summoned to speak to the Senate Judiciary Committee, her detailed telling of the events that occurred is "silenced" in part (via ridicule) by the direction of questioning pursued by those who wished to protect Thomas and maintain a narrative of the nominee’s suitability for the position of Supreme Court Justice. Eventually, however, the treatment of Hill (as one forced into silence and one taunted for the information she supplies once her silence is broken) provides the necessary evidence, among other pieces of evidence, for devising sexual harassment policies for the workplace. And through subsequent writing and speaking opportunities, Hill is able to expound on her position, affected largely by the interplay of prolonged silences and speech. While I am providing a greatly abbreviated version of Glenn’s more thorough analysis, my point is to emphasize the necessity of contextual factors, including the discursive politics surrounding silences, to the perceived translation of such acts as rhetorical devices.

Fortunately, the situations on which Glenn focuses in her article are largely interpretable because the silenced (Hill and, many years later, Lani Guinier, who is dismissed as a viable candidate for Assistant Attorney General in—and, as Glenn demonstrates, by—the Clinton administration) finally speaks and thus is able to offer her perspective on the functionality and rhetoricity of her silence. I appreciate Glenn’s willingness to "listen" to each rhetor’s examination of her own communication practices and the resulting empowerment and powerlessness each experiences. In fact, because Glenn acknowledges the complexity of each of these cases, as well as the complexity of silences as functional acts in general, I found that I discovered new and relevant rhetorical information each time I read the essay. This rich interweaving of details demon-
strates Glenn's commitment to "new and 'other' rhetorics," while taking into account the multiple perspectives that inform them (261).

What happens, though, when silenced parties are not "allowed" (in the case of disciplined silence) or "motivated" (in the case of intentional or strategic silence) to break their silence, to give meaning, however indefinite, to their behavior? Further, how might we as rhetoricians interpret acts of silence that are not wholly understood within the complex circumstances within which they occur? Is there danger in making uninformed assumptions about the meaning of silences? I wish to examine these questions further by discussing a specific rhetorical context that results in a range of silences, both imposed and chosen, yet that makes interpretation of the functionality and rhetoricity of silences difficult.

In their Introduction to *Wings of Gauze: Women of Color and the Experience of Health and Illness*, Barbara Bair and Susan Cayleff indicate that "what we call 'illness' and 'health' are both private bodily matters and public social constructs based on notions of relative value" (13). In western culture, the stories that we tell about illness and health (both to ourselves and to our communities) allow some to speak, thus giving voice to their values, while restricting the words of others. As in the history of rhetoric, many of these stories construct oppositions of "good" (the healthy, able-bodied, strong individual) and "bad" (the ill, disabled, weak individual). Susan Sontag tells us, for example, that the metaphors for particular "mysterious" diseases (AIDS, cancer, and tuberculosis, for example) move beyond the physical body and focus on the moral failings of the diagnosed or the depraved society from which they come. And others focusing on the discursive power of illness narratives indicate that those stories that allow for recovery and the avoidance of further illness are more likely to be acknowledged and celebrated in our culture (see Couser; Frank; Hawkins). Restitution narratives, Arthur Frank suggests, are told routinely by the media, medical institutions, and even support groups whose members are currently suffering from illness, because the purpose of illness in our culture is not to learn from it or accept it, but to return as quickly as possible to the "normal condition" of health (77).

A long and riddled history exists to explain the roots of various illness narratives, as well as the relative power of institutional representatives who have been granted the right to speak for the silenced and, often, objectified ill (see Foucault; Katz). The purpose of this essay is not to summarize this broad history, however. Rather, I wish to focus on the
personal and public construction of breast cancer, specifically, as a physical threat and a cosmetic concern. In this story, I argue, lie assumptions about women's silences that are problematic and that point to a wider dilemma for rhetoricians who wish to interpret the meaningfulness of situated silences.

