



PLAZA: DIALOGUES IN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Casteel, Jessie. "How Does What We Do Matter?" Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature 4.1 (Fall 2013): i-vi. PDF.

Jessie Casteel, Editor

How Does What We Do Matter?

January 2014

Often in the course of graduate school, I have been struck by an anxiety about the gap between theory and praxis that seems to haunt us all from this point onwards. It underlies the papers we write; I don't think I know a single graduate student who has not had a crisis of faith over whether or not the texts we're producing in our academic coursework *mean* anything, and as most of us move into our teaching careers I can perceive a related anxiety about how our research and pedagogy should best inform each other in ways that are commensurate with our social, professional, and political goals. Most of all, I think we are concerned about the intersection between theory and its practical effects on the lived experiences of people. Many of the authors we've encountered in our coursework have been quite engaged in how to address this gap, but many of them have stopped short of offering specific suggestions for how their theories might be applied in practical ways, leaving us to wonder if those practical applications even exist. The pedagogical theorists, of course, at least give the appearance of real-world applicability, but what about literary or rhetorical theorists? What can we, as academics – moreover, as graduate students and not even fully-fledged members of academia – offer the world in practical terms? When we write, are we simply engaging in the rhetoric of display for our fellow scholars and professors, like an especially erudite analog of the puffing up of a lizard's throat sac, or can we have relevance to people outside of academic circles?

As a rhetorician, of course I come at this issue from that direction. If we accept Brummett's assertion that "if reality is not objective, then it must be the case that people make their own reality" (158), which seems reasonable enough, and proceed directly from there to the idea that "[r]eality is what experience *means*" (159), it reasonably follows that he's correct that "meaning is taken from personal experience and communication about it with others, the sharing of meaning" (159). This gives a formidable power to rhetoric as a world-shaping tool, and definitely implicates rhetors as responsible for the realities that they create. Brummett further posits that this makes rhetoric the "*advocacy of realities*" because "[a]mbiguity

generates conflict and disagreement about meaning and a constant striving to resolve these divisions” (160). Reality, therefore, is not only generated by rhetoric, but may also be changed by rhetoric. This effectively creates the map between theory and praxis, and even metaphorically draws 'here there be dragons' on the border. Logically, Brummett's ideas have crucial implications for the way we use rhetoric in our daily lives – but Brummett does not show us specifically what that means, which puts us back uncomfortably close to the anxiety we started with.

I hate to say that this ailment is only in the early stages. If there is one thing I think all graduate students learn while reading the central texts of our various disciplines, it is that many of those texts wander into the rarefied realms that worry us in our own writing. Take, for example, Judith Butler. I actually find Butler's work very useful and intellectually stimulating, and I often cite her texts in my own work. In “Gender Trouble,” Butler pioneers the idea of gender as performance rather than innate, biological fact. This idea totally undermines the notion of male and female as a strict binary determined by physical bodies. She posits that gender is, in fact, a culturally constructed text which inscribes itself on the body through repeated actions: “words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core of substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause” (Butler 136). This understanding of gender as separate from biological morphology, as performance rather than essence, entails a radical new way of looking at identity formation, and offers the possibility of changing the problematic and unequal gender roles in our society. This result appears to be the *implied* aim of Butler’s theories, though she does not offer concrete steps or suggestions for change so much as demonstrate that such a change is possible. It is also worth noting that Butler’s writing style is quite densely populated with theoretical terms and abstruse phraseology. It is clear that the audience Butler is writing toward consists of fellow professional literary theorists. While her ideas are applicable to the wider world and might well attract broader interest if they were more easily understood by those who haven’t been trained in literary theory and criticism, Butler’s rhetoric restricts the circulation of her discourse and limits the effect of her ideas upon the world outside academic circles. She links her work to lived experiences, investigates how unconsidered identity formation works to reproduce unequal conditions, and she provides theories that are geared towards the possibility of addressing social problems, but the rhetorical manner in which she pursues these things may make her work less likely to produce any kind of widespread social change. We may admire her ideas, but nevertheless be a little uncomfortable with their inaccessibility to anyone outside our discipline.

