
Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics

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The Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab¹

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PROLOGUE:

ALL: This is a cultural rhetorics² performance. It's also a story.

MALEA: Let me set the scene. It's early April and we're gathered in a genuine vintage 1970's vacation home in a birch forest just north of Harbor Springs, Michigan. It's still snowing this far north. Driving in, it feels a little like that scene from *The Ice Storm*, the one right before they find the dead boy. Still dark trees, snowy ground, winding roads greet me as I've come ahead of everyone else to make sure the house is ready for our weekend's work—a writing retreat to finish this article. It started to snow in earnest near Houghton Lake, and the roads here are covered with a film of snow. One of the main turnoffs for the house is drifted nearly shut. I text directions for navigating the roads to those following a couple of hours behind me. It's not like we're in the wilderness, but the directions will help folks unfamiliar with this part of the state. The house we've rented is in a subdivision situated on a golf course full of vacation homes belonging to the wealthy white tourists who'll stream up here in the summer, just like they did to the Wequesintong down by the shore of Little Traverse Bay in the late nineteenth century. Later this weekend I'll take my fellow writers farther north to lesser settled places—Good Hart, Middle Village, Cross Village, Sturgeon Bay Beach—but for tonight I just want them to arrive safely to a warm and welcoming place.

This is Odawa territory.

So I put down a tobacco offering, shovel the drive, turn up the heat, call for a firewood delivery, and sage the entire house before I head into town to bring back local supplies—smoked whitefish and pasties. Soon, my companions arrive, unload, explore the house, eat warm pasties, and settle in with glasses of wine and bottles of beer. We make a schedule for the next two days, knowing no work will be done this evening. We talk late into the night, catching up with one another, laughing a lot. The next morning we wake, eat breakfast together, and slowly gather our things at the big oak table in the dining room—surrounded by windows open to the forest outside—and write collectively until we grow hungry for lunch. We eat, write some more, then gradually gather snacks and water bottles and head into the woods, out to the lake, and into town, visiting places that mark important Odawa-white histories. Standing on the frozen shores of Lake Michigan, we take pictures and laugh and talk some more, working through ideas for the article, yes, but also working through our relationships with one another; renewing familiar patterns, starting new ones. Working out a relationship to the land, to the lake, to the histories of this place. Building a space in which our work exists alongside those histories. Building a practice we can remember when we're not all together, not in this place/space.

This is a cultural rhetorics practice.

The article you're about to read was written collectively—six of us sitting around a table generating each move together. We've styled the article like a play—a classic three-act with Prologue and Epilogue—the kind Aristotle liked best.³ It has a number of characters:

US. Our collective voice.

NIIJ. A collective interlocutor who brings the real questions we've experienced from disciplinary community⁴ into the performance into this story in a respectful way. In Anishinaabemowin—one of the indigenous languages of what is now the state of Michigan—"niij" is an informal term used to designate a friend.⁵ It was important to us to name using one of the original languages of the place⁶ where much of this article was written, and to use a term that implies a long, friendly relationship. We don't see Niij as an adversary; on the contrary, the questions that s/he asks have helped us think more deeply, more persistently, and more broadly about our collective work and its relationship to the discipline of rhetoric and composition.

MALEA. The Stage Manager in this article's *Our Town*, this character begins and ends the piece plus provides some directions (and critical contributions) along the way.

ANDREA, DAISY, MARI, JENN, MARIA. These characters appear as themselves, representing their own experiences with cultural rhetorics practice/methodology apart from the collective.

You'll also see stage directions throughout. We hope they help you imagine this article literally spinning out in front of you in a small black-box theatre space, the kind of place where the audience is asked to participate in the performance.

We've taken this approach for several reasons. First, because of its imaginative power in our own writing and thinking processes. Second, as a dual nod to the Greco-Roman-centricity of our discipline and to the performance-focused nature of much cultural rhetorics practice. Third, as a way to emphasize the fluid and shifting nature of this thing we're calling cultural rhetorics, and the necessity of deliberately reflexive practice that such a methodology requires. Fourth, as a way to clear a path through the complex tangle of theory and practice we want to embody in this writing—as a way to show how we're navigating the intellectual trade routes that cultural rhetorics gathers together.⁷

And, so, our story begins.

