On Silence and Listening: “Bewilderment, Confrontation, Refusal, and Dream”

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Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe, whose first books (Rhetoric Retold and Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions, respectively) established them as primary researchers in feminist rhetorics and reshaped the field of composition and rhetoric by focusing on the work of female rhetors previously under-acknowledged by our field, have used their second books to again study and bring to light the under-explored, this time not historical or contemporary female figures, but rather overlooked (and not surprisingly nor coincidentally traditionally marked as feminine) rhetorical strategies—silence and listening—that, they argue, ought to accompany our current (and historical) professional study of speech, writing, and, to a lesser extent, reading.

Reading these books’ arguments for silence as a rhetorical construct, and for rhetorical listening as a conscious act that requires a stance of openness as a way to produce conscious identifications that promote productive communication (Ratcliffe 25), invites a reevaluation of our most mundane and under-examined encounters and practices with language, silence, and listening—including, as it turns out, writing, reading, and responding (or not) to the book review. Thus, Glenn’s work on silence and

Ratcliffe's work on rhetorical listening, while opening up new frameworks for seeing and doing rhetorical work, have also caused me to cast a critical eye on our current assumptions about the role, form, and function of the book review. They have also inspired me to wonder about the possibility of a different type of book review: one that treats silence as a sign (just as speech is) that can convey meaning or not, that can assume power or not, that can be productive or not, and one that asks all of its participants—reviewers, authors, and readers—to strive to implement rhetorical listening as they consume, produce, and participate in the discourses that construct the review. This particular review, then, is an effort to understand and apply, in small measure, some of what Ratcliffe and Glenn are proposing; at the same time that I review their works, I am attempting also to engage in rhetorical listening and to be attentive to rhetorical silences in the very form and context of this genre.

**Bewilderment**

One could argue that this reframing of the book review as a site for rhetorical listening and for the analysis of silence as a rhetorical strategy is in and of itself a feminist move, one that hopes to dismantle and undo strategies of response traditionally deemed masculine, where silence is usually constructed as passive and even listening is conceived as an invitation to “challeng[e] speakers to a verbal duel to determine who knows more and who is quicker on his feet” (Ratcliffe 21). On the other hand, what if these projects of rhetorical listening, of rhetorically analyzing silence, and of re-imagining the book review are not actually feminist moves, but rather more of the same-old, same-old: women doing emotional work for men? As in: you men over there can argue and act defensively and attack each other without questioning your reasons for doing so, while we women over here will spend an inordinate amount of our time and energy asking why we argue, whether we should argue, and whether there are better ways of
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communicating. We will also commit ourselves to honesty, openness, and ethical response, even in the face of writing/speaking that bores us, offends us—in fact, especially in those cases. Additionally, we will be careful to do all this earnest self-examination using the conventions of academic discourse—disembodied voice, close analysis of significant terms from powerful theorists, carefully chosen language that is as neutral as possible—so that we are more likely to be heard.

Thus, even as I engage in these projects, I question whether the work of a feminist rereading of silence and of rhetorically listening, as well as my proposed reframing of the book review to make room for these intellectual strategies, is too akin to the expressivists' "ethic of care," too close to maternal teaching, too linked to the social/cultural expectation that women attend to the unexpressed, attend to the rejected and misunderstood, attend to voices we find infuriating and destructive, too tied to the construction of woman as nurturer, the female teacher as mother, the good girl, the polite professional woman—all roles female academics veer from or take on at their own risk. This ambivalence about how to frame one's feminist identity, whether to align oneself with the do-gooders or to haughtily proclaim the uselessness/danger of reframing a masculinist world, is articulated well in Julie Jung's book, Revisionary Rhetoric, Feminist Pedagogy, and Multigenre Texts, in which she describes her attempt to listen and respond to Robert Connors' essay on "Teaching and Learning as a Man." She argues that "[we] need to rhetorically analyze the purpose of agonistic discourse. Such an analysis can move us beyond some of feminist composition's most resilient binaries—mother/bitch, ethic of care/agonistic debate—and into a more productive conversation about how we as teachers-scholars might consciously perform these subjectivities and discourses in both our classrooms and our scholarship" (109).

