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Eavesdropping on Others

Krista Ratcliffe

About the time I finished reading Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford's "Negotiating the Differend: A Feminist Trilogue," I also completed Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (thanks, Ilene!), a novel in which a conservative, white, Eisenhower-era Southern Baptist named Nathan Price volunteers himself, his wife Orleanna, and their four daughters to "minister" to families in what was once called the Belgian Congo. The novel is a searing commentary on Africa, politics, and whiteness as well as truth, justice, and the American way. When one of the Price daughters, Adah, reflects on her family's role in the Congo, she names their unconscious imperialistic arrogance and explains their ministerial ineffectiveness by focusing on how language differences affect U.S.-Congo relations, both national and personal: "*Dundu* is a kind of antelope. Or it is a small plant of the genus *Veronia*. Or a hill. Or a price you have to pay. *So much depends on* the tone of voice. One of these things is what our family has coming to us. Our Baptist ears from Georgia will never understand the difference" (175; emphasis added). As I began writing this response, I found it impossible to separate the trilogue and *The Poisonwood Bible* in my mind. Why? Because both texts explore how to negotiate a differend.

What is a differend? According to Davis (via Jean-François Lyotard and Avital Ronell), *differend* signifies "unresolved differences between two (or more) parties who don't share the same rules of cognition—that is, who don't operate within the same 'genres of discourse,' within the

same 'language games' or 'phrase regimens.' The differend . . . 'carves out an abyss within interlocution; cables have not been set up to hear the other without static, warping, and constant interruption,'" and, I might add, without power differentials (590). In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver explores the differend between the American Price family and Congolese families—specifically, the gaps in their perceptions of one another's ethics, politics, and power. In the trilogue, Ballif, Davis, and Mountford explore differends between academic feminists—specifically, the gaps in their perceptions of one another's ethics, politics, and power. The authors cite several differends haunting academic feminism (those between second- and third-wave feminists, between white and nonwhite feminists, and between African-American feminists), and they argue that these differends may inadvertently foster unproductive and unnecessarily hurtful exchanges among feminists—or, what they call "feminist trashing in the parlor" (618). The focus of their trilogue, however, narrows to the differend within rhetoric and composition studies between cultural and ludic feminists. (Other words for "cultural" are "material" and "red"; other words for "ludic" are "postmodern" and "French.")

In response to the trilogue, I want to eavesdrop on Michelle, Diane, and Roxanne's conversation and write back. (Because the authors' first names function as dialogue tags in the trilogue, I will use them here too.) I should probably say from the outset that I find myself more theoretically aligned with Roxanne (we usually "get it" when we talk to each other, without too much static or abyss-jumping). But I should also say that I am always learning from Michelle and Diane (even—no, *especially*—when my materialist feminism impels me to shake my head and wonder whether their world is my world and vice versa). And because so much depends on tone of voice, I hope my tone here engenders the respect I feel for all of their writings. Having said that, I also want to say that my goal for this response is to question the terms of our disciplinary alignments with cultural and ludic feminisms.

First, I want to emphasize the importance of the trilogue. A cultural feminist might suggest its importance is not only in naming a problem (the differend) but also in offering a plan of action (negotiation). A ludic feminist might suggest its importance is not only in identifying the cultural/ludic differend but also in inviting readers to stay on the question. So much depends on the figures we think through. In my view, its importance is this: the trilogue names the cultural/ludic feminist differend; it theorizes that we should negotiate this differend "by coming (together)

in writing”; it models how to implement this “coming together” by having the cultural ethnographer Roxanne exchange writings with the ludic theorists Michelle and Diane (who, by the way, have differences of their own); and it enjoins readers to enter the exchange (614). This naming, theorizing, modelling, and enjoining remind us that we need, in Diane’s words, “to be really careful with each other” in how we define ourselves, each other, and the terms that are important to us (601). As such, the trilogy has implications for *any* differend haunting our lives. I’m thinking, for example, of a differend that haunts white and nonwhite feminists. Specifically, I have used the terms *white* and *nonwhite* in this response instead of the terms *white people* and *people of color* as I did in my article on rhetorical eavesdropping (see Middleton 439). To be honest, though, I am still considering this issue because, while I agree with Joyce Middleton that juxtaposing the terms *white people* and *people of color* may send the wrong, even unintended, message (that is, that white is not a color), I am also not so sure that I like the foundational feeling that *white* assumes in the *white/nonwhite* usage. Hence, we must keep talking and writing.