Lights dim. Players arrange themselves onstage. Lights up, slowly.

¹ The Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab is a research collective with participants from four academic institutions. Members of the Lab who participated in the final production of this article are Malea Powell, Daisy Levy, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, Marilee Brooks-Gillies, Maria Novotny and Jennifer Fisch-Ferguson. Other colleagues whose support and thinking contributed to this writing are Doug Schraufnagle, Donnie Sackey, Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Madhu Narayan, and Gabrielle Rios.

² As will become clear, we're not talking about the popular notion of "cultural rhetorics" as cultural studies + rhetoric studies here. While that model, initiated during the formation of the Composition and Cultural Rhetorics (CCR) program at Syracuse University in the late 1990s, is an important one for the discipline of rhet/comp, it is not the model that guides us. Instead, we offer the following performance as a partial construction of our definition of the practice of cultural rhetorics.

³ Classic three-act structure features a first act that is usually used for exposition, a second act that contains rising action, and a third act of resolution. Aristotelian tragedy requires five parts – introduction, inciting incident, rising action, climax, and resolution—which we interpret as three parts plus Prologue and Epilogue.

⁴ One of our core beliefs is that the discipline is a community of practices – not always shared and valued equally, but a community nonetheless.

⁵ In consulting several Anishinaabemowin speakers, there was general agreement that using "niij" to designate this collective voice was acceptable. This term is often orthographically represented as "neeg" or "neech" in print, and for other regional dialects of the language.

⁶ Acknowledging the space/place where we do work is part of our decolonial method here.

[7](#) For scholarly work that articulates the idea of "intellectual trade routes," see Warrior and Haas.

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[Act I](#) ▾

Act I

ACT I, SCENE 1:

US. In this performance, you'll notice we use the word "story" a lot. That's because the practice of story is integral to doing cultural rhetorics. The way we say it—if you're not practicing story, you're doing it wrong. Or, in traditional academic discourse: our primary methodology in this article is to tell stories. These may not be the kinds of stories you're used to hearing, or the kinds of things you're used to recognizing as story, but we hope you'll be patient with us—we think you'll know why in the end.

We also want to be upfront about this: the project of cultural rhetorics is, generally, to emphasize rhetorics as always-already cultural and cultures as persistently rhetorical. In practice, cultural rhetorics scholars investigate and understand meaning-making as it is situated in specific cultural communities. And when we say "cultural communities," we mean any place/space where groups organize under a set of shared beliefs and practices—American Indian communities, workplace communities, digital communities, crafting communities, etc. JENN. Wait just a minute. I think we need to explain some of our assumptions. When I first started learning about cultural rhetorics, it took me a while to realize which definition of "culture" was being referenced.

DAISY. Thanks for that reminder, Jenn. Like a lot of folks in the discipline, sometimes we forget that the assumptions underneath our theory/practice aren't widely shared. It's important to get them out on the table. So, yeah, "culture" is a concept whose meaning is highly contested. But we have a story about how we use the idea of "culture" in cultural rhetorics work.

US. In our experience, culture is often conceptualized and written about as a static object. This object-oriented approach is especially prevalent in mainstream scholarship from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and from the borrowings that folks in rhet/comp studies have initiated from these inter/disciplines. By "object-oriented,"⁸ we mean scholarship that identifies "culture" as an *object* of inquiry, one that can be isolated from other human, economic, political, geographical, historical frameworks that exist around and within it. In addition to the false stability this imposes on the dynamic rhetorical phenomenon within cultural communities, this object-oriented approach to understanding culture also erases the human bodies involved in their makings. This erasure has far-reaching roots and impacts that stem from and recapitulate a colonialist/capitalist paradigm. All too often, scholars in rhet/comp rely on this object-oriented approach to cultures because it allows us to select "exemplars" from specific oppressed cultural traditions as a way of feeling good about how inclusive our discipline has become. One of the affordances of cultural rhetorics, and our tellings in this article, then, is to surface, recognize, extend and intervene in how rhetoric scholars think about culture.

NIIJ. Okay. I get the point about the dangers of tokenizing exemplars from specific oppressed cultural traditions. Still, *hasn't* our discipline become more inclusive? Every year, the discipline expands and makes space for new and different types of scholarship. Are you arguing against this kind of inclusion?

