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## Rhetorical criticism's multitudes

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We approach this issue of *Review of Communication*, dedicated to the state of rhetorical criticism, as longtime queer scholars and privileged editors committed to a multitude of rhetorical practices, the copiousness of criticism. Inspired by a series of editorials crafted by Robert L. Ivie two decades ago in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* that outline the beginnings of a project he later coined “productive criticism,” and goaded by our own survey of an enterprising field of rhetorical inquiry, we use this occasion to ruminate on recent currents of critical, political, and performative thought in rhetorical studies. In the epilogue of this issue, Ivie invokes Walt Whitman’s epic poem *Song of Myself* to accentuate the expansive promise of multitudes, emphasizing the heterogeneous and interdependent character of a “democratic ensemble.” We find ourselves taken with Ivie’s appropriation of this imagery by one of America’s premier queer critics, believing that “multitudes” offers an apt metaphor for the contemporary landscape and expansive promise of rhetorical/critical praxis. When Whitman proclaimed, “Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes,” near the conclusion of his prodigious verse, he did so to offer texture to the situated nature of the self and its dynamic relationship among a constellation of norms, practices, and bodies. We appropriate the multitude here to enable a promiscuous reading of seemingly incongruent and discordant practices in order to make intelligible variegated treatments of theory, method, object, political commitment, and history in rhetorical criticism.

In his inaugural editorial, Ivie opined that the essays being published in *QJS* at the time were notably manifold in their diverse scholarly approaches. Despite their distinct pursuits, Ivie reasoned that the articles pointed toward “a fundamental restructuring of the discipline.” He contended that this reconfiguration necessitated a relinquishing of presumed objectivity and impartiality still underlying disciplinary practices and supplanting those norms with a sustained focus on the inventive possibilities of knowledge creation inherent to criticism. Ivie passionately defended the conceptual promise of critique by stressing that rhetorical criticism should scrutinize the symbol systems that organize our lives and interject with an active intelligence and comic attitude, in the Burkean sense, that betters the human condition. In doing so, Ivie was careful to avoid championing overly prescriptive heuristics that would stifle inventive possibilities, returning repeatedly to the rhetorical lexicon that privileged contingency, praxis, practical wisdom, interpretation, and performance.

The vicennial anniversary of Ivie’s musings on rhetorical praxis provides an opportunity to revisit the diverse mission of rhetorical criticism and continue a tradition of

metacommentary about the focus of our scholarly endeavors. Having both taught Ivie's editorials to undergraduate and graduate students at various points, we remain captivated by their staying power and continued relevance. At the conclusion of his column titled "Productive Criticism" in 1995, for instance, Ivie produced an extended list of issues he felt necessitated disciplinary attention. These concerns included the furthering of peace efforts, a commitment to environmentalism, the plight of marginalized populations, deliberations in the scientific community, the necessity of cultural dialogue, and gender discrepancies in the workplace. Ivie's call remains as imperative as ever in an era of ongoing military conflicts, the slow death of the planet, the continued harassment and murder of people of color, the abusive powers of legislatures to entrench discrimination against LGBTQ people, the dismissal of science by factions on the Right, the resistance to decolonize countries and conceptual materials, and the glacial pace of achieving gender equity. Apropos of his pressing call within the possibilities of multitudes, *Review of Communication* editor Pat Gehrke invited us to expand beyond our original vision for a forum dedicated to the Ivie editorials, encouraging us to commission a full special issue on rhetorical criticism. We did not hesitate, and that Lisa Flores, Phaedra Pezzullo, Angela Ray, and Bonnie Dow have contributed major statements—that centrally concern race, environment, archive, and gender in relation to rhetorical criticism—seems to us perfectly fitting. We believe this is the first collection of metastatements on criticism in the discipline's history authored entirely by luminary rhetoricians all of whom are women.

