

Listening to Stories: Practicing Cultural Rhetorics Pedagogy A Virtual Roundtable

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[PROLOGUE] In the autumn of 2017, Chad and Margaret, editors of the *constellations pedagogy blog*, held space for scholars to come together and discuss the topic of cultural rhetorics pedagogy. Using email, AdobeConnect, and transcription services, we met digitally to chat synchronously and asynchronously about our experiences and share our stories. For this inaugural post, we share a part of that experience and space—a telling of the constellating stories that were told about how to practice a cultural rhetorics pedagogy. This is the first of two blog posts centered on that conversation.

Margaret Price, blog editor: How do you practice cultural rhetorics pedagogy? And if you wouldn't describe your approaches a cultural rhetorics pedagogy, we'd love each person to say more about their pedagogical approaches.

Staci Perryman-Clark: I'm going to answer this question in a non-traditional way. Because I'm a WPA who also serves as associate director of my campus's teaching and learning center, I don't have many opportunities to teach, and so this means I cannot teach many courses in rhetoric, where I have occasions to focus on cultural rhetorics as an area of study. The one class I teach is our graduate course for GTAs teaching first-year writing for the first time. I try to bring in discussions about cultural rhetorics in relation to classical rhetorical theory in that course, but it's challenging: Based on my institutional context, we don't have a graduate program in rhetoric and writing, so I'm constantly negotiating how I orient those unfamiliar

with rhetoric and writing by teaching the traditional cannon vs. revising the traditional cannon and making cultural rhetorics a part of that cannon. It's a constant struggle.

Andrea Riley-Mukavetz: I do define my work as cultural rhetoric pedagogy. I have thought about describing it as decolonial pedagogy because practice, experience, and relationships are so central to my course design and pedagogy. When I set up my course, I frame cultural rhetorics as a practice—as something that is built and made. I ask students to enter into the discussions and the material as relationships and consider their own subject positions, languages, histories, and relationships to institutional and community spaces. This relational approach isn't easy for the teacher or student. The entire semester really feels like students grappling with what they have learned in previous courses or in their everyday lives, what they are currently learning, how my course is very different from their other classes or how I'm a very different kind of professor. This is what happens when I frame things as relationships, practices, or experiences instead of a space where we simply read a text, figure out what it means, and write about that meaning. And so I talk about this grappling because I think it's really similar to how I think some cultural rhetoricians talk about a reorientation to material or moving from “that to how.” This reorientation to material is embodied, violent, and dis-jarring because it requires us to redefine our relationships to knowledge and meaning. This redefining is ultimately decolonial and it needs us to be reflective of ourselves and the para-colonial spaces we're on. And it's these moments of this grappling or this dis-jarring aspects that might reveal something about how the institution is embedded in colonial practices. When we start to feel those tensions--the things that cannot really be articulated but it hurts in our bodies, we are starting to feel the revealing of the paracolonial and the possibilities of decolonialization.

Lisa King: Andrea, I think we have a lot in common. In my own training as a TA, when I began teaching as a master's student, we did not really address these kinds of questions. So I think for a long time I didn't have a name for what I was trying to do. Years later, we can name it, and at my current institution I was allowed, even encouraged, to design a class called “cultural rhetorics.” I have been teaching it since my very first semester here, and it is officially on the books now under its own title and line number. I am grateful for that space, and it's very much like what Andrea is describing. The challenge for me now is that it's a different kind of class than my students have ever taken. They sometimes don't trust the idea of relating their own experience or investing in story-as-rhetorical-practice personally: it means examining the self critically and the way they engage with the rhetorical traditions, and what it means to recognize the story in traditions of this land, this place. Or for that matter, how they are implicated in this story, in this place, since most of the students come from Tennessee and they haven't considered their own home as a site for rhetorical questioning before now. Additionally, this university is

a predominantly white institution, and so we have to reckon with how and why that becomes part of the story when we consider the history of Indigenous lands. Getting them to engage in this way, through the stories of place, has become a really important part of my teaching. But the interesting thing for me over the last 5 1/2 years as I've taught the cultural rhetorics class is seeing how that work has now set a new standard for me in my other classes. I have to think really hard now about how to reshape what I do in my general rhetoric and writing classes, because I don't see cultural rhetorics as something separate, even if the curriculum tends to treat it as a "special topic."