This uncertainty about how to perform a feminist identity is one area of potential public self-silencing: we want as feminists to provide a united front to our audience; we are reluctant to cause conflict amongst ourselves; we want to be able to identify with each
other in simplified ways. One of Ratcliffe’s intentions in her book is to offer rhetorical listening as an alternative to what one might identify as our most common form of agonistic scholarship, “read[ing] simply for what we can agree with or challenge, as is the habit of academic reading . . .” (25), so I am using this review essay not merely to trace what I agree with, nor to stake out what challenges I have to these texts, but instead to put into practice Ratcliffe’s recommendation that “we choose to listen also for the exiled excess and contemplate its relation to our culture and our selves” (25). An example of exiled excess might be this: I find myself, by endorsing Glenn’s and Ratcliffe’s projects, on the brink of silencing my discomfort with the ways I seem to have sided with the nurturing feminists who do the work of bridge-building, of bringing others to voice (even when we disagree with them), of earnest self-reflection, of giving of ourselves in ways that other feminists believe will ultimately drive us to exhaustion or despair. I think I hear some of this doubt in Glenn’s voice as well when she writes: “The third thing I have learned for sure is that the complexity of identification, the politics of gender and sexuality, and the infinite inflections of scholarly discourses all describe and circumscribe my own life, even as they contribute to ever-unfolding spirals of bewilderment, confrontation, refusal, and dream” (xxii). I want to support Glenn’s and Ratcliffe’s works; however, at the same time I want to voice the more likely-to-be-silenced concerns that cause me to wonder: with what time and energy and at what cost to ourselves and our professional advancement do we commit ourselves to such reformist projects? Or to put it in more Foucauldian terms: with what naïveté and idealism do we embark upon making dents in the patriarchal paradigm that works to constrain our speech, silence, and listening, even as we employ and analyze them?

Ratcliffe’s idea of the “exiled excess” is a reference to Heidegger’s argument that we ought to interpret logos as including aspects of speaking and listening, as recognizing its verb form *legein*, which has two meanings: “saying” but also “laying.” “Laying” in this context, Ratcliffe argues, implies “laying others’ ideas in front of us . . . . This laying-to-let-lie-before-us functions as a
preservation of others' ideas, and, hence, as a site for listening” (23–24). Ratcliffe combines Heidegger's concept of the divided logos (he argues it has been separated from its listening function) with philosopher of listening Gemma Fiumara's argument that we retrieve functions of listening to allow for "truer forms of dialogue" (qtd. in Ratcliffe 24). According to Ratcliffe, "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" (24). It is this excess that rhetorical listening hopes to recover—the material (as I interpret it) that is left behind when we come to some form of common ground that has silenced the ideas most difficult, radical, or confusing to hear. This excess is the material we find most threatening to our current ways of thinking, most foreign to our comfortable identifications, and it is what rhetorical listening strives to incorporate back into our consideration and conversation. Included in this excess are the arguments I have against my own thesis here, the doubts that come, though I am not happy to hear them, about what I have said thus far, my ambivalences about aligning myself unproblematically with yet another project of feminist reform. The excess, in other words, may very well be ideas that we keep unspoken, even to ourselves. Or it may be what we cannot hear and thus do not speak to.

**Confrontation**

Using such disparate exempla as the silences and silencing that occur in academic environments (by warring colleagues and seemingly mean-spirited chairs), in contemporary political life (by women in the media spotlight such as Lani Guinier, Anita Hill, Monica Lewinsky, and the others Glenn collectively terms "the President's women"), and in American Indian communities, Glenn argues that "silence is a specific rhetorical art, one that merits serious investigation within rhetoric and composition studies" (2). Although Glenn doesn't name it as such, I take her argument in
Unspoken to be that silence, like speech, functions as a sign to the
signified, and thus ought to be analyzed in the same complex ways
speech is, taking into consideration context, audience, kairos—all
the elements of rhetorical analysis, with its full range from neo-
Aristotelian to ideological criticism.