Disciplinary Silencing
Less than two weeks following a mastectomy of her right breast, Audre Lorde returned to her physician's office to have her stitches removed. Having traveled through an extremely rough terrain of post-surgical pains and fears, Lorde explains that she was "really rather pleased with myself, all things considered, pleased with the way I felt, with my own flair, with my own style," in this instance expressed through an "African kente-cloth tunic and new leather boots, . . . the most opalescent of my moonstones, and a single floating bird hanging from my right ear in the name of grand asymmetry" (59, 58). Lorde's feelings of self-confidence are soon erased, however, when the office nurse criticizes her for choosing not to wear a prosthesis where her right breast had once been. A visibly absent breast, the nurse explains, is not an appropriate response to breast cancer: "You will feel so much better with [the prosthesis] on, and besides, we really like you to wear something, at least when you come in. Otherwise, it's bad for the morale of the office" (59).

"I could hardly believe my ears!" Lorde claims. "I was too outraged to speak then, but this was to be only the first such assault on my right to define and to claim my own body" (59). Though temporarily "too outraged to speak," Lorde emphasizes throughout The Cancer Journals the necessity of giving voice to her anger and to expressing openly the unique perspective through which she encounters breast cancer (as a black, feminist, lesbian, mother, poet), as well as the refusal of white, male, heterosexual medical and social establishments to acknowledge and respect her position. Lorde's encounters with the dominant discourses that "discipline" the experience of breast cancer—as a "cosmetic" problem rather than as "physical" endangerment—came to mind as I read Glenn's essay, because Lorde's journal entries chronicle multiple scenarios in which silencing, voicing, and disciplining occur and illustrate the rhetorical significance of each of these acts.

When diagnosed with breast cancer over nine years ago, I remember the empowerment I felt when I read Lorde's book. I understood at last why I felt such anger not only about my physical circumstances, but also about the questions that I continually fielded from medical practitioners,
institutional partners in the cancer industry (salespeople in retail shops that cater to breast cancer survivors, for example), family, and friends:

"Do you plan to undergo immediate reconstruction or return for a series of surgeries to repair your left side?"

"Have you been given the list of shops that sell wigs? Some of them look almost real!"

"Ooh, do you think you’ll lose all of your hair?"

"Why are you crying, honey? Your hair will grow back in no time, and I know the name of a really good plastic surgeon."

The “absent” breast that Lorde chose as one response to her disease spoke volumes to the institutionalized dictate to look well/normal/feminine despite one’s physical struggles. At times silenced by the atrocities she experienced, Lorde selected various “textual sites” (both physical and discursive) through which to express her views. Surely, I thought, in the early nineties, the decade of heightened breast cancer activism (see Ferraro), more alternatives would exist for me to respond aloud to the “disciplined” protocol placed on women with breast cancer. Lorde, after all, wrote The Cancer Journals in 1980, when public conversations about the disease were fairly limited. But while opportunities to voice our experiences have increased through the decades, many survivors continue to “live their illnesses” silently. After providing an example of the “disciplined” silence that survivors currently experience in the public sphere, I explore the complicated rhetoric(s) of chosen silence regarding breast cancer as they occur in private contexts.

Lorde’s call to breast cancer survivors to stop hiding behind prostheses and reconstructed breasts, to break their silence about breast cancer as a debilitating and devastating disease, is still overwhelmingly resisted in the public sphere. In “Welcome to Cancerland,” Barbara Ehrenreich discusses her experiences with breast cancer, specifically the call to join a culture of “pink kitsch” once diagnosed with the disease. Survivors are expected to exhibit hope and general cheerfulness by wearing pink ribbons, buying pink books, and cuddling teddy bears donning pink turbans, all while undergoing therapy and fighting for “restored” femininity. When Ehrenreich attempts to offer an alternative discursive response to breast cancer, she is quickly silenced by other survivors: “As an experiment, I post a statement on the Komen.org message board, under the subject line ‘angry,’ briefly listing my own heartfelt complaints about debilitating treatments, recalcitrant insurance companies, environmental
carcinogens, and, most daringly, "sappy pink ribbons" (50). While Enhrenreich receives a few "words of encouragement" in her fight against insurance companies that restrict treatment options, she characterizes the majority of responses as a "chorus of rebukes" for her "bad attitude," wasteful "bitterness," and self-defeating position. In short, Ehrenreich's example illustrates the tendency for private resistance to be interpreted through dominant value systems once silences are broken, presented for conversation, for reflection.