Candace Epps-Robertson: I do believe I practice a cultural rhetoric pedagogy. I have taught now for 15 years. I think I was doing it before I had a name for it. It has been really interesting to look at my course evaluations over the past years. A very consistent theme that I see is that students say, I was not expecting an English class to be this way. Or, I was not expecting that you really wanted me to share what I think about my experiences and how I interact with the world. One of the hallmarks, I think, of how I practice and understand cultural rhetorics pedagogy is that I try hard to express to students how much I want to make room for their epistemology of home. I tell them, that while the academy is important in terms of how we build and think about knowledge, your home communities are as well. And that takes a lot of work. It takes a lot of work to get them to write and believe that. It also takes a lot of work I think to set up a classroom that can be a welcoming space. So one of the things that I have to do a lot and talk a lot about is rhetorical listening. I'm thinking about it in the way that Krista Ratcliffe describes, this idea that listening it is an active practice. I think students value this work. In thinking about the reflections and evaluations I often get, overall while students may feel some discomfort, for the most part I think they value having a space on campus, in a classroom where their opinions do matter. That's not to say we always agree with them. One of the things I try to tell students, is that this can also be a place where we work things out together. We collaborate to make real knowledge together. We may not always agree with one another, but this is space where we can learn to do some of that work.

Andrea Riley-Mukavetz: I wanted to respond to one thing you said, Candace, that relates to what Lisa said about the notion of familiarity. There's this moment in my classrooms when students stop asking me for permission to do the work they want to especially with how they want to write it. It's often after we talk quite a bit about audience, disrupting the belief that academic traditions are solely western, and how we can learn from being messy and exploratory. At this point, we start to have a very frank discussion on some of the frameworks or theories we are encountering--even if they are not from their subject position--express some truths or realities that they have also lived. We discuss how that is often a different feeling after being in so many classes where they are expected to take on someone else's truths or

realities to pass or perform to maintain this illusion of academic success. I often share how when I did that it felt extremely painful and boring. I wasn't ever challenged. I think that's one of the key aspects of a cultural rhetorics pedagogy, is that we create a space for students to make knowledge in their language and on their terms. And that is the kind of the tension that I am thinking about, is that they know the rules on how to succeed in the institution. Those rules don't always feel good. And then to ask them to trust, as you said, Candace, to break those rules, is hard. But at the same time the knowledge-making practices that we are having them do, I see are still familiar to them and it feels affirming in a lot of ways as well.

Jessie Male: One of the conversations that I have with students is about the use of the “I” voice, or the inclusion of personal experience in a formal research paper. Many--most--students are terrified about utilizing these techniques, because they disrupt previous instruction on how to perform academic text. My practice of a cultural rhetorics pedagogy is very much rooted in destabilization. What does it mean to destabilize the practices that students have been taught in their previous institutions? This destabilization is not only in relation to past experiences, but also in relation to the present and the future. This all ties back to story. In the classroom, students engage with the ways their experiences are valuable to their understanding of the practice of writing, and how their personal history can inform the content produced for the class. But, it's important to emphasize that it is more than their story. A practice of cultural rhetorics means to consider the spaces beyond the present, individual state. It means to consider your own story, and how your position contributes to your understanding of that story, but it also means to consider all the other stories that aren't being told, or aren't be heard, or aren't being heard by the majority. It asks—is anything sacred?

Amy Vidali: When Jessie was talking, I was thinking about in my classroom right now. I think unfortunately doing cultural rhetorics pedagogy is a lot about resisting consumer culture, that students have to learn right now, that they have to show me in assessment that they know what I am teaching right now, and that my classroom needs to be the “real world.” But the real world is mean, and I don't think it's a learning space. It's not a space for trigger warnings. It's certainly not a safe space. I feel like especially around assessment, I am trying to resist that everything has to happen on this schedule, instead of the idea that I'm planting a seed and it's going to bloom whenever it's relevant in your life. As someone who really prioritizes disability, both my own and in general in the classroom, I do also sometimes feel a little excluded in cultural rhetorics pedagogy discussions, much in the same way that disability is often excluded from diversity discussions. So I think in some ways I am finding “cultural rhetorics” to be a useful term. But then also, I am resisting it because I often find the sort of workshops and discussions on my campus around cultural rhetorics and pedagogy don't include me either in topic or in terms of access.