US. Not exactly. We completely agree with you about the fact that our discipline, like all cultural communities, is continuing to change and adapt its stories about the possibilities of rhetoric. But we mark those new stories as *the beginning* of the work of making paradigmatic shifts, not as the end. One of the ways we see that disciplinary community resisting those kind of paradigm shifts is through the language used to mark those changes and adaptations—words like "other," "alternative," "marginal," "non-traditional," etc. These terms imply a norm, a stable center in which a "main" rhetorical tradition exists and is augmented by "additive" traditions. For us, all rhetorics are cultural. All rhetorics are global. All rhetorics have histories and traditions. So, instead of letting ourselves get caught up in "center/margins" binaries, we're more interested in offering a way of thinking about practices like "culture" and "rhetoric" that makes it clear that *everyone* has them. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau takes a more rhetorical approach to culture by looking at *how people use everyday practices* to build cultures and communities.

MARI. For De Certeau, and for us, cultures are made up of practices that accumulate over time and in relationship to specific places. Practices that accumulate in those specific places transform those physical geographies into spaces in which common belief systems can be made, re-made, negotiated, transmitted, learned and imagined. Under colonialism/capitalism, however, not all cultures are seen as equal—some are believed to be dominant/civilized while others are seen as marginal/savage.⁹

US. We find the theoretical frame that De Certeau builds in *The Practice of Everyday Life* especially amenable to understanding the power differentials that result from such beliefs. For De Certeau, many practices that compose cultures are hidden by dominant (aka, established) rules and authorized practices. He argues that we "must

determine the procedures, bases, effects, and possibilities of this collective activity" if we are to understand how the making of culture occurs through everyday practice instead of through official, sanctioned dominant acts of cultural installation (xiv). For us, the product and process of this "collective activity" is rhetorical, and offers a way to begin to understand *how* such everyday practices betray the instability of colonial/capitalist claims to dominance. Our interest in this instability comes from our commitment to engaging in decolonial scholarship.¹⁰ It also provides us with a way of understanding cultural practices as always-already rhetorical, and as made by accumulated collective everyday human practices.

NIIJ. So, De Certeau helps you point out what you've already claimed—that rhetoric is always cultural and culture is persistently rhetorical. It's interesting how you chose De Certeau to talk about rhetoric—not a lot of people really think of him as a "rhetorician."

MARIA. Yes! We find De Certeau really helpful. Although he doesn't show up in some of the big traditional anthologies of canonical rhetoricians, we know plenty of folks in the discipline find his work to be persistently important. Drawing from a wider range of thinkers, especially those who get used a lot by practitioners, and naming them as intellectual relatives is a part of our commitment to decolonial scholarship and to the practice of constellation—which means, of course, more stories.

Lights dim. A projected image of Ursa Major appears in lights on the backdrop. Players arrange themselves onstage. Lights up, only enough to see the players while still displaying the projected image.

ACT I, SCENE 2:

NIIJ. What did you mean just a minute ago when you said you're "committed to decolonial scholarship?" What does that mean? How do you even start to do that work?

ANDREA. That's a great question with a long complicated answer. Decolonization is a big project, and folks who engage in decolonial practices have connections to all kinds of communities all over the world. Our commitment to that larger project connects us to other scholars, activists, writers, community leaders, who are engaged in decolonial work in and (mostly) outside of the academy. For this article, though, what we want to emphasize and practice is our position inside a constellation of relationships with other decolonial scholars like Shawn Wilson, Linda Tuhivai Smith, Qwo-Li Driskill, and Malea Powell. In fact, it's through listening to decolonial scholars that we've come to understand the making of cultures and the practices that call them into being as *relational and constellated*. All cultural practices are built, shaped, and dismantled based on the encounters people have with one another within and across particular systems of shared belief. In other words, people¹¹ make things (texts, baskets, performances), people make relationships, people make culture. As Wilson puts it, "relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality" (7, emphasis original). The practice of *constellating* gives us a visual metaphor for those relationships that honor all possible realities.

NIIJ. Hm. Why constellating, rather than something like *intersecting*?

US. Good question! Lots of folks wonder about this, we find. For us, the metaphor of intersection implies a linear arrangement in which a subject stands at the nexus of straight lines that only cross at one point. This linearity imposes ideas about causality or origins, both of which are generally also obscuring many of the other meaningful relationships between places, spaces, events, people, and communities. And it traps subjects who are literally held in place, skewered by multiple discourses.

