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Invisible Labor in the Academy

From the Editor: “Invisible” Has Always Proven a Useful Verb

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"Despite the relentless attempts to silence, our voices erupt, flow, cultivate, and generate. We, the perpetual outsiders within, come together, even if only briefly, even in discord, in transformation. I cannot fathom any other journey. These paths cannot be traversed by any one of us. This is a coalitional and intersectional journey, each piece of it part of an unfinished and always partial mosaic."

—Lisa A. Flores, "Towards an Insistent and Transformative Racial Rhetorical Criticism"

Rhetoric is a powerful technology that highlights the ability of language to fashion reality. When we engage rhetoric—talk about it, use it, teach it—we engage practical action. Not just theoretically or at a remove, but in, as, and of the world. Materially, affectively, corporeally. Nonetheless, too often we reduce rhetoric and its power, if not to simple persuasion, to a matter of communication in words alone. However, even when we do acknowledge the polymorphic modality of rhetoric, we tend to discuss modes in isolation, as if they emerge simultaneously or overlap rather than mutually constitute each other through rhetorical interactionality. I use this term intentionally to evoke Karma Chavez’s work illuminating how “our intersectional identities, power and systems of oppression intermesh, interlock, intersect, and interact” (2013, p. 58). The makeup of this ever-protean nexus of forces thwarts (or should, anyway) attempts to render identities and structures as static. By extension, I argue, interactionality applies to communicative modes as well, since the same forces determine our valuation of different modes, how we learn to “listen” or not through them, and even whether we recognize particular modes as registers of meaning-making.

Identities, power, and systems of oppression cohere in the world through multimodal application and experience, and by force, coercion, or accident, we are trained to privilege those modes that expedite perception that sustains oppressive and/or status quo systems. For example, in our society, driven by surveillance and dataveillance practices, specularity informs impressions of objective reality and watchability as worth (Daston, 2010; Marshall, 2010). On January 6th, we experienced one extreme outcome of this modal privileging/deprivileging: we watched in amazement, anger, and not quite surprise as white supremacists attacked the U.S. Capitol, using self-authorizing discourses to paint themselves as victims while openly denying

the lived experiences of minoritized communities—they were “tired of being erased.” But said “erasure” suggests a presence that minoritized people seldom have, ever displaced by stereotypes and caricatures. Hence, despite evidence of the alt-right’s gratuitous looting, vandalism, reckless endangerment, and destruction of federal property, many sympathizers dared deflect from the violence through lazy comparisons to the Black Lives Matter movement. For all the talk of liberty and justice for all that we are trained to recite from birth, surveillance practices habituate dehumanizing attitudes that frame BIPOC as criminals even when they struggle to breathe. Social circumscription that occurs vis-à-vis the spatial and procedural (legal) modes reifies the reality of race, including assumptions about white innocence and Black and brown guilt.

These issues should necessarily prompt questions regarding the communication, reception, and teaching of multimodality. How much meaning gets lost when we overlook the multimodality of all texts and, therefore, overlook one mode at the expense of others (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1998; Wysocki, 2005)? How much suasion is enacted in modes we are trained to ignore? What bodies do we ignore in the process? And, for the purposes of this issue, how much hard work is discounted when it manifests in modes other than those privileged by privileged people?

A story: I like to tell students that much of the labor that writing calls for never makes it onto the page or screen, that 75-80% of writing actually happens before, after, or alongside our putting pen to paper or sitting before a computer. (That percentage is my rough estimate of my own process, but while the numbers might vary according to person, I sincerely believe that the numbers will still be high no matter the writer.) “You say composition is difficult,” I say. “Well, have you ever considered how living life as a disabled and/or racialized person, trying to get by with a family, a job, responsibilities to friends and community, dealings with -isms and -phobias, and *then* school are part of the process? That those supposedly unrelated things are constantly refining your perspective, biases, and analytical skills? And that as you compose an essay or speech or video, you’re doing the difficult work of assessing and creating knowledge against every one of those experiences? Your audience is doing the same. No wonder you think it’s hard. Writing, and reading, and knowing is hard. You’re doing a lot. So maybe give yourself a little credit... Or maybe a lot.”

There is so much more to be said regarding these issues. This special themed issue on invisible labor represents just one tiny fraction of what needs to be highlighted. And yet, I hope that even this limited look at everything that permits, precludes, facilitates, and hinders our rhetorical endeavors shows up the very high stakes attached to what we ignore when we hone our attention solely on privileged modes and their products. The work the authors featured here undertake, too, is hard work. It’s difficult to articulate the unspoken in words and images when we have been conditioned to ignore much of our contexts of writing. Our racialized and gendered identities, our dis/abled identities, the languages we speak, the communities we come from, and the systems that seek to in/validate our lives all make their way into our writing, no matter how neutral we try to sound. Positionality influences our goals and frames our ethoi, creates impressions of insider and/or outsider status in rhetorical relationships, and affects others through our constructions of discursive spaces. It is inescapable though some

believe it's not always about "identity politics." Life is about those things for us all, even if default norms obscure those dimensions of privileged persons' identities and obscure the lives of those without privilege altogether. As Tara J. Yosso argues, subjugation "is often well disguised in the rhetoric of shared 'normative' values and 'neutral' social scientific principles and practices" (2005, p. 74). This is why it proves crucial that we recognize the invisible labor that many of us must undertake to even make our way to pen and paper or a computer desk.

Trying to make our way into communicative contexts and make ourselves "heard" entails a lot of effort in the embodied and spatial modes that we are directed to exclude in conversations that center sanctioned modes of speech. We can't forget that Aristotle ascribed full potential to the unmarked masculine body, an impression still equated with authority. Consequently, rhetoric and writing aren't morally neutral even if they tend to be taught as though they can be. Given Aristotle's classifications of female, disabled, racialized, and otherwise Othered bodies, his rhetoric was aimed at a very select population defined by very selective paradigms of morality and citizenship. Such specificity hasn't dissipated simply because contemporary communication is aimed at diverse audiences. It is precisely rhetoric's power as epistemological architectonic that expedites the framing of culturally-distinctive whitestream techne as universal principles. We must acknowledge the embodied efforts that some of us must take on to communicate; we all write in/with/through the body, but some of us are penalized for living in our bodies more than others. We must honor the spatial navigation that allows marginalized and minoritized folks to bridge academic environments and their extracurricular worlds even when some would seek to destroy those bridges. We must make room for affective registers too often discounted because they reveal the inequities of our systems and society. Ultimately, we must demand that the immense amounts of unrecognized labor we put into our work be recognized and compensated. Otherwise, the whole notion of a good person speaking well will continue to promote epistemic violence.

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