Victor Del Hierro: To me what really helped my teaching this year was having reflexivity of cultural rhetorics. I could teach the class I wanted to teach while being sort of careful and being able to sort of teach with these kinds of students. I think the biggest issue for teaching with me when I was a graduate student was understanding how to relate to the sort of both very urban and very rural students of Michigan, and mostly white students. That's something I had to learn and figure out. When I came here, it wasn't quite that sort of issue. It was sort of easy to figure out -- not figure out, but kind of do the move that you all are sort of talking about, help students seeing themselves in their class and finding their voices and help them with listening. It's a totally different class than the class I could do here just because of the experience of students. I want to put that out there. In terms of how I describe my pedagogy, I think one of the, sort of biggest influences on my teaching has been hip-hop, specifically hip-hop work and research and scholarship and work that comes out of education. I feel like a lot of things we are talking about is classroom management, and usually that sort of comes with a negative connotation sort of discipline. At least you don't think of it that way. It's not that. I think being able to apply cultural rhetoric practices to classroom management has been a powerful sort of space. For me, it's helped me, when I think of my ideal student. And something we talked about -- I was lucky enough to be a student in one of Candace's courses. One of the things we did in that class is, who is your ideal student, who is the student you envision when you think about your pedagogy. So that usually starts with yourself and you sort of think about, I try to design things. I think this sort of helps build towards that and thinking about classroom management practices.

Christina V. Cedillo: I think that's something that's very important, the building of community, because that's what cultural rhetorics allows us to do. It's very interesting. I came here because it's a school designated in HSI (a Hispanic Serving Institution). As a Latina, I found it very important that I wanted to work with students from my background. And as a result, something that you said earlier about how, you know, that people think that teaching Disability Studies or cultural studies only happens in certain classrooms or only should happen in certain classrooms--we talk about that in every single class that I teach. But it's also very isolating sometimes to be thought of as the political colleague and sometimes it makes people uncomfortable. Like, why do you have to bring this up now? Why do you always have to bring it up? We weren't talking about this. As though those dimensions of culture and communications don't affect us all. At one point I had a colleague ask me what decolonization had to do with first year teaching comp. I think everything. Even I had to unlearn the ways in which I saw myself as deficient and broken and being able to take pride in who I am as a person from a particular culture, as a woman, as a disabled person. And I've had be able to find the ability, sometimes even the courage, to speak that difficult process which many people might not understand. And I want my students to be able to have that ability, too.

So to find a community of friends and scholars who understand that without having to explain yourself all over again to me is really important.

Staci Perryman-Clark: One thing I've tried to do is bring cultural rhetorics into the training I do at my institution's teaching and learning center, our Office of Faculty Development. In that context, I've begun shifting the institution toward Writing Across the Curriculum, I've pushed rhetorical education, especially cultural rhetorics as part of the training we do around WAC. I've developed a Teaching Inclusivity Workshop series that helps attendees see cultural rhetorics in relation to access and privilege. A few examples include our workshops on implicit biases and microaggressions. What I've found from doing those workshops, though, is that we have conversations about presenting argument and sharing our stories in ways that move beyond "object-oriented" approaches to social discourses ([Powell et al. 4](#))¹. I've found that my work with cultural rhetorics offers an enhanced method, tool—or dare I say—skill for facilitating workshops on diversity: Positioning my own epistemological framework in relation to storytelling helps me resist the colonialist and paternalistic discourses that often control conversations surrounding diversity.

Andrea Riley-Mukavetz: That seems to return us to how we see story as a pedagogical practice for cultural rhetorics. To begin with, it's the thing that I privilege in my class. The thing I talk about with my students is what stories can mean and look like a lot, anything from multi-modal to alphabetic to oral, embodied, and things like that. I privilege and prioritize the stories of people of color and from underrepresented communities. And the thing that I'm trying to show my students all of the time is that these people are theoretical and intellectual. Their theories are viable and valuable in the institution as a way to show my students that to be an academic or write in academia doesn't mean you have to write in one standard type of writing practice or in a certain kind of voice.

Jessie Male: I'm so invested in this idea of story. But I want to complicate that a little bit. On the one hand, everyone's story is valuable. But what happens when one person's story becomes very dangerous to another person, or what happens when we as educators facilitate a space where all stories can and should be heard, but then a very dangerous space is created for some students? How do we grapple with that as educators? I think about this in relation to the question of what it meant to teach after the election and what it meant to go into that classroom and say, "we are a community and everyone's story is important, but this is also a space with many, many vulnerabilities." How do we grapple with vulnerability and storytelling? On another note--I just want to put this out there--I'd love for us to address teaching online, which is the platform I am working within this year. Talk about destabilizing what a classroom environment is, and what it should look like! I want to pose the questions: How do we utilize a cultural rhetoric pedagogy in an online

classroom? What does a cultural rhetorics pedagogy look like in alternative educational spaces?