MALEA. A constellation, however, allows for all the meaning-making practices and their relationships to matter. It allows for multiply-situated subjects to connect to multiple discourses at the same time, as well as for those relationships (among subjects, among discourses, among kinds of connections) to shift and change without holding a subject captive.

US. It also allows for different ways of seeing any single configuration within that constellation, based on positionality and culture. We are thinking, for example, of the way that different cultures have different ways to draw relations between stars in the sky, and how naming those relations, those constellations (Ursa Major, the Bear, the Big Dipper, the pathway to Sagittarius) is an act of meaning-making.

All turn to look at the backdrop projection, tracing out the images in the air.

NIIJ. Ok, I'm starting to get some of your assumptions—culture as a practice, this thing about constellations as a metaphor—but where's rhetoric in all of this? Are culture and rhetoric the same thing?

JENN. Let's reorient and talk about *rhetoric*.

Players rearrange themselves onstage. Projection image fades

US. For us the general term "rhetorics" refers *both* to the study of meaning-making systems and to the practices that constitute those systems. The systems and the practices can't be separated from each other, much like the ways we say culture and people can't be separated. While De Certeau posits both "rhetoric and everyday

practices can be defined as internal manipulations of a system—that of language or that of an established order," (24) we contend that *rhetorics* are made through everyday practices, and these systems of practice, conversely, constitute cultural rhetorics. We study rhetorics by looking at how practitioners negotiate, and even create, established orders, whether they are the workings of a local community of urban Native women, the creation and maintenance of a crafting circle, or the impact of Western notions of "the body" on actual bodies.

DAISY. For us, it is this persistent focus on the *how*—the *practices* of meaning-making that create, negotiate and maintain those structures – that equals a focus on rhetorics. In other words, rhetoric is not so much about "things" as it is about "actions." This orientation towards actions, then, teaches us how particular practices—ways of thinking, ways of problem solving, ways of being in the world—are valued (or not) within specific cultural systems and/or communities.¹² We believe studying those power relationships is central to the project of studying rhetorics.

US. We see this orientation as distinctive in the discipline of rhetoric studies where human practices and makings are often reduced to texts, or to textual objects, in a way that elides both their makers *and* the systems of power in which they were produced.

NIIJ. What do you mean by "distinctive"? Didn't you say something earlier about how other disciplines have similarly objectified or textualized human practices?

MARIA. Yes, we did. You're right to make that connection back to our story about the concept of culture in other disciplines, and to our claims about disciplines as cultures. When we mark our orientation as "distinctive," we're really marking an orientation to rhetoric studies that's different from the current culture of the discipline.

MARI. Remember, one of the main functions of an academic discipline is to instruct its participants in the dominant practices of that cultural community and to reward them for following the rules of that community. One of the ways we see that happening in rhetoric studies is through a tendency to fetishize texts, to turn everything into a text that can be read, and to sometimes objectify those texts in a way that disconnects them from their relationship to humans and to place/space.

ANDREA. We want to be very clear about this notion of "discipline" and "being disciplined." We are talking about a *discipline*, built, as Foucault tells us:

by groups of objects, methods, their corpus of propositions considered to be true, the interplay of rules and definitions, of techniques and tools: all these constitut[ing] a sort of anonymous system, freely available to whoever wishes, or whoever is able to make use of them, without there being any question of their meaning or their validity being derived from whoever happened to invent them. (222)

We are also talking about a community of disciplinary *practice*—a culture—built on particular traditions and lineages that is, like all cultures, always changing.

Up to this point, the disciplinary culture of rhetoric has been built on the canonization of idealized Western (colonial) systems and worldviews (imperial). The story we're telling about cultural rhetorics invokes a different possibility for our disciplinary culture. Again, this is a decidedly decolonial possibility in that it theorizes a constellated web of systems, discourses, communities, and indeed, paradigms alongside those of Western imperialism.

JENN. This is the place where I always ask—why use the term "cultural rhetorics"? Why not just argue for a different understanding of "rhetoric"?

NIIJ. That's exactly what I was thinking!