However, there are other models we can find. Ngugi, Liyong, and Owuor-Anyumba, by contrast, are quite straightforward in their conclusions about the practical role they see for

their work. They obviously come from the assumption that rhetoric creates reality, as Brummett so brilliantly argues, but they are most interested in what implications that holds for what we should actually *do*. For instance, their main concern is that they feel that their English department's focus on British literature has wrongly privileged Anglo-centric ideas and attitudes, and has therefore served as a kind of rhetorical indoctrination of colonial ideology. They allege that this practice effectively, as Brummett might put it, advocates a reality that is not their own, perpetuating a colonization of the mind even after the formal withdrawal of the British as active imperialists. Accepting the Western world as the root of their cultural consciousness, these authors hold, pushes African ideas and identity into the periphery, forever defining these things as other, as less important. To continue to espouse this kind of rhetorical strategy is to recreate oppression anew in each successive generation. As Africans, they assert that African literature is more reflective of their cultural heritage and identity, and therefore must be the focus of their study if this cycle of self-colonization is to be broken: "the primary duty of any literature department is to illuminate the spirit animating a people, to show how it meets new challenges, and to investigate possible areas of involvement and development" (Ngugi, Liyong, and Owuor-Anyumba 1997). Accordingly, they lay out a very detailed, specific set of proposals to redesign the English department of the University of Nairobi and reconceive its mission. This idea that the study of literature can interact with and assist the development of social identity by rhetorical means – or, conversely, retard and warp that development – is the driving force behind the reforms that they propose. They approach the question of academia's place in the world from a postcolonial stance, casting its role as a force that can identify, resist, and regenerate from colonial oppression in very real and vital ways. I think it is very notable that Ngugi, Liyong, and Owuor-Anyumba make their proposals in clear, concise, un-jargonized prose that would be readily accessible to those outside professional English academia. This makes it more easily possible for the issues they raise to enter into a wider public debate, and therefore to have a more direct, immediate effect on social consciousness and practices. These authors display a marked avoidance of any rhetorical style that might exclude certain readers without specialized knowledge, ensuring as wide an audience as possible; this seems a sensible strategy to adopt in a manifesto for cultural change if it is to be broadly accepted. The methods that they propose for combating the lasting effects of colonialism are not the only conceivable ways that goal may be accomplished, of course, and I think these authors are conscious of the fact that a broad, open debate might provide a greater multiplicity of possible solutions and bring more energy and diverse skills to bear on postcolonial issues; fiction writer Salman Rushdie's "English is an Indian Literary Language," to name one example, was directly inspired by "On the Abolition of the English Department," and proposes a nearly opposite way to fulfill the same goal. Ngugi, Liyong, and Owuor-Anyumba also go so far as to specifically insist that their proposals are not "mere rhetoric" (1998). By implication, there is an underlying suspicion

here of a possible emptiness in any rhetoric that does not proceed directly from theory to praxis, and an insinuation about the irrelevance of ivory tower academics who do not actively engage with the world and lack a consciousness of and concern for the political and social impact of their theories. All of these factors point to the question these authors answer with their proposals: what are the effects of adopting or refuting a colonizing rhetoric, and how can we, as academics, use knowledge of these effects to bring our work to bear on the world at large?

This academic pragmatism is not something that only happens elsewhere; models of this kind of applied scholarship can be found among American academics as well. For example, *Yearning*, by bell hooks, is particularly notable as a text that is concerned with attempting to marry theory to praxis. In *Yearning*, bell hooks explores many of the same issues that preoccupy Ngugi, Liyong, and Owuor-Anyumba. She, too, is very invested in examining identity formation and its effects on social inequality. She is openly excited about the possibilities that anti-essentialist theories offer in this respect, because they allow for a rich multiplicity of African-American experience, rather than flattening those experiences to static caricatures that reinforce colonial imperialist stereotypes and continue to prop up white supremacy. She states unequivocally that this can offer a great deal to efforts to address racial inequality. But as positive as she is about theories which critique essentialism, hooks is wary of giving up a unifying social identity that aids in group political action. She keeps an eye always toward the practical application of these theories, voicing concerns about how attacking essential identity may also weaken the struggle for racial equality if some provision is not made for collective bonding. She points the way to Ngugi, Liyong, and Owuor-Anyumba's ideas, directly linking the critique of essentialism with efforts at self-decolonization such as theirs: "Abandoning essentialist notions would be a serious challenge to racism. Contemporary African-American resistance struggle must be rooted in a process of decolonization that continually opposes reinscribing notions of 'authentic' black identity" (hooks 28). She refers to developing an African-American critical voice as vital in the formation of a shared identity that is not relegated to the periphery and constructed as a negative mirror of Anglo-centric subjectivity. She is also concerned that theories celebrating difference and otherness neglect the actual voices of others, and that the theoretical discursive landscape is dominated still by white men talking to each other, men whose discourses "are often exclusionary even as they call attention to, appropriate even, the experience of 'difference' and 'Otherness' to provide oppositional political meaning, legitimacy, and immediacy when they are accused of lacking concrete relevance" (23). It's also worth mentioning that hooks' style is accessible. It isn't that bell hooks doesn't enjoy academic discourse; she readily avers that she does, and this is hardly surprising given that she is a professional literary academic. Nevertheless, she has reservations about