One can push so far, I think, that silence becomes as unread-
able as language. For if we distrust language to convey a stable,
unitary, universal meaning, then the same thing should be true of
silence—that there is no simple and final way to interpret (to borrow
one example from Glenn’s analyses) the silence of a colleague at
a department meeting. One can discuss, as Glenn does, the
effects of a chair’s silence on an assistant professor’s bid for tenure
(she feels invisible, insecure, confused, marked non-existent) (34–
35); however, one must also consider possible excesses, such as
the chair’s point of view (how did he intend the silence? was he
aware of the silence?), as well as the cultural, social, and institu-
tional constructs that shape such silences. The assistant profes-
sor, it is clear, gave the silence a certain meaning, which Glenn
reports; however, what remains doubtful (in my mind at least) is
whether the silence had any meaning without it having some
ascribed to it.

This is of course a response to silence that, in seeing it as
rhetorical, also necessarily sees it as meaningless outside of its
context/rhetorical situation/political/social/cultural constructions.
Within at least one context—a broad construction reproductive of
dominant cultural epistemologies—silence is routinely granted a
meaning that often does distinguish it from speech, and that is a
Western tendency to see some forms of silence as weak, passive,
or subordinate. A well-turned phrase versus respectful silence. A
smart retort versus empathetic listening. It is clear which of these
rhetorical choices our Westernized field of composition and rheto-
ric has traditionally privileged, coloring our pedagogical practices,
our styles of scholarly writing, and our daily modes of professional
interaction.

The book review, as it happens, is a primary example of such
preferences in our professional practice. In a well-known response
to Bob Connors' reply to her review ("Feminization") of his book *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, Roxanne Mountford wrote, "Agonistic trends in oratory live on in academic writing and in academic life. For example, Olivia Frey and Jane Tompkins have argued that there is nothing more agonistic than a book review . . ." ("Reply"). The discussion at hand, as readers might recall, was whether there was enough evidence to invoke a causal relationship between the entry of women in higher education and the demise of rhetoric at the expense of composition. Mountford has since gone on to publish her own book, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces*, which documents current practices of female preaching as rhetorical expression, thus implying that women have not been able to kill off the practice of rhetoric altogether, and therefore, in a roundabout way, one could construe her book as her final word on the debate, Connors' untimely death notwithstanding. As members of the composition and rhetoric community, we all learned something from the risks taken in that initial public conversation, its key characteristic being that neither author chose silence but rather risked conflict and disagreement for the sake of articulating his/her worldview.

Why did the authors choose to risk public disagreement and public conflict? Only the authors know for sure (and perhaps even they would confess to their ignorance of unconscious motives), but what perhaps played into their decision is the cultural assumption most of us work under, which Glenn identifies—that silence is an expression of submission or weakness. To not respond to a public critique of one's work performs a rhetorical function, especially in an environment that expects and encourages agonistic communication. And as Glenn is careful to point out, sometimes silence is weak, lacking in meaning, ill-advised. She persuasively argues that the judicious use of silence is just as important to our survival, rhetorical and otherwise, as is the wise use of language. Glenn writes:

This is not to say that silence is always strategic, empowering, or patently engaging. Not all silence is particularly potent.
However, silence is too often read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power. Employed as a tactical strategy or inhabited in deference to authority, silence resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use. Whether choice or im/position, silence can reveal positive and negative abilities, fulfilling or withholding traits, harmony or disharmony, success or failure. Silence can deploy power; it can defer to power. It all depends. (xi)

So perhaps silence might have played a more significant rhetorical role in the Connors/Mountford exchange. Or perhaps it did play a role that is not readily apparent. It’s worth noting when considering the potential for silence that Glenn ends the last sentence quoted above with an implied object: “it all depends.” But on what? While Glenn doesn’t say, what immediately comes to mind for me are the ever-shifting postmodern rhetorical situations that beg a range of analyses. A legitimate question to raise about the exchange is a Foucauldian one: how does the form of the book review itself limit, a priori, the discussion of texts in ways that encourage agonistic response or devalue the diplomatic use of silence rather than encourage engaged attempts at communication across difference and commonality?

