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RHETORICAL CRITICISM
AND THEORY

Rhetorical Questions, Theoretical
Fundamentalism, and the Dissolution
of Judgment

Lester C. Olson

Nor is his judgment warped...by having a theory to market.
Herbert A. Wichelns (1925)

How should communication scholars characterize the relationship between rhetorical criticism and theory? Accomplished rhetoric scholars have articulated conflicting answers to that central question, one of many that could be featured in a retrospective review. Answers have been assumed in passing or advocated with heartfelt commitment. At times, the criticism-theory relationship has been characterized as a seamless union, other times by conflict akin to divorce, and, more typically, transient liaisons in conceptually driven or generative essays. Critics and theorists alike are sometimes adamant about the available options. During the last half-century, controversy concerning the criticism-theory relationship has transformed inherited options for communication scholars. This essay will reexamine five ways of representing the criticism-theory relationship to examine an unnoticed, but significant development in the history of rhetoric scholarship.

That perspectives concerning the criticism-theory relationship should vary might come as no surprise. As the cultural conditions for communication scholarship have changed over the decades in the United States, rhetoric scholarship transformed in
noticeable ways—sometimes dramatically—especially at mid-century, again during the Vietnam war years, and during technological revolutions near the millennium. Rhetorical criticism now has a century-long history in colleges and universities across the nation (on earlier roots, Oravecz, 1986). As for rhetorical theory, treatises on this subject have spanned the centuries as messages designed for educating the economically resourceful, socially privileged, and politically powerful members of cultures from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Italy down to the present day in the United States and abroad. Rhetorical criticism and theory have changed remarkably over the years—both apart and in relation to each other.

In the United States, among major cultural developments affecting communication scholarship are: (1) the broadening of the franchise in the U.S. during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with expansion of citizens’ participation in high profile political processes initially across economic class by eliminating property requirements for white men, then across race in the aftermath of the Civil War, and, most recently, across differences of sex; (2) the proliferation of communication technologies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not only photography, the telegraph, and radio, but also, most recently, film, TV, the Internet, and digital technologies for the preservation, transmission, and representation of speeches, discourses, and symbolic practices; (3) the increasing concentration of extraordinary material resources in multi-national corporations and trans-national organizations, as well as the current processes of globalization with its ramifications for democratic institutions and the nation state; (4) the ongoing legacy of institutionalized inequality across differences of economic class, race, sexuality, sex, age, and the like, which have systemically entrenched identities in the rules, procedures, and practices of law, political life, the legislatures, the courts, religions, educational systems, media industries, health care, and home life in the United States and throughout the globe; (5) the current and disgraceful history of rampant, public violence, hatred, and inter-group conflicts, occasionally escalating into genocide, which communicate hierarchical place among groups of people, often masked as virtue and tending to undermine free and open participation in democratic processes in the U.S. and abroad; and (6), concurrently, the roles of organizations, institutions, ideologies, conventional genres, and the like in circumscribing human agency, calling rhetorical practices into question as delusive. These and other cultural transformations have profoundly affected communication scholarship, including the definitions and scope of rhetorical criticism and theory.

What is or should be the relationship between rhetorical criticism and theory? A suggestive list includes the possibilities that scholars should: (1) apply existing rhetorical theories to instances of historically-situated communicative transactions to illuminate them, (2) generate or construct rhetorical theory from critical examination of instances of historically-situated communicative transactions, (3) identify recurring, general features or norms pertaining to a consequential group of communicative transactions, usually characterized as genres, ideologies, or social movements, (4) practice criticism with an appreciation for “atheoretical” insights concerning communicative transactions, and (5) articulate and synthesize the implied rhetorical theory by the individual communicator as embodied in her or his communicative transactions. Because of ambiguities characterizing the expression “atheoretical,”
which identifies an approach by negation—not theoretical—the fourth options is vague. Unless I am mistaken, this viewpoint ordinarily concerns histories of communication, where, I will suggest, an immense outpouring of careful, detailed scholarship has profoundly transformed both criticism and theory. As a counterbalance to the evident bias in reducing historical scholarship to "atheoretical," in what follows I will notice "ahistorical" treatments of rhetorical theory. The list is simple for heuristic, analytical purposes. Authorities on criticism and theory have combined certain possibilities, sometimes ambivalent and mindful of potential circularity.

By considering each option in communication scholarship during the last century, I will raise awareness of available options for the criticism-theory relationship to inculcate appreciation for the strengths and limitations attending each of them. None is unproblematic. In each instance, I will specify underlying stakes in the ongoing controversies, especially commitments to specific approaches for the construction of knowledge, the inclusion or exclusion of demographic groups, and ramifications for critical assessments. I will suggest that approaches which have begun from inherited rhetorical theory tend to be conservative and exclusionary in that they have proceeded from conventional wisdom ordinarily based on a relatively narrow demographic group's communication practices within a limited sociology. On the other hand, approaches that generate theory from practical critical activity tend to be relatively radical in that they have questioned, transformed, or provided alternatives to conventional wisdom, while dramatically expanding the range of demographic groups comprehended in relatively capacious and inclusive scholarship. There are exceptions. In fact, one major transformation in rhetoric scholarship has entailed rejecting these two options as a stark binary, or double bind (Jamieson, 1995), while actively seeking alternatives, such as conceptually driven or generative scholarship (e.g., Jasinski, 2001).

Over the decades, numerous essays have explored past rhetoric scholarship to describe its current state and to anticipate its future. During 1957, a special issue of Western Speech featured essays concerning criticism and public address, which, a decade later, were reprinted with additions as a book (Nilsen, 1968). In 1959, Re-establishing the Speech Profession presented four retrospective essays on rhetoric and public address (Oliver & Bauer, 1959). In 1971, a committee of prominent rhetorical critics produced an influential, collaborative statement, which set up priorities for the discipline in communication departments (Sloan et al., 1971), and another committee did likewise for rhetorical theory (Ehninger et al., 1971). In 1973, Charles J. Stewart wrote an historical survey of rhetorical criticism during the first half of the twentieth century in the United States. Subsequently, in a 1985 book, three essays focused on criticism of symbolic inducement (Gregg, 1985), rhetorical theory in communication (Leff & Procario, 1985), and communication and human rights (Hope, 1985). In 1980, 1990, and again in 2001, special issues of the Western Journal of Communication reassessed scholarship on rhetorical criticism with varying degrees of attention to its relationship to public address and theory (Campbell, 1990b; Henry, 2001; Leff, 1980a). Typically, these special issues situated rhetorical criticism in relationship to theory as though criticism is merely a "practice" with neither an immense body of critical and aesthetic theory nor with a crucial role in rhetorical histories. Among recent attempts to encapsulate current scholarship are Barbara Warnick's
fine essay on the ethos of rhetorical criticism (see Warmick, 2004), overviews of public address (Hariman, 1997; Medhurst, 2001) and tantalizing, brief reminiscences in Rhetoric Review (Enos, 2006). Because diversity of viewpoint on the history of rhetoric in communication departments is invaluable for sketching changes in the discipline, characterizing lively ongoing conversations, and anticipating its future, I encourage readers to revisit these essays. Allow me to begin with a sketch for a narrative orientation to noteworthy changes in rhetorical criticism and theory during the twentieth century before turning to five major options for characterizing the criticism-theory relationship. The narrative must be a sketch, because there have been several, consequential contributions to rhetoric scholarship. This narrative will take us to the 1980s, when I will turn our attention to five options to trace subsequent trajectories in a cartography of current scholarship.

A NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON RHETORICAL CRITICISM AND THEORY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Today, a certain narrative concerning the early history of rhetorical criticism and theory in the United States has solidified in communication departments. In this narrative, oratory was the central focus of rhetoric scholarship at the outset of the twentieth century. In 1898, Brander Matthews wrote concerning early rhetorical criticism that “an oration, or drama, shall be judged not as literature only, but also in accordance with the principles of its own art” (Matthews, 1898/1968, p. 4). In 1925, Herbert A. Wichelns observed, “We have not much serious criticism of oratory.” He argued, “Yet the conditions of democracy necessitate both the making of speeches and the study of the art” (Wichelns, 1925; reprinted, Bryant, 1958, 5–42; reprinted, Brock & Scott, 1972/1980, 40–73, p. 41). Early rhetoric scholars’ commitment to social responsibility and civic engagement motivated their systematic study of oratory, public speaking, and debate. Rhetoric scholarship, they argued, provided citizens with vital skills and theories for improving citizens’ speech-making, while it sharpened their abilities to observe, describe, analyze, interpret, and assess current and historical orations, public speeches, and debates over civic issues. Fully a century later, this commitment to rhetoric abides as useful and necessary for an informed citizenry in democratic and republican societies.

Wichelns’s topics and general approach to oratory became ensconced in criticism over the subsequent decades, even though he deplored pre-commitment to any specific theory or approach as “warping” critical judgment (Brock & Scott, 1972/1980, p. 48). His essay nonetheless became a recurring resource for an approach to scholarship on oratory that shaped much scholarship in speech departments for at least half a century (Brock & Scott, p. 69). Stewart summarized, “The emergence was rapid but narrow because critics were attempting to establish a new academic field—speech—and accepted too quickly a methodology and purpose of criticism that limited the nature and contribution of studies” (Stewart, 1973, p. 1).

In the United States, most communication scholarship throughout the first two-thirds of the century featured politically powerful, economically resourceful, and socially privileged white men within the nation. During the last third of the century,
there was a profound transformation in communication scholarship with regard to the inclusion of women, especially the most privileged women with regard to race, sexuality, economic class, and other institutionally consequential differences. Today, we probably need to exert imaginative effort to appreciate Wichelns’s endeavor in his essay to distinguish the study of oratory from literature, because, at the time, departments for the study of speech were being founded apart from English. This institutional change accounts, in part, for Wichelns’s overt revulsing of style and his suggestion to treat style as a “means of persuasion” in ephemeral oratory. Usually, rhetorical criticism was synonymous with speech criticism during the first half century.

Eventually, this general approach to rhetorical criticism, as it was elaborated during subsequent decades, was identified as “neo-Aristotelian” criticism (Black, 1965) or, more broadly, “neo-classical” criticism (Leff & Mohrman, 1974; Mohrman & Leff, 1974). The early approach to criticism of oratory was not as monolithic as it is sometimes characterized today, nor was it devoid of internal debate over such matters as standards of judgment. For instance, in the 1940s and 1950s, alternative approaches featured criticism of public address to examine social and intellectual history or social movements (e.g., Griffin, 1952; Wrage, 1947). In 1948, however, Lester Thomssen and A. Craig Baird’s Speech Criticism canonized what came to be known as the “traditional” approach to the criticism of speeches (Stewart, 1973, p. 1); Thomssen & Baird, 1948). Even so, conflicts among early scholars within the neo-classical approach may be exemplified by another landmark book, American Speech, which sought to shift the prevailing standard of critical judgment from an emphasis on pragmatic effects to a speech’s aesthetic merits (Nichols, 1954; Parrish, 1954).

The approach’s broad outlines were characterized by a commitment to using classical sources to understand oratory, because of an assumption that human nature had not changed appreciably with culture or history. Aristotle’s views were valued by these scholars, as evidenced in recurring allusions to the “available means of persuasion.” Scholars placed detailed emphasis on a speech’s historical context, giving priority to the speaker’s public image and purpose, the audience’s disposition and concerns, the message’s appeals and style as strategic, and extant evidence of results from the oration. Scholars regularly commented, if only in passing, on differences between written and oral prose.

The approach became a subject of increasingly vocal dissatisfaction during the late 1950s, when alternatives were proposed in earnest (see Nilsen, 1968). Escalating discontent among rhetorical critics culminated in Edwin Black’s 1965 book, Rhetorical Criticism, which was its most devastating commentary. Subsequently, during the 1960s and 1970s, some endeavored to reshape critical practice to reform the “neo-Aristotelian” or “neo-classical” approaches for the study of orations. Such attempts may be exemplified by Forbes Hill’s emphasis on “target audiences” to adapt Aristotle’s rhetoric to new cultural conditions (Campbell, 1972; Hill, 1972a, 1972b). Adopting a different tack, G. P. Mohrman and Michael C. Leff advocated reforming the neo-classical approach by devoting attention to the contemporary audience’s judgment to be rendered and, consequentially, the norms for the corresponding genre. The co-authors likewise acknowledged significant changes in cultural conditions, exemplified by the political campaign speech in nineteenth-century U.S. history (Leff & Mohrman, 1974;
Mohrmann & Leff, 1974). In 1983, essays pertaining to the controversy were antholo-
gized for students of rhetorical criticism (Andrews, 1983).

Concurrently—certainly by the 1950s at the latest—definitions for rhetorical criti-
cism opened to alternatives extending beyond oratory, public speaking, and debate. For
example, some scholars began to consider “discourse” (in the sense of verbal
messages) and symbolic action as the subject of rhetorical criticism. In the 1950s,
Donald C. Bryant wrote regularly concerning the “informative and suasive” uses
of “discourse” to broaden the scope of rhetorical criticism to include essays, open
letters, and other written means of communication (Bryant, 1953, 1973, p. 11). In addi-
tion, during the 1950s, Kenneth Burke’s germinal book, A Rhetoric of Motives, was
published and soon reprinted, becoming a major factor in broadening the scope of

Consequently, Burke influenced generations of intellectuals in communication
departments across the nation, especially from the 1960s through the 1980s (see
Medhurst & Benson, 1984/1991), down to the present time (e.g., Chesebro, 1993;
Christiansen & Hansen, 1996; Clark, 2004; Demo, 2000; Gregg, 1984, 1985; Olson, 1983).
The broad impact of Burke’s voluminous writings extended throughout the humani-
ties and, on occasion, into the social sciences and sciences. Traditional scholars inter-
ested in orations could no longer assume that rhetorical criticism was synonymous
with speech criticism. In 1974, for example, Carroll C. Arnold titled his book, Criticism
of Oral Rhetoric, language which acknowledged a sea change in definitions of rhetoric
(Arnold, 1974). In later years, scholarship on the rhetoric of visual artifacts and popular
culture sometimes combined symbolic and functional definitions of rhetoric (e.g.,
Brummett, 1993; Medhurst & Benson, 1984). An intellectual movement that was both
broad and deep was well under way.

Broader definitions for rhetoric as the study of “discourse” or “symbolic action”
made a profound difference for the inclusion of women and other under represented
groups in communication scholarship. During the nineteenth century, heartfelt con-
troversies recurred in the United States concerning whether women should speak
from the public platform. Women who complied with restrictions on public speaking
as “unladylike” or immoral would write open letters and essays instead of speak in
public to influence audiences, while other women confronted and transformed the
idea that women’s speeches in public were indecent or obscene. So definitions of rhe-
toric featuring “discourse” and “symbols” made it possible to feature a more inclusive
understanding of these women’s endeavors to persuade and influence contemporane-

Likewise, diverse racial minorities, working class people, and other vulnerable
populations found that broader definitions of rhetoric made it possible to reclaim
histories of persuasive engagement in public life. Considerations of forums beyond
the presidency, federal and state legislatures, and courts made it possible to include
speeches by many, under-represented groups in U.S. history. Much of this scholar-
ship burgeoned during the Vietnam War years, as dramatic war protests, the civil
rights movements, the counterculture, and activism on behalf of rights for women,
homosexuals, and diverse, oppressed groups came to public attention through
photography, film, and television. Social movement studies, the “rhetoric of black

During the 1960s and 1970s, moreover, rhetorical critics and theorists examined what was variously called "nonoratorical" rhetoric, "nonverbal" rhetoric, or "symbolic strategies" (Benson & Freyd, 1976/1982; Bosmajian, 1971; Tompkins, 1969; Worth & Gross, 1974). Rhetorical critics undertook examinations of popular culture and such visual media as film, TV, murals, and comic strips (Benson, 1974a, 1980, 1985; Gronbeck, 1978; Scott, 1977; Turner, 1977; for an overview, see Gregg, 1985); this arena blossomed to encompass all manner of vernacular discourse and visual culture. Books, such as *Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works* (Corbett, 1969), exemplified what Stewart called "the spread of interest in rhetorical criticism beyond the field of speech" (1973, p. 20). Scholarship from the 1960s through the 1980s was not "rather staid, uniform, and predictable," nor was it the case that critical essays "varied little in terms of their general format, tone, and articulated goals" (for an alternative view, see Blair, 2001, p. 271).

