

From My Own Land:
**Making Cross-cultural Feminist Connections through the
Rhetorical Listening of Personal Experience Writing**

This is a way for me to do my work—this is a way for me to listen.

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I sit in a cozy suburban living room, cuddled up in a quilt, drinking hot tea with soy milk, vanilla, and raw sugar, talking with my mother about my studies in rhetoric, my interest in challenging a tradition that historically excluded women and people of color—still excludes. But I am not listening well enough; I am more focused on talking, expressing my own thoughts and opinions, the ones that have been writhing around in my gut since I started my graduate work a year ago. Bubbling up inside of me like a tea kettle threatening to shriek: my impatient need to get involved in the recovery, the reimagining and the rethinking of a tradition dominated by men and whiteness. I stop short when I hear her words, and my eagerness is focused on the voice that has soothed so many of my worries and fears: “...it’s like hearing someone from my own land for the first time.” I focus my listening, realize my mother has summed up in just a few words, everything I have been moving towards in my studies, everything I have been reading from women rhetors, writers white and of color, poor and privileged—the need to be heard, the need to be understood; the moment of clarity that comes when you have lived as an alien and the Other and finally you find someone from your own land who speaks your language. It might be a land of women, a land of poor, a land of black, brown, yellow, or red. It might be a land of disabled, crazy, abused; some or all of these—even some other land where you have never heard anyone speak your language. Whatever land it is you come from, comfort comes in the moment of someone listening—someone acknowledging you and your silence.

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From my mother, I carry with me the listening of a woman alienated in a workplace dominated by men. I carry with me the listening of her being poor, with parents who could not provide financially or

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emotionally for a child, a girl, a woman, an artist. I carry with me the listening of a mother at nineteen, lonely and away from home with no one to nurture her through this weird and frightful new aspect of her life—motherhood. Before anyone took responsibility for her, she was responsible for someone else’s life—mine. My mother articulated for me in those few words, my emerging understanding of what Krista Ratcliffe calls, *rhetorical listening*, the need for “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (*Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, 1).

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I acknowledge my place within a privileged, dominant culture. I choose a stance of openness.

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I work as part of an organization that sells higher education; wordsmiths spin marketing strategy and when the administration asks me the question, “Is the absence of an African American a concern?” it is for all the wrong reasons. I ride the slippery slope, never really gaining ground because I am still part of the game and the rules are slanted in my favor—knowing something is wrong is not enough.

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I acknowledge the work I must do to better understand my privilege and the slick landscape I live and work in.

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Acknowledgment is a start, but the difference comes in turning it into action. I take a step on the way to action by implementing a methodology from Ratcliffe: “articulating intersecting identifications of gender and race to promote cross-cultural communications” (*Rhetorical Listening*, 3). I specify “feminist,” and

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even more explicitly, feminist writings of personal experience. I focus my attention on four women writers: Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker. By selecting these writers and listening to them in chronological order, I am at once mimicking methodology employed in Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's, *The Rhetorical Tradition*, but at the same time, interrupting it by identifying nontraditional origins for invention. Aristotle's "available means of persuasion" assumes his right to speak, it does not, however, account for gender, class, or ethnicity (*Available Means*, xvii). With this work I locate Woolf, Rich, Lorde, and Walker within rhetoric, by listening as they reveal their silence and identity through writing that is comprised largely of personal experience. It is also through this listening that I interrupt, reclaim, and connect these women, with each other and myself.

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My understanding of agency, before my course on the history and theory of rhetoric was as shallow as the plot of a *Mission Impossible* movie. Listening to the word being tossed back and forth during a class discussion, I soon realized my only understanding of the word, as a nickname for a clandestine spy organization, was not getting me very far. I embraced my embarrassment and exposed my ignorance. It was shaky at first, but since then, I have done further reading on rhetorical agency and it has come up in much of my work for this project. Still, my understanding is a work in progress. One of the most useful definitions I have found, so far, comes from *Kairosnews: A Weblog for Discussing Rhetoric, Technology and Pedagogy*. At *Kairosnews* I found an article that gave me a good place to expand from:

Those with the ability or capacity to influence others might be called agents... Rhetorical agency is the capacity to influence the form and shape of a rhetorical culture. Rhetorical culture can be shaped both in a material sense and in a sociological sense. Material influence has to do with products and technologies. This specifies the means available for bringing about change.
(McGreer)

I have not abandoned my movie metaphors completely. I just ground my definition in better movies—"Never send a human to do a machine's job" (Internet Movie Database). I would say that turning

humanity into a field of coppertop batteries is influencing their agency, which would be Okay if you were an Energizer Bunny.

No less engaging, is the idea of personal agency, which I fold into my broader, emerging definition of agency, from Ratcliffe's, *Rhetorical Listening*. Here, the use of agency is on a personal level, used to "interrupt unethical discourses or unethical cultural structures and practices" (75). I expand on these definitions by connecting them to my work. By listening, interrupting, reclaiming, and making connections, I am opening spaces for personal agency to occur, without delimiting Others.

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Through this work I can begin to look at myself as a rhetorician for the first time and rediscover myself as a writer.

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Through this work, I employ a method of listening to include Other voices. In defining Other, I begin with an exploration of how I identify myself: woman—tenacious—mercurial—resilient—dramatic—compassionate—smart—silly—daughter—toad—gamer—lover—wife—poet—creative—melancholy—brilliant. Other is how I silence myself or when I let others silence me: fat—ugly—victim—crazy—stupid—selfish—lazy—liar—thief—gossip—sarcastic—negative. Other is when I silence someone else by not listening.

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I ground my understanding of Other in the work of Simone de Beauvoir. I first read Beauvoir as an undergrad in an introductory course on feminist criticism. In Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, I find a text that is so intelligent and rich with language—the kind of approachable piece I am drawn to and hope to write one day.

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I do not have to force a place for myself among her work, like with much of the rhetorical tradition. With Beauvoir's work, I am already there—she is writing from my own land. When I listen to her words I find myself pulled in by her lyrical use of language:

The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality – that of the Self and the Other...The feminine element was at first no more involved in such pairs as Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, and Day-Night than it was in the contrasts between Good and Evil, lucky and unlucky auspices, right and left, God and Lucifer. Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought...Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself. (Marxists Internet Archive)

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Joy Ronald and Kate Ritchie write about the “act of invention for women,” in their book, *Available Means* (2001, xvii) and how it is located differently than it was for Aristotle: “women must first invent a way to speak in the context of being silenced and rendered invisible as persons.” There is a step beyond that where I want to go. I carry with me the silences of Other women, as they carry mine. But I also silence Other women when I let my whiteness and my privilege slip away from me—when I stop listening.

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I am a collector of words and information.

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My emerging definition of rhetoric relies on the ability to draw from a wide and diverse assortment of ideas and theories—I will eat vanilla wafers but I crave Lindor truffles, Twizzlers, and Almond Joy. There is nothing wrong with vanilla wafers or Aristotle, however, I do not believe his appeal to the whole person is the whole truth, nor is that of the rest of the mostly white, mostly privileged rhetors, that make up the rhetorical tradition—a whole Other is suspiciously absent. There are many truths, some

compare closely, with only slight variations; others are far apart and alien to one another. On the idea of multiple or more inclusive truth(s), I start my work with Virginia Woolf. Her insistence that women “devise some entirely new combination of [our] resources . . . So as to absorb the new into the old without disturbing the infinitely intricate and elaborate balance of the whole” (*A Room of One’s Own*, 85), is the basis for my work of interrupting rhetorical tradition and a starting point for listening to Others. After Woolf, I listen for the ways Rich, Lorde, and Walker interrupt and go beyond Woolf.

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I have more books than spaces for all of them in my house. You can find a book on nearly every surface of my office, too. They fill two bookshelves and are in stacks on my desk and a small table. Lately, I have been hungry for titles on feminist rhetorics, women’s studies, lots of books on Woolf and Rich, some Butler and Kristeva, anthologies of women speaking, writing, critiquing and theorizing. Over the summer I bought and borrowed books on visual rhetoric, visual marketing and branding, fonts and typography. Before that it was digital rhetoric, cyber culture, online social networking. Before those books, I bought other books on Web usability and accessibility, Web development and Cascading Style Sheets, Web design, HTML, XML, DHTML, PHP, ABCDEFG...I become enthralled once I start searching for books on my latest, favorite topic, online. Time slips away from me and sometimes I become a little anxious with my searching, comparing, checking and sorting. I do not have fifty bars of soap in my bathroom—I have books everywhere else. They arrive at my office in plain brown cardboard packages, manila envelopes, in plain white paper with lots of tape—always lots of tape. I love getting packages. Sometimes I let them sit on the corner of my desk or my table, savoring the thought of scissoring through to the treasure wrapped neatly inside.

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I love the feel of books, the slight stir of air as I fan the pages with my thumb. Some of them have smooth, glossy pages with lots of brightly colored images and diagrams. With some books, the texture of the pages feel course when you run your fingers over the words: serif, san-serif, Arial, Garamond, Times New Roman; plain and elaborate headers, notes, indices, introductions, forwards, afterwards, glossaries, contents, character lists, annotations, CD-ROMs tucked in the back—even the technical manuals are a pleasure for me when they arrive—delicious morsels of enlightenment waiting to be devoured. It is a privilege, a luxury to have them and it is a shame that I do not read them all.

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There are at least twenty books in close proximity to me, right now and there is only one slim volume that I have read cover to cover. There is no time—no, I do not make the time. Instead, I flip and scan and highlight, I tab lots of pages with colorful little sticky notes—a reminder to read those parts later. I marvel over the titles gracing each thick and narrow spine; each plain and artful cover. I carry books around with me in a worn denim bag with a faded American flag on it—to and from work, to and from class. Along with them, I carry good intentions to read each one. I recently discovered something about my obsessive compulsion for book—all of these books are keeping me from writing. I finally made myself slow down and spend one entire day just reading the pieces I wanted to work through for this project. I read slowly and carefully and then I read them again and again. As soon as I slowed down and afforded myself the time and the luxury of reading and synthesizing the words, I could not wait to write and respond. It was as if a giant floodgate had opened and everything rushed out and started to make sense. I had a moment of feeling stupid for not realizing how this reading thing worked sooner. I have been reading and loving words for most of my life. The difference has been in trying to read and respond thoughtfully while also trying to juggle my roles as a full-time professional with a new boss and new

responsibilities; greater expectations for my work as a graduate student; being a more understanding wife; a more supportive daughter—all framed by the onset of an unbearable depression.

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My book-buying, reading, and writing habits are part of my privilege. They are a luxury many women cannot afford—women who are worried about feeding their children, finding a safe place to sleep at night, or finding a job.

I have arrived late at this slightly fuller understanding of just how precious my books and my education are. I have mentioned some of my struggles in trying to become a serious writer and scholar of words. I am tempted to enumerate other challenges that have left me silenced, but in this moment I do not want to move away from my privilege—my whiteness. There is discomfort and there ought to be. I need to be accountable for what my privilege has afforded me. I need to listen to the words and voices of women who have been far less comfortable than me, far less privileged.

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My husband and I have a home, it is modest, but it is ours. We have two cars, both are older, but I do not have to walk or ride the bus when I need or want to go somewhere—I can come and go as I please. We have all of the usual modern amenities, heat, electricity, and water; washer, dryer, refrigerator, sink stove, cable TV, DVD players, VHS, two computers and high-speed Internet access. I have a large DVD movie collection and many computer games. If I am hungry, I go to the kitchen, go out and buy food, or go to a restaurant. I have a full-time job with a 401K retirement plan, dental and comprehensive medical benefits. I get regular sick time and personal days. I work inside at a desk. I am not inappropriately harassed. There is little or no crime in my neighborhood—police patrol regularly. I have pets, three dogs and 120 gallons of tropical fish. Most weekends, my husband and I go to the movies for our date night.

My husband is a good man. He makes me laugh and smile. He is my best friend and he tries very hard to understand and support me—which I can imagine is a Herculean task at times. I have a support system of friends and family, led by my mother who has sat with me square in the eye of every storm, bringing me through every category five bipolar hurricane. I have never written it out like this, all that I have—my privilege. It is a lot.

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One of the books I have been trying to read with care is Virginia Woolf's classic essay on women's roles in society, *A Room of One's Own*. In listening to the words of Virginia Woolf and those written about her, a certain sense of sadness creeps in, a familiar sadness of one who feels brilliant and alienated, simultaneously. I get the sense that Woolf understood her own greatness, when in a letter to close friend and composer, Ethel Smyth, she refers to herself as "legendary" but the same passage also brings to the surface her self-censure and the silences fill the spaces between each word of her writing—even as she was trying to help other women liberate themselves:

I forced myself to keep my own figure fictitious; legendary.
If I had said, Look here I am uneducated, because my
brothers used all the family funds which is the fact—Well
theyd have said; she has an axe to grind; and no one would
have taken me seriously (*A Room*, 195).

This purposeful silencing, of making her "figure fictitious," is a subtle yet palpable thread of tension winding throughout Woolf's, *A Room of One's Own*. She hopes for other women more than she is willing to grant herself. Her hesitations and deflections are moments when she denies herself, her truly "legendary" self. I wonder what Woolf's life and writing would have been like if she had complete courage to write exactly what she thought? She many have killed the Angel in the house but she left may silences in between the lines of her essays and fictions. After the Angel is dead she is left to struggle with the articulation of her own body and passions.

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This idea struck me: the army is the body: I am the brain. Thinking is my fighting.

—Virginia Woolf, “The Writer’s Diary”

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I listen and connect with Virginia Woolf in a number of places, her suffering as a result of abuse from her older half brothers, disclosed in autobiographical writings and with her self-professed madness that she wrote of in her diary: "I feel certain now that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time ..." Four days later, Virginia Woolf walked down to a nearby river bank, filled her pockets with stones, left her walking stick on the ground, stepped into the river and drowned herself. She was luminous and brave for as long as she could be. She used her writing to make sense of her mental chaos and personal suffering: “But it is always a question whether I wish to avoid these glooms. . . . These 9 weeks give one a plunge into deep waters which is a little alarming, but full of interest. . . . There is an edge to it which I feel is of great importance. . . . One goes down into the well & nothing protects one from the assault of truth. (*Letters 5*, 112). What we know now is that Woolf was plagued by dysfunctional brain chemistry that caused her periods of both severe depression and wild, incoherent insanity. What she was aware of was using the double edge of her emotions as a tool for artistic inspiration and productivity. I do not mean to simply wrap Woolf up in a neat package, which some might naively label a brilliant madness. It would be a mistake to glamorize a life where day to day you question every thought, uncertain of where your real self ends and your insanity begins.

Regardless of Virginia Woolf’s intense struggles, with the losses in her life and the slow erosion of her mind, she was an inherently gifted writer and scholar. She was well-read and by any reasonable standards she was well-educated and of more than comfortable means. We should not dismiss her struggles, but at the same time, it is important when studying her work to be aware of the privilege that

came from her being white and of upper-class. Woolf's privilege was an important factor in her ability to have a room and means of her own, even with its Angel and all of its demons.

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We need to support each other in rejecting the limitations of a tradition—a manner of reading, of speaking, of writing, of criticizing—which was never really designed to include us at all.

—Adrienne Rich, "Toward a More Feminist Criticism"

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Adrienne Rich does not place herself within the tradition of Western rhetorical theory. Instead, she defines herself as "a writer, a teacher, an educator-publisher, a pamphleteer, a lecturer, a sometimes-activist," and, most of all, a poet. (*Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Tradition, Virginia Woolf, Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich*, 108). Rich began by writing in the traditional style, the "man's way," but as she continued to write, she broke from traditional styles to a form one of her own.

I first came to know Adrienne Rich as a poet, over a decade ago in junior college, but even then, I had barely scratched the surface of her voluptuous language and eloquent persuasions. Rich fits into my work on listening through her call for us to see women's writing through an act of revisioning and reclamation that connects us to the rhetorical act of invention, style, and arrangement. In her 1971 essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*," Rich talks about the "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." Just as Woolf wrote and spoke on what a woman needs to write, Rich calls this need for revisioning "an act of survival" for women. But Rich goes farther, interrupting Virginia Woolf as she rereads Woolf's essay, *A Room of One's Own*. Rich finds an anger stewing in Woolf's gut, something bubbling and brimming, a tone on the edge, waiting to spill out but kept simmering just below a boil:

"It was the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is willing herself to be calm, detached, and even charming in a roomful of men

where things have been said which are attacks on her very integrity. Virginia Woolf is addressing an audience of women, but she is acutely aware of being overheard by men." (*When We Dead Awaken*, 37)

Through this rereading, Rich locates Woolf's writing and Woolf herself as still writing for men, Woolf's inability to "stop being haunted...by internalized fears of being and saying" of writing her own body and personal experiences (38).

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Like Virginia Woolf, I am aware of the women who are not with us here because they are washing the dishes and looking after the children...I am thinking also of the women whom she left out of the picture altogether..." (*When We Dead Awaken*, 38)

Adrienne Rich makes a leap beyond Virginia Woolf, in that she acknowledges her own privilege, Rich speaks of herself as: "born white and middle-class into a house full of books, with a father who encouraged me to read and write" (38). Rich writes of how her privilege, dominated by white patriarchy, led her to confuse being a writer equal to men and having to write in a way that sounded like men. Looking back at her earlier works, she saw much of what she saw in Woolf's work, a poet still hidden, who also defined herself by her relationships with men and a tradition of writing dominated by them. As a mother, Rich came to understand that beyond a room and money of one's own, a woman needs: "time to think, time to write" without feeling like a failed woman, a failed mother, or a "monster" (42).

In 1979, Adrienne Rich goes farther still, with her commencement speech, "What Does a Woman Need to Know?" given at Smith College. Rich puts her privilege front and center:

"Everything I can say to you on this subject comes hard-won, from the lips of a woman privileged to by class and skin color, a father's favorite daughter, educated at Radcliffe...Much of the first four decades of my life was spent in a continuous tension between the world the Fathers taught me to see, and had rewarded me for seeing, and the flashes of insight that came through the eye of the outsider" (3).

Through the acknowledgement of her privilege and her willingness to make connections outside of her own experiences, Rich is finally able to affirm Other experiences “as the source of a legitimate and coherent vision,” so that she was finally able to do the work she really wanted to do and live the life she really wanted to live, “instead of carrying out the assignments I had been given as a privileged woman and a token.” (4).

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Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself—a black woman warrior poet doing my work—come to ask you, are you doing yours?

—Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action, *Sister Outsider*

“...we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. ”

—Audre Lorde, “Poetry is not a Luxury,” *Sister Outsider*

When we were asked to select two rhetors for a roundtable assignment in my graduate course on the history and theory of rhetoric, I thought briefly of selecting Audre Lorde, whose poetry I remembered from a creative writing class many years ago—lush and provocative. But I did not select Lorde. It was not for any rational reason, it was an uneasy moment of fearing to go where I did not feel adequately equipped to venture. It was an irrational fear of being mistaken about trying to understand what I thought I could not possibly claim to understand. It was a false assumption that I could not make the “appropriate” connections. In that brief moment, I shut the door on any chance of persuading anyone, of being persuaded—of listening.

Fortunately that door did not close all the way. I do not remember exactly the moment, but as I read more pieces that interrupted the rhetorical tradition, I came around to the understanding that my own work needed to go farther. First I began with my obsessive collecting of resources, then when I realized I was not really synthesizing Lorde’s work through my furious bookmarking and hunting for books, I settled down and read her essay, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, included in

the book I was reading for class, *Available Means*. With the first line, I was hooked and the work I thought I had been doing, really began: "...what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood." (303)

I am able to make a connection with Lorde on the level of wanting to speak and to share and being heard, but what are the words I have not been allowed to speak? The action I can take that would be the most transformative, is to first listen. If I pause to listen, then I am more prepared to speak from a place where I can take action, action to make myself a more whole person, action to connect with other women.

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Audre Lorde knew my fears before I knew them myself; she knew them when I was only a child of seven: "In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, or annihilation." (303). While white women have fought for visibility, women of color have been rendered invisible and vulnerable because of their visibility. However, Lorde points to these vulnerabilities as "the source of our greatest strength." (303). Failing to turn our vulnerabilities into our strengths will not make us any less afraid.

I connect with Audre Lorde in a commitment to use the "power of language" to take action (304). I connect with her in the commitment to the reclamation of language that was—still is—made to work against all women. I connect with her in the commitment to listen to the lost and buried voices that can connect all women.

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I think we have to own the fears that we have of each other, and then, in some practical way, some daily way, figure out how to see people differently than the way we were brought up to.
—Alice Walker

In her essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Alice Walker locates her authority, her available means of persuasion, in the personal realm of home and garden, in "women's work" (*Available Means*, 314). This piece is important, as it offers further interruptions to Virginia Woolf and her descriptions of what a woman writer needs. Walker offers a revisioning of Woolf's, *A Room of One's Own*, by inserting historical women of color into her narrative. What is a room of one's own to a slave, "who owned not even herself?" (317). Walker adds "chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one's body by someone else, submission to an alien religion," to Woolf's list of "contrary instincts" to any girl born with a great gift. (317). Walker writes of women like Zora Hurston and Phillis Wheatly, for whom the later there could be nothing but "contrary instincts." Their culture was denied to them, they were penniless, half-starved, and neglected. Unable to truly imagine the mental anguish these women and Others like them have endured, I am put off by Woolf's inadequate phrase, "contrary instincts." While I still acknowledge Woolf's place as foundational to women's writing, women's studies and women's rhetorics, I am compelled to move beyond her limiting scope. In listening to Walker's passionate words, I am opened to a richer, more expansive legacy of women's rhetoric, from which I can continue to listen and move my own work toward making connection and taking action.

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Who were these Saints? These crazy, loony, pitiful women?
—Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*"

One of the most touching portions from Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," is right in the beginning, when she talks of "Saints;" black women living in the South in the early twenties. Black women "whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so *unconscious*, that they made themselves unaware of the richness they held" (315). These were not rich or privileged women, they were abused, cast off, despicably treated as objects of sex: "These crazy Saints stared out at the world, wildly, like

lunatics—or quietly, like suicides; and the “God” that was in their gaze was as mute as a great stone” (315). I cannot connect with Walker here, or with her Saints. I feel deep compassion and sympathy for them, but I feel helpless and useless. I understand how a woman can force her mind to desert her body, let her spirit rise up and away from corporeal terrors, but I cannot connect with this kind of brutality. I hope that through my work of listening I can pay some small piece of the great debt I owe, to honor their lives and their pain, which I have been privileged not to have had to endure.

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In reading the work of these rhetors and the work of Krista Ratcliffe, and her concept of *rhetorical listening*, my understanding and making of connections through listening, means more than just listening for the writer or speaker’s intentions. It also means more than listening for my own self-interest. The kind of listening I am trying to do means listening with purpose—letting Others’ words and discourse come in and resonate with me. The first step is to acknowledge the viewpoints of Others, then to listen for connections, and finally to let Other voices influence my viewpoint and decision-making process.

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We all of have a desire to be heard; whether it is a rapid beating like the wings of a bird, frantic to fly from the cage of our heart, or a seed that has taken root in our brain ready to bloom from our mouth, or the wary hiss of a snake coiled tightly inside our gut waiting to strike. Whatever way our need to speak rises from within us, we must take care not to let the cacophony of our million birds, blooms, and snakes drown out Other voices. Listening is a way of connecting; through listening, each of us can navigate our way toward a land, toward a world, where everyone speaks the same language.

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