US. We use the term "cultural rhetorics" deliberately, as a (hopefully) short-term intervention, to mark our orientation to a set of intersecting, shifting, and variable methodological and theoretical frames and relationships we bring to our scholarly and teaching practices. Although it seems obvious that where someone is located culturally, socially, historically, and physically is significant to the ways that s/he makes meaning, in our discipline there is a temptation to try to demarcate the cultural, social, and physical away from one another into camps—feminist rhetorics, African American rhetorics, disability rhetorics, etc. This set of demarcated inclusions creates the illusion that we are, in fact, attending to culture and filling "gaps" in "the" rhetorical tradition. But these additions—fetishized, objectified, recuperated—only shore up the fiction of a single narrative, a single tradition. As decolonial scholars, we believe there is no need to maintain this fiction—no need to create gaps in a single tradition that scholars must fill. Instead, we believe it's important to keep all traditions/stories/histories in play as

equally legitimate origins and progenitors of many simultaneous rhetorical traditions.

Further, we argue there is rhetorical power in building relationships between multiple traditions, multiple histories, multiple practices. To do this, we have to understand histories traditionally silenced in "the" Western narrative as whole, and as systems of practice that require our attention. Thus our advocacy for "cultural rhetorics" as a marker, and for sustained scholarly attention to meaning-making as it is enacted in specific cultural communities. To be plain, we have to have a solid understanding of as many stories as possible if we're going to be able to say anything at all about the practice of rhetorics over the past 10,000 years. And, just as important, we have to have a solid understanding of the relationship between these stories—good, bad, ugly and beautiful.

Lights dim. Players turn to leave except NIIJ, who steps forward. Lights up, all the way.

ACT I, SCENE 3:

NIIJ. Wait. What do you mean, UGLY? What's ugly about all of this?

Players turn back to face center stage and each other.

US. As a collective of cultural rhetorics scholars, and as humans sharing space with each other, we feel compelled to acknowledge how we are all complicit in colonial rhetorical practices. Recognizing this complicity is one way to acknowledge how we are all related and how all of us have been affected by colonialism. Although we don't intend to erase this complicity or pretend that it's not there, we also know that behind colonialism hides a surprising reality—academia can be an indigenous, decolonial space as well. The duality of practicing cultural rhetorics plus studying cultural rhetorical practices that we're trying to maintain throughout this piece, for example, is one way of engaging in a decolonial practice which recognizes the liberatory possibility of even colonized spaces like academia.

NIIJ. So, can you tell us more about decolonial practice? It keeps coming up, and I'm still not sure what you mean.

[13](#)

ANDREA. I'm sorry. We're really trying to work on visibilizing our assumptions. Let's go back to one of the things we said before—that decolonization is a much larger project than a single academic discipline; it's larger than the academy itself.

US. When we use the term "decolonial," we're referring specifically to stories from the perspective of colonized cultures and communities that are working to delink from the mechanisms of colonialism. This delinking encourages a shift to a set of knowledge-making practices that don't reinforce colonial logics, which also form the roots of systems like capitalism. We've rooted our own practices in those already going on in Native American and Indigenous studies. We're especially committed to the understanding of decolonial practice articulated by Qwo-Li Driskill: "an ongoing, radical resistance against colonialism" (70). For Driskill, decolonization "includes struggles for land redress, self-determination, healing historical trauma, cultural continuance, and reconciliation" (70). For other scholars, like Emma Perez, the decolonial imaginary becomes a tool for remaking and rewriting, a practice that not only deconstructs, but reconstructs.

MALEA. Let's look for a minute at what Walter Dignolo says in his most recent book, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*.¹⁴ Dignolo argues that:

the defining features of decolonial options is the *analytic* of the construction, transformation, and sustenance of racism and patriarchy that created the conditions to build and control a structure of knowledge, either grounded on the word of God or the word of Reason and Truth. ... The decolonial option starts from the analytic assumption that such hierarchies are constructed... and specifically that they have been constructed in the very process of building the idea of Western civilization and modernity. (xv-xvi, emphasis added)

For Dignolo, and for us, decolonial practice isn't a mission, it's an option, an orientation that includes "both the analytic task of unveiling the logic of coloniality and the prospective task of contributing to build a world in which many worlds will coexist" (54). The next step after analysis—a step we hope our work helps to build—is "to build decolonial options on the ruins of imperial knowledge" (11).