In 1971, a collaborative statement set up priorities that expanded the scope of rhetorical criticism to encompass symbolic action. The "Report" commented, concerning an intellectual movement that was already underway in communication departments across the nation, "Rhetorical criticism must broaden its scope to examine the full range of rhetorical transactions; that is, informal conversations, group settings, public settings, mass media messages, picketing, sloganeering, chanting, singing, marching, gesturing, ritual, institutional and cultural symbols, cross cultural transactions, and so forth" (Sloan et al., 1971, p. 225). Another committee chaired by Douglas Ehninger, likewise asserted that "Rhetorical studies are properly concerned with the process by which symbols and systems of symbols have influence upon beliefs, values, attitudes, and actions." These theorists called for studies of "the rhetorical nature of such forms as television news and editorial programs, multi-media campaigns, political demonstrations, and teaching in all its variations" (Ehninger et al., 1971, pp. 208, 217).

These academic statements, along with earlier intellectual contributions on rhetoric as symbolic action, set the scene for subsequent rhetorical criticism by scholars on what today is regularly referred to as visual rhetoric, an immense body of rhetoric scholarship whose history I have sketched elsewhere (Olson, 2007; see also Gregg, 1985; Handa, 2004; Hill & Helmers, 2004; Hope, 2006; Olson, Finnegan, & Hope, 2008; Prelli, 2006). Communication scholars sought to adapt to dramatic changes in cultural conditions, as media technologies affected how speeches were recorded and transmitted and as groups that had previously been excluded from scholarship demanded recognition and meaningful inclusion across differences of race, sexuality, sex, economic class, and the like.

Concurrently, alternative approaches to the definition of rhetoric shifted from the objects of study—speeches, discourses, or symbols—to perspectives taken toward
them (Sloan et al., 1971, see p. 220). Differences of commitment concerning such definitions of rhetoric were heartfelt. Stiff resistance to capacious senses of rhetoric may be illustrated by Bryant's 1973 denunciation of the definitions as excessively broad and the "Report" as "reckless" (Bryant, [1973], pp. 16–17). Although a "great man" approach had continued to dominate communication scholarship (Brock & Scott, 1980, see cover), the underlying stakes in the definitions of rhetoric extended beyond the demographic exclusion of featured speakers, however crucial this was. The institutional placement of rhetoric affected the controversy, too, because the departmentalization of knowledge in U.S. colleges and universities impeded acknowledging rhetoric as a counterpart to philosophy in its pertinence to humanistic scholarship across multiple departments. In addition, capacious senses of rhetoric were constrained by a keen appreciation that varied literatures, arts, and media required extensive specialization to adequately understand, criticize, and theorize them (e.g., Benson, 1978).

Since mid-century, rhetoric scholars witnessed a multiplicity of "methods" of rhetorical criticism, much of it inspired by science with its emphasis on hypotheses and reproducible procedures. The 1971 Report alluded to the twin roles of "critic-scientist" and "critic-artist" as means for a "rapprochement between the two" (Sloan et al., 1971, p. 224). Anthologies on criticism, such as Methods of Rhetorical Criticism, which went through three editions between 1972 and 1989, stressed assumptions, key concepts, and procedures for criticism (Brock & Scott, 1972/1980, Brock, Scott & Chesebro, 1989; similarly, Burgardt, 1995/2005). Such methods usually began from a supposition that rhetorical theory informed the contours of criticism.

However, some critics noticed that a critic's own values surfaced in his or her selection of message to be studied, the critic's understandings of its meanings, and communication concerning it to others (see Wander & Jenkins, 1972). Eventually, rhetorical critics and theorists turned to the study of science itself in a burgeoning body of research known today as the rhetoric of science, which has regularly questioned the verities of scientific methods and objective truth (Campbell, 1994; Ceccarelli, 2004; Condit, 1999; Fahnestock, 1999; Gross, 1990; Harris, 1997, 2005; Keränen, 2007; Lyne, 1986, 1995, 2005; Mitchell, 2000; Reyes, 2004). Scientific methods were not guarantees of objectivity, because they were designed by people whose interests led them to give priority to certain components of whatever they wished to research. Consequently, critics were left with arguments, intersubjective consensus, and, at times, speculation to support their appraisals; criticism was therefore rhetorical.

There were and still are alternatives in communication scholarship for defining rhetorical criticism and theory. Throughout the last half century, there continued to be heartfelt differences of viewpoint on whether rhetoric concerns the study of speeches, discourses, and symbolic actions. Across those diverse viewpoints, rhetoric scholars differed, moreover, on the specific functions of such messages to be considered as rhetoric. These perspectives range from a narrow focus on messages that function as "persuasion" (rather than "self-expression" or "aesthetic form") to a broader interest in the "informative and susorary" discourse to a capacious concern with identifications and divisions. Ordinarily, most rhetoric scholars combined
Rhetorical Criticism and Theory

During the last third of the twentieth century, additional intellectual developments further complicated and significantly enriched rhetoric scholarship, as both rhetorical theory and public address became increasingly inclusive in subject matter and attentive to differences of power, resources, and privilege among citizens. Scholars became better informed about an extensive range of theoretical perspectives on rhetoric that were neglected by previous generations of scholars. Historical studies of public address by oppressed and vulnerable communities multiplied, as did both substantive speech collections and critical biographies. These historical studies of public address profoundly transformed the available literature concerning rhetoric, not only by documenting previously invisible histories of public speeches, discourses, and symbolic actions but also by making it possible to recognize egregious omissions and limitations in prevailing rhetorical theories. In addition, the proliferation of increasingly visual media and innovative communication technologies affected the circulation and diversity of messages that seek to persuade, influence, or promote identifications.

So controversies over definitions of rhetoric can be understood as healthy signs of a discipline adapting to changing cultural circumstances in the United States. Yet, the differences of viewpoint affect how scholars characterized the criticism-theory relationship. Although this sketch is adumbrated, I hope it gives sufficient background to appreciate how the criticism-theory relationship has been opening up options since mid-century, an ongoing historical process to which this essay now turns. As I consider each of five specific options, I will trace trajectories in rhetoric scholarship in the 1990s and recent years.

Rhetorical Criticism-theory relationship: liaisons, unions, and divorces

The criticism-theory relationship has been a perennial and vexing subject. During the last century, some of the finest minds in rhetoric scholarship have made statements concerning this relationship, usually in brief passing remarks, but sometimes in lengthy essays. To even a casual reader, the range of options and views is noticeable; in some cases, the options are perhaps irreconcilable, because the various positions entail fundamental assumptions about definitions of rhetoric, the construction of knowledge, and appraisal itself. In this section, I consider the following questions: What are possible ways of characterizing the criticism-theory relationship in rhetoric scholarship? What are the assumptions, advantages, and disadvantages of each of those possibilities? What underlying stakes—academic, political, sociological, educational, and the like—attend each of the possibilities? What assumptions are entailed concerning criticism and theory in formulating the relationship(s) between them? Allow me next to consider some options for characterizing the criticism-theory relationship in the historical sequence in which they have arisen in communication, beginning with the earliest and most familiar approach, which continues to predominate today.
Apply Existing Rhetorical Theories to Specific Instances of Historically Situated Communicative Transactions to Illuminate Them

Edwin Black, who ranks among the preeminent critics of rhetoric during the twentieth century, gave his second book a mischievous title, *Rhetorical Questions* (1992). It was both a playful pun and a serious title. As a pun, it named a familiar rhetorical form: one could pose a query so that it appeared to ask a question while knowing that respondents would supply a predictable answer. This sort of rhetorical question depended entirely on conventional wisdom. Because received beliefs constituted the basis for apprehending and assessing discourse, the rhetorical form enacted and perpetuated a conservative sensibility—regardless of whether rhetorical questions were posed by a critic on the political left or right. Theory provided a dependable orientation or sensibility, whereas criticism consisted of its application to illuminate specific instances. This sort of rhetorical question bothered Black whenever he encountered it in scholarship, because he viewed this approach to criticism as a self-fulfilling prophesy, an affirmation of faith or ideology, not an inquiry through which a critic might learn something unexpected. At the same time, Black's pun, *Rhetorical Questions*, solicited attention to genuine questions concerning rhetoric as a discipline. Throughout his extensive writings, it was the latter sort of rhetorical questions that engaged Black's heartfelt interest and informed his vision of rhetorical criticism as human inquiry (see Black, 1992, pp. 1–2). This intellectual commitment positioned him on the theoretical end of the ongoing controversy, which was already decades long by 1990, concerning how to characterize the criticism-theory relationship.

Black is better known for his 1965 book, *Rhetorical Criticism*, which systematically dismantled an approach to criticism known today as neo-Aristotelian or neo-classical criticism. Black's effort to dispel the stultifying pre-commitment to classical theories in criticism was consistent with his vision of rhetorical criticism as having the potential to generate insight concerning rhetoric theory. Black was trained by Wichelns at Cornell, and Black ultimately believed that neo-Aristotelian criticism was a caricature of his teacher's ambitions for the study of oratory which Wichelns had outlined toward the conclusion of his 1925 essay. Yet, Black's commitment to criticism as human inquiry unmistakably continued a line of thought that he shared with his teacher, because both men abhorred the uses of criticism to "market" a theory.

Yet, among the early standpoints concerning the criticism-theory relationship was Bryant's lament: "The critical activity that has occurred...has failed systematically to apply the accumulated inheritance of rhetorical theory and principle to the phenomena, the processes, the artifacts of public address" (Bryant, 1973, p. 32). Celebrating the use of inherited rhetorical theory in applications to public address, Bryant continued with reference to an intensifying interest in dramatism: "Rhetorical criticisms' greatest ventures have been led, provoked, or inspired by Kenneth Burke." Although Bryant was bothered by a widespread failure to apply theory in practical criticism, his comments concerning "a penndie cookie-cutter" reiterated a commonplace metaphor concerning an unimaginative and predictable application of preexisting theories to instances of communicative transactions (Bryant, 1973, p. 33; similarly, Gregg, 1985, p. 46).
As was typical of most scholarly writing of that time, the options were presented in stark contrast—what today we recognize as a binary opposition or perhaps a double bind. Another illustration of the two opposing options for the criticism-theory relationship surfaced in Lawrence W. Rosenfield's essays about what he termed "model" and "analogy" approaches to rhetorical criticism, with the former following an approach that began from generalities to apprehend strengths and weaknesses in individual instances. Disparity, he explained, "between the norm-discourse and the actual one should provide some insight into both the aesthetic excellence and the rhetorical weaknesses evident in the discourse being inspected" (Rosenfield, 1968b; also see Rosenfield, 1968a, p. 66). The model procedure that Rosenfield sketched was predominantly deductive and presumed that the available knowledge in rhetorical theories was adequate for the speeches, discourses, or symbolic actions to be appraised in criticism.

Edwin Black's 1980 essay likewise set up a stark opposition between two competing views of criticism either as application of a theory or as open human inquiry by comparing what he termed the "etic" and "emic" approaches. He named "the theoretic or etic viewpoint, which approaches a rhetorical transaction from outside of that transaction and interprets the transaction in terms of a pre-existing theory; and the non-theoretic or nominalistic or emic viewpoint, which approaches a rhetorical transaction in what is hoped to be its own terms, without conscious expectations drawn from any sources other than the rhetorical transaction itself" (Black, 1980, pp. 331-332; in reply, see Leff, 1980). Black amplified, "One perspective on rhetorical criticism—the etic—holds that theory is to practice as means are to ends.... In sum, etic criticism applies general ideas for the purpose of illuminating specific rhetorical transactions" (p. 332). He offered as examples of the "etic" approach "neo-Aristotelianism, or fantasy theme analysis, or argumentational analysis or Marxist analysis" (p. 333; on fantasy theme analysis, see Bormann, 1985). Critical of such approaches as formulaic and predictable, Black observed, "A problem of applying any pre-existing theory to the interpretation of a rhetorical transaction is that the critic is disposed to find exactly what he or she expected to find.... It is, in the strictest sense, a prejudice" (Black, 1980, p. 333). He added, "It is significant that there is not a single case in the literature of our field in which a rhetorical theory has been abandoned as a result of having failed an application in criticism" (Black, 1980, p. 333).

Though Black's verdict may seem too sweeping—much may depend on the specific rhetorical theory and the historical conditions pertaining to the specific message—there was nonetheless an underlying political role, usually conservative, in using inherited rhetorical theory to inform criticism. In 1985, Richard B. Gregg (p. 43) observed astutely, "Often the relationship of criticism to theory is seen in a conservative light; knowingly or unknowingly the critic calls upon theory or aspects of theory to provide the substance from which questions or analytical topoi may be drawn to illuminate rhetorical transactions."

The conservative commitment can be discerned, moreover, by noticing patterns of exclusion in access to participation in the very forums highlighted by inherited rhetorical theories featured—theory not being exempt from history and culture. During the mid-1900s, rhetoric scholarship concerning theory transformed the entire terrain in U.S. colleges and universities, especially insofar as relatively privileged women
were concerned. In the United States, advanced education in rhetorical theory for
generations had featured ancient Greek and Roman cultures, when voluminous
tomes centered on oratory by a specific demographic group, typically consisting of
male citizens with sufficient social and material resources to lead in public forums for
the exercise of power and privilege. Such education featured theories by the sophists,
Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Hermagoras, Cicero, Longinus, Quintilian, and on through
the centuries to Augustine, Boethius, Erasmus, Peter Ramus, and still onward to
Francis Bacon, David Hume, George Campbell, Hugh Blair, Richard Whately and,
subsequently myriad twentieth century thinkers (e.g., Herrick, 1997; Kennedy, 1963,
1980; Luaties, Condit, & Caudill, 1999). Although such rhetorical theories varied sig-
nificantly in their assumptions, principles, and key concepts from culture to culture,
they usually presumed that oratory was central to rhetoric and their authors ordinar-
ily were privileged men representative of a certain social background.

Subsequently, many rhetoric scholars realized that colleges and universities had
neither accurately nor comprehensively characterized rhetorical theories from the
past. Rhetoric scholars documented rhetorical theories produced by and for women
(Donaworth, 1992, 2002; Glenn, 1997; Lunsford, 1995; Wertheimer, 1997). Such schol-
arship expanded the information available for relatively inclusive training in rhe-
torical theory. In 2001, a massive collection, The Rhetorical Tradition, brought together
diverse theorizing of rhetoric by a relatively broad range of theorists across dif-
ferences of sex, race, and, less thoroughly, sexuality and economic class (Bizzell &
Herzberg, 2001).

And yet, the preponderance of rhetorical theories taught during the last century
were exclusionary with regard to basic factors such as sex, race, and economic class.
So starting from such theories was problematic for an immense variety of speeches,
discourses, and symbolic actions. As Linda Alcoff remarked, “A plethora of sources
have argued in this century that the neutrality of the theorizer can no longer,
can never again, be sustained, even for a moment. Critical theory, discourses of
empowerment, psychoanalytic theory, post-structuralism, feminist and anticolonial-
ist theories have all concurred on this point” (Alcoff, 1991–1992, p. 12). Thus, although
classical theories by the powerful and privileged might have abiding value for studies
of communication by the people and forums comprehended within them, their
limitations and political ramifications became apparent for an immense range of
speeches, discourses, and symbolic actions.

Scholars noticed, moreover, that concerns with vision were evident in Greek and
Roman rhetoric treatises and that, during other periods, rhetoric ranged across the
humanities, including painting and architecture (Bevilacqua, 1976; Kjeldsen, 2003).
Therefore, starting from rhetorical theories that presumed a speech-centered focus
was problematic. Still others drew on theories concerning visual culture and repre-
sentation to enrich rhetorical criticism and theory (e.g., Barthes, 1977, 1981; Finnegam,
2003, 2005; Hope, 2006; Mirzoeff, 2002; Mitchell, 1994; Olson, Finnegam, & Hope, 2008;

The predominant mode of scholarship today continues to enact a theory-driven
approach to criticism, whether it proceeds from the evocative theories of Kenneth
Burke (1950/1955/1969) or Michel Foucault (1977, 1986; Cooper & Makay, 1988), from
Althussian notions of interpellation and derived constitutive views (Althusser,

As these examples indicate, the theories now available are more complex, diverse, and inclusive than during the first half-century of rhetoric scholarship. Yet, theory-driven criticism has tended to be predominantly conservative in that received wisdom has shaped the contours of practice. To its detractors, theory-driven scholarship contributes to the dissolution of judgment in that it is predictable and formulaic. In some instances, inherited theories produced under cultural conditions quite different from those in the United States migrate transnationally, as though universally applicable. Seldom do critics who proceed from this approach conclude a criticism by reconsidering, much less rejecting, the suppositions from which they began. Why this is so is a complex matter, and an explanation exceeds what I can contribute in this retrospective examination of the criticism/theory relationship in communication. Let us turn next to the other “choice” in a stark alternative, or double bind, often posed during the 1970s and 80s to trace its development with attention to possibilities—past and present.

Generate or Construct Rhetorical Theory from Critical Examination of Instances of Historically Situated Communicative Transactions

Certainly before the mid-1970s, scholars in communication recognized more options than using theory to guide and shape criticism, though many still embrace that first option, viewing criticism as a means to illustrate and exemplify foundational perspectives. For example, in 1971, Sloan and others (p. 222) asserted, “Whether rhetorical criticism ought to contribute to theory seems to us to be beyond question…. Whether rhetorical criticism can contribute to theory seems much more in doubt.” While articulating disciplinary priorities, the committee affirmed that contributing to theory was their first priority as critics and that they saw value in what they described metaphorically as “illuminating” contemporary transactions, an emphasis on the contemporary that still predominates (Sloan et al., 1971, p. 222).

Prominent critics proposed various technical terms for rhetorical criticism that sought to generate open-ended, theoretical insight from criticism of specific speeches, discourses, or symbolic action usually emphasizing persuasion or identification. For example, in 1968, Rosenfield briefly sketched what he proposed as “analog” criticism as a preliminary step in characterizing genres. He explained, “The essential feature of...the analog modality” was that “the norm employed is some actual discourse and not a theoretically derived prototype” (Rosenfield, 1968a, 1968b). He proposed that, by critically comparing and contrasting two carefully chosen speeches, critics could, through a predominantly inductive approach, generate hypotheses about normative patterns concerning genres of speeches. Although it was improbable that such comparison introduced an element of “objectivity,” as he claimed, he nonetheless sought to generate theoretical insight from critical practices.

Another sustained example can be found in Edwin Black’s writings, though he, unlike most scholars, believed that attention to a single instance could be sufficient to generate theoretical insight. This perspective on generating theory from rhetorical
criticism can be traced to his 1965 book, *Rhetorical Criticism*. Black wrote, “I can justify my appraisals of specific discourses by recourse to generally accepted touchstones of rhetorical excellence.” He amplified, “This may not be a generic definition, but it is a common procedure in ethics and aesthetics, and I can apply it equally well to rhetorical discourses” (Black, 1965, p. 67). He generalized, “Similarly, when the critic abstracts a formula from a single phenomenon of discourse, that single occurrence is enough to establish the formula” (p. 137). Subsequently, in 1980, Black's technical language commented on “emic” criticism and the use of “touchstones,” an idea in criticism that can be traced to David Hume’s eighteenth-century writings on aesthetics. Black explained, “Emic criticism does not view the understanding of particular transactions as the end or fulfillment of criticism. Rather, such understanding would acquire intellectual respectability only as it moved toward or issued in general truths about human experience” (1980, pp. 332, 334).

Michael C. Leff’s 1986 essay on textual criticism, close reading, and touchstones expanded these cryptic suggestions. Leff commented on the role of inherited rhetorical theory in textual criticism: “Theory is something that arises from an understanding of the particular, and abstract principles become important only as they are instantiated and individuated within the texture of an actual discourse.” (Leff, 1986, p. 382). Turning attention to how critical practice could generate theoretical insight and critical judgment, Leff then focused on touchstones in the criticism-theory relationship: “Since the exemplary case instantiates a standard of excellence, it provides access to qualitative grounds for rhetorical judgment” (p. 383). With regard to theory, Leff added, “Moreover, I think it fair to regard such critical activity as theoretical, though not in the dominant contemporary sense, which refers to theory as a body of doctrine, an abstract set of principles organized in a self-contained and coherent structure. Instead, theory becomes linked with a kind of activity, and meaning approximates the early Greek sense of *theoria*, which... denotes, a viewing or observing of something as a whole in order to understand it” (p. 383).

Black and Leff were atypical, however, of practicing rhetorical critics in the potential that each of them recognized for generating theoretical insight from criticism of single instances. Interestingly, caricatures of such approaches as “traditional” have deflected attention from the transformative, perhaps radical, ramifications for generating theories for current cultural and historical circumstances. More commonplace than either Black’s or Leff’s views concerning the criticism-theory relationship were endeavors to study groups of messages, usually as genres, movements, or ideologies, to which we now turn in this necessarily brief sketch.

Identify Recurring, General Features or Norms Pertaining to a Consequential Group of Communicative Transactions, Usually Characterized as Genres, Ideologies, or Social Movements

Although Bryant was troubled by a “failure” to apply extant rhetorical theories, he mentioned a potential to study groups or “families” of speeches or discourses (Bryant, 1973, p. 35, 41). Recall, too, that one reform of neo-classical criticism proposed attention to “genres,” a French word referring to kinds or types. A speech
was to be assessed normatively against the genre corresponding to the kind of judgment to be rendered by the contemporaneous audience (Leff & Mohrman, 1974; Mohrman & Leff, 1974). Similarly, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell distinguished between contributions as either enduring or ephemeral (1974, p. 10). After suggesting varied "processes that transcend argumentative controversies and immediate situations," she asserted, "These contributions are enduring because rhetorical theory deals with symbolic processes that are inherent in the human condition and recur in different times, in different places, and in response to different issues" (p. 12). The assumption that theory transcended history and culture, which pervaded communication scholarship well into the twentieth century, buttressed her belief that criticism provided enduring knowledge by contributing to theory.

Confidence in this assumption began to wane before the 1980s. For instance, Edwin Black's 1980 essay on the mutability of rhetoric inquired about how we might view the history of rhetoric differently were we to begin from an assumption, provocative at the time, that rhetoric changes with culture (reprinted in Black, 1992, pp. 171-186). Retrospectively, few may appreciate the originality of this essay, because the alternative assumption that he proposed has become enshrined today.

A modest claim might be defended today that generating theoretical insight has a general, though not universal, value, for appreciating, interpreting, and assessing messages within the historical and cultural moment for which the specific theory was composed. Genres, ideologies, and social movements were among the most worthy ways that scholarly attention to groups of messages developed over the decades. Landmark treatments of rhetorical genres ranged over an extensive variety of approaches and institutions (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978, 1990; Simons & Aghazarian, 1986). Scholarship on ideology in communication often featured Michael Calvin McGee’s essays concerning a concept called the "ideograph" (Charland, 1987; Cloud, 2004; Condit & Luaiates, 1993; Edwards & Winkler, 1997; Luaiates, 1997; McGee, 1975, 1980, 1982). Movement studies have likewise blossomed since mid-century (Griffin, 1952; Morris & Browne, 2001/2006). Normative attention was devoted, moreover, to components of rhetoric, such as narration and metaphor, on occasion advancing claims concerning "archetypes" (Fisher, 1984; Osborn, 1967, 1977). As major bodies of scholarship on genres, ideologies, and social movements developed, they demonstrated an increasing awareness and appreciation for history and culture, significantly circumscribing the scopes of theory constructed through critical practice.

In 1985, Gregg wrote optimistically concerning criticism of "symbolic inducement":

If critics can examine human response to and the suasive potential evoked by not only formally delivered speeches but films, art, music, architecture, and a myriad of other symbolic artifacts, then clearly we seem to be assuming that there are similarities of human behavior whenever we use terms like suasive potential or rhetorical response. The similarities do not lie solely in message characteristics or in the symbol systems or codes that structure them. The similarities reside importantly in the human responses to those messages and codes; in other words, they reside in what humans choose to do with symbolic messages (p. 50, see also p. 60).
Gregg emphasized, "When critics discover constancies in the processes of symbolic processing and inducement, they are examining fundamentally significant aspects of human behavior" (p. 59).

Yet, one shortcoming that ordinarily attends such research may be precisely a preoccupation with norms. It is perhaps desirable to question an assumption concerning the value of an emphasis on normative similarities in constructing theories. Much that could be valued in criticism concerns one of a kind events, or non-normative rhetorical performances, which upend presumptions concerning prudence and decorum. A growing body of criticism concerning queer and feminist rhetoric challenges preoccupation with the normative (e.g., Brouwer, 1998; Demo, 2000; Morris & Sloop, 2006; see Morris, 2007). Yet a fourth perspective on the criticism-theory relationship valued "atheoretical" insights from criticism.

Practice Criticism with an Appreciation for "Atheoretical" Insights Concerning Communicative Transactions

Since Sloan and others averred, "Certainly, much that we value as criticism is atheoretical" (1971, p. 222), rhetoric scholarship centering on public speaking has been transformed profoundly by extensive historical scholarship of public address during the 1980s and 1990s. Numerous anthologies of speeches and discourses featured understudied populations across differences of sex, race, religion, sexuality, and the like. These collections made it easier for critics and theorists to explore previously excluded communities' rhetorical practices. Concurrently and more important, critics produced numerous edited collections featuring rhetorical criticism and critical biographies of understudied populations. It would overstate the case to characterize such criticism as altogether " atheoretical," because most studies were either conceptually driven or generative (Jasinski, 2001) and because many studies were richly textured by familiarity with rhetorical theories. It would be precise to say instead, however, that these scholars were at least as interested in history as theory. In general, they recognized, too, that history and culture ordinarily formed the contours of theory concerning rhetoric, even though scholars bothered by " atheoretical" insight sometimes had produced "ahistorical" theory.

During the 1980s and 1990s, a wealth of anthologies did the helpful labor of making numerous speeches and discourses available to critics and theorists—usually without extensive critical comment. Of course, there had been earlier anthologies for protesters' and women's speeches during the 1960s and 70s (e.g., Fabrizio et al., 1970; Martin, 1972), as well as collections for speeches by individual women (e.g., Dworkin, 1976; Goldman, 1910; Shulman, 1972). But in the 1980s and 1990s, collections of women's speeches multiplied (e.g., Campbell, 1989; DeFrancisco, 1994), ranging across the centuries from speeches of nineteenth-century religious leader Lucretia Mott (Greene, 1980) to those of feminists like Catherine A. MacKinnon toward the millennium (1987, 1993).

In addition, the 1980s and 1990s saw numerous collections featuring speeches by racial minorities within the United States. Massive collections circulated the speeches and other persuasive discourses by prominent, individual African American leaders within the United States, ranging from Frederick Douglass (Blassingame, 1982)
and W. E. B. Du Bois (Poner, 1970) to Martin Luther King (Washington, 1986), and Malcolm X (Breitman, 1989; Clark, 1992). Noticing the omission of black women from most histories of African American public address and the underrepresentation of African Americans in most histories of women’s public address, The Rhetoric of Struggle featured public speeches by black women in the United States (Walker, 1992), whereas yet another collection included both black men and women, with an emphasis on men’s discourse (Dunbar, 2000). In addition, black women’s voices circulated through collections of speeches, essays, and poems by individual feminists (e.g., Davis, 1983, 1984) and rarely in collections centered on lesbian feminists, such as Audre Lorde (1984) and Barbara Smith (1983). This Bridge Called My Back encouraged reflections about rhetoric as practiced among radical women of diverse, minority races, especially black, Chicana, and Latina (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1981). Another collection sampled speeches by members of indigenous tribes from within the United States (Blanche, 1990). Still another anthology attempted what was termed a “multicultural” approach to communication studies of racial groups in the United States (Straub, 1996).

Other consequential differences were explored in collections featuring religion, economic class, and sexuality, as these too became the central focal point for communication scholars interested in speeches, discourses, and symbolic actions. Speeches and discourses concerning Judaism became increasingly available in various anthologies (Israel & Forman, 1994; Klepfisz, 1990; Klepfisz & Kantrowitz, 1990). Sometimes, collections of speeches were from religious and political leaders abroad; for example, by the Dalai Lama in exile from Tibet (1990) and Desmond Tutu of South Africa (1984, 1989). Rhetoric scholarship on sexuality was enhanced by collections concerning specific leaders ranging from early figures like Harry Hay (Roscoe, 1996), Harvey Milk (Shilts, 1982), and Larry Kramer (1989) to lesbian feminists like Adrienne Rich (1979, 1986), Lorde (1984), and Smith (1983). In 2004, Speaking for Our Lives made numerous speeches by gay men and lesbians available for serious study (Ridinger, 2004). Concurrently, the Internet and digital technologies made it possible to record and transmit speeches representing a much broader spectrum of human experience than had been possible in the past enabling the study of speeches, discourses, and symbolic actions concerning taboo and sensitive topics.

Recall that, during the 1970s and 1980s, most rhetorical criticism featuring understudied public address centered on speeches by women, usually foregrounding economically resourceful and racially privileged women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Critics typically made efforts to include examples across differences of class, race, and, rarely, sexuality. During the mid-1990s, a landmark two-volume reference, Women’s Public Speaking in the United States, featured numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century women speakers (Campbell, 1993, 1994). In certain entries, as well as many essays elsewhere, the rhetoric of working-class women and minority women in the United States came into view through rhetorical criticism and critical biography—often juxtaposed with practices by affluent women (e.g., Cloud, 1996; Condit, 1990; Dow, 1996, 2004; Solomon, 1991; Tonn, 1996; Tonn, Endress, & Diamond, 1993). This complex development concerning women’s rhetorical practices and diverse feminist perspectives unfolded through broad
chronological stages. However heartfelt are controversies today over philosophic sensibilities and approaches, recent scholarship on women’s communication would not have been possible without the pioneering research on terms available to scholars at earlier times (see Spitzack & Carter, 1987).

Critical studies and biographies of racial minorities also began to proliferate in communication scholarship pertaining to rhetoric. Rhetorical critics endeavored to enrich communication scholars’ understandings of rhetoric concerning racial differences in the United States (Calloway-Thomas & Lucaites, 1993; Cloud, 1996; Davis, 1998, 1999; Harold & DeLuca, 2005; Wilson, 2003) and, on occasion, transnationally (Cloud, 2004; Ehrenhaus & Owen, 2004). In 1996, a landmark collection, *African American Orators*, provided useful critical studies of forty-three accomplished African American orators in the United States, whose careers spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Leeman, 1996). Since the late 1970s, a range of Hispanic and Latino cultures have been receiving increasing attention by rhetorical scholars (Calafell & Delgado, 2004; Hammerback & Jensen, 1998; LaWare, 1998; Scott, 1977), although rarely centering on Latina and Chicana women to examine differences of sex and sexuality within U.S. borderlands (Flores, 1996). On occasion, there has been substantive rhetorical criticism of Native American protest rhetoric as well (Lake, 1983; Morris & Wander, 1990). Rhetorical criticism in essays and collections concerning rhetoric and sexuality likewise made it increasingly difficult for traditional scholars of rhetorical criticism and theory to continue to present research as either comprehensive or sufficiently complex for diverse societies (Balter-Reitz & Stewart, 1996; Brouwer, 1998; Cheesbro, 1981; Morris & Sloop, 2006; Olson, 1997; Ringer, 1994; see Morris, 2007). One ambivalent outcome of the central focus on demographic groups is that rhetorical practices and actions pertaining to interconnections and intersections among such populations may need to be placed more in the foreground than is sometimes the case, because communication is central to the discipline, and because interaction among and within groups usually characterizes democratic and republican political systems.

Ambitious efforts to examine interconnections among various social and demographic groups sometimes emphasized human rights and liberation discourse (Cmiel, 1990, 1999, 2004; Hope, 1985). Reference books, such as *American Voices*, published in 2005, concentrated on speakers from diverse backgrounds and enhanced critical examinations of interconnections among multiple cultures within the United States (Duffy & Leeman, 2005). Criticism of visual rhetoric concentrated on photography, film, TV, digital technology and other vision-enhancing technologies in ways that have generated a wealth of conceptual insights (Benson, 1985, 1998; Delicath & DeLuca, 2003; DeLuca, 1999; DeLuca & Demo, 2000; DeLuca & Peebles, 2002; Edwards & Winker, 1997; Ehrenhaus & Owen, 2004; Erickson, 2000; Shields, 2001; Stormer, 1997; Twigg, 1992), although some criticism of visual rhetoric features eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultures in the United States and abroad (Finnegan, 2003, 2005; Lancioni, 1996; Olson, 1991, 2004). Visual argument and figuration are now receiving increasing attention (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996; Finnegarn, 2001, 2005; Palczewski, 2002, 2005; Pickering & Lake, 2000; Scott, 2004; Shelley, 1996; Willerton 2005), as are “performances” and “rhetorical bodies” (Blair, 2001; Hauser, 1999a; Pezzullo, 2003, 2007; Selzer & Crowley, 1999; Skow &

Conceptually driven and generative criticism has provided a powerful and attractive option for the criticism-theory relationship. Yet, the contribution to theory seems typically to be synecdochic, resulting at times in innovative concepts of general value, but not systematic, synthetic, or relatively comprehensive rhetorical theories. Another option for the criticism-theory relationship was proposed as early as 1978 and, while it has extraordinary but untapped potential, merits mention next in this necessarily brief sketch.

**Articulate and Synthesize the Implied Rhetorical Theory of the Individual Communicator as Embodied in Her or His Communicative Transactions**

A fifth option for characterizing the criticism-theory relationship shifts the focus to the enacted or embodied theory of the historical figure engaged in rhetorical practice. In 1978, Thomas Benson wrote concerning various senses of rhetoric,

> Another school of critics is interested in the author's implicit rhetorical theory. In the presentation of his own communication, and in the depiction of the interaction of characters in a novel, film, or play, the author stages rhetorical transactions and frequently employs, in passing, metaphors that refer to the process of communication. Close examination of these transactions and metaphors may reveal that the author has a coherent, if not explicitly stated, theory of rhetorical interaction. Without offering examples, he continued, "The search for implicit rhetorical theories is in its infancy, but is likely to be an important and productive line of inquiry" (Benson, 1978, p. 247).

> Fully three decades later, little explicit has been done to extend and refine this idea, though collections on public address oftentimes sketch proto typean prototypes for this sort of scholarship, which could be actively encouraged, especially inasmuch as it has the potential to significantly strengthen and improve communication scholars' appreciation for implicit theories by under-represented groups. To my knowledge, this approach has not been explicitly developed in sustained ways in the literature, though examples for it can be found in collections that provide rhetorical biographies of orators with attention to each speaker's patterns of rhetorical invention, style, and delivery (Campbell, 1993, 1994; Duffy & Leeman, 2005; Leeman, 1996; Olson, 1997).
Rhetorical critics have generated conceptual insights from attention to specific speakers, but, presuming that theory entails much more extensive examination of general qualities, this approach to scholarship may merit development by critics and theorists alike. It has the potential to generalize from practices by radicals and activists who were too busy with confrontation and protest to write rhetorical theories. I have in mind speakers such as the Jewish lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich, the black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde, and the black gay novelist and speaker James Baldwin, with appreciation for overlapping, systemic obstacles to their speeches, discourses, and symbolic actions.

CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE OF RHETORICAL CRITICISM AND THEORY

To an extent, rhetorical critics' and theorists' views of the criticism-theory relationship are contingent on our views concerning the critics' and theorists' roles in society, as well as how we value varied purposes for each kind of research independently and in relationship. Rhetoric scholars differ over whether critics aspire to improve a citizenry within a republic or democracy, to deepen appreciation of speeches, discourses, and symbolic action as individual transactions or normative patterns; to contribute to histories of communication practices; or to apply or generate theory. Today, we might wish, moreover, to heed Kenneth Burke's call during the late 1930s for additional purposes of criticism, such as inoculation against unworthy appeals for assent (Burke, 1937/1973, p. 191). Critics' roles have changed from that of detached, ostensibly objective reporters, observers, or expert spectators to that of performers and arguers, whose interests, values, and commitments surface in the selection of subject matter, meaningful responses to it, and arguments soliciting the assent of readers to interpretive claims (Wander & Jenkins, 1972). Critics may sometimes propose becoming overtly political and cultural participants in shaping current controversies and future commitments (Cloud, 2004; DeLuca, 1999; Eberly, 2000).

Less frequently today do rhetorical critics present ourselves as judges who offer reasons for an explicit appraisal in light of pre-existing theories or models, normative depictions of genres, ideologies, or movements, or even touchstones. Some have apparently abandoned judgment in favor of interpretation as being sufficient for criticism (Morris, 2007, p. 3). While there has been a long tradition of considering interpretation as indispensable to criticism, one ambivalent outcome of this stance might be that it could become impossible to distinguish between a thesis for criticism and history, since history is ordinarily interpretive, too (Carr, 1962). Perhaps one future direction for scholarship in criticism is to re-examine the assessment of "masterpieces" and "touchstones" to reconsider these approaches re-calibrated for diverse life situations with regard to material resources, political power, and social privilege. Criticism can and does assess artistry by an immense variety of means, ascertains ethical integrity, judges propriety, and, on occasion, attempts to gauge pragmatic outcomes of communicative acts.

In general, perhaps rhetoric scholars should re-examine how rhetorical criticism, history, and theory are entwined in interdependent ways. My suggestions for our
future are based on my assumption that worthwhile rhetorical theories from the past were responsive to the most important cultural developments of their own time. In a spirit of collaborative conversations, I would propose these general goals to rhetoric scholars for continuing to reinvigorate rhetoric.

Rhetoric scholars should make a high priority of concentrating on the underlying conditions for speech, discourse, and symbolic action insofar as various factors authorize and legitimate the rhetorical agency of some people to the exclusion of most, including conscious examination of the social and political positions of rhetoric scholars ourselves. In general, implementing this recommendation would entail concentrating on varieties of power and agency in relation to material conditions for speech and silence, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence. In a conscious reversal of the usual presumption of the enabled speaker whose access and participation are assured, for instance, I encourage endeavoring to theorize rhetoric by starting from considerations of silence with attention to factors disabling discourse (Olson, 1997, 2004/2005).

This objective has more, interconnected elements. For example, rhetoric scholars should consider poverty in terms of its ramifications for silence and silencing, as well as speaking for and about others (e.g., Alcoff, 1991–1992; Asen, 2002; Zarefsky, 1986). Rhetoric scholars could examine how material affluence, political power, and social privilege afford access to participation, visibility, and recognition within forums for the most actively studied and visible rhetorical tradition, as well as the empowerment of rhetoric scholars willing to feature the forums exclusively reserved for the powerful and privileged as “central” considerations of the field. As scholars, we ought to ask how we use our privilege mindful of the social, political, and material ramifications of our deeds.

Further, it would entail examining the life predicament for speech, discourse, and symbolic action by vulnerable and underrepresented communities, such as poor people; gay, lesbian, and otherwise queer people; and members of racial and religious minorities. By “vulnerable communities,” I mean groups whose lives and histories—not to mention public speeches, discourses, and symbolic actions—tend to be actively silenced, forgotten, excluded, misnamed, trivialized, disabled, punished, and/or persecuted as a consequence of complex systemic factors embedded in law, religion, education, politics, health care, home life, social groupings, and the like. In addition, it would entail concentrating on how class, race, sexuality, gender, sex, age, and the like intersect and interact with each other in complicated ways. Thus, this suggestion entails a direct examination of identity politics in both a minimally necessary form that results from the history of situated identities as entrenched within institutions’ practices with resulting material consequences and vulnerability to violence and its pejorative forms resulting from merely aggrandizing power among the most privileged among us. These factors merit attention in terms of enabling and disabling of speech, discourse, and symbolic action. Beyond that, it would be necessary to concentrate on communication practices actively silencing and disabling discourses, such as an entire range of historically taboo topics. Further, it would be necessary to investigate the roles of communication practices through institutionalized inequalities affecting genuinely vulnerable groups. We should undertake such work for considerations of race, class, sexuality, and sex, giving priority to areas not
currently acknowledged by state and federal law. We ought to recognize and explore multiple rhetorical traditions both within the United States and transnationally.

Second, rhetoric scholarship should actively consider visual communication by concentrating on the ramifications of diverse media technologies—not only in the narrow sense that features their role in the preservation, transmission, and representation of public speeches but also in a broad sense that highlights visual culture and symbolic action. Implementing this recommendation would entail teaching and researching the rich histories of rhetoric concerning a range of symbolic means of communication, including not only scholarship during the last fifty years derived from twentieth-century scholars, such as Kenneth Burke and Michel Foucault, but also largely forgotten rhetorical theories engaging the vision (everything from painting to architecture). As a consequence of decades of research by diverse intellectuals, there is now an immense body of scholarship on visual rhetoric and symbolic inducement, which can provide resources for enriching our understandings of rhetorical practices.

Implementing this suggested goal would dovetail with my first recommendation, because both vernacular and material culture in general provide vital means for recovering the rhetorical practices of vulnerable communities and underrepresented groups from the past. All people use artifacts that convey symbolic meanings. In addition, diverse people are preserving and distributing the speeches, discourses, and symbolic actions by minority voices through the Internet and World Wide Web, resulting in accessibility to communicative transactions that ordinarily are hard to locate, having been neglected by mainstream archives. Beyond that, implementing this objective may entail reenvisioning how rhetoric has been institutionalized in relationship to media scholarship. In this connection, notions of rhetorical agency seem especially vexing, as does requisite breadth of training in the humanities.

Third, rhetoric scholarship in theorizing and criticism should examine and complicate ways of theorizing from recent and current speeches, discourses, and symbolic practices, especially by giving priority to identifying and reconfiguring concepts articulated by underrepresented groups, such as double or multiple consciousness, embodiment, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, essentialism and difference, intersectionality, matrices of power, the simultaneity of oppressions, complicity and collusion, tokens, appropriation, ventriloquism, and the like. Above all, this suggestion would entail a sea change in how rhetorical criticism and theory are taught by shifting attention primarily from demographic groups to communication practices and actions, while transforming the organization of our scholarship away from familiar “methods” and “approaches” to center instead on rhetorical practices and actions, synthesizing and integrating what we have learned about speeches, discourses, and symbolism across various social groups.

Perhaps the most promising options here would feature (1) textual criticism that consciously complicates notions of touchstones, masterpieces, and canons by being attentive to the political, legal, and social conditions of speech making and symbolic action; (2) analog criticism, which consciously complicates merely demographic notions of power and privilege through consideration of communication practices cutting across multiple, vulnerable groups to generate generalities about rhetoric within a multicultural, global society; and (3) criticism of rhetoric's implicit theories,
provided that it foregrounds largely understudied speakers in the interest of exploring how power and vulnerability affect rhetorical practices.

Ultimately, I am interested in rhetorical criticism, history, and theory that take adequately into account significant asymmetries among people whose identities position them in complex ways with regard to privilege and vulnerability, access and exclusion, and the like. I therefore suggest giving priority to these approaches to theorizing rhetoric through criticism in a conscious reversal of prevailing norms for rhetorical theory. In further developing rhetorical theories, I suggest paying greater attention to asymmetries in power, privilege, and resources as they complicate these communicative transactions. Current scholarship, for all its welcome diversity, has tended to collude in treating these positions in a binary relationship wherein those who conduct criticism and theory either examine elites or vulnerable populations. In looking to the future, it would be desirable to concentrate on rhetorical practices across significant differences in material resources, social privilege, and political power in ways that calibrate how such differences inform rhetorical practices and conceptualizations in rhetorical theories concerning them. We might need, in this particular, to be engaging in rhetorical criticism as generative and open-ended practices of human inquiry concerning rhetoric in its relationship to history and culture. Ongoing process of transnational communication and globalization call for increasing attention in our intellectual labor.

I offer these suggestions for future scholarship in a spirit of collaboration, because I am less interested in a center that holds future scholarship together or mapping predetermined destinations than I am in suggesting focal points for continuing ongoing conversations with all of their welcome diversity and promise. Our is an period of increasing fundamentalism around the globe—both religious and intellectual fundamentalism, both on the political right and on the left. In closing, I want to suggest that intellectuals of all political commitments and perspectives need a vision of rhetorical criticism, history, and theory as human inquiry now more than ever.

NOTE

1. I presented a brief version of some ideas concerning the future of rhetoric scholarship at the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies held in Evanston, IL, in September 2003. In November 2003, James Jasinskip and I co-directed a seminar on the rhetorical criticism-theory relationship. Participants in the lively discussions included Robert Avery, Barbara A. Biesecker, Rosa A. Ferby, Stephanie Houston Grey, Melva J. Kearney, Lenore Langsdorf, John Lyne, Dann L. Pierce, G. Mitch Reyes, and John M. Sloop—all of whom I wish to thank for provoking reflections here, though none are responsible for them.

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