When Michelle, Diane, and Roxanne remind us to take care with how we define ourselves, others, and the terms between us, they cut to the heart (pathos intended) of feminist trashing and differend negotiation. Feminists are fairly adept in defining our own theories, but we are less adept in defining each others’. Therefore, I want to examine these two processes—defining self and defining other—in terms of cultural and ludic feminist theories. (As I begin defining, I am aware that multiplicities exist within each term; that these two terms cannot contain feminism; that these two terms are not static; and that so much depends on the standpoint of the definer. Nevertheless, I will proceed.)

Cultural feminists see themselves as political players in a patriarchal or phallogocentric culture. They believe people encounter culture via culturally specific and historically specific textual filters—or, to use Kenneth Burke’s term, through terministic screens. Embracing varied traces of marxism (lowercase *m* intended), they view discourse as a map of culture wherein already existing boundaries may be redrawn and new spaces charted. In other words, cultural feminists write to demystify the rhetorically constructed and hopelessly entangled cultural structures (gender, race, and class, for example) that compose our culture and our identities. Goals of cultural feminists are to help people become more aware of the interplay between culture and identities; to help people become more appreciative of differences within culture, within others,

and within ourselves; and to help people revise oppressive cultural structures and identities. Cultural feminists try to imagine a post-patriarchal society. In this imagining, they are responding to what Mary Daly names “Call of the Wild”—that is, “the Elemental Sounds of Otherness which awaken Be-Longing. . .” (101). Daly’s Be-Longing perhaps suggests a play of similarities and differences; that is, Be-Longing suggests the possibility of a similarity that enables feminists to gather together in the name of “woman,” not as a category representing some foundational truth but as a rhetorically constructed political tool (which historically has been used against women but which feminists have reclaimed for ends of their own). At the same time, Be-Longing suggests, via its hyphen and capital *L*, an inevitable longing not just for post-patriarchal spaces but for the similarities that cannot be achieved—hence, a longing for differences. Cultural feminists imagine post-patriarchal spaces (the “there” where they want to arrive), but to be honest, they mostly demand answers to the question “What should we do now?” (in the ever-changing “here” where we are). Roxanne exemplifies this focus when she narrates a “classroom moment”: as the teacher, she imagines the students other than where they are in terms of their thinking about race, so she designs a pedagogical tactic for moving them from their “here” to her-and-their “there”—well, not “there” exactly but toward “there” (611-12). In other words, Roxanne tries to help her students develop what Zora Neale Hurston calls a “formalized curiosity” about the differend haunting their classroom and their lives (612).

Ludic feminists also see themselves as political players. They play with and within language via writing to shake up the “epistemic project” that haunts academia in order to move us all “out, out, out of the world that phallogocentrism has made” (614, 610). In other words, they undefine feminism as it is popularly thought and revisit the term as a space for uncovering “that which ex-scribes itself from phallogocentric in-scription” and that which is “beyond phallogocentric recuperation” (594). In this process, ludic feminists continually question how to “chart [an] expropriating course home. . . . [and seek to move toward] a feminism that’s beyond reaction, that overflows boundaries, and that embraces its own *différance*” (610). In their continual questioning, they are responding to Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud’s call of “a wild *logos* that has no answers but that never stops talking” (602). In their embracing of *différance*, they also risk it (613). What exactly is this *différance* that must be both embraced and risked? Diane addresses this question:

Différance is my point of departure, a certain recognition and affirmation of a wild play of multiplicities, of radical singularity. Writing is a testament to it: writing is not a *means* of communication, as Jean-Luc Nancy has noted; rather, it is communication itself. . . . [O]ne writes to respond to the call of writing itself, which is the call of the exscribed. Because to inscribe is also, simultaneously, to exscribe (there's the inherent violence), the call is perpetual. And it is, in my view, a *call*: it comes from elsewhere, from the Other, and I respond. (601-02)

To embrace and risk this *différance* for feminism, Michelle encourages us to “undefine” feminism as we know it and see whether we can, in our radical singularity, “begin to read and write ‘woman’ in a postmodern way—that is, as something undefined and undefinable,” as something other than “the dialectical other of the male” (604). In other words, Michelle claims that the “current agenda [of feminists] must be to discover the radical otherness of the sexes (all of them, and there are more than two),” for she believes that such an agenda may help us move “out of the world that phallogocentrism has made” (604, 610). Yet, in the meantime, because there is no post-phallogocentric “there” here—at least not yet—Diane affirms that not having answers does not mean refusing to help people (for example, rape survivors) “right here, right now” (605-06). (Traditional grammar gets in the way here: my subject/verb constructions—“they see,” “they play,” “they question,” “Michelle claims,” and “Diane affirms”—presume an agency that is contrary to ludic writing, an agency that ludic feminists might describe as always partial, only partially conscious, and always written by the language that [in]habits us).

I have undoubtedly mangled the above definitions so as to trigger several more response pieces, but let me just say that these definitions represent as much care as I can manage at the moment (under deadline and in this limited space) for trying to understand how these two feminisms define themselves. Beyond these definitions, however, I am curious (good word, Roxanne) about how the two feminisms dance the chiasmatic crisscross and define one another, for it is in this cross-defining, I believe, that the differend between cultural and ludic feminisms really comes into play, gets in the way, and begs to be heard.

According to ludic feminists, cultural feminists often perpetuate grand narratives such as Marxism (uppercase *M* intended); presuppose a naive cause/effect reasoning (foregrounding how we use language, not how language uses us); offer a false liberation (one without sufficient attention to the unconscious); and, most egregiously, focus on difference(s) at the expense of *différance*. Conversely, according to cultural feminists,

ludic feminists are often apolitical (playing with texts while violence plays out on the streets); are “daddy’s girls” (daddy being Lacan et al.); are not attentive to the material here and now (on issues as far ranging as dress, hair, relationships, and rape); and stay on the question when they should act. As Diane suggests, neither side recognizes itself in the other’s description (617). Yet, both sides have danced this dance. The result? Cross-definition turns to accusation. Accusation leads to an abyss. Power differentials play out. And the divide-and-conquer feminist two-step (two steps forward; one, two, or more steps back) continues at the patriarchal ball.

Granted, similarities do exist between cultural and ludic feminists. Inasmuch as we all embrace the goal of a post-patriarchal, post-phallogocentric culture, we all flirt with idealism (not as the pursuit of the perfect but rather as the pursuit of the more just—an important distinction). Inasmuch as we all use metaphors from cartography (cultural feminists “map” and “remap” culture; ludic feminists “chart a course” out of phallogocentrism), we all imagine feminism as a journey. And inasmuch as we all believe in the power of language to inform psychical and cultural identifications in ways that may lead us to a post-patriarchal post-phallogocentric “there,” we all play with and within language. Even if we cannot yet manifest such a “there” in our daily lives, our being able to imagine it is incredibly important if it is ever to materialize (just as it was important for Alonzo Church to imagine his lambda-calculus, which in 1936 existed only as idea but years later materialized as computer languages). For me, what Michelle, Diane, and Roxanne have in common is that they all keep me imagining a “there” that might materialize, yet they keep me imagining it differently.

The differences between cultural and ludic feminists, it seems to me, lie not so much in our political goals and desires (we all imagine feminist “theres”) but more in our political processes (in how we think/write/act ourselves “there” via Nietzsche, Ronell, Marx, Daly, or whomever) and in our political assumptions (in how we value the terms of our, and others’, processes). These differences in process and assumption expose the differend haunting cultural and ludic feminisms. Once aware of this differend, feminists (and anyone else encountering a differend) have several options: denying the differend, trashing other sides, affirming the differend, critiquing it, or negotiating it. Because denying and trashing are not usually productive options, I agree with the authors of the trilogy, who opt for negotiation, which, in turn, may encompass both affirmation and critique.

How does such negotiation occur? First, Michelle suggests “coming (together) in writing” (614). Roxanne and Diane agree, as do I. Second, Roxanne suggests listening for both difference(s) and *différance*, for she sees listening for difference(s) and listening for *différance* as valuable terministic screens for differend negotiation. I agree. But Diane and Michelle are skeptical; they assert that, while listening for *différance* includes a consideration of difference(s), listening for difference(s) excludes *différance*. Here is Diane on the issue:

While [listening for *différance*] would embrace an unending play of differences and attend to the exclusions that are created in the name of feminist solidarity, [listening for difference(s)] retains an insidious and invidious standard, a “proper” feminist against which to judge difference. This approach operates through the ethic of tolerance that [Susan] Jarratt describes, and it draws the line finally at what is *not* tolerable. It’s this line drawing that prompts the need and the desire to align oneself on the good side, to issue a feminist station identification that excludes in the name of inclusion and sets the stage for the differend, for unlitigable injustices *within* feminism itself. (585)

Now here is Michelle: “listening for difference(s) always already precludes listening for *différance*. That is, I would argue that understanding difference(s) is all too possible, that it is our epistemological impulse to render difference(s) into the (self)same. We are altogether too good at knowing—that is, fashioning—the Other (exotic or nonexotic) into a tidy mirror image of ourselves” (587). In this trilogue about listening for difference(s) versus listening for *différance*, I find it is not so much a matter of figuring out who is right (or left) but more a matter of (re)figuring the terms.

As a cultural feminist, Roxanne affirms rhetorical listening as an act of negotiating cultural difference(s) in order to understand them. As ludic feminists, Diane and Michelle do not affirm the possibilities of listening for difference(s) and of understanding, for they read these moves as always already an act of appropriation—or, a misguided attempt to eat the cockroach (if you don’t get this allusion, read the trilogue!). Because Roxanne grounds some of her claims in my article “Rhetorical Listening” (which, I have a hunch, is why I was invited to write this response), let me weigh in for a moment on rhetorical listening, demonstrating why Roxanne and I both believe it *may* (key term) enable people to listen for cultural difference(s) without appropriating those differences and without ignoring excess difference(s).

In my article, I define rhetorical listening in the following way:

a performance that occurs when listeners invoke both their capacity and their willingness (1) to promote an *understanding* of self and other that informs our culture’s politics and ethics, (2) to proceed from within a *responsibility* logic, not from within a defensive guilt/blame one, (3) to locate identification in discursive spaces of both *commonalities* and *differences*, and (4) to accentuate commonalities and differences not only in *claims* but in *cultural logics* within which those claims function. As such, rhetorical listening enables us to hear textual strategies associated with a h(ear)ing metaphor, such as voice and silence; relatedly but more encompassingly, it enables us to hear what Toni Morrison calls “the sound that [breaks] the back of words” (*Beloved* 261), thus enabling us to question the *logos* as we know it. (204)

Questioning the *logos*, as we know, is important, for we live in what Martin Heidegger calls a “divided *logos*,” one that speaks but does not listen. To make his case, Heidegger examines “the relationship between the Greek noun *logos* and its verb form *legein*, which in its fullest sense means both ‘saying’ and ‘laying’ [L]aying,’ entails laying others’ ideas in front of us in order to let these ideas lie before us. This laying-to-let-lie-before-us functions as a preservation of others’ ideas,” as a means of acknowledging the existence of every exchange’s exiled excess, even if we cannot see it (Ratcliffe, “Rhetorical” 202). Rhetorical listening reworks understanding and offers it as consciously “standing under” discourses that surround us and others, “letting discourses wash over, through and around us and then letting them lie there to inform our politics and ethics” (205). Thus, rhetorical listening does not stipulate that understanding is knowing, as Michelle suggests often happens, nor does it posit understanding as foundational, as John Locke suggests often happens (see Burke 23). Rather, performing rhetorical listening signifies simply (and, of course, it is never simple) a humble stance that we may choose to assume towards self, other, and our respective discourses.

Rhetorical listening (in the space of the conscious agency available to each of us) is humbled not simply by respect for self, other, and culture but by respect for language, for the perpetual “problem” of communication is that there are gaps—gaps between what is said and what is meant, between what is said and what is heard, between what is heard and what is listened to, between what is known and what can be known (the list of potential differends continues). So much depends on how we theorize these gaps. I agree with Michelle and Diane that understanding and

misunderstanding precede us, and that “in fact, ‘we,’ to a large extent, are a function of ‘it’” (612). But I also agree with bell hooks that we may engage in “talking back” in ways that inform and thus change our (mis)understandings (9). The possibilities for (mis)understandings, then, are endless. Given these endless possibilities, Michelle, Diane, and Roxanne may all be correct: listening for *différance* may include difference(s), and listening for cultural difference(s) may also acknowledge *différance*. This claim has implications for the politics of the parlor.

Burke offers the parlor as a metaphor for rhetorical exchanges; Virginia Woolf exposes its gendered power dynamics. (As a young woman, Woolf sat in her father’s parlor, serving tea and cake while smiling politely at young men, less talented than she, who had come to see her father but who ended up talking endlessly to her about their writing; perhaps these parlor games explain her later reputation for waspish retorts to young would-be intellectuals, both male and female.) In the trilogy, Michelle, Diane, and Roxanne further complicate Burke’s and Woolf’s views on the parlor by reminding us that parlor politics include gendered power dynamics not just between men and women but also among feminists. According to Roxanne, feminists may enforce discursive protocols of the parlor “by interrupting and ejecting each other from the parlor” in the name of solidarity (584). According to Michelle, such moves discipline difference (584-85). And according to Diane, such disciplining is accomplished via a feminist ethic of (false) tolerance that “draws the line finally at what is *not* tolerable” (585).

Drawing lines at what is intolerable is not necessarily a bad thing. Just as Aristotle names rhetoric a neutral art, so too is line drawing. The issue is not *that* we draw lines (or name or inscribe); the issue is *how* we do so. Diane agrees: “it’s not that we could possibly *not* name; rather, in naming, or inscribing, it is necessary to realize that we simultaneously exscribe something. Thus, any naming comes with the responsibility of continuously responding to the call of what has been exscribed” (598). Michelle joins with Susan Jarratt and Lynn Worsham who suggest that feminists have a responsibility when naming. Jarratt suggests that we simultaneously “articulat[e] difference while exposing the power relations at work in acts of naming.” Michelle suggests that “by attending to the specific temporal moment, one can avoid the pitfall of naming,” which, says Worsham, “tends to freeze difference in static categories and obscures the fact that our differences are constituted ‘in time’” (599). But, again, Michelle is skeptical:

I am doubtful, however, that one can know either the “power relations at work” or the “temporality” of the differend—other than those . . . that have been named as such and that are always already subject to the “agreements” or “understandings” of “normal discourse”. . . . how is it possible to hear that which is radically different and radically outside those spaces? Finally, I am arguing, it is not enough to say “we must make time to listen,” or, we must “dialogue” with Jackie Royster. I am arguing that we have not yet theorized how it is possible to listen to that which is beyond our understanding, that which is beyond our limits. (599-600)

I agree. We are not yet “there.” But we are talking and writing about it.

Perhaps the best we can do is to be aware of the pitfalls, of the existence of things that we do not know we do not know. Or perhaps, as Diane and Jarratt and Worsham suggest, the best we can do is employ this awareness for political decision making. Let me suggest, then, an ethic of awareness that does not presume either a happy-faced “I’m OK, you’re OK” stance of false tolerance or a “we can know everything better than you” stance of false mastery. Rather, because *aware* and *wary* are etymologically linked, an ethic of awareness presumes caution—that is, not being too cautious in taking action (for we must act) but being cautious in accepting an action (textual or otherwise) as the last word. In my view, the tactic of rhetorical listening fosters this ethic. It leaves open possibilities for staying on the question, as Diane suggests when she advocates a *différance* dedicated “to a perpetual revving up of any settling of difference(s)” (600). It also leaves open possibilities for taking action *toward* settlement, as when Roxanne suggests that we should have e-mailed Jackie Royster after she invited us to do so in her CCCC chair’s address (595). What tactics, other than rhetorical listening, might foster an ethics of awareness? As I mention in my article on rhetorical eavesdropping, there are several. Nevertheless, this question is a good one. And we all have our work cut out for us—staying on this question while living our lives.

As I write this response in the fall of 2000, several differends are haunting me. Israelis and Palestinians are returning to violence. Al Gore and George W. Bush are vying for the presidency. And my mother is insisting on invoking her living will (pun intended) against the will of her doctor. In honor of all these events, I want to offer, not political talking points, but ethical writing points for differend negotiation that is part of an ethic of awareness.

- Reflect on our own processes of understanding and identification.
- Listen.
- Let each side (and, to echo Michelle, there are more than two) define itself.
- Remember that gaps are inherent in language function.
- Recognize that the parlor is always already a site of power differentials.
- Reclaim old words and coin new ones.
- Keep writing to one another, and respect the times when we cannot.
- Keep listening.
- Keep striving for understanding.

Confronted with global and personal differends, cultural feminists might argue that these writing points are deadly serious; ludics, that they are laughable. And both would be correct, for within their respective feminist logics, both claims would be political in that both are attempting to interrupt and break up the existing logics that constrain us. I can live with that.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the price paid by Orleana Price (the white mother who simply desires to save her children) is, ironically, one of those children, her youngest daughter Ruth May Price whom she buries in the bosom of Africa. So much depends on the lessons we learn, and Orleana learns important ones from the “price,” as it were, she has to pay: “Some of us know how we came by our fortune [read “privilege,” specifically “white privilege”], and some of us don’t, but we wear it all the same. There’s only one question worth asking now: How do we aim to live with it?” (9). Orleana has learned two things from her Congo experiences: how to recognize a differend and how to negotiate it by staying on a question while living a life. Similarly, the price that academic feminists have to pay for negotiating differends (for staying on a question while living a life) is simply the recognition (with thanks to Gertrude Stein) that there is no “there” there, no one theory that completely explains the world, its peoples, and its mysteries. Of course, such recognitions are never simple. In the trilogy, Diane and Michelle desire that readers recognize that academic feminism often cannot hear (at least not fully) what disagrees with it. Roxanne desires that Michelle, Diane, and readers recognize that she can hear (at least partially) and talk back. Once again, I’m with Roxanne on this one, but that also makes me with Diane and Michelle. And (with thanks to Virginia Woolf) such moments of being-with-others offer us our best possibilities for negotiating all our differends.

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Tight Spaces In and Out of the Parlor: Negotiation and the Politics of Difference

Eileen E. Schell

In the opening paragraphs of “Negotiating the Differend: A Feminist Trilogue,” Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford “bust up” the metaphorical parlor conversation (à la Burke) of feminist discourse. The Burkean parlor—which connotes warmth, solidarity, sharing, and nurturing—is replaced by a different space, one in which