US. And while we acknowledge that not all cultural rhetorics scholarship is decolonial,¹⁵ what's crucial to our story *now* is how we understand decolonial practice as the guiding principle to our work in cultural rhetorics. Which is why we're going to spend some time offering stories that show how decolonial theory works as well as how to work from this orientation as scholars and teachers.

NIIJ. Wait. Could we go back, please? You've said very strongly that decolonial practice is the guiding principle for

your cultural rhetorics work. But you also said that not all cultural rhetorics work is decolonial. Isn't that a contradiction? Shouldn't all scholars in cultural rhetorics have the same guiding principles? The same common practices?

DAISY. It does seem a little wonky, doesn't it? Okay, let's go back to our discussion of constellation as a metaphor. Part of using a metaphor that assumes and honors multiplicity is to assume and honor the multiplicities of orientations to scholarship that are possible. This acceptance of multiple possibilities, multiple approaches, is also a part of decolonial practice.

ANDREA. Remember, we're not on a mission to convert everyone to decolonial practice, or to our version of cultural rhetorics practices. We're visibilizing options and making those options available for others to use, and doing so as part of an attempt to intervene in and enlarge the acknowledged practices of our disciplinary community.

MARI. The way we're doing that here is by constellating stories in order to visibilize a web of relations. This web can help us intervene in the discipline by acknowledging our location within a set of dominant institutions within which we are complicit with colonialism. And all of these locations, institutions, and interventions exist as constellated practices. Remember when we talked about rhetoric and composition¹⁶ as a community of disciplinary practice? Communities are made up of people, with real lived experiences and lives at stake. As members of this rhet/comp community, we are invested in actively creating and sustaining a visible space considerate of relational and complex histories of rhetoric. We've learned this from decolonial scholars who enact practices within their communities to not only survive colonialism, but create a place for present and future generations to engage with their traditions.

MALEA. Decolonial theories and practices help us pay attention to how knowledge is made, used, and disseminated in these dominant spaces (like academia). Decolonial projects like Driskill's and Perez's offer the discipline a number of ways to do rhetorical work. Let's take a look.

Lights down, curtain down.

[8](#) We want to note here that our use of the term "object-oriented" isn't a direct reference to current theoretical trends in object-oriented ontology (OOO) or object-oriented rhetoric (OOR). While we do see some OOO/OOR scholarship making the same mistakes about humans that we point out here, a full conversation between what we're identifying as cultural rhetorics practice and OOO/OOR scholarship is well beyond the scope of this essay.

[9](#) Our understanding of the link between colonialism and capitalism comes from a collection of indigenous scholars and from Roy Harvey Pearce and Walter Mignolo—more on that later.

[10](#) Decolonial and post-colonial scholars investigate the historical and contemporary impacts of colonialism across disciplines and often times in relation to communities outside the academy. Distinctions between the various prefixes – de-, post-, neo-, anti-, para-, etc.—are often a matter of perspective or orientation. For example, the term "post-colonial" is primarily concerned with stories told from the perspective of the colonized *about* the process of colonization (literature, travel writing, etc.) while the terms "neo-colonial" and "para-colonial" are used to draw attention to the continuing status of colonial occupation in settler colonial places like the Americas.

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[11](#) Our use of identifiers like "humans" and "people" is entirely purposeful, here. As we pointed out above, and in earlier notes, many disciplines' understandings of "culture" as an object removes all bodily, human, peopled

agency involved in the production of all aspects of any culture. This removal objectifies culture, of course, as we've pointed out, but in turn, then, it also objectifies the people, their bodies, actions, and relationships, thereby re-inscribing a code that depends on seeing some people as things. Namely, it's a colonialist, racist code, and one we are actively interrupting by centering our theories on these very people and bodies as critical to the making of all cultures.

[12](#) Yes, this means that cultural rhetorics approaches can be used to study dominant cultural practices. For us, remember, "culture" isn't a word we use to mark "difference" or "otherness." Instead, a cultural rhetorics approach is meant to focus on how specific cultures are built around particular beliefs and practices, which lead that culture to value some things and not others.

