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# Rhetorics of Invitation and Refusal in Terry Tempest Williams's *The Open Space of Democracy*

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## **Keywords**

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Jill Swiencicki, PhD

## **Rhetorics of Invitation and Refusal in Terry Tempest Williams'**

### *The Open Space of Democracy*<sup>i</sup>

#### Abstract

This essay aims to break through an impasse in the scholarship about the uses and limits of invitational rhetoric for social change. After analyzing the arguments about invitational approaches to communication, the essay focuses on a case (about freedom of expression after 9/11) wherein invitations to listen have been refused. In examining the refusal stage of the invitational encounter, I find that what interlocutors chose to do after being refused is as important as the gesture of invitation itself. The choice to publicize refusals to listen, for example, reveals previously unconsidered ways that invitational rhetoric succeeds in getting marginalized points of view heard, and reinvigorating democratic practice. Using the example of Terry Tempest Williams's book *The Open Space of Democracy*, the online journal she kept during her book tour, and student activism surrounding her campus visit at Florida Gulf State University, I examine ways out of binary constructions of rhetorical modes in their conceptual, isolated forms, and into studying modes like invitational rhetoric in their dynamic ecologies.

Keywords: invitational rhetoric, listening, feminism, rhetoric, Terry Tempest Williams,

September 11, 2001, activism, social change, campus activism

“The arduous challenge of negotiating political difference is to solicit a response from an individual who is functionally dead to one’s appeal.” –Jeffrey W. Murray, “The Face in Dialogue” (2004)

## **Introduction**

Is it possible to listen with openness to those whose political agenda runs entirely counter to one’s own? What value lies in listening to how their beliefs came to be, or listening for the overlaps in values, or for possibilities for consensus and action? How, in our casual encounters, in our political work, and in our national discourse, do we move beyond the verbal rehearsal of ideologically entrenched views? This essay furthers the conversation on the uses and limits of attempting to communicate with those whose worldview actively undermines one’s own. In it I focus on practices that fall under the category of invitational rhetoric, practices that aim less to persuade than to talk with the intention that more complex understandings of each other’s differences may emerge. The term “invitational rhetoric” was coined almost twenty years ago in Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin’s 1995 article, “A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,” which aims to expand and name feminist rhetorical practices that do not have persuasion as an endpoint or marker of a successful encounter. The article’s claims—along with research that features listening over persuasion—continue to draw impassioned responses. Yielding vigorous discussion in the fields of speech communication, women’s studies, and rhetoric and composition, “the theory of invitational rhetoric raises questions about the language we use, our goals as communicators, the options available to us, and the way we position and view those with whom we communicate” (Bone et al. 448). A post-9/11, contemporary consideration of invitational rhetoric must explore the extent to which listening is an adequate political gesture in

an era marked by the repeated bypassing of democratic processes. Such trends include the broad censure of political dissent, the governmental and corporate bypassing of democratic structures of deliberation, and militaristic restrictions on grass-roots, citizen activism. Is the invitational mode part of a legacy of liberal, civil exchange no longer possible in an era of such keen ideological entrenchment, extreme power differentials, and real material disparities?

In the pages that follow, I reframe debates about the relationship among listening, acting, and change within ecological theories of rhetoric and theories about rhetoric's role in democratic public culture. Such approaches advocate studying rhetorical modes in their dynamic, complex spheres of engagement; as performances of self within given discourses and communities; and as examples of invention that reveal invitation's creative, contextual force and its distributed effects. I apply this way of evaluating the invitational act to the events described in and resulting from the 2004 publication of Terry Tempest Williams' *The Open Space of Democracy*. Although Williams does not directly reference theories of invitational rhetoric in her book, I am interested in how she constructs invitations to those who openly and hostilely disagree with her critique of civic culture after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. I specifically focus on the rhetoric of refusal that consistently results from those invitations. I argue that telling the story of a person's motivation to listen, and the story of being refused, reveals the importance of narrative both for involving the audience in the ethics within and surrounding the exchange, and for creating opportunities for those differently positioned in the situation to take up the issue when listening fails. The activist spheres of engagement that were created by students who were inspired by *The Open Space of Democracy* reveal that issues of publicity and collectivity are a crucial part of invitational encounters, ones that serve the interests of the most vulnerable members of the democratic process. Rather than seek a perfect or maximal strategy in which persuasion may succeed, this

essay seeks a path out of condemning such practices as invitational rhetoric, which are as limited or potent as any other options we have to make social change. Instead, the essay encourages analyses that trace how rhetors respond to and recuperate the inherent limits of scenes of persuasion.

### **Invitational Rhetoric: Advocates and Critics**

Rhetorical modes based in listening feature “a stance of openness that a person may chose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (Ratcliffe 1). In this tradition, invitational rhetoric, as Foss and Griffin describe it, is advanced as a broadening of rhetorical means beyond the patriarchal bias of “persuasion, influence, and power” and toward feminist principles of “equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (“A Proposal” 2; 4). “In contrast to wanting to change another person,” argue Bone, Griffin and Scholz, “when rhetors use invitational rhetoric their goal is to enter into a dialogue in order to share perspectives and positions, to see the complexity of an issue about which neither party agrees, and to increase understanding” (436). Drawing from Levinas’s notion of “face in dialogue,” Jeffrey Murray observes that invitational rhetoric aims to lift ideological veils: “whereas a rhetoric of disruption challenges the potential masking effects of ideology, a rhetoric of [invitation] goes unto the Other in order to facilitate that unmasking” (339). In sum, invitational encounters are listening-based exchanges that create an environment where transformation and growth can occur, but neither are criteria for success (Foss and Griffin, “Beyond” 6).

After September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, activist Terry Tempest Williams attempted such listening-based encounters with those whose political views run counter to her own. In *The Open Space of Democracy*, she defines listening as a foundational democratic mode, one in need of being

recovered and relearned as the primary way to prevent the bypass of democratic processes and representative decision-making. Williams is committed to what Ratcliffe calls the exiled excess: recovering the material “that is left behind when we come to some form of common ground that has silenced the ideas most difficult, radical or confusing to hear” (24-25). In *Rhetorical Listening*, Ratcliffe critiques a “dialectic wherein the posited thesis subsumes the acceptable aspects of the antithesis with the unacceptable excess being exiled from the dominant logic” (24). To not bypass or exile difference, but to engage it, those who study and practice the invitational mode carefully outline processes and methods for this form of communication. For example, invitational encounters are consciously built and enacted on the principles of safety (others have a right to their own views), value (views different than one’s own are worthy), and freedom (people have the right to make choices that work for them)” (Bone et al. 445). While focused on listening, Foss and Griffin describe the change process that an invitational encounter may provoke as an affective-cognitive deepening rather than an encounter involving humiliation, guilt, embarrassment, or angry submission from interlocutor/s: “as rhetors and audience members offer their ideas on an issue, they allow diverse positions to be compared in a process of discovery or questioning that may lead to transformation for themselves and others” (6). This deepening generally happens through the main genres of the invitational mode— narrative/storytelling and direct questioning/inquiry—approaches which reveal origins and motives for beliefs, values and actions.

Despite these worthy aims and ideals, for some in the fields of rhetoric, communication, and women’s studies, invitational rhetoric’s appeal is limited. At base is the question of whether the desire to change someone can ever truly be suspended. Critics suggest that invitational rhetoric is fundamentally manipulative: what they see as the unavoidable desire to produce a

conversion experience in the interlocutor/s is embedded in the aim of understanding and listening. In “Civil Tongue,” Lorzano-Reich and Cloud describe invitational rhetoric’s inherent irony; although it was conceived as a feminist expansion from the solely antagonist mode, the calls for civility, reciprocity and understanding at the core of invitation are part of a sexist, racist legacy of limiting radical, passionate, change-oriented speech and emotion, along with bold material change (223). Desser sees invitational rhetoric as a reinscription of a disempowering, feminized stance, arguing that invitational practice is “too akin to the expressivists’ ‘ethic of care,’ too close to maternal teaching, too linked to the social/cultural expectation that women attend to . . . the voices we find infuriating and destructive” (313).

Critics also find that the nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, nonadversarial assumptions that undergird invitational rhetoric disregard how power differentials skew how listening happens, and disregard how power differentials create firm disincentive to dialogue (Lozano-Reich and Cloud 221); this is what Murray calls “the fundamental ethical asymmetry of the interpersonal encounter [that] infiltrates into the core of reciprocity” (345). Arbor and other theorists have developed practices attending to the triggers and defenses that emerge before and during invitational encounters, implementing strategies to address what critics see as the mode’s burden of conditionality: so many conditions for respect need to be met for interlocutors to remain motivated to risk, disclose, reveal, and explain that any sign of judgment or withholding during the encounter can make those involved retreat into practices that look like engagement, but are actually formalities. Desser highlights this resistance the invitational gesture must overcome before talk among stakeholders even begins, arguing the practice might be as apt to “reaffirm a person’s original dislike for a particular worldview” as it is to complicate or deepen it (324), thus

risking reinforcing the very dynamic those in the minority or oppressed position struggle to change.

Critics of invitational rhetoric concede that “theorizing resistance to oppression requires attention to both invitation and confrontation, along with criteria enabling critics to evaluate both modes” (Lozano-Reich and Cloud 224). Indeed, Murray writes that “both rhetorics are ethically obligatory,” and “neither rhetoric alone can adequately represent or fulfill the mandate of ethics” (335). Such critical analysis rests on the assumption that invitational rhetoric is the opposite of confrontational rhetoric, and takes place largely among a dyad that can but may not have larger repercussions (Lozano-Reich and Cloud 340, 341). This dyadic assumption is at the core of analysis of invitational rhetoric. It is an assumption that I believe crops out the larger context, situation and actors that are influencing that dyad, and crops out those who take up the work that remains, or the ideas produced by the invitational encounter. Working from the assumption of their distinctness, rather than their fluidity or existence on a spectrum of dialogic options, further simplifies and polarizes how we see these modes in their dynamic fullness in a rhetorical context. Lozano-Reich and Cloud, for example, posit invitational labor as opposed to activist, grassroots tactics (224), and this opposition presupposes that the two do not work coterminously and mutually to reinforce common ends in activist work. Lozano-Reich and Cloud do concede that at base all rhetorical encounters are both invitational and persuasive (221), and that theorizing resistance requires equal invitation and confrontation (224), but they do not examine in depth what such an interconnection looks like or achieves. When such examinations do take place, it is assumed that a refusal to listen marks the failure of the invitational gesture or encounter.

### **Rhetorical Ecology**

Critiques of invitational rhetoric, then, have oversimplified the invitational encounter in three main ways. First, scholars consider invitational rhetoric largely in a binary formulation, where modes of listening (which are cast as passive, accommodationist, and civil) are positioned in opposition to confrontation (which are cast as active, uncompromising, and change-oriented). Second, analysis of invitational rhetoric remains largely focused on the rhetorical modes of invitation and confrontation in a tight, dialogic exchange—assuming a person-to-person or group-to-group engagement that begins and ends with that dyad’s encounter. Third, invitational rhetoric has been considered primarily as an abstract, isolated form, and we lack robust case studies of this mode in concert with others engaged in a rhetorical problem, begging the questions: *What counts as a “deepening” of understanding resulting from an invitation to listen? For whom and at what stage in the process that effects do the mere gesture of invitation itself, or the refusal of the gesture, engender?*

These questions are essential to pull more centrally into the conversation, since rhetorical gestures like listening are distributed acts, rather than isolated acts of creation among individuals. How do we create models for analysis that capture the emergence, distribution, and effects of such rhetorical gestures as invitation? “Rhetorical situation models are undeniably helpful for thinking of rhetoric’s contextual character,” writes Jenny Edbauer, “but they fall somewhat short when accounting for the amalgamations and transformations—the spread—of a given rhetoric within its wider ecology” (20). Edbauer advocates the promotion and development of existing ecological models that capture persuasive strategies as part of “co-ordinating processes, moving across the same social field and within shared structures of feeling” (2). Such models highlight “the way rhetorics are held together trans-situationally, as well as the effects of trans-situationality on rhetorical circulation” (20). If a given rhetorical exchange does not reside in

fixed spaces, but rather in spaces that merge with others, then an ecological rhetorical model helps us see rhetoric both as a “process of distributed emergence and as an ongoing circulation process” (13). To recontextualize rhetorics in their temporal, historical, and lived fluxes is to potentially shift the way we view counter-rhetorics, issues of co-optation, and strategies of rhetorical production and circulation (9; 2).

And so when Lozano-Reich and Cloud ask “by what standard . . . are we to decide when and under what conditions invitational rhetoric would be productive?” (221), I argue we consider an *ecological* standard. When applied to evaluating invitational strategies, an ecological standard begs questions like: *Who made the invitation? Who listened and who eavesdropped? Who took the invitation up, intended or otherwise? By what means did the invitation get taken up? To whom did the invitation or its effects transfer? To what effect? What marginalized positions emerged in the taking up? Which positions remained suppressed and why? Which material conditions changed? Which did not?*

Critiques of invitational rhetoric rest on a conflation of agent and theory: that when an individual refuses an invitation to listen and engage, it is the fault of invitational rhetoric rather than the individual’s choice. To move away from this assumption, I examine what happens when invitation is studied as one strategy in an ecology of actors and processes working on a political problem. Activist and writer Terry Tempest Williams argues in *The Open Space of Democracy* (her 2004 book critiquing the public and political cultures created in part by the Bush administrations’ policies after September 11<sup>th</sup>) that rhetorical acts of listening serve the most fundamental of collective interests. The writerly, readerly, and activist ecologies surrounding *The Open Space of Democracy* reveal that no rhetorical mode—neither invitational nor persuasive—

exists in isolation, or is deployed in situations fully of our own making and control. The book's representations of engagement, and the readers' actions in relation to the book, show that when invitations to deepen political understanding are made in view of the public on matters of civic urgency, they can set in motion other kinds of gestures from actors differently positioned and empowered to serve the interests of those most in need of solutions and change. The invitational scenes in *The Open Space of Democracy*, and the journal Williams kept of her book tour (which appeared in installments online at *Grist Magazine*), highlight rhetorical features that resist pitting understanding against acting, and listening against change-making. When writers like Williams take us into the rhetorical ecology, describing their affective experiences and decisions to engage in invitational exchanges, it helps us identify the complex elements that make up modes of listening and observing, explore which ones overlap with and diverge from the persuasive, and see with more clarity their material and social effects.

### **Listening and 'Personal Diplomacy'**

Williams begins her 2004 book *The Open Space of Democracy* with the question: "How do we engage in responsive citizenship in times of terror?" (7). In other words, "[h]ow might we bypass political rhetoric and find our way toward our own humanity as we engage in meaningful dialogue and deep listening" ("Tempest"). In the desire to "bypass" rhetoric, Williams is not naively arguing that there is a truth outside rhetoric that we can access. Instead, she is interested in strategies that will move citizens beyond the verbal rehearsal of ideologically entrenched views. In this way, *Open Space* aims to counter a post-9/11 rhetorical trend in U.S. public culture that stifled the democratic exchange of political ideas. The first chapter in the book, "Commencement," chronicles Williams' experience as the University of Utah's 2003

commencement speaker. The essay moves between long excerpts from her commencement address and descriptions of her motives, fears, and affective experiences while actually delivering the speech. Early on in the chapter, Williams quotes from her commencement speech and characterizes the problem of our time as an undemocratic consolidation of power among government, media, and corporations enacted and maintained in part through what she calls a hijacking of language:

Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, we have witnessed an escalation of rhetoric within the United States that has led us to war twice in two years. We have heard our president . . . cultivate fear and command with lies, suggesting our homeland security and safety must reside in their hands, not ours. Force has trumped debate and diplomacy. Our language has been taken hostage. Words like patriotism, freedom, and democracy have been bound and gagged, forced to perform indecent acts through the abuse of slogans. (2)

Several studies of the curtailment of civil liberties and citizen dissent after 9/11, such as the ACLU special report, “Dissent after 9/11,” characterize the spring of 2003 as the season of Presidential bravado: President Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” rhetoric in Baghdad; the much-publicized toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Firdos Square; and rhetorics of might and right that, through an enactment of Bush’s “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” threat, aimed to limit the robust spectrum of response and action.

A perversion of language through ideological propaganda, as Williams describes it to the graduating students, has material implications for civic participation:

How do we engage in conversation at a time when the definition of what it means to be a patriot is being narrowly construed? You are either with us or against us. Discussion is waged in absolutes not ambiguities. Corporations have more access to power than people. We, the people. Fear has replaced discussion. Business practices have taken precedence over public process . . . Abraham Lincoln warns, ‘Accustom to trample on the rights of others and you have lost the genius of your own independence and become the fit subjects of the first cunning tyrant who rises among you.’ (6-7)

Restrict the deliberative power at the heart of democratic practice, Williams argues, and corporate interests will fill the space. This concern about “replacement”—about corporations and elected officials replacing citizen proposals and actions—was taken up by public intellectuals such as Williams, and by scholars of rhetorical theory such as Sharon Crowley, who observed in her 2006 book *Toward a Civil Discourse*, “if Americans do not know how to invent arguments, if they do not know that they can discover alternatives to the positions defined by powerful people and institutions, democracy is indeed in trouble” (26). Williams’ activist aims in this chapter focus on urgently changing the way ordinary citizens argue, listen, and promote diversity in public dialogue and public policy. Like Chris Hedges, Paul Loeb, Phil Donahue, Susan Sontag and other May 2003 commencement speakers, Terry Tempest Williams received more boos than cheers for this stance (Goodman and Hedges), and faced state harassment through several mechanisms, such as FBI watch lists and “no-fly” lists (Rothschild).

Williams does not just lecture about the problem, though. Throughout *Open Space*, she describes how, starting in 2003, during the Bush administration’s responses to the 9/11 terror attacks, Williams’ began to invite powerful public officials to, quite simply, engage in

conversations and shared experiences with her on the issues that divide them. Eager to practice a citizenship premised on rejecting the discourse of terror, with its hallmarks of binary exclusion, domination, and pre-emptive judgment, Williams promotes what she calls “personal diplomacy,” “a flesh-and-blood encounter with public process that is not an abstraction but grounded in real time and space with people we have to face in our own hometowns. It’s not altogether pleasant and there is no guarantee as to the outcome. . .” (*Open Space* 23-4). Those she invited to talk were men in the highest positions of the U.S. federal government and in higher education—officials who had at different times censored her arguments against the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, against the curtailment of civil liberties after 9/11, and against the large-scale, federal auctioning of public lands for corporate oil and gas production.

But in a book that champions invitational rhetoric, each of her invitations to dialogue are refused. Refusal to listen is, of course, the premiere option available in hegemonic struggles, especially for those in power. In the chapter “Commencement,” for example, Williams exited the stage after her speech to Utah grads with Tom Korologos, who was also receiving an honorary degree. Korologos served as an adviser to every Republican president in recent history, and was then a lobbyist in Washington for war funding for Iraq. “You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” he yelled at Williams as they left the stage; “I’d like to take you to Baghdad and see what you’d say then” (15). Less an invitation to Williams than threat, insult, and empty gesture, so appears the book’s first invitation/refusal. Along with Korologos, Williams quit the stage with Utah Senator Bob Bennett who said, “In the spirit of democracy, I want to register my strong dissent to your talk . . . you’ve inspired me to write you a letter” (15). His letter, of which Williams reprints large excerpts, focused on the central question that occupied his thoughts during her speech: “What would she be willing to die for?” (15). Bennett quickly moved on to

describe what would constitute *his* ultimate sacrifice: “the cause of freedom” (16). “This is what went on in Iraq,” he explains to her (16). Bennett refers to Williams in the letter as “she,” not as “you”—an interlocutor, a dialogist—further removing this letter from the realm of invitation, of a respectful exchange among engaged stakeholders. Implicit in Bennett’s question is the association of dissenters with those who, unlike patriots, will not sacrifice for their country, or even with traitors (“what would she be willing to die for?”).

A third refusal Williams features occurred while during her book tour for *Open Space*, when she encounters Gail Norton, Secretary of the Interior under George W. Bush, in a Denver airport. Readers fully expect a harsh greeting, and it comes on cue when Williams’ extends her hand and Norton refuses to shake it (“Tempest”). Over and over we see insults hurled, invitations refused, and dialogue rejected in response to Williams’ calls for free speech regarding our national response to terror and the erosion of democratic engagement. Those who oppose her in private use the language of hostile dismissal, adversarial challenge, and condescending didacticism, all of which aim to adjust and censure her perspective rather than hold a space for it.

While in the chapter “Commencement” Williams chronicles instance after instance of being silenced and refused, her central point is to feature her own attempts to listen, to end ideological deafness. After receiving the letter from Senator Bennett, which did not request a reply, Williams begins to construct one. She describes her invention process prior to composing the letter, and it features her keen focus on Bennett’s position as a Mormon Elder, as a former soldier who is part of a long military tradition with roots in both in the Mormon martyr tradition and in the U.S. military. As a member of a Mormon family that has lived in Utah for generations, Williams uncovers numerous points of identification between them, reflecting the principles of

safety (others have a right to their own views), value (views different than one's own are worthy), and freedom (people have the right to make choices that work for them) at the core of the invitational scene (Bone et al. 445). Williams replies to Senator Bennett with the following invitation:

We do not agree on the war on Iraq . . . And we do not agree on America's Red Rock Wilderness Act currently before the Senate. But I do believe we can come closer to understanding why each of us is committed to our own points of view and perhaps even adjust our perspectives along the way to find creative alternatives that we cannot only both live with, but feel comfortable in proposing together . . . [O]ur points of view might expand, even change, if we were to accompany each other to these areas of conflict . . . Baghdad and areas open for oil and gas exploration in Utah . . . Both are regions in need of creative discourse. Both are sites of deep philosophical divisions . . . I would like to think that we could bring our imaginations to the table and find a way through our positions to possibilities. . . . If you and I, a senator and a writer, but first, as neighbors, could find our way to common ground through shared experiences, perhaps it could provide an example of how people can come to listen to one another with real, authentic exchanges. (19-20)

In this passage Williams focuses less on the content of Bennett's beliefs than on what formed them. The aim of listening to understand is apparent here, as Williams solicits information about that which shapes Bennett's beliefs, rather than the beliefs themselves. To enhance accountability and identification across differences, Williams then points to similarities in family, beliefs, region, and then offers to construct a new co-identification—the shared identity

of traveler, of witness—in the proposed visits to Utah and Iraq. In this invitation, she creates a context in which accountability and trust would be crucial, as both would be travelers, foreign, and therefore potentially open to and reliant upon each other and each other’s perceptions. Such an invitation exemplifies Ratcliffe’s description of the four modes that make up the change process that grounds rhetorical listening: promoting understanding of self and other; proceeding within an accountability logic; locating identifications across commonalities and differences; analyzing claims as well as the logics from which those claims function (26).

### **Confronting the ‘Civility Standard’**

Foss and Griffin argue that “the change process” that emerges in invitational encounters allows “diverse positions to be compared in a process of discovery and questioning that may lead to transformation for themselves and others” (6). But for Williams, such an encounter did not occur. Despite serving as textbook examples of invitational rhetoric, the invitations from Williams represented in “Commencement” are refused. There is no reply from Senator Bennett, for example. There is no trip taken to Iraq or elsewhere. Invitational rhetoric as represented in Williams’ book and journal entries looks more like stalemate, thwarted desire, laying out of positions with real listening occurring in William’s prose, but not in lived encounters. These refusals take on added poignancy when we note that the most frequent term she deploys to describe a potentially adversarial interlocutor is “neighbor.” Williams uses this referent in her written reply to Bennett (“a senator and writer, but first, as neighbors”), and when she reflected on her brief encounter with Interior Secretary Gale Norton:

We were both women of the west, from the west. Colorado and Utah. Neighbors. What shaped our different views of landscape? What could we agree on? And at what point in

our development did we forge such contrary allegiances? This is the conversation I wish we could have had, that maybe one day we can have . . . Instead, the awkward silences exposed both our ideologies, our beliefs, our hopes. The difference was one of power. She didn't have to talk to me. I was desperate to talk to her. ("Tempest")

One might argue that Lozano-Reich and Cloud's arguments against invitational rhetoric are realized in the passage above. "It is precisely in situations of power differentials that we should be most cautious about invoking the invitational paradigm" (221), they argue, for "the oppressed are hard pressed to convince oppressors who benefit materially from oppression to be open to dialogue, let alone radical change" (222). Perpetuating such action advances what they call the civility standard (223), which aims "for understanding and dialogue rather than material (institutional and economic) social change as the desired ends of rhetorical engagement" (223). Here civility is placed in opposition to activist, change-oriented persuasion, rendering invitation as accommodationist, as "predicated on making distinctions that support accepted practices and values, and entails enacting those distinctions to the detriment of the purportedly uncivil" (224). Isolated as a single rhetorical mode, invitational rhetoric in a private encounter, like a letter or private conversation, can appear to reinforce the inability for such a civil mode to succeed, for the counter-hegemonic invitation to be dismissed.

Sharon Crowley is also a skeptic of civility's potential to deepen action-oriented, change-oriented, social justice-oriented civic engagement. In Williams' invitation to Bennett, Williams demonstrates what Crowley might see as a liberal "faith in reason and shared understandings," which undergird the logics of deliberative and, to an extent, invitational rhetorical practices:

The implication is that peaceful resolutions of disagreements can occur if citizens become able to understand the circumstances of one another's lives, can grasp the motives and actions of others with clarity and/or achieve empathy with one another. While I do not doubt that the achievement of understanding would greatly assist the resolution of disagreements, I suffer from a failure of imagination regarding its feasibility in the really hard cases of disagreement that Americans face today. (43)

Such a focus on shared understanding, as Williams emphasizes in her letter to Senator Bennett, and in her reflection on her encounter with Interior Secretary Norton, could “forever postpone adjudication of opposing points of view” (Crowley 44).

### **Refusal and Publicity**

In “Commencement,” Williams does appear hampered by the civil, rational, measured response, by the apparent naiveté of suspending asymmetry for connection and neglecting how interests and power determine incentive to listen. But a bifurcated notion of agency may contribute to such a skeptical reading of Williams' invitations to listen: “In rhetoric as persuasion,” Bone et al. argue, “agency is present when a person tries *to change* another person; in rhetoric as invitation, agency is present when a rhetor tries *to understand* another rhetor, even if they do not agree with that person” (446). For these authors, “agency lies in the means used to create the environment that leads to relationships of reciprocity, self-determination, and increased understanding” (446). But such a paradigm circumscribes agency within the dyad's encounter, making a refused invitation look like weakness, like a lack of power for someone like Williams. A focus on power asymmetry, and on the failure of the dyad to listen, does not yet

acknowledge the strategic deployment of invitation, the power of its public story, and the ways that story can be taken up and remade.

In Williams' writing on dissent, the rhetoric of invitation is more resonant than an invitation to a single interlocutor. What is a failure among interlocutors because of the issue of power asymmetry, or because of a liberal faith in understanding over persuasion, becomes an invitational encounter among a readership to make space for corrective action. It is imperative to note that Williams' invitational rhetoric both performs the invitational gesture and then publicizes the outcome. This *invitational publicity* is activist, potentially provoking engagement in readers who are moved by the narrative Williams tells. Telling the story of the refusal to listen, of an invitation shot down or unanswered, is making public the bypass, a rhetorical move that invites *and* confronts. This two-fold move of gesture and publicity helps reveal the complex ways that the invitational mode achieves change. In the struggle for the signifier, it is important to narrate attempts at democratic engagement, to publicize when those attempts are refused, and to allow a larger space for response than Williams' alone can provide. Invitational publicity expands our ability to track how power circulates in such encounters, because it opens the scene of action out into those who witness/read it, react to it, and make change because of it.

Through an invitational encounter, Williams produces herself as a new subject of an emerging discourse of listening, and in doing so exposes discourses brought to bear in the invitational encounter that stall, refuse, or prohibit such gestures of engagement. Such production and exposure helps place the invitational scene out of the interpersonal or private realm and into the realm of doxa, or "broad cultural assertions about the way things are—what exists, what human nature is, how the world operates;" though doxa are arbitrary, they "become naturalized

and internalized as real (Holiday 391). Invitational publicity exemplifies what Sharon Crowley sees as the heart of the rhetor's skill: invention. Crowley locates invention as the site of power in rhetoric, featuring the double move that occurs in invention: interrupting and connecting with circulating discourses. Williams' narrative of gesture and refusal denaturalizes the cultural logics in place by creating an event that hooks into circulating discourses to simultaneously connect and interrupt (Crowley 51).

Publicizing the invitational gesture may denaturalize the ideological frames of those who seek isolation in their beliefs and from the repercussions of their actions. "One contextual principle that can mitigate the possibility of change," writes Crowley, is "the single-mindedness that accrues to isolation or privilege . . . those of us who want change should challenge privilege and isolation in whatever ways we can find or invent" (194). *Open Space* makes public the refusals to talk from those in power in Homeland Security, the Senate, and Department of Interior, calling attention to the crisis of democratic exchange among different stakeholders in the citizenry, as well as the reader's responsibility to act or repair this breakdown. The issues Williams sheds light on happened as a result of the hegemonic privileges of purposeful isolation, which justify the bypassing of the modes of deliberation that are the hallmark of representative democracy. Williams' detailed accounting of these refusals makes her point that ideological positioning bypasses listening and inquiry and hastens a rush to judgment; her publicity holds people accountable to their ideological rigidity, and publically logs their stance.

If the double move at work in invention—interruption and connection—is a crucial kind of power that rhetors perform (Crowley 51), then Williams does not succumb to the civility standard, nor reveals compromised agency when refused. Instead she plays out the limits of her

role (commencement speaker, author, respondent), makes public the intention and outcome, and in doing so invites those differently positioned in the ecology to enact agential change from where they are positioned. Civility then is a strategy optioned by one member positioned to enact it within the ecology of the larger struggle (such as U.S. civil liberties and anti-war activism).

### **Invitational Publicity and the Collective Response**

The journal Williams kept during her 2004 book tour for *Open Space* describes her visits to college campuses, listening to students talk about political engagement, dissent, and their future during the fall 2004 election season. Published online at Grist.org, the environmental news and commentary website, Williams' journal is in part an archive, featuring documents from Florida Gulf Coast University central to her dis-invitation from its convocation, as well as news articles about the incident. It is also a diary and travel journal. Texts and commentary mundane, intimate, institutional, and political mingle in this online record of stakeholders' engagement with the very ideas *The Open Space of Democracy* takes up.

The central drama of the journal is Williams' cancelled trip to Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), where faculty and students chose *Open Space* as their book in common for the 2004-2005 academic year and where Williams was to be the freshman convocation speaker and Rachel Carson Distinguished Lecturer in October, just before the 2004 Presidential election. The Trustees of the University voted to postpone Williams' keynote speech; in a shrugging apology, President William Merwin explained to Williams that he "didn't keep this job [serving at the pleasure of the then-governor Jeb Bush] by doing stupid things" ("Tempest"). Merwin argued that the overt political bias in *The Open Space of Democracy* was inappropriate during an election season. This was his claim, which the *U.S. News and World Report* subtly discredited

when it reported that, after Williams' visit was cancelled, Vice President Dick Cheney was invited to appear on campus in a re-election campaign capacity on October 12<sup>th</sup> ("Tempest"). According to the journal, in the debate that ensued among the President, faculty, and students of FGCU, Merwin conceded that Williams could speak if she expressed no political point of view and refrained from a critique of George W. Bush. Williams refused these constraints. Merwin requested a phone conversation with Williams to explain his final decision.

Williams did not summarize their phone conversation in full in the journal, but instead chose to feature herself as a listener who attempted to steer Merwin's pro-forma phone call into an invitational encounter. While the phone conversation lasted over an hour, she framed her retelling of it through the two questions she asked him: what were his concerns about her visit? What specific section of her book did he find most offensive? After Merwin read and then interpreted the passage in *Open Space* that he most objected to, Williams explained her intent in that section, discussed the section's purpose for her larger argument, and stated that she felt he misinterpreted the passage: that the section critiqued *her* responsibility as a citizen much more than it critiqued George W. Bush. When he reasserted how Trustees, state government officials, and other interested members of the institution would interpret this passage, Williams told him she felt they were each "trapped by ideology." "I appreciated our conversation," she reported as saying to Merwin at the close of their phone call, "It was important to me to listen to your concerns."

This refusal by Merwin to do more than echo the party line appears to reinforce critiques of invitational rhetoric as limited by the power differentials of interlocutors. Florida Gulf Coast University's leaders contended with powerful governmental sponsors that curtailed freedom of

expression on campus. Williams' journal exposes the limits to what ideas an institution can align itself with in a given situation, and the extent to which individuals can intervene. Still, a too tight focus on Williams and Merwin highlights the problem of "sender-receiver models of public communication" that "tend to identify a kind of homeostatic relationship, which simultaneously abstracts the operation of social links and circulation" (Edbauer 6). Indeed, most news articles that covered the story of Williams at FGCU feature the dis-invitation, and the polarized perspectives of Williams and Merwin; this insistent focus on the dyad begs the need to attend to the "constitutive circulation of rhetoric in a broader social field" (Edbauer 7).

The online journal dispenses of the conflict between Williams and Merwin early, and focuses instead on the effects of invitational publicity. This is the immense value of the journal, in which these power differentials are exposed—letters are published in full, the absence of replies are noted, newspaper articles are logged and, most importantly, an archive of the ecology of dissent unfolds. When Florida Gulf Coast University students learned of the outcome of the conversation between Williams and President Merwin they called Williams, who said, "you are the ones who stand to lose the most by this decision," and "this is in your hands now" ("Tempest"). According to the journal, the students informed her of their intent to create a coalition of student organizations united in protest and action to reclaim free speech on the FGCU campus, honoring Williams' aim to "bypass political rhetoric that has diminished all of us." The coalition decided to sponsor an alternative convocation on campus that October. This confrontational move, working against the administration, was explained in the students' letter of invitation to Williams, which she included in her journal. The letter was written by Brandon Hollingshead, FGCU student and representative of the student coalitions:

The students of Florida Gulf Coast University overwhelmingly and enthusiastically invite you to address the student body on campus Oct. 24, 2004. A growing list of clubs and student organizations . . . wish to co-sponsor this speaking event.

. . .

The [President's] decision flies in the face of what it means to be a university, particularly a university that places its emphasis on interdisciplinary studies and active engagement on campus and in the community. The goal of our university is to teach students not how to earn a living, but how to make a life. To this end, "The University Guiding Principles" places student success at the center of all university endeavors, stating, "learner needs, rather than institutional preferences, determine priorities for academic planning, policies, and programs." We feel that the decision to postpone convocation and to cancel the Rachel Carson Distinguished Lecture events does not place our needs above institutional preferences.

. . .

We wish to invite you to campus . . . as a speaker committed to the values of our Learning Goals and Educational Outcomes: culturally diverse perspectives, ecological literacy, ethical responsibility, and, most importantly, civic engagement. ("Tempest")

Of the many rhetorical strategies the students could have chosen to launch their case for an alternative convocation, they chose to feature the disconnect between the administration's actions and the university's core documents. The FGCU students show how the administration has trampled on the institution's core beliefs, wrongly promoting an adherence to a specific

political ideology that threatens to destabilize the more permanent, civic values of the institution. This approach exposes an administrative stance to prompt judgment among stakeholders and observers, to halt the trend away from student/civic needs, and to enact the principles called on in the institution's guiding artifacts.

The students' goal is ultimately creative: to create the space for dialogue, exchange, and information that the annual convocation was meant to engender. The students' broader motive exemplifies what Joseph Harris calls "countering." Harris features countering as a corrective to the standard notion of critique as merely identifying weakness or flaws in claims. Like Williams, Harris writes in a post 9-11 climate, and the analytical approach he promotes is focused on disrupting ideological stagnation and using analysis for creative inquiry and problem-solving. "What distinguishes the practice of countering," explains Harris, "is that it pushes beyond mere disagreement. Popular debates tend to begin with their conclusions . . . but the aim of countering is to open up new lines of inquiry" (57), focusing "less on the problems of a text than the work you are trying to do with it" (67). The central concerns of countering are eliminating logics of polarization or binarism, and promoting the performance of listening and creative thinking. The FGCU students highlight the disconnect between core values and current practice, yet their endpoint is not critique, but the production and sponsorship of a diverse gathering that produces the return to those very core values. As Harris states, the "aim is not to refute what has been said before, to bring the discussion to an end, but to respond to prior views in ways that move the conversation in new directions" (56). Harris grounds his rationale for countering through the concept of civility, which emerges as an insistence on both listening and right action; "in arguing for civility, then, I'm not pressing for a mere politeness, but for a style of countering that doesn't

stop at disagreement but instead pushes on for something more—that rewrites the work of others to say something new” (71).

Harris’s method of countering assumes a tight relationship between reader and text, but in the context of the students’ alternative convocation, the method of countering helps show how students took up the invitation of *Open Space*, remade the invitation to Williams that the university cancelled, and transformed the refusal into grass-roots organizing and a public event that fully achieved their aims of upholding university principles of free speech. The students ended their letter of invitation to Williams by saying: “The FGCU Guiding Principles closes by stating, ‘Tradition is challenged; the status quo is questioned; change is implemented.’ Please join us in challenging tradition, questioning the status quo, and implementing change” (“Tempest”). In an interview with the *Progressive* magazine, Williams says, “I did speak at Florida Gulf Coast University at the student-organized event, and it was an extraordinary gathering . . . I thanked them for their true civil disobedience . . . for not only reading *The Open Space of Democracy* but for embodying it” (Kupfer). She returned her speaking fee and asked that it be used to establish an on-going, student-led forum for engaging with experts and ideas related to the most pressing issues of our democracy and our environment. That student-run, student-centered forum is still in existence.

## **Conclusion**

Conceiving of invitational rhetoric in a persuasive ecology appears to run counter to Foss and Griffin’s intent of carving out a separate mode, outside the persuasive, in which to communicate. I argue that this intent is out of our control. Different rhetorical modes get enacted at the same time, and with effects we cannot determine. In the case of Williams and *Open Space*,

change happens not quite through invitational rhetoric, and not quite through confrontational rhetoric, but through ecologies of engagement where actions emerge, take shape, and then close or are remade around related issues. Such a view melds the aims of Foss and Griffin with those of Crowley: to identify and support rhetorical modes of listening and understanding to make just social and political change.

One element key to both invitational and persuasive rhetorics is the feeling people such as Williams describe when they are engaged in them: nausea, light-headedness, overwhelming desire to flee, and racing heartbeat. After speaking with President Merwin, Williams states, “I hung up the phone and my whole body was shaking. This unfortunate situation is now in the hands of the students. I feel like I failed them” (“Tempest”). Such descriptions of acute distress recur in *Open Space*. It can’t be underestimated how hard it is, as Terry Tempest Williams describes it, to “speak and stay,” to engage with a person who is actively working against interests you find integral to the work of justice (3). Yet further study that polarizes the affective and strategic complexities of modes like invitation and confrontation loses these linkages, as well as their dynamic exchanges and dependencies.

Balancing a critique of invitation while promoting its opportunities for agency and change reveal less the value of one approach over another than invitation’s affordances when played out in the larger context, which itself is always changing. The power of the collective to seize the limits of the invitational moment, and transform it into an agential sphere of engagement fully of their own making, makes Williams’ on-line journal an important artifact, and makes the students’ action so integral for communication studies. It reveals why invitation as a strategy toward change was essential in this case, as it launched grassroots work outside

spheres of power that were too entrenched to create change. Certainly motive matters, as it can be manipulative to publicize an interlocutor's refusal to listen in a headline-grabbing form of posturing that creates more hurdles to authentic, future attempts to engage. But as in the case of Williams, who so carefully set up ethical parameters for a listening encounter, it can also be a key act of invention, a genuine offer of engagement, and a call for others differently located to take up the problem from their uniquely situated space. Those in power like Williams are less change agents than invention agents. They are figures who provide exigence for movement among coalitions—like the Florida Gulf Coast students—toward a desired change. Balancing

Gestures of refusal are stark in invitational encounters, and refusal to listen to the oppressed or counterhegemonic view is outside the parameters of democratic engagement. Were rhetorical scholars to explore the dynamic ecologies of invitation and refusal more overtly, such analysis could contribute significantly to our understanding of political change. In a fractured political culture that suppresses dissent and shortchanges representative deliberation, considering rhetorical modes that do not have persuasion as their goal is an activist move toward (re)constructive democratic engagement. This is especially the case a post 9/11 climate of increased surveillance of those with dissenting views, the curtailment of direct action through protest, and the abdication of major media outlets in maintaining spheres for critical literacy. In this context, invitational rhetoric's attention to the change process in dialogue—how interlocutors make change through increased listening and understanding, distributing that work over time and across contexts and purposes—is important to consider in points of civic crisis and democratic impasse.

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