The editors of JAC have chosen to elevate the status of the ordinary book review so that it can function as scholarship in the form of a critical essay, as opposed to the highly conventionalized form that goes something like this: summary of the book’s main chapters, followed by something nice to say, which in turn hopefully undoes some of the sting of the one substantive critique the book reviewer must level in order to gain some credibility for him or herself. The reviewer’s critique, however, is inevitably also precisely what can get him or her in hot water, as the author is then compelled to defend his or her book by revealing the review’s flaws. This often serves to further solidify the author’s privileged position (usually someone of some renown to merit a book review) over the reviewer (usually someone in a more vulnerable position, less published, perhaps not yet tenured)—a dynamic, unfortunately for
me, that is not entirely mitigated by the form more akin to a scholarly essay. In addition, the JAC editors have created the opportunity for the book review to take on the form of a public debate between reviewer and author, back and forth, until one or the other chooses silence over continued public speech. (Nor is this limited to reviews: consider as a similar example the acrimonious article/response essay exchange between Robert Samuels and Slavoj Žižek in JAC.) Given the usual power differentials as well as predominant professional biases toward speech over silence and empathetic listening, ethical questions abound as to how the writing of a book review can best be accomplished, and strategic questions arise for both reviewer and author about what can best be spoken and what is best left unsaid.

Refusal

There are no easy answers, for women in particular, about whether speaking out or silencing one's self—in a book review or elsewhere—will prove more productive, empowering and/or rhetorically effective, as Glenn aptly illustrates through her examination of Anita Hill's and Lani Guinier's troubled choices between speech and silence when under extreme political pressure and in the media spotlight. Hill chose silence over speech for many years, until she was subpoenaed, and then she was rewarded for speaking out with her removal from her position as tenured law professor at the University of Oklahoma and with the vision of her sexual harasser (yes, I believed her allegations), Clarence Thomas, being confirmed as a Supreme Court Judge (52–64). Guinier, on the other hand, chose to remain silent, under pressure from the White House, while the media misconstrued her legal opinions on race and actual opportunity for representation, while she was dubbed the Quota Queen, and while Clinton ultimately went from enthusiastic endorsement to claiming he had been unacquainted with her views on race and thus had to distance himself from her by
withdrawing his nomination (64–76). Neither choice—succumbing to pressure to speak, nor succumbing to pressure to remain silent—seems to have worked, in the short term, for these women.

However, Glenn argues that we must assess the fruits of their labor with an eye toward their long-term effects: “both Hill and Guinier have moved far beyond their silence/ing—further, perhaps, than they would have had they [been] permitted to speak—and been listened to—all along. Their silence/ing provided them greater reasons—and according to Butler—built-in opportunities, to resist—and speak out” (75). Glenn concludes that “both of these women were indeed silenced. But when non-white overachieving women come out of their silence, they can deploy their resistance to greater influence than they might ever have if they had spoken and been heard at the time. And such resistance can be used to confront, resist, and transform—even the discipline of rhetoric” (76). Thus, we must learn to assess the rhetorical effectiveness of silence within a temporal context; like speech, it cannot be immediately or universally assessed but is contingent upon time, place, culture, and audience.

Glenn makes clear that not all of the responsibility of effective communication relies upon the rhetor’s effective choices of either speech or silence, arguing that the audience has an obligation to create the possibility for effective communication as well. The cases of Hill and Guinier demonstrate that it is possible to speak well or to use silence well, and still not be heard. As Glenn explains of Hill’s case:

The Senate Judiciary Committee was riveted, but it was not listening, not rhetorically, anyway, for “what is at stake in any ‘listening,’ in any striving for comprehension, is that which our own structures of thought have made impossible to think: the unthinkable, the unbearable” (Ballif, Davis, Mountford 587). . . . If Hill’s spoken and written allegations had been listened to rhetorically (which is not the same as whether Hill was believed), Thomas would have not been confirmed, nor would male dominance have been confirmed . . . . (56–57)
Here, at the nexus of audience and rhetor, Glenn hints at the significant relationship between rhetorical uses of silence and rhetorical listening. For silence to be understood as rhetorical (in other words, imbued possibly with meaning or non-meaning, as a sign of power or lack of power, as a sign of respect or lack of engagement), the listener has to be committed to a practice of listening rhetorically—not hearing what he/she wants to hear, not responding defensively or with a desire to assign blame or take on guilt, but rather with a commitment to a form of conscious listening that is aware of silence and speech as rhetorical constructs, as embedded in cultural codes that ascribe meaning to them, and as worthy of more than knee-jerk defense or attack.

**Dream**

Neither Ratcliffe, Glenn, nor I would argue that it is best to unreflectively choose silence over the risks and challenges involved in public debate, for that sort of silencing of the self can be just as unproductive as agonistic debate. To exemplify, in her chapter “Listening Metonymically: A Tactic for Listening to Public Debates,” Ratcliffe describes the losses that can occur when silence *seems* the best route for one or all involved but, instead, an honest engagement with a difference in opinion might be more productive as a “means of resisting a gendered and racialized silence that haunts U.S. public discourses” (79). She calls the latter a “dysfunctional silence,” arguing that it “results from and perpetuates a differend, or discursive disconnect, between interlocutors . . . who occupy competing cultural logics about how gender and race intersect” (79). This accords with Glenn’s important point, cited earlier, that not all silence is strategic, empowering, or patently engaging, that it is not always potent (xi). Although Ratcliffe focuses her study on “how rhetorical listening may help listeners negotiate troubled identifications with gender and whiteness in public debate, scholarly research, and classroom pedagogy” while acknowledging the potential for rhetorical listening to
be applied in many other situations (xiii), both she and Glenn argue, by implication, that sometimes we mistakenly silence ourselves out of fear of engaging in a debate that could provoke harm to ourselves and others. One alternative, which Ratcliffe suggests would be more productive, lies in the employment of rhetorical listening as a way to enter a debate.

Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as “a trope for interpretive invention and as a code of cross-cultural conduct,” as signifying “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture . . .” (1). Rhetorical listening is comprised of the following accompanying moves that Ratcliffe says will foster productive communication:

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

Ratcliffe offers painstakingly precise definitions of these terms, locating them in relevant research and debate in philosophy, feminist theory, linguistics, and composition and rhetoric.

To illustrate the necessity for rhetorical listening, Ratcliffe describes her disappointment over Mary Daly’s decision not to respond in full to Audre Lorde’s arguments in her “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” in which Lorde explains the ways that Daly’s book Gyn/Ecology overlooks the differences among white women’s and non-white women’s oppression and thus perpetuates prevalent racist assumptions in white feminists’ work. Daly acknowledges Lorde’s letter in a subsequent preface to her book, and she gives her reasons for not responding to Lorde’s claims: “I regret any pain that unintended omissions may have caused others, particularly women of color, as well as myself. The writing of Gyn/Ecology was for me an act of Biophilic bonding with women of all races and classes, under all the varying oppressions of patriarchy” (qtd. in Ratcliffe 84). It is clear that Ratcliffe sees this as a missed
opportunity for important work to be done between Lorde and Daly, neither of whom appears to be listening in the ways that Ratcliffe argues would allow for improved understanding and communication to occur.