[13](#) In terms of very basic definitions, decolonial and post-colonial scholars investigate the historical and contemporary impacts of colonialism across disciplines and often times in relation to communities outside the academy. Distinctions between the various prefixes—de-, post-, neo-, anti-, para-, etc.—are often a matter of perspective or orientation. For example, the term "post-colonial" is primarily concerned with stories told from the perspective of the colonized *about* the process of colonization (literature, travel writing, etc) while the terms "neo-colonial" and "para-colonial" are used to draw attention to the continuing status of colonial occupation in settler colonial places like the Americas.

[14](#) It's important to note that Mignolo's argument is "built on "options" and not on "alternatives." Mignolo states, "If you look for alternatives you accept a point of reference instead of a set of existing options among which the decolonial enters claiming its legitimacy to sit at the table... the first decolonial step is delinking from coloniality and not looking for alternative modernities but for alternatives to modernity" (xviii).

[15](#) Again, Mignolo insists that of the four major options currently at work today in shaping world futures—rewesternization, rewesternization, dewesternization, decoloniality—*only* the decolonial option works towards building a world in which many worlds coexist.

[16](#) By now, you'll have noticed that we use different names to designate "the discipline" —rhetoric and composition, rhetoric and writing, rhet/comp, rhetoric studies, comp studies, etc. This is on purpose and reflects the shifting ways in which we imagine and re-imagine our disciplinary community at different times, from different perspectives, with different purposes.

[◀ Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural RhetoricsupAct II ▶](#)

Act II

ACT II, SCENE 1:

Curtain rises. Lights come up as NIIJ begins.

NIIJ. I don't mean to be disrespectful, here, but, um, you keep saying that decolonization is bigger than the academy. I believe that. And it seems like it's a really important effort that impacts the lives of people all over the world. I can't help but think, though, that most of those people don't really care about what we do in the academy, and all this careful positioning doesn't matter to them at all. Which makes me think that all of this "decolonial" business might just be a new scholarly fashion trend.

US. Actually, we would say that *how we do scholarship* matters a great deal to colonized peoples, especially those engaged in the huge task of decolonization. Again, let's shift orientations—from an idea that the academy is apart from the "real" world to an understanding of the ways it's really an important part of systems that perpetuate oppression. Linda Tuhiwai Smith addresses just that kind of point in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. She points out how Western research methodologies continue to harm indigenous people on a global level. But more than just critiquing Western research paradigms, Smith provides strategies to decolonize methodologies to be more mindful of working with and for indigenous peoples. She writes,

Research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism is both regulated and realized. It is regulated through the formal rules of individual scholarly disciplines and scientific paradigms, and the institutions that support them (including the state). (7-8)

MARIA. By contextualizing decolonial practices and projects within research and academia, Smith draws attention to the relationship institutions have with imperialism. But here's an important part of Smith's work: She does not discourage us from doing research. Instead, she provides another orientation to it:

To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves. The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages, and social practices—all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope. (4)

DAISY. In the place between resistance and making, we see a location for the practice of cultural rhetoric—a practice that creates a decolonial space inside rhetoric studies. It is here, we believe, where we can forge necessary relations inside and outside of the university. This relationship allows us to make scholarship—to develop frameworks—reliant on growth and sustainability, instead of negation and destruction. And Smith reminds us of something that we often forget within academe: research is about people. It affects people. It can save and destroy lives.

JENN. We know this seems pretty specific to scholars who work in/with communities outside the university.

MARI. Or that it's only useful for the handful of rhetoric scholars who work in/with indigenous communities, but if we look at Emma Perez's work on the "decolonial imaginary," other possibilities start to come into view.

MARIA. Where Smith's attention is on how traditional research in ethnography, anthropology, and other community-based paradigms perpetuate the imperial project, Perez stages a similar critique of the colonial practices of Chicano history and historiography.

ANDREA. Perez's methodology "trace[s] social change from the bottom up" (19). She focuses her attention on the representation of Chicana/os within Yucatan Nationalist movements, the Mexican Revolution, Chicana feminisms, the lived experiences of immigrants, and Selena as a Chicana icon of desire. Her practice in doing so draws attention to the intellectual spaces in which Chicanas live and work but that have been ignored even within Chicano/a history produced under a colonial historiographical model. The space Perez locates, then, is "the decolonial imaginary," a "rupturing space between the colonial and postcolonial...the space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated" (6).