Privately, though, many women diagnosed with breast cancer do choose silence as a means of resistance, and they decide, strategically, to keep it to themselves and the communities with which they identify. The problem of assigning meaning to these silences is that various rhetorical purposes or functions might be attributed to them, making analysis not only difficult but also dangerous in some instances. Consider the following scenarios.

African-American women have long remained silent about their encounters with breast cancer. Because representatives of the white medical establishment have explained these silences from a dominant perspective (for example, black women are negligent about their own health, black women are uneducated, black women are uncooperative patients), African-American women's resistance to the establishment and their adherence to the beliefs of their own communities have been completely overlooked (see Lannin, et al.). Further, it has taken decades for white practitioners to recognize the need for black women to share their silences with other African-American women in order for changes in healthcare to take place (see Grayson; Ryan).

Many women, myself included, go out into the world each day in "disguise," as Lorde puts it, donning prostheses that hide our wounds. While some might interpret these silences as cowardly, exhibiting denial of our circumstances, I consider the resistance and resilience necessary to look in the mirror each day at an altered body and to come to terms with this image as acceptable to the self, if no one else. Also, an interpretation of prosthetic silence as nonresistance discounts the many factors that might influence women to "replace" for a few hours each day what another has removed: physical balance, comfort, and an ability to speak equally in contexts where the "absence" of a breast would draw attention away from our words.

But what of women who go along with the "disciplinary silencing" advocated by the medical establishment, those who are encouraged to accept narratives of restitution and to assume their former positions post-
breast cancer, their breasts salvaged by lumpectomies or reconstructed, often beautifully, by surgeons trained in the art of aesthetic repair? Perhaps, as Lorde suggests, these women are giving power to those who wish to deny the horror of the disease. Though outwardly (that is, physically) these responses might seem less resistant to disciplinary responses to breast cancer, women's often unspoken reasons for their choices can be read as self-empowering. I know survivors who have undergone reconstructive surgery decades after a mastectomy, explaining that their physical presentation had to be determined by them, on their terms, in their own time. The kairos inherent in such gestures is significant.

Silences offered by institutions that represent women with breast cancer offer yet other rhetorical possibilities for determining who may speak, and how, as well as what the empty spaces in speech might mean. Recently, I completed a study of the organization that produces the periodical *MAMM: Women, Cancer, Community*, whose readers include survivors of breast and reproductive cancers, their caretakers, and activists. Since the magazine's inception in 1997, the editorial staff has fought dominant images of women with cancer as spiritually and emotionally weak, asexual, uninformed, vulnerable individuals. Instead, the publication portrays survivors as people with active, albeit altered, lifestyles, whose voices deserve as much recognition as those of "normal" healthy women portrayed in most mainstream media. To accomplish this goal, *MAMM* editor-in-chief Gwen Darien has systematically rejected money from advertisers who wish to influence editorial content, to maintain an image of the cancer survivor as traditionally constructed. While this stance has resulted in the loss of profit for the magazine, and the occasional skipped issue because of lost revenue, "silence" is preferred to the reinforcement of speech that marginalizes and disciplines readers.

So what do these various situated silences mean to the formation of a "new"—or, perhaps, "revived"—rhetorical art? I do not claim the power to interpret such acts definitively, though I recognize, like Glenn, the importance of acknowledging "absence(s) with a function," thus broadening our understanding of a range of productive (and unproductive) rhetorical strategies (263). How, I wonder, might we "listen" to silences in ways that reveal the "unquiet" purposes and possibilities behind them? And more importantly, how do we avoid "reading" others' silences, especially private silences, from the public and often narrow discursive positions and spaces we occupy when we analyze, interpret, and critique others' actions? The silences to which we have the most access are those that are "broken" in a public sphere (the cases of Hill and
Guinier, for example); thus, they enter a discursive (disciplinary) context that unavoidably influences the meaning assigned to them.