what we might call theory-talk. hooks feels that theorists' opinions and interpretations are no more valid and worthy of consideration just because they are phrased in formal academic terms, and that to divorce theoretical discussion from the rest of the world is to both render the exciting developments in theory futile and to rob theory of the wisdom and wealth of experience that those outside academic circles might provide. She argues that "theoretical ideas and critical thinking need not be transmitted solely in written work or solely in the academy," and says that "critics, writers, and academics have to give the same critical attention to nurturing and cultivating our ties to the black community that we give to writing articles" (30). Inclusivity is a major concern for her. In fact, she explicitly states that theory must have a real, practical connection to the groups it theorizes about in order to have any relevance to those groups and functional utility in political terms. For hooks, this is the role theorists can and should play in the world. It is not enough, she argues, to discover and delineate the unequal operations of power; if we do not provide practical tools to address these issues, we are not having an effect on anything – we are engaging in "mere rhetoric," as Ngugi, Liyong, and Owuor-Anyumba would name it. hooks therefore concludes that she is more comfortable expressing herself in more widely accessible ways that will allow a broader audience to interact with her ideas and possibly use them to construct practices that could lead to meaningful social change.

As we move into the role of professional English academics, I think we're all concerned about the relevance we can have to the world outside the rarefied circles of academia. Like scientists researching for the pure joy of discovery, of course many of the texts we produce are simply to serve our own interests – and I am not saying there is anything wrong with that. But like those same scientists, I think we can also find that what begins as intellectual curiosity may still develop practical applications. Among my own student cohort, I've noticed a strong central concern with deriving praxis from theory, in order that our ideas might translate to actual social change; this idea lurks at the periphery of much of the theory we read, but in so many cases remains unsatisfyingly amorphous or rhetorically inaccessible to the outside world. Nevertheless, it *is* possible to find work that demonstrates the potential practical applications of what we do. We need not imagine that our future scholarly lives must always be fraught with an uncomfortable tension between our research and the wider world; we need not be haunted by the anxiety of our irrelevance.

I took over as managing editor of *Plaza* because I believe that what we do, even as graduate students writing more or less as directed, can matter. I believe that sharing our work with each other makes this more apparent to us all, and engages us in a lively intellectual conversation with each other that can only offer more avenues for developing our ideas.

Perhaps it is optimistic and idealistic of me to imagine that those avenues for development give our work more influence – possibly even on the world outside academia.

I would like to thank all those who submitted articles for issue 4.1 of *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature*. Also, I would like to give many thanks to the members of the review and editorial boards:

Allison Laubach-Wright
Allie Faden
Rose Pentecost
Lauren Alfred

Bruce J. Martin
Katie Truax
Chris Varela
Cecilia Bonnor

Kerry Dickenson
Rebecca Colwell
Liz Blomstedt Keating

Jessie Casteel
Editor, *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature*

Works Cited

- Brummett, Barry. "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Postmodern Rhetoric." *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory*. Ed. Lucaites, Condit, and Caudill. New York: Guilford Press, 1999. 153-175. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- hooks, bell. ***Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics***. Boston: South End Press, 1990. Print.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o, Taban lo Liyong, and Henry Owuor-Anyumba. "On the Abolition of the English Department." ***The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism***. Ed. Leitch, Cain, Finke, Johnson, McGowan, Sharpley-Whiting, and Williams. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010. 1995-2000. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. "English is an Indian Literary Language." ***The Norton Anthology of English Literature***. Ed. Greenblatt, Christ, David, Lewalski, Lipking, Logan, Lynch, Maus, Noggle, Ramazani, Robson, Simpson, Stallworthy, and Stillinger. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. 2540-2541. Print.