This special issue of *Review of Communication* provides a space for ongoing reflection about criticism's continued evolution and we give specific attention here to the dearth of scholarship being produced about public engagement and social justice interventions. Following important volumes such as Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland's *Critical Questions: Invention, Creativity, and the Criticism of Discourse and Media*, as well as decennial forums in the *Western Journal of Communication*, and thought-pieces in *Rhetoric Review* (2006) and *Communication Studies* (2003), we explore and demystify rhetorical practices to pursue sustained reflection about disciplinary norms and the pedagogical utility of such introspection. Repeatedly, if inadvertently, the contributors to this special issue crystalize the import of engaged scholarly critique and the conceptual horizons such work expands. These scholars vivify the now familiar (and often institutionally rehearsed) calls to produce scholarship that instigates deliberation, dialogue, and cultural transformation. They give attention to the necessity of altering the composition of rhetorical studies with nuanced analyses of race and gender, the paucity of environmental scholarship in our journals and criticism textbooks, the promise of performative publics, and the pitfalls of anthropocentrism, among others. They accomplish these tasks by employing various methodologies, paying notice to archival treasures, philosophical modalities, field methods, and historical remnants. The scholars featured here act in reparative fashion, often thinking through absences, but never digressing into a paranoid state of critique that divests itself of restorative possibility. The scholars of the contributed major statements and Ivie "remixes" acknowledge the expanding apparatus of scholarship in their areas of expertise, even as they encourage additional research trajectories, continued disciplinary interventions, and critical engagement. The scholarly, artistic, and political "worldmaking" practices that follow demonstrate commitments to processes and telos, exchange and dissemination, private interiors and constitutive outsides. They merge political aspirations with personal reflection, offering a sustained affirmation of the promise

of rhetorical labor. Critique, especially reparative, productive critique, actualizes the inescapability of cultural narratives, the paradoxes of ideology, the confounding powers of metaphor, and the formative possibilities of myth. It enables a connection between abstract principles and quotidian practice, practicality and art. The attention given to concepts such as white fragility, gender performativity, and historical appropriation simultaneously ground serious issues of the day and provide a launching pad for future pedagogical interventions and research trajectories.

One need only glance through our journals, our class offerings, and our conference proceedings to observe that productive criticism, often in the form of public engagement, has become a ubiquitous element of our scholarly endeavors. Indeed, some of the most exciting work being performed in our discipline comes from scholars challenging the artificial binary between academic and public life. In preparing this edition, examples of public engagement from members of the field were pervasive on our social media, a space that expands our academic proclivities and provide a testing ground for the public uptake of ideas. The organization PCARE (Prison Communication-Activism-Research-Education) continues to draw attention to the institutional failings and structural racism of incarceration; LGBT Books to Prisoners provides materials to populations disproportionately criminalized in the legal system and abused in the prison-industrial complex; one contributor to this special issue cofounded a network to bring more women to politics in the American South; another developed a smart-phone application to educate publics about Emmett Till's murder; rhetorical scholar Mike Lee has gracefully raised awareness of and funding for childhood cancer, founding "With Purpose," a philanthropic organization that honors his son, Sam. Members of the field, several of whom are featured here, repeatedly give voice to concerns about the environment, immigration, asylum, disability, sexual assault, domestic abuse, and economic disparities. Sometimes our scholarship is explicitly dedicated to the need for "cross-over" work, as is the publication *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, which brings together activist and academic endeavors with creative force. At other times a pronounced individual political statement on a blog may capture the spirit of productive criticism.

Mediation about rhetoric's unfolding critical, historical, performative possibilities seem especially pertinent at a moment when the humanities confront ongoing scrutiny, if not outright hostility, from those eager to displace the liberal arts. The perpetual corporatization of the university, the recent financial collapse, budget cuts, attacks on tenure, and the continued reshuffling of resources are just a few of the sundry challenges confronting higher education. The simultaneous assault on education and the increasing turn to public engagement in Rhetorical Studies may very well be a matter of coincidence. However, it might also suggest that rhetorical criticism, with its scholarly dexterity and intellectual buoyancy, its uplift and insight, micro and meta, then and now and soon-to-be, is especially well suited to endure such attacks, taking up the mantle of public engagement on its own terms as one strategy for survival. In an era of cluster hires, departmental consolidation, and a thinning of resources, rhetorical critics have found ways to continue championing their work while innovating in their grasp and reach. The essays assembled in this issue, with such doldrums in mind, will hearten, as rhetorical critics reflecting on their praxis and imagining disciplinary futures have always heartened through their creative, rigorous, generative engagements of taking stock and taking joyful risk on the possible, on the deeper, on the just. Rhetorical criticism releases multitudes.