A feminist rhetoric of silence should, as Glenn suggests, "resist disciplinary pigeon-holing, embrace political resistance, and refuse the discipline (or 'correct training') of sociopolitical culture and power" (262). In other words, a feminist rhetoric of silence should allow the rhetor/silenced to negotiate his or her own position in communication, as well as in the broader cultural context in which he or she communicates. Thus, I think it is important that those who employ a rhetorical strategy of silence be allowed to determine when, why, and how to break this silence, as well as whether or not silence should enter a larger public domain. The rhetorical art of listening, recently theorized by scholars including Krista Ratcliffe and Anne Gere, requires relearning how to consume the ideas of others, both spoken and unspoken. In our discipline, we are still in an early stage of defining appropriate boundaries between communicators (of words and spaces) and those with the interpretive power and ethical responsibility to observe and comment on communicators' practices and intended meanings. Some silences, perhaps, should remain unspoken, continuing to empower the individuals who keep them.

Toward a Rhetoric(s) of Silence
I am anxious to see the development of a rhetoric (or, preferably, rhetorics) of silence alongside a rhetoric of listening in the field of rhetoric and composition. Insight into these arts could potentially transform our understanding of empowered discourse. Such a project must be interdisciplinary, drawing on the research of individuals in communications, anthropology, sociology, and psychology who provide perspectives on how to perceive silences within broader cultural and social terms. Muriel Saville-Troike, for example, suggests that the very classification of silence as a communication strategy needs to be examined. She indicates that "a principle concern in the ethnography of communication is the discovery of the regular patterns and constraints (i.e., 'rules') that operate at different levels [and domains] of communication" (for example, societal level, communicative level, participant level, noninteractive level) (13). The multiple dimensions Saville-Troike points to reinforce my concern that we not rush to interpret others' silences (particularly private silences) without a clearer model of the complexity of silence as a communicative act. The "rules" that operate at each level are key, it seems, to the interpretations we make as rhetoricians about the discursive significance of individual instances of silence.
Finally, I agree with Glenn that silences have been traditionally dismissed as weak and meaningless gestures, and I am curious about how the art of silence might be brought effectively into the classroom as an alternative rhetoric available to students studying appropriate ways to engage in current issues. Again, I think it is risky to teach silence as a rhetorical strategy before we have fleshed out the complexity of this art and the multiple and often contradictory ways in which it might be interpreted in private and public contexts. Gestures of silence, as Glenn has acknowledged, are filled with unquiet implications. We must carefully and responsibly examine what lies beneath.

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Notes

1. I, like Glenn, italicize the to represent the singular, and thus at times, marginalizing, narrative told throughout the traditional history of rhetoric.

2. See Clair; Jaworski; Johannesen; Tannen and Saville-Troike.

Works Cited


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**Building a Theory of Affect in Cultural Studies Composition Pedagogy**

Ilene Crawford

Lisa Langstraat is right: there is "a befuddling paucity of pedagogical attention to affect—including cynicism—in the composition studies classroom" (303). We are experiencing the consequences of a traditional theory of affect that treats *pathos*, in Doug Brent's words, as a "technical means of persuasion" (61). In "The Point Is There Is No Point: Miasmic Cynicism and Cultural Studies Composition," Langstraat contributes to a new theory of affect taking shape at the intersection of feminist rhetoric, feminist philosophy, and cultural studies. This theory of affect treats emotions as more than something to which rhetors appeal. It treats emotions as more, even, than "evidence for knowing" (Brent 61). In essence, this emerging theory of affect treats emotion not as epistemological action but as ontological action. Our emotions are performances. With these performances, we compose affective stances for ourselves. Our affective stances provide a vantage point from which to make meaning of the world around us. Our affective stances, then, give us agency.