

Transcript for Episode 18: Rhetorical Listening with Krista Ratcliffe

Run Time: 21:27

AH: Allison Hitt (co-executive producer)
KR: Krista Ratcliffe (special guest)
BK: Ben Kuebrich (host, co-executive producer)
KS: Karriann Soto (host, producer)

Cue music: "Horizontal Drift" by Jared C Balogh.

AH: You're listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

Last fall, Krista Ratcliffe came to Syracuse as the final keynote in our Rhetorical Listening & Composition Colloquium and Workshop Series. Ratcliffe's presentation titled "Rhetorical Listening: What's Next?" re-visited ideas from her 2005 book and discussed how other scholars have employed rhetorical listening to discuss educational policy, feminist methodology, and critical race studies. Ben Kuebrich and Karriann Soto had a chance to sit down and chat with her about some of the themes in her presentation. Drawing on examples from the classroom and current issues, Ratcliffe offers insights on creating civil civic discourse, defining cultural logics, and enacting rhetorical listening in our composition pedagogies.

Cue music: "Twinkle Toes Delux" by Jared C Balogh.

BK: So thank you so much for coming on the show.

KR: You are welcome.

BK: So on the program, we've been exploring like the various links between people's daily lives and their experiences and rhetoric. And in the introduction of *Rhetorical Listening*, you set out a few of these experiences that led you to the relationship gender and whiteness in relation to rhetorical listening and trying to get at this cross-cultural dialogue. So I was wondering if you could detail a couple of those experiences that led you to this sort of study.

KR: Certainly. I think that teaching probably more than anything. There was a moment in a rhetorical theory class that I regularly teach to juniors and seniors that a young man was responding to the Cornel West book *Race Matters*, and the young man was kind of twisting in his seat. Then finally he put up his hand, and I called on him, and he said, "I think he's just exaggerating a little bit." He said, "I don't wake up every morning and look in the mirror and say, 'Hey. I'm a white guy.'" He said, "I just don't. I don't even think about it." And I looked at the young man, and I said, "Well, don't you think that maybe that's Cornel West's point?" And then the room kind of erupted, and there was a pretty good discussion, but what I realized later was that young man or anyone who

agreed with him left the room further convinced that this was a liberal conspiracy and that he had no place to talk and that there wasn't really a conversation to be had on this topic. And so I stopped to think about why did I react the way I did and why did he react the way he did and what might be better.

Reflecting on that, I realized if I had stepped back and said something like, "Well that's a really interesting response. Let's think about that for a minute." People who might have that same response, and then immediately move from him to other people, uh, what might be the way of reasoning that would lead them to that conclusion, you know? And we could have mapped out some very rough cultural logic on the board behind me. And then I could have said something like, "Well, for people that might not agree with that but might take another stance, what might be a way of reasoning?" And then suddenly, I've got two discourses behind me that are both existing in our culture, and I could ask, "What are the stakes for each one of these," you know, "and for *whom* do the stakes exist?" And suddenly you're doing a critique of discourse, you're doing an intellectual activity. You're not doing a naive reader-response, "You're wrong" [*laughs*].

BK: Right.

KR: Because you have this "opinion." Uh, and you're also exposing that the "That's just my opinion" response is in a sense a cop-out because a lot of people agree [*laughs*] on the same things, and so there's a larger cultural logic that one is participating in when one usually says this is my opinion, right?

BK: Right.

KR: So, it was those kind of uh, moments in the classroom where I felt like I wasn't effectively opening one's mind. My goal wasn't to change the young man's mind, but I wanted him to open it up and at least entertain other possibilities. And if he comes around, and he concludes that he still thinks that Cornel West is exaggerating too much, okay but at least it's more of an informed opinion he as an awareness of what assumptions and what kind of reasoning pattern he's using to get there. I don't like it maybe, but it's okay. Reasonable people can disagree. That's the first principle of rhetoric. That I thought would be way more effective pedagogy and frankly a way of modeling of being in the world once they're out of the classroom. You can transfer that into business, you can transfer that into, you know, social justice work, you transfer into lots of arenas.

BK: Right. So instead of like, the student has a conclusion they bring up, and then the teacher maybe countering it with well, this is like another conclusion—

KR: Right.

BK: And sort of really taking the time to work towards the assumptions—

KR: Right.

BK: That underlie the—

KR: Right. Right.

