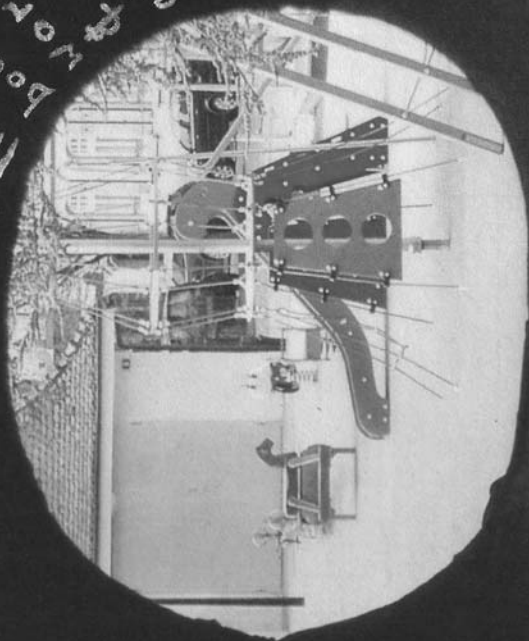
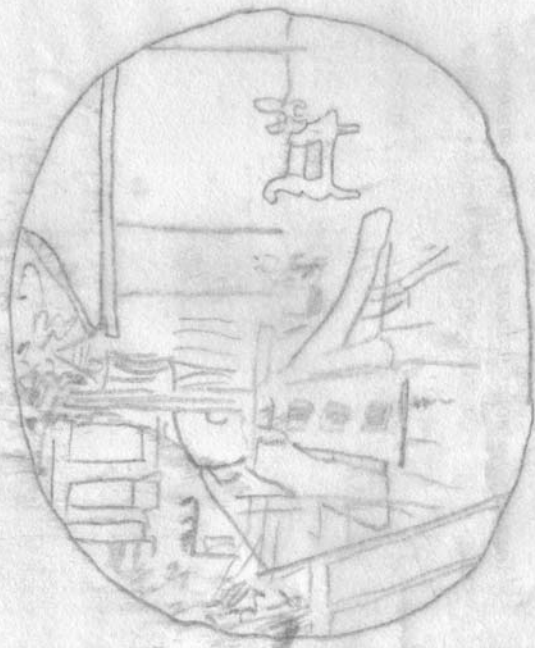


change
of worlds
listening
bodies
speaking



four

zine



zine

four

This zine is one in a series of five.

Each contains an edited version of a prelude to a chapter from the book
'Experiments in Listening' by Rajni Shah.

The book was published by Rowman & Littlefield in June 2021, as part of the Performance Philosophy series.

If you would like to buy the book, you can use the code 'RLFANDF30' for 30% discount at rowman.com.

Thank you for being here.

rajni s.

bodies relate to each other. And at the other end, as I have begun to describe, it includes some kind of transition from the state of being-in-audience to not-being-in-audience, from the particular invisibility of attentiveness to the weight of embodiedness and embeddedness.

END

¹ Andy Smith, *all that is solid melts into air*, in The Preston Bill (Oberon, 2015), p. 86.

² *two from a smith*, 2 December 2014, The Nuffield Theatre, Lancaster.

³ Jacqueline Jones Royster, 'When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own', *College Composition and Communication*, 47.1 (1996), 29–40 (p. 38).

⁴ Krista Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

⁵ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* [1984], revised edn (Crossing Press, 2007), p. 42.

⁶ Susan Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict, and Citizenship* (Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 124–25.

⁷ Andy Smith, 'What We Can Do with What We Have Got: A Dematerialised Theatre and Social and Political Change' (unpublished PhD, Lancaster University, 2014), p. 8 fn 4.

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qualify his statement. Because if it is the people in the theatre who carry the capacity for change, then that change cannot help but be unevenly distributed between those bodies, moving as they are into a world where hearing and seeing happen according to what and who is already deemed visible and audible.

I believe that theatre's most important function might be to provide a 'critical moment' of listening akin to that which Royster describes as missing from most models of discourse. Yet if this is the case – if theatre can function as a listening intervention in a model of human interaction that would otherwise have us 'just talk and talk back' – then within the question of how one defines theatre is the question of both how we move into and out of this critical moment, as well as how this movement is shaped by the bodies we inhabit as we perform these transitions. This includes the act of invitation, a complex and plural act that determines which bodies are present and which bodies are missing, as well as how those

“ Anyway, thank you for listening to me.

In a minute I am going [to] stand up and walk out of that door.

In a minute we all are.

I'm going to walk towards change and optimism, towards complicated struggles and joyful celebrations, towards our houses and homes and our cities and our streets, towards families and friends and strangers and enemies.

I will walk towards all these things and more.

I am walking towards them now.

The performer stands.

I hope someone is with me.

They exit.

- Andy Smith , *all that is solid melts into air*¹

At the end of the show I am sitting in the audience and the house lights are up, as they have been throughout the evening. Andy Smith has been performing his solo show *all that is solid melts into air*.² Just before he leaves, as he is beginning to make his way out of the theatre, he says these words:

"I hope someone is with me."

Perhaps he is asking whether we, the audience, might share his commitment to optimism. But he is also hoping that we might walk out of the theatre, just as he is now; and in performing that action, the action of leaving our seats and leaving the theatre, an action that we would have performed even if he had not spoken those words, he is suggesting that we are already with him.

We are with him simply by virtue of having been in the audience.

You might remember that I chose to call my experience at the end of Smith's show a crisis of identity. If I now revisit my first analysis of that moment, I was proposing that through the act of leaving the theatre, and of having been together, we as audience might already be moving alongside Smith towards change. In this version of events – which is the version I believe Smith to be advocating – the potential for change is not located in the special category of theatre or elsewhere in our lives, but in our own bodies as they cross the threshold between one set of parameters and the next. In Smith's own words:

"[I]t is the people in the theatre – not the entity of the theatre itself – who hold the capacity for change."⁷

In some ways I agree with Smith here – it is important to not only ascribe the potential for change to an abstract entity, but to locate it within the embodied experience of those who are present. However, I also feel it is important to

" And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.⁵

I believe there is a relationship between what Lorde refers to here as self-revelation, what Royster (writing almost twenty years later) proposes as translation, and my failure (almost twenty years later again) to move into action at the end of *all that is solid melts into air*. Each of these situations might be described as an attempt to move from the attentive to the declarative, in order not only to listen, but also to be heard. In other words, each of them refers to a desire to both acknowledge and move beyond the boundaries of the individual body into the social sphere, while recognising that within the social sphere the body is inevitably constrained and shaped by the systems that surround it – a state that Susan Bickford has succinctly described in relation to Gloria Anzaldúa's work as 'embodiedness and embeddedness'.⁶



It is a beautiful ending, one that suggests that the act of gathering together to be in audience is enough; one that suggests, or reminds us, that when we are gathered together in a theatre we are also, in some sense, already walking towards change and optimism and struggle and celebration and houses and homes and cities and streets and families and friends and strangers and enemies. It is an ending that suggests that to change the world is to take a moment to acknowledge that we are already part of a changing world, and to notice each other differently within it. The end of this show allies the experience of being in the theatre with the many other experiences of our lives, suggesting that to take part in theatre is at once a necessary, profound, political act, and that it is continuous with all the other parts of our complex everyday lives. It is an ending that acknowledges its audience. And it is optimistic.

And yet.

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And yet, on the night that I was in the audience, I had a very particular experience of this ending. I was sitting in my seat and the house lights were up, as they had been throughout the show. Andy Smith had been performing *all that is solid melts into air*. Just before he left, as he was beginning to make his way out of the theatre, he said these words:

" **I hope someone is with me.** "

And what I saw was a man leaving the theatre, hoping that someone was with him, but walking alone. What I wanted to do more than anything in that moment was to get up from my seat and to walk with him. I wanted to share his optimism, and I wanted the fact of our gathering to have given me the strength that I needed to take this action. But instead of doing these things, I remained in my seat, and I applauded along with the rest of the audience, allowing the experience of being-in-audience to officially end before I walked out of the auditorium that night.

assumptions and biases about 'voice' to become evident, and for this evidence to influence the shape of the discourse that follows. Taking on Royster's proposal, in her writing Ratcliffe outlines a model for rhetoric that includes a series of specific practical exercises to encourage the recognition and acknowledgement of personal biases in a teaching situation.

Both are describing a need for change that is systemic.

Royster's words are of course also a tribute to Audre Lorde's famous 1978 essay 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action'. This feels important to note. Both pieces concern the experience of attempting to speak and to be heard as a woman of colour in a society that struggles to hear, but repeatedly creates, both the categories 'woman' and 'coloured'. In Lorde's essay, the transformation in question is one that feels exposing and dangerous but also essential to survival:

→ in a listening environment, assumptions & biases rise to the surface (can be painful/difficult) (9)

took up the challenge of answering Royster's question in her 2006 book, *Rhetorical Listening*, a scrutiny of her own practices of listening and speaking as a white female academic.⁴ Royster and Ratcliffe both confront the problem of how to 'talk back' in a way that also involves listening; this includes the problem of how one might be able to listen without already preparing to talk back, and without already imposing an agenda. In other words, they are taking on the problem of the transactional nature of speaking and listening, asking whether and how it might be possible to change the shape of those transactions in a way that prioritises listening.

In the quote above, Royster proposes the inclusion of what she calls 'a critical moment' within spoken discourse. She goes on to describe this critical moment as a deliberate pause or hiatus in familiar institutional paradigms – where words are customarily exchanged rapidly and without reflection on subject position – in order to allow

At some level, I felt that I had failed.

As I reflect back on this moment and read the playscript, I understand that Smith did not require us to physically join him as he left the theatre that night. The reading I now prefer is the one that I described first, the one in which Smith's hope functions as an acknowledgment of what he feels is already happening when we gather together to be in audience. Perhaps more significantly, I also understand that whether I had stayed in my seat and applauded, or leapt up to start a revolution, the same problem would have become manifest for me. And that problem was not in fact about whether I was capable of moving into action; rather, if anything, it was a crisis of identity. My crisis in that moment was located in the impossibility of imagining myself in the world outside the theatre while remaining within the listening of the theatre; or in other words, borrowing from Jacqueline Jones Royster, it was the crisis of how to translate listening into language and action. →

→ "We speak within systems that we know significantly through our abilities to negotiate noise and to construct within that noise sense and sensibility. [...] My experiences tell me that we need to do more than just talk and talk back. I believe that in this model we miss a critical moment. We need to talk, yes, and to talk back, yes, but when do we listen? How do we listen? [...] How do we translate listening into language and action, into the creation of an appropriate response?"³

Royster's writing has a specific context and purpose; this essay, originally a speech she gave at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Washington DC in 1995, was intended to address institutional sexism and racism and to advance the parameters for cross-boundary discourse in an academic setting. It is also primarily an essay about speaking rather than listening. Bearing in mind these differences in context and aim, I would like to spend a

little time with Royster's thinking around the relationship between listening, language, and action – one that she goes on to describe as being unavoidably bound up in both speaker and listener's personal history and culture as well as their marked racial and gendered status. It is my belief that it will prove productive to consider her question, 'How do we translate listening into language and action, into the creation of an appropriate response?' as a way to draw out the relationship between the constructed, temporary resistance of theatrical listening, and the wider political and social contexts of that resistance.

Royster begins the paragraph above by referring to the systems within which we speak; systems which, in her words, 'we know significantly'. These are the familiar systems of the declarative: systems which not only privilege certain modes of speaking but also privilege certain bodies as more visible and audible than others. Ten years after Royster's essay was published, Krista Ratcliffe explicitly