

## Look Away, Dixieland

Suzanne de Castell  
*Simon Fraser University*

Can we please begin at the end of this presidential address, and read backward to its announced topic of “listening at an angle”? Because my response is to say that much more than listening is at stake in this address, and (contrary to all we’ve been taught) we will never get to see that by looking straight ahead.

Audrey Thompson directs us, at this essay’s conclusion, less to listening and more to what has been a longstanding project of rousing philosophy of education to awareness of foundational challenges to both its substance and method, and to the tools philosophers of education can bring to bear on these. A constellation of profound critical work thus composes the backdrop to the present address — from the “baby with a gun” to “postmodern sheep,” that trajectory targets and challenges the very medium of philosophy, from its means to its ends, in painstaking, careful intellectual inquiry done through gently mocking and endearingly comical representations of philosophical discourses and practices.<sup>1</sup> It has chipped away at the pretensions and misdirections and predilections of a discipline that studiously refuses to see, hear, and feel the world and its others, in the name of “making sense.”

As the concluding sentence says, “Philosophers (and others) do a certain amount of talking to (rather than with) others in our heads. We explain things, we debate things, we rearrange the discussion so that enlightenment ensues. But there is no way to make things come out right in your head: they can only come out differently in the relationship.”

Making things come out right in one’s head is hard enough to keep us all distracted from the business of living well in a world of others. “You’re not quite right in the head,” my mother used to despair (surely as “shrug-ily” as, and maybe more so than, Thompson’s mother, mine, too, came at things a bit differently). At any rate I did try hard to get things right “in my head,” and, studiously philosophical, I managed for many, many years to miss her point and thereby to leave a good deal behind in pursuit of “enlightenment”: the world, for example, other peoples’ minds, my own and other peoples’ bodies — just for starters. Every form of knowledge has its “dark side” of finely honed ignorance, and philosophy is no exception. In learning how to look, we learn at the same time how to look away. This is unavoidable: if we could see everything that is here, we would make out nothing. And so we undertake, as philosophers, to make things come out right in our heads, and we look away from how this often makes things come out (wrong!) in the world, for other people, even in our own bodies. Is this an essay about listening, then? Or one about what we look away from, and ways we might devise to encounter that from which we look away.

I WISH I WERE IN THE LAND OF COTTON...

Whiteness studies have generally received (and for the most part have graciously and, quite resiliently, accepted) critiques of self-absorption: that whiteness

studies repackages, for the dominant, new and ever more redemptive ways to continue to occupy center stage in the guise of self-reflexive critique and in the service of antiracist pedagogies and practices. Thompson's brilliantly ironic "Tiffany: Friend of People of Color"<sup>2</sup> led us through some of the deeply ingrained ways we have developed to make our looking at racism and white privilege into just another way to "look away" from the avowed subject of our attention and to look back at ourselves, out there front and center yet again, seen from the standpoint of our own desires and wishes, inured to the ways in which this skilled return to center in the name of concern for "the other" works against our purported subjects, to resubjugate the other in a stirring Song of Myself:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume...<sup>3</sup>

How can we come to see and to understand without placing ourselves in the center, without presuming that others could or should assume what I assume,<sup>4</sup> and know only insofar as they know what I know? This is where "angled listening" and "sideward glances"<sup>5</sup> come into play. Armed with years of sophisticated talking to others from inside our heads has afforded philosophers a well-honed language "mightier than the sword," so that it is only really through glancing blows, attacks from behind, and assaults from the periphery that our defenses can be breached. How, then, to make ourselves vulnerable enough to consciously inhabit our fragile and flawed bodies, to dwell enough with others that we no longer insist that they see what we see, to live with our complicity in a broken and dying world, one in which things MUST be deliberately remade, MUST be reworked so they can "come out differently" because, to re-cite Dorothy Smith's insistence, "the dimensions of our oppression are only fully revealed in discoveries that go beyond what direct experience will teach us"<sup>6</sup> Can we cultivate *indirect* experience, and experience through indirection? To listen "at an angle," to see by "looking away," these may be invaluable tools for that deliberate remaking.

"What I am looking for — seeking and knowing I can't find in any final, satisfied way — is a different, embodied response, a different relationality, a visceral, embodied shift ... a refusal of telling relations," Thompson observes. Relationships of embodied responsiveness, where people touch one another, co-inhabit a "lived actuality"<sup>7</sup> seen as "a call to be attuned, to acknowledge, to testify, to experience with," can't be realized through skillful information processing, sincerity, or studiousness. Thompson characterizes hers as a "broken" address, and I would just add that very likely it is only through such broken talk that what needs saying can get said.

"I'LL TAKE MY STAND...": ACCOUNTABLE POSITIONING,  
TEXTUAL PLEASURES, AND RHETORICAL RESPONSIBILITIES

To address a scholarly society as its president is a very peculiar kind of thing. Here, words take a special significance; they are differently "marked" with their own distinctive requirements and unique temptations and pleasures. A president normally will want to please the listening members, so usually a kind of redemptive-to-congratulatory tone is indicated. Rhetorically, a "presidential address" is inevitably

an act of steering, a proposing to that society of a particular course. Resistance to the “taking a stand” part of the rhetorical agenda is more or less futile.

A performance will be enacted, a text will be produced, and then the libertine practices, both “ruled” and un-ruly, of reading will take over an accomplishment of present speech now ossified into a textual form regulated by a different rhetorical apparatus. Unable to be bodily present at the original speaking, I feel accountable for a kind of secondary steering — a reader’s, not a listener’s steering — of “what is being said” in this text. Thus risking interpretive violence, I read the text as an appeal to this society to trace and attend to its limits, to better know its margins, and to more fully inhabit worlds ec-centrally. Thompson indeed speaks particularly about listening, asking how we are to “listen and receive the other...when the very terms of listening are articulated to the virtues, principles, sense of wholeness, sense of ourselves in relation that we now have”? She uses touch as a way to think about listening (and textually, of course, listening as a way to think about touch, about embodiment and being in place), “to frame listening in terms of responsiveness rather than simply receptivity.”

What follows, if we take rhetorical positioning into account, is a call to engaged interaction as a methodological keystone of philosophy of education, in which “what is at stake is not a set of idealized virtues but an emergent approach,” a theoretical shift from epistemology to ontology<sup>8</sup> that relinquishes (if often imperfectly) the premise of intelligibility and manages to live accountably under always-contingent conditions, walking on shaky ground.

So what about listening as a way to think about touch? How does interactivity work in that direction? “Listening” — the auditorily sensible, as against “the visual” — is a useful synecdochic trope for referencing embodiment.

If we think about the remaking that has to be done, with our current tool set (“we explain things, we debate things, we rearrange the discussion so that enlightenment ensues”), philosophy, good as it may be in advancing and sustaining “the virtues, principles, sense of wholeness, sense of ourselves in relation that we now have,” will have no useful part to play in any deliberate remaking that privileges being over knowing. If, however, indirection, imperfection, complicity, incompleteness, and incomprehension can become a focus of our responsive attention, rather than seen as failures or roadblocks on the path to enlightenment, we might hope to build a philosophical scholarship capable of “remaking...our relations with others and...our knowledge.”<sup>9</sup> For, quoting Dorothy Smith again, “Remaking, in the context of intellectual enterprise, is itself a course of inquiry.”<sup>10</sup>

Playfulness, incomprehension, concession, a shrug — all have their place, but what is called for can only be known or even really thought about from within our embodied relationship to that situation; what’s “called for” needs to be informed by the particularities of who’s calling, and who’s being called, rather better than philosophers have been accustomed to. What matters is being, (following Audrey following Lugones) “the interactive part,” the being in touch by being touched, so that in speaking, we might better grasp to whom and of what we speak. Thus we start

with de-centered listening that cares to know who is speaking, why, and about what before and over the “what” that is said, and, by intentionally setting itself off balance, can listen enough to not only hear but also, therefore, to inter-act “at an angle.” But what (inter-)actions, and how will readers “hear” this address?

I read this text as one addressed specifically to the members of this society and those students, colleagues, and others who may in time read its annual meeting papers collected in this volume. So seen, this is a very tight focus, from the standpoint of addressivity. Taking account of that focus, and reading backward to end at the beginning, this address is an exhortation, one that devotes quite a lot of its time to giving hearers fair warning of the upheaval its proposed direction will cause, pointing out ways that pain has its values, gruffness may convey loving support, confusion can be precisely what makes sense — and that they (we) will need to turn and shoulder a glancing blow whose head-on encounter could paralyze us. I therefore read this text as one of the utmost gentleness, care, and kindness, and I urge the reading of Thompson’s other work, which helps greatly to see how deeply radical is this call for “listening at an angle.”

Finally, who is being called, and called to what? At least two audiences: The first is educators, who need to understand how great is the contribution ignorance can make to their pedagogical (inter)actions.<sup>11</sup> And, as principal audience, it is surely professional philosophers of education who are being addressed, who are being warned to anticipate blows, for whom the message surely has not to do so much with how to listen, but with the need to ontologize epistemology — and to make that move reflexive by reinhabiting bodies and contexts and communities in ways that will make our selves as vulnerable as our work. We have to do things differently; things are now too broken to carry on; and critical times call for radical turns, as does Thompson take this presidential opportunity to make here: let’s just be clear about that.

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1. Audrey Thompson, “The Baby with a Gun: A Feminist Inquiry into Plausibility, Certainty and Context in Moral Education,” in *Philosophy of Education 1990*, ed. David P. Ericson (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1991), 240–50; and Audrey Thompson, “There Are No Sheep in Post-Structuralism,” in *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald David Glass (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 193–201.

2. Audrey Thompson, “Tiffany: Friend of People of Color,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 81–114.

3. Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (1881; repr. Stilwell, Kans.: Digireads.com Publishing, 2006).

4. Interpretive violence again: this is an eccentric “reading” of Whitman, very admittedly. Whitman intends “myself” entirely inclusively, after all. At least at first glance, there is, therefore, considerable distance between the generosity of Whitman’s verse here, as it is more faithfully read, and attributing epistemic arrogance and self-absorption. The question of what is and what isn’t a “gift” is deeply implicated, though, in this question of assumptive mutuality, making the readings closer together than first suspected.

5. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

6. Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern Press, 1987), 107.

7. Ibid., 25.

8. Martin Holbraad, "Ontography and Alterity: Defining Anthropological Truth," *Social Analysis* 53, no. 2 (2009): 80–93.

9. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic*, 107.

10. Ibid.

11. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kirstin Ross (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).