Toward such utopic ends, Ratcliffe posits four critical functions of rhetorical listening: "(1) it is driven by an openness to terms, both negative and positive; (2) it is motivated by a cultural logic that recognizes differences as well as commonalities; (3) it offers functional rhetorical stances of recognition, critique, and accountability; and (4) it proceeds via the interpretive trope of listening metonymically" (94). To listen metonymically, as opposed to metaphorically, is not to assume that one woman speaks for all women, nor that one non-white woman speaks for all non-white women. Rather, metonymic listening enables listeners to hear the limited expression of one individual without jumping to the conclusion that all members of the group with whom the writer/speaker is associated would claim the same perspective or truths. It allows us to avoid the generalizations and stereotyping that tend to inspire defensiveness and guilt, anger and hurt, all of which can lead to dysfunctional silences or, in the case of Daly, dismissals of rhetorical obligations to the other and retreats to the authorial intentions of the self. Similarly, if Bob Connors had not assumed that Roxanne Mountford spoke for all (or even most) feminists in composition and rhetoric, or if Mountford had not assumed Connors spoke for the macho men of our discipline, all flexing their muscles in response to their nightmarish visions of feminists overtaking the halls of academia, perhaps their exchange would have gone a bit differently.

Or perhaps if they had more directly explicated each other's cultural logics, the exchange would have taken on a different tone. Ratcliffe explains: "If a claim is an assertion of a person's thinking, then a cultural logic is a belief system or shared way of reasoning within which a claim may function" (33). This focus—the identification of claims and the ideologies that help to construct those claims—is comfortingly familiar, not so different from what Sonja K. Foss terms "ideological criticism" in her well-known textbook on
rhetorical analysis, *Rhetorical Criticism*. Ratcliffe’s model differs from Foss’, however, in that in Ratcliffe’s approach this interpretive move is foregrounded by a desire to understand oneself and the other; it is a preliminary engagement in what some might call “critical thinking” that, according to Ratcliffe, sets the stage for a more accurate hearing of texts. Ratcliffe’s idea is that a rhetorical listener would be self-reflexive rather than indulging in the blame/guilt game at moments of dissonance. A fair question, nonetheless, is whether recognition of such claims and ideological frameworks necessarily creates an “appreciation for the reasoning powers of others” (33). I wonder whether they might equally serve to reaffirm a person’s original dislike for a particular worldview. That is, would identifying Connors’ intellectual frameworks and analyzing how his claims worked within them have made Mountford any more sympathetic to his views? Or vice versa?

The rhetorical potential for silence and for listening invites such questions; they are questions that, on their face, appear to belong to a well-established tradition of “critical reading” so valued in the humanities and so demanded by genres like the book review. I ask them here not in the interest of critique for its own sake, but in an effort to better hear what’s being said and to think more about what’s not being said. The utopian ends that motivate both Glenn’s and Ratcliffe’s books are worthy of even more questions and, for many of us, even more work. In the meantime, we can dream. We can dream of silence and listening, inextricably linked, bearing together new insights and wisdom to a battle-worn field and its combatants, offering encouragement and solace to those discouraged by fighting words or the silent treatment, and giving us all the opportunity to ask once more: why write? Why speak? Why read? The answers lie somewhere amidst our unspoken words, our exiled excesses, and our desires to truly understand and be understood.


Among the many changes that emerged after September 11, 2001, was a renewed interest in surveillance and professional transparency, with a particular spotlight on higher education. Revelatory of this trend are the two infamous lists of faculty members who purportedly are ruining the minds of youth on campuses nationwide. First there was the November 2001 American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) report, written by Jerry L. Martin and Anne D. Neal, that listed 117 university professors by name and institution along with such "uncivilized" responses to the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon as "we need to hear more than one perspective on how we can make the world a safer place" (21). More recently, David Horowitz published his list of the United States'101 most dangerous professors, claiming that his study is a highly researched collective profile of the biased professoriate and not a McCarthy-era "list." Regardless of what we call these texts, I was anxious to see who made the lists and only mildly surprised to discover that there was no significant presence from composition scholars, and only scant attention paid to rhetoricians. Given that composition is one of the few required courses