MALEA. Notice here how both Perez and Smith focus on creating sustainable frameworks instead of spending

time proving how their respective disciplines have done very bad things.

NIIJ. Still, it seems like you're saying that scholars in our discipline sometimes do very bad things.

US. We get that. And although we do believe critique of our current disciplinary practices *is* important and necessary, we want to make sure that critique leads to something even more important—*making*. Critique is not the end of the process of decolonization—it's the beginning. We want to make something that people will *use*, rather than to take things apart only to show that they *can* be taken apart.

One of the models we offer for the relationship we're trying to instantiate between decolonial and cultural rhetorics scholarship is Qwo-Li Driskill's "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies." In hir story, Driskill enacts decolonization by creating "theories and activism that weave together Native and GLBTQ critiques that speak to our present colonial realities" (70). Through the methodology of doubleweaving, a Cherokee basket-making practice, Driskill produces a decolonial framework that creates an alliance between Native and queer studies. In doing so, s/he draws attention to a complicated but ignored shared history between queer and Native/two-spirit peoples, which is a direct effect of colonial approaches to historiography. This alliance calls both fields to be more accountable for how they imagine their own histories and how they can produce more thoughtful scholarship that considers the very real impacts of colonization on all peoples.

End scene. Curtain down

ACT II, SCENE 2:

NIIJ. But what about scholars in rhet/comp? All those people who you're talking about aren't really in our discipline.

US. Qwo-Li Driskill *is* a rhetoric scholar.

MARI. I remember presenting with Qwo-Li on a MLA panel called "Aristotle is Not Our Father." The room was full, and we each trembled at the podium when it was our turn to speak. Qwo-Li told a story about hir decision not to include any Kenneth Burke texts in hir Histories of Rhetoric course. Other faculty members could not understand this decision. As Qwo-Li spoke, hir frustration with hir colleagues and the discipline was palpable: Why do we tell only one history of the discipline? Why do we claim some ancestors and not others? In that moment, I remembered that I was part of a movement. In that moment, I felt like a contributing member of a community of cultural rhetorics scholars. In that moment, I felt an increased investment to play a part in defining and making the discipline. In that moment, I *knew* and I continue to know, more than ever, that our work matters.

US. Driskill's work is a model for cultural rhetorics scholars because it emphasizes four important practices.

MARIA. We have all been affected by colonization. We are all complicit in colonial discourses. It is our responsibility to both remember and acknowledge this as we teach, create curriculum, serve on committees, and develop research plans.

JENN. The manner in which we engage, orient in relation to, or produce scholarship matters. We must be mindful that research methodologies are not value-free tools. Our practices, including our research methodologies, are imbued with ideological and epistemological beliefs and values that have material effects in the world.

MARI. Driskill's model of doubleweaving, a deliberate methodological movement across communities (disciplinary and otherwise) emphasizes the necessity of moving beyond even the most robust idea of a disciplinary canon—of reaching across, around, underneath, above and over disciplinary boundaries in the practice of cultural rhetorics. We must understand the discipline as fluid, not static.

DAISY. The combination of these four components is central to doing cultural rhetorics scholarship. Embracing just one or two of these elements is not enough. A cultural rhetorics orientation requires an investment in a methodological frame that values the relation among history, practice, and knowledge.

ANDREA. It should be noted that these practices aren't exclusive to Qwo-Li's work, of course, but are vital to the practice of cultural rhetorics scholarship. These four practices are not a step-by-step approach to creating a cultural rhetorics framework; they *inform* the orientation required to develop a cultural rhetorics framework. Scholars working in our discipline consistently integrate these practices into their academic life.

US. Along with Driskill, Malea Powell and Terese Monberg embrace fluidity, multiplicity, and the good, bad, and ugly of rhetorical studies. In much of her work, Powell argues for theoretical and practical endeavors (no matter the disciplinary affiliation) that make multiple orientations and frameworks both visible and heard. She insists that not to do so is irresponsible, doubly so, because a scholar's work tells stories, and these stories are always positioned within and among other stories ("Blood and Scholarship: One Mixed Blood's Story" in *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition*, and "Learning (Teaching) to Teach (Learn)"). Similarly, in "Listening to Legacies" Monberg listens to how multiple communities create theories and stories in order to weave another orientation to feminist historiography, community-based research and rhetