

ENLIVENING EARLY RHETORICAL UPTAKE ALONGSIDE OTHERS

Recent scholarship featured in the Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture has drawn attention to changing market conditions and, by extension, the changing literate practices needed to navigate such complex and rapidly changing terrain. With everyday people in mind, this book asks: in the face of these critiques, then what? That is, what do critiques of contemporary conditions mean for people striving to make their lives go in relation to complex systems, including institutions like higher education, that are bent toward their own survival in ways that aren't necessarily publicly responsive?

These questions push the work of the field beyond description, expression, and critique to the risk-ridden realm of wise if always also limited rhetorical action—the productive knowledge building required to compose and to employ cultural texts, broadly construed, for the purposes of public life. Here, scholarship in composition, literacies, and cultures hold an important and distinctive promise: the capacity to inform and to devise responsive working theories that can invent with other people new ways forward in light of their own interests and values and in the face of obstacles that couldn't have otherwise been predicted. The work that this book takes up is decidedly collaborative—distributed across publicly situated strangers, including citizen-educators.

This project frames its object of inquiry—a responsive rhetorical art—in terms of wise rhetorical action, and it situates this action in public with others. This is especially significant because everyday rhetors and public workers navigate lots of different situations over the course of daily life and need to gain wisdom in light of differences within and across these situations.

To address this challenge, this project pursues its public focus in relation to some prominent disciplinary conversations. One is the teaching-for-transfer

movement, much of which seeks stability, often in general education classrooms, to identify generalities that apply across contexts. Another spans the post-process leanings of posthumanism and ecological approaches to composition—approaches that have advanced the field’s inventional discourse. In relation to these conversations, this project focuses on the tooled invention that responds to the call for early rhetorical uptake. Rather paradoxically, such situations are simultaneously somewhat familiar and altogether new. An argument emerges from this project for including studies from public life in the mix of these other disciplinary conversations—variously concerned as they are with the relative teachability of rhetoric.

To say that a rhetorical situation is altogether new is to focus on what’s unique about its particular confluence of contingencies—or what Kristopher Lotier refers to in his review of inventional discourse as its “singularity” (361). According to Lotier, posthumanism and ecological approaches to composition “attend . . . to singularities *as such*” (361; emphasis in original). Offering a rationale, he elaborates: “To ask what a thing means is to attempt to pin it down, to resolve its complexity, to gain some form of mastery over it, to translate it into something more recognizable—that is, to deny the thing its singularity or uniqueness” (361).

Similarly, it’s the singularity of early rhetorical uptake that makes performing a responsive rhetorical art particularly challenging—singularity that can make cues for how to understand a concern and what it means for wise action unfamiliar and unclear; singularity that handy habits, assumptions, and schemas risk distorting and skewing to align with what is expected.

Hanging in the balance here is the question of what disciplinary concepts might contribute to pedagogical efforts to commend rhetoric as a productive art. From the premise of singularity, Lotier observes that ecological and posthuman approaches conclude that writing can’t be taught. Quoting Matthew Heard, Lotier writes: “what is truly postprocess is the idea that communication is paralogic—unpredictable and uncodifiable” (379); among its tenets, the “impossibility of generalization, the unteachability of writing as such” (363). According to such logic, disciplinary concepts might do important work for us in the academy, but turning to them to teach the public arts of rhetoric is not a reasonable aim.

In relation to these prior conversations, an argument from this project’s studies emerges. For in these studies, disciplinary concepts offer cues for operationalizing the kinds of questions that orient a responsive rhetorical art’s public stance. An argument follows: I contend that valuing what disciplinary concepts could contribute to early rhetorical uptake in the service of public knowing will depend on expanding our disciplinary sense of what its concepts can do. Findings from this project’s studies indicate that disciplinary ideas can not only comprise the field’s threshold concepts and inspire expansive textual experiments—they can also enliven and inform early rhetorical uptake alongside other rhetors.

Taken as a whole, this project documents a rhetorical art responding to cues for public engagement during the phase of early uptake when much about a concern and what's shared about it are still coming into view. It aims to support people who seek to join others—not as people mistakenly seeking to become adopted family members within ethnic kinship groups—but rather as members of a polity responsive to the public call to see other people's capacity to thrive caught up in their own.

Three chapters are coauthored with community partners and fellow educators. This is not merely a complementary gesture to recognize primary data sources; rather, the chapters themselves document alternative interpretations of rhetorical activity and the situations calling for it. Joint authorship marks how community partners, other colleagues, and I have been approaching a responsive rhetorical art and using it to take various kinds of action in our own communities.

This book is divided across five parts. Part 1 seeks to situate and define a responsive rhetorical art for readers in light of the experiential accounts featured in the book's subsequent parts. Chapter 1 situates a responsive rhetorical art in the early uptake of public life. Characterizing the project's focus on local cases, the chapter defines a responsive rhetorical art by its purposes and guiding questions, for which it nominates some actionable disciplinary concepts. The chapter grounds this art in conditions of contemporary public life that make it both necessary and so challenging to pull off: the volatile presence of difference, out-of-sync institutional practices, and people's intense struggles to thrive despite often having perpetually to defer desire. To close, chapter 1 previews why studying something as elusive as a rhetorical art includes taking a performative and iterative approach to inquiry methods themselves.

Chapter 2 elaborates a responsive rhetorical art as a purposeful, collaborative literate activity—one that is situated in local public life, carried out over time through the work of everyday people, committed to dialogic discovery across difference, and that informs humanizing responses to contemporary conditions that thwart people's capacity to thrive. Anticipating the cases to come and indebted to what they have taught me, chapter 2 takes a deliberately definitional tack. It theorizes the project's key concepts in relation to disciplinary concerns with art and invention. It defines *responsive*, *rhetoric*, *art*, and *humanizing responses*, as well as a few theoretical ideas that help bring these key concepts to life. Readers who want to see how the stories play out—what happens when actors enter into early rhetorical uptake—may want to jump ahead to the observational studies in parts 2, 3, and 4.

Part 2 presents an observational study of entry into this public space by three sets of participants responding to three different circumstances. Each of the case studies across part 2 helps define a responsive rhetorical art in terms of the conditions that create it and the work it aims to take up in the world. Chapter 3 presents

the methods I used to carry out this study. The chapter commends such methods to others who are similarly situated in academic institutions and seek to take up calls for public response. These methods tease out the rhetorical work of a responsive rhetorical art taking multiple forms and involving multiple agents. Chapter 4 presents the study's first two cases—both featuring community actors taking up a responsive rhetorical art. The first set is a group of Gambian American student activists working in New England; the second, a South Sudanese women's leadership council located in Phoenix. The cases testify to a responsive rhetorical art's defining purposes—bearing witness, cultural critique, and public world making—while drawing out some critical points and dimensions of successful engagement under conditions of intense difference, misaligned institutional practices, and thwarted desire. Chapter 5 presents the study's third case, one in which I take my cues for a responsive rhetorical art from the rhetors featured in chapter 4. Here, I trace my own process of slow entry working alongside other engaged actors—including some of the South Sudanese women featured in chapter 4—to launch a community literacy project. The project had previously stalled after violence reignited between Dinka and Nuer tribal members in South Sudan during the winter of 2014. War in South Sudan heightened ethnic political tensions within the South Sudanese diaspora in Phoenix as well. The study examines my attempt to find a place not within a Gambian American or South Sudanese enclave but within specific publics.

Part 3 stipulates conditions warranting a responsive rhetorical art for our times—from two radically different vantage points. First, chapter 6 takes an in-depth look at the responsive rhetorical art that fueled efforts of the Gambian American student activists' efforts to challenge patronizing rhetorics of "aid to Africa." Critiquing the self-other norms that pervade noblesse oblige, celebrity re-ferudalism, and neoliberal economics in the context of aid to Africa, the rhetorical performances featured in chapter 6 offer a robust site for theorizing the art's capacity to support rhetorical invention.

Yet as readers well know, critics in the field of rhetoric and composition take issue with projects like this one that primarily theorize and support public talk. Chapter 7 engages these critiques as sources of disciplinary wisdom, and closes with four additional disciplinary arguments that characterize rhetoric's elusive transformative potential. Together these arguments warrant the importance of collaborative, provisional knowledge building in a responsive rhetorical art's commitment to the early uptake of public life.

Part 4 focuses on educators helping students and institutions support a responsive rhetorical art. These studies are deliberately sequenced to present this section's cumulative claims about the distinct work of a responsive rhetorical art during early uptake of public life.

Focusing on a college writer interning at a domestic abuse shelter, chapter 8 follows a college intern named Hillary learning to listen for the situated knowledge of shelter residents. Chapter 9 situates a responsive rhetorical art within a community-writing curriculum where students worked alongside community residents to respond to a local exigency: the government's decision to refuse the Nipmuck Chaubunagungamaug federal recognition as a Native American tribe with an ongoing existence as an identifiable and separate Algonquin community rooted in New England. Chapter 10 documents the artful process by which a growing intercultural cluster of women and men affiliated with the South Sudanese diaspora in Phoenix devised inventive activities for enacting public life. These activities interrogate institutional logics of literacy sponsorship and bring practices of adult literacy learning into better alignment with women's own purposes for their writing and their and their families' lives.

Part 5 offers a practical guide to rhetorical invention as a public, productive art—the focus on chapter 11. Over the course of reframing programmatic outreach, community-engagement initiatives, extracurricular events, and curricular revision, the guide offers ideas for charting mutually sustaining next steps.

In sum, this project is situated amid global social, cultural, and economic disruptions that have pronounced local effects on displaced people and students. It takes description and critique one step further into an analysis of rhetorical action in public life. By portraying the rhetorical performances of students, teachers, and communities, it shows the risk-ridden stage on which public life is conducted. It also argues for the possibility of wise rhetorical action in that public space. Over the course of the project's studies, a nameable approach to public life emerges—a responsive rhetorical art. This form of rhetorical action and reflection transpires in public with others across differences. As such, this art presents an argument for what responsive invention can make and do in daily public life.