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University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Novotny

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Cultural Rhetorics in Precarious Times

7/22/2020

By Maria Novotny

During the spring 2020 semester, I taught a Cultural Rhetorics graduate seminar at UWM and I must admit that this course feels as if it took place a lifetime ago. So much in the world has since happened: the continued spread of COVID-19, the announcement made by many universities that students should expect to return to campus in the fall, as well as the death of George Floyd and the resurgence of protests supporting Black Lives Matter. With all that has since happened, I want to reflect on what my Cultural Rhetorics course may offer us now – in these increasingly precarious times.

In their [Introduction to the Special Issue: Entering the Cultural Rhetorics Conversation](#), Phil Bratta and Malea Powell offer four defining pillars of cultural rhetorics: (1) the idea of story as theory, (2) engagement with decoloniality and decolonial practices, (3) constellative practices as a way to build community and understanding, and (4) the practice of relationality or honoring our relatives in practice. As a class, we discussed these pillars frequently and many students often questioned how these pillars help guide cultural rhetorics as a methodological practice. Here, I'd like to suggest how these pillars can support stakeholders in higher education so they may engage in accountable community allyship to dismantle the bricolage of injustices we face.

Story as Theory

Orients us to critically engage with whose stories are told, who is trusted to hear some stories, and why who listens matters.

Stories wield power and can influence how quickly we may adopt change. Yet, we know from the murders of Black and brown people in this country, that not all stories are told nor are they heard equally, even when they are shared. Take black maternal health for example. The [Black Mammamas Matter Alliance](#) report that mistrust and racist bias in medical and hospital settings are leading factors contributing to the spiking black infant and black maternal mortality rate. Black women, their lived experiences, and the stories that they may or may not share (depending upon how safe they feel) are too often disregarded.

Cultural rhetorics reminds us that these stories matter. While Black women's stories often do not align with dominant narratives of maternal health, cultural rhetorics offers theoretical tools to question why Black women's stories are often muted or distrusted. The pillars of cultural rhetorics help retrain and reorient how we listen to stories, whose stories we are listening to, and how we may mistrust what we are trained to assume are "dominant" or "normative" narratives.

Want to learn more? I suggest reading: [Lee Maracle's](#) book [Oratory: Coming to Theory](#).

Engagement with Decoloniality

Helps us identify colonial systems of power that have become so ingrained into the “everyday” whereby inequity is easily disguised.

Recent calls to ‘defund the police’ have been met with polarizing viewpoints. While a [recent poll](#) finds that 61% of Wisconsinites support Black Lives Matter, a [Marquette University Law poll](#) finds that 70% oppose defunding the police. Such polls indicate clear misunderstandings about the rationale to defund the police as a supportive action of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Cultural rhetorics serves as a theoretical lens to better understand how systematic structures, like the police, operate as a colonial construct reinforcing racism. For instance, by adopting a Cultural Rhetorics lens to arguments supportive of defunding the police, more clarity emerges as to why defunding is essential in order to “delink” ([a term coined by Walter Mignolo](#)) from what Toni Morrison has called ‘the white gaze’. This gaze is a practice adopted through many police practices whereby black and brown bodies must navigate how their bodies are read and thus become constructed as non-white targets which allows for public suspicion, police surveillance and/or unjustified acts of violence. Take the recent video of Amy Cooper as an example whereby a white woman uses her whiteness to reinforce her superiority over a Black man by calling the police with no warranted reason. Engaging with the pillars of cultural rhetorics – particularly decolonial theory – helps us dismantle misconstrued threats against our safety, such as the installation of fear in white bodies if we remove all policing.

Want to learn more? I suggest reading: [Alex Vitale's](#) book [The End of Policing](#).

Constellate with Communities

Reminds us that community work happens through intersectional coalitions, bringing together a variety of perspectives.

The ripple effect of events occurring over these last four months – from March to June – have without doubt emerged at a time that has caused many to reflect on threats in their own lives. For instance, [NPR ran a recent story](#) noting because of asymptotic spread and political mishandling of the pandemic, many white people suddenly could relate to feeling as if their own bodies were at risk. This yielded increased support and allyship for Black Lives Matter. Yet, to truly constellate with communities we must think about all bodies in relationship with our own positionality.

Cultural rhetorics demands that our work be reflective as we work in constellation with others, not self-serving to reduce privileged feelings of guilt or shame. It must be in the trenches of injustice and as such it may be uncomfortable for more privileged bodies. As Natasha Jones and Miriam Williams in [“A Just Use of Imagination: A Call to Action”](#) write, “In this historic

moment, when yet again the collective Black community is called forth to proclaim that our lives matter, that Black Lives Matter, we extend this idea of critical imagination to calls for justice and equality.” They conclude with this powerful statement: “Dismantling white supremacy requires your work. How might you make a difference? Just use your imagination.” Constellating with communities invites a critical reimagining of other stakeholders – beyond the Black community – that must engage in work supportive of equity and change.

Want to read more? I suggest reading [Academic #BlackLivesMatter: Black Faculty and Graduate Students Tell Their Stories](#).

Acknowledge All of Our Relations

Demands our embodied experiences are reflected upon and accounted for in the community work we engage.

What does true allyship look like in practice? How do we make transparent the reasons for our actions, given the positionalities we embody? Ellen Cushman in “[The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change](#)” articulates the difference between what she calls ‘missionary activism’ and ‘scholarly activism’. For Cushman, the latter option may engage in activism by either empowering communities through the achievement of goals by providing necessary resources, facilitating action through language or literacy, or situating our own ethos as a tactic to move forward a community’s need. We may do well to reflect on how our commitment to activism appears to those communities we seek to work alongside, as an accountability tool forcing us to be transparent about the objectives of our allyship.

Cultural rhetorics draws on Indigenous theory to tend to the ever-evolving process of not just developing but *learning* from our relationships. Such a process asks us to engage in reciprocal practices with our communities and favors methods that allow our actions to be taken as what [Andrea Riley Mukavatez](#) calls “speak[ing] with and alongside” (122) our community partners. Relationality asks us to make our own body transparent alongside the other bodies that we work in coalition building with – often this is messy and takes time. We would do well to remind ourselves of this as the protests dwindle and calls for action become less vocal. We must remain accountable to the communities we work alongside.

Want to read more? I suggest reading “[Decolonial Directions: Rivers, Relationships, and Realities of Engagement on Indigenous Lands](#)” by Rachel Jackson and Phil Bratta.

I want to close by acknowledging that these reflections are a work in-progress and still very much in formation. I come to cultural rhetorics as a white cis woman and all the privileges such identities afford me. As such, I still have much to learn and many to listen to as I try to teach cultural rhetoric practices to support community engaged activism here in Milwaukee.

Maria Novotny is an Assistant Professor with the Public Rhetorics and Community Engagement program at UW-Milwaukee. Her research uses cultural rhetorics as a lens to understand and support the community advocacy practices of those diagnosed with infertility.