BK: The perspective or like the point that one would make.

KR: Right. When I talk about cultural logics, what I mean by that is when you assume certain things then you decide to think in a certain way and that gives you a cultural script for acting in a certain way. So we're back to Kenneth Burke's notion of rhetoric with its socializing function having both a means of moving one to attitude and to action. And so thinking about cultural logics that way—what's the assumption? what's the kind of principle that I'm functioning from? and what kind of action gets associated with that? and then suddenly people see that yes I believe this, but I'm not alone. It not just helps them see cultural logics, but it helps them see it as something that can be critiqued and analyzed with a non-personal threat attached to it. And I think that's key. I know some critical pedagogy is very big on making students feel uncomfortable, and while I respect that with people who can do it well, my personality is such that I can't do that well because I get more uncomfortable than the student, and then it's just...no, it doesn't work for me. *This* worked better.

KS: Yeah, and I believe it's your first chapter where you're defining rhetorical listening...um, I was drawn to the example of listening to a student's listening.

KR: Mhmm.

KS: And so I was wondering if you could summarize that for our listeners or provide us with another example—

KR: Right.

KS: In which you've seen—

KR: Right.

KS: That the students are engaging in rhetorical listening—

KR: Right.

KS: Perhaps outside of the classroom. Maybe inside of the classroom they're like overtly aware of it.

KR: Right. Right.

KR: Yeah, that was an important pedagogical moment for me, was a real learning experience because I was giving a talk at UWM, and I was trying to write this up a little bit. I was teaching a women's literature course at the same time, and we were reading *Beloved*.

This young woman was a criminal justice major and an English major, I believe, combined, or maybe a political science and English major combined. But anyway, she had gone to talk with someone who worked in the prison systems in Wisconsin. Well, talking about the prisoners and defining them and how they behaved and what their problems were, what their issues were, what their talents were, but he referred to them as *chained dogs*. He said, “How do you expect people to react if you chain them like dogs?” And he kept referring to them as dogs, and we had been talking about *Beloved*—the chapter where...the only one told from the white people’s point of view in *Beloved*, and the four horsemen show up. The four horseman of the apocalypse from the bible, but it’s four horsemen. They come to get Sethe and her family, and in there, the white farm owner talks about how you can’t beat animals like you would beat a horse because you render them unusable. So it’s not that you don’t beat slaves because they’re human beings; you don’t beat them because they’re animals.

So suddenly, that morning she had heard prisoners compared to chained dogs, and she’d heard the sort of slave logic that justifies having slaves but treating them in a certain way. Laying those two things side by side for her was a real eureka moment in terms of the cultural logic of what it means to be human, and what our classifications of human are and how that justifies certain behaviors and actions with and against other people. And she wrote a wonderful, *beautiful* paper that practically made me *weep*, and it was like, “Wow, all these things I’ve been thinking, I just kind of see.” Now part of it was I was impressing on her [*laughs*], you know, what my framework was, but she was also informing—it was just a nice dialogic moment in the classroom, and I had to later ask her for permission to use her paper in the book. And she was like, “Oh I’m sort of horrified that this is going to be out there.” She said, “But I guess it’s okay. I understand what you’re trying to do here.”

KS: Great.

BK: One of the concepts that I was most interested in, or one of the parts of rhetorical listening was, the concept of accountability.

KR: Mhmm.

BK: You’ve got on one side erasing differences—to try to identify—and then on the other side you’ve got erasing commonalities so that you can name all the differences in access and privilege. So accountability seemed to be the term that found a space that could acknowledge both sides, right?

KR: Both.

BK: So I was just curious if—how did you come to that term accountability? What does it mean in practice? Or if there’s examples that come to mind.

KR: Yeah, it was precisely that. I mean, because in the academy we had focused so long on identification as commonality where necessary differences are bridged in terms of

rhetoric, and that is *true*. But it also has a set of problems that hadn't been necessarily addressed. Then with the multicultural—all this postmodern, poststructuralist—we had all this focus on difference, which kind of denied the commonality. And so it's a both/and, you know, commonality and difference. And sometimes neither, you know. It's just you're kind of up against one another. So I was trying to think about how listening with that in mind might be a possibility—so accountability as a *stance* of listening. I talked particularly about moving from a dysfunctional silence where the stance is like, "I'm not guilty. I didn't do anything. Don't blame me" to a rhetorical listening stance of accountability of, "Okay, I didn't do anything. Don't blame me, *but* I was born into a system that preexisted me because of how I'm classified—whether it's in terms of health or race or whatever. I have certain privileges that I circle in and out of, and to what extent am I accountable for how that privileges me and does not privilege others?"

Privilege is not a thing that you're born into, and it's there forever. It changes, and as I say you cycle in and out of them. Initially, in the article in *CCC*, I had used *responsibility*, and when I did the book, I changed it to accountability. And I thought that was an important distinction. Joyce Middleton and I have gone back and forth. She likes responsibility better, but responsibility resonated for me just—I could here echoes of *responsible*, and I didn't really want people taking a stance of feeling responsible for racism. We were all born into a system where that preexisted all of us, but to what extent are we accountable for the now? Free of guilt and blame because guilt and blame is basically narcissistic.

BK: Right.

KR: You know, "I blame myself. I feel guilty." Or, "I'm not guilty. Somebody else wants to blame me." You know, that's still all about me, me, me, me, me. Rhetorical listening asks us to look outward, I think.

BK: So that, we're accountable for now but also accountable for the histories that inform.

KR: Yeah, we're accountable for what we do now, in the present, recognizing that the moment that we are in now is shaped and created by the past. It's not a denial of the past. It's not taking responsibility for the past in terms of *causing*. It's taking responsibility, and preferably accountability for how we behave given the structure we find ourselves in, yeah.

KS: So, I wanted to go back to the talk yesterday in which you mentioned being interested in looking at civil civic discourse, and, especially when one side is not so civil.

KR: [*laughs*] Yes.

KS: Could you remind us of some of the strategies that one can employ to deal with those who refuse to listen and insist on being uncivil?

KR: Well, one of the things that I found slightly amusing about people's reception of rhetorical listening is they think it solves a problem. They think that if you listen rhetorically, then [*snaps fingers*] boom! Everything will be fine, you know? And I keep saying, "No, it's a tactic in the same way that analyzing the enthymeme is a tactic." You know? That doesn't solve the world. Rhetorical listening doesn't solve the world. So, it's a critical analytical move that's a little different from some other interpretive moves. With that in mind, when you've got—I think what came up in the talk yesterday was, what happens when you've got, say abortion protesters, and someone is shoving either a bottled fetus in your face or a picture or some doll representation. What do you do? How do you make that person *civil* and have a conversation with that person? And my response was, "You might not be able to." [*laughs*] You know, the enthymeme doesn't always work. Rhetorical listening doesn't always work.

KS: Right.

KR: So, I'm not out here making promises for a kumbaya world. *But* that said, part of what you do is figure out, *Okay, who's the audience that will listen? And who's the rhetorical audience, in Bitzer's terms, who has the power to make changes?* Those sorts of things, if you listen to, think about which logic will I approach the person on. Then I think you kind of make a difference. So rhetorical listening is helping us, it's helpful, I think, in terms of thinking through those kinds of things. But it doesn't solve all problems, and I don't pretend that it will.

BK: Yeah.

KR: But I also think, I could also then say, "Okay, I don't agree with somebody politically. They're just stupid; they believe that." Well, maybe not. Maybe they actually have a set of assumptions and a way of reasoning and logically come to the conclusion that they want a certain bill passed. I may disagree with them vehemently but I can also recognize they're *smart*, they're committed, they're ethical. And, rather than just dismissing someone as stupid, having the ground of respect is kind of important. So I think that's the other way in which it can help.

BK: Is it safe to say that rhetorical listening is a tactic that can be used once they're in these situations like, you mentioned the classroom or maybe when someone's lobbying and has the access to the politician that has the ability to make the change. It's a tactic for those moments where there is a difference of opinion, but at least, the ability to speak and hear each other.

KR: Mhmm.

BK: Is that kind of safe to say in trying to map the conditions in which rhetorical listening seems useful?

KS: Yes, I think that's a fair statement. I also think, for example, I remember someone, one of my daughter's friend's mothers saying to me right after 9/11, "I don't care how these

terrorists think. We just oughta bomb them all,” you know? And I get how she reached that conclusion, but it struck me at the time, unless we know how people think we’re never going to be able to intervene. So, I chose at that moment not to engage that, so you know I listened rhetorically, but I then didn’t act with *her* on that. I’ve obviously thought about it a lot since, but one could, I suppose. So the condition, it’s hard to generalize, you kind of, it depends. If it were something where I thought, *this is important enough that I have to try*, I would. So, it’s kind of hard to say. Is there a set of conditions that always works and always not?

BK: Yeah, well, one thing that that example does for me is to think that rhetorical listening is a tactic not for just like immediate action. I want to persuade someone right now—

BK: Right, exactly.

BK: But I’ve got a chance to learn some of their perspectives so that I—

KR: Right.

BK: So that I can be better—

KR: Yes.

BK: At persuading someone in the future—

KR: Exactly.

BK: Hear my point of view later.

KR: Right.

BK: And that not every moment is a moment where I’m also speaking. Right?

KR: Right.

BK: Okay.

KR: Yeah.

KS: Is that also a part of the strategic idealism that you were mentioning in your book?

KR: Yes, yes.

KS: So, could you just give us a little bit of a description of how that relates in terms of ... is it, kind of like a micro [*laughter*] approach to idealism?

KR: I suppose it is in a sense. Certain terms take on negative connotations in the academy, right? And, so, for example, in feminist studies *essentialism* took on this very negative term, and Spivak came out and said *strategic essentialism*. Sometimes you have to create a coalition, common ground, present a united front, and no, we're not all alike, but we're going to pretend we are for political action. And, one of the charges against rhetorical listening when I first started talking about this was, people said, "Well it doesn't always work." And I was like, "I know." [*laughs*] You know? Neither do thesis statements. But I've been fascinated—and I probably have to write about this sometime but I don't have it enough in my head yet—why does idealism get so linked to listening? And I think there's a long history of listening in religion, and there's a long history of listening in managerial handbooks. There's a long history of listening in philosophy and in communication studies, for example. So they're different elements, but, for most people in the street they think you're just *born* to listen. You grow up, you talk, you listen. You learn to read, you learn to write, and you kind of learn to talk, but you just listen, and so it's this natural thing that just *is*, and so you don't need to be taught. And constructed as this ideal bodily function of some way. And then, there's this notion add on to that, that if I listen to you I'm showing respect, right? Because it's always been kind of a reception strategy, so, I'm choosing to respect you, and/or I'm listening for God or something for greater instruction. And, so, there's this passive, reception, respect that's attached to it. And, it's like the higher truth is going to come to you.

So, I wanted to counter that a little bit, but you never get away from that. I think those two factors, the sort of, you know, it's this ideal bodily function, but it's also this which we hear something outside ourselves [and] we know something greater than ourselves through listening *idealizes* how we think about it. So, "Oh, if you listen to me. Oh." You know? In some ways it's our greatest desire for somebody else to finally hear us and know us and who we are. So, the idealism that got—it was slightly annoying in the sense that people couldn't hear listening as a trope. When I would say it's a trope of interpretive invention. Reading is a trope. There's a thing, a physical material practice of reading, but reading, R-E-A-D-I-N-G is a trope we use to talk about some of those practices. Listening is a trope, and when I talk about rhetorical listening, it's a trope for a way of positioning yourself with a text! It wasn't this ideal "God in my ear" kind of thing. But [*snaps*] people immediately went there and wanted it to be something that solved all problems.

KS: Mhmm.

KR: And I guess I was surprised by that and, as I said, slightly annoyed, but then I decided, it's really, why be annoyed? It's kind of interesting. Let's figure out why this is going on.

BK: Yeah.

KR: So, yeah, that's a very long-winded answer to your question. But, what was happening is they were conflating idealism with this listening. And, I'm just saying it's a rhetorical tactic, and that's pragmatic. That's in the real, in the moment. And, it's hard for people to

give up that idealism, so I decided, well, let's talk about it in terms of strategic idealism and—

BK: Ah.

KR: Then that made more sense.

BK: Yeah. Is that maybe a part of—listening hadn't been part of discussions of rhetoric for a long time?

KR: Right. It had been in communications, but it hadn't been in rhet/comp and English Studies.

BK: Right.

KR: And philosophy has a long history of talking about listening in the *logos*. And obviously it was Heidegger I went to to get some of the sort of theoretical touchstone to build on.

BK: Thank you so much for spending time with us.

KS: Thank you. Thank you.

Cue music: "Tea Top" by ROW.

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Executive producers of This Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt, with additional production and editing from Karriann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Jana Rosinski.