Victor Del Hierro: I think you brought in a really interesting question at the end. What I was interested in hearing about and maybe posing as a question, but giving a little bit of my experience. I think story is central to cultural theory and pedagogy. I think that's one of the more difficult things for students to comprehend, not necessarily the value, but maybe see it as sort of scholarly theoretical work. One of the issues with why it's hard to see it is because it's not a thing you get by reading - you read an article and sort of understand what they are talking about. Story doesn't necessarily work like that as a theory. So I think I am wondering what kind of examples I might think of. I know starting with my history course with the truth was a way to set up that sort of conversation and sort of plant it, this is a historiography and coming back to it through conversation, and having students say things like, I wish we had read this earlier; we would have liked this earlier. Would you have gotten it this way at that point then? We need to go through a couple different steps. I don't know what those kinds of different steps are. Sometimes they happen and don't happen. I was interested in that perspective of how to set up that maybe repetition or coming back to -- it's important to talk about that.

Christiana V. Cedillo: To think about story and that idea that maybe we cannot necessarily be thinking of story as method at all levels, well, I'm always thinking about power dynamics and other rhetorical factors like that. In my classroom, what I try to do is focus on story. I try to focus on story as research, research as story. We are all building narratives. And I throw out some really theoretical names for them deliberately so we can compare, revise, or contest those theories. Because one of the things I always try to bring it back to is questioning why we legitimate certain ways of looking at story and not others. So we can think about someone like Paul Ricoeur, thinking through narrativity and how we always think back on things and try to make sense of them. I tell my students, think about the kind of day you have had. What are the things you are going to put together to tell me about that? We also tell stories within our families, and we get into academic spaces and we sometimes feel embarrassed by these stories, as if they don't have theoretical value or meaning beyond these personal relationships. So I want us thinking about what Candace said earlier, about home epistemologies, and talking about those as really valuable and valid frameworks that challenge authorized theories, or when we are thinking through the stories we will tell. Because the one thing to remember always is that story always has an audience or audiences. And sometimes, we think that the story has to go out there to reach as many people as possible, and that's true because we want to change things. But we also need to center those audiences who are often left out and backgrounded by a lot of the academic ways of telling story. And so, I tend to be very overt with my students about who I want to center and

why I'm centering them. And people will say, well, that's kind of political. But all writing is political. I tell students that from the moment that they are in first year comp. Because it is political. The people who get to read your writing or that see themselves in your writing will always be determined by everything that's going on around us in the world. So we have to be overt about who we are going to choose to side with. Sometimes I say that in terms that are a little bit "nicer." But I think the implications are the same. I think that story, the focus on story always brings us back to the things that I think as rhetoricians we need to focus more on in terms of research. We must be compelled by the notion of relationality and the ethical responsibilities that it brings with it if we are going to build relations with people, especially people who are ignored or disenfranchised, instead of just talking over and/or for them.

Lisa King: I wanted to follow up on what Andrea and Candace said about listening. But also Amy's really important critique about how we define diversity, the importance of story and the importance of listening. When you think about stories, stories also need people to hear them so that we are not all just talking at each other. I think what a classroom based on cultural rhetorics can do is make space for everybody's stories, however they want to tell them, whatever they choose to tell, whatever they want to reveal, and build through the course of the semester to make a space of trust to do that. My students commented this semester -- I've just been reading through their final portfolios -- that the entire last two or three weeks of the semester was nothing but their presentations, and how much they liked that. For their researched presentations, they could work on any topic, anything that they want to talk about that was important to them, and then give that story-work to the class, and to me. I tell them, "Of course, yes, I am the professor. That's kind of my job to stand up here and talk part of the time. But I want this to be your space just as much as mine. When you do your presentation, you are teaching me. It's reciprocal. I am listening to you. You are teaching me." I can only do so much. I will cover as many topics and stories as I can. But my students are also bringing something valuable to this classroom, and they are teaching each other, too. Their stories are valuable and are important. So I think part of what cultural rhetoric pedagogy looks like is trying to make that physical space happen where the students are teaching the teacher and each other, that we are all listening to one another, trying to make that work. It doesn't always work perfectly well, and I don't intend to be naive with this - by the time we reach the end of the semester, students know that the story space is meant to ask hard questions and be a place to challenge each other for the sake of doing better, not dominating the conversation. That's why their presentations (the higher-stakes stories) don't happen until we have established good relationships. But I will say at the end of every semester when I do this, I am deeply grateful to them, and for what they share.

NOTES

¹ Powell, Malea; Daisy Levy; Andrea Riley-Mukavetz; Marilee Brooks-Gillies; Maria Novotny; Jennifer Fisch-Ferguson—The Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab (2014). Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics. *enculturation*. Issue 18.

About the Authors

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Amy Vidali is a Teaching Professor in the Writing Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research and activism centers on disability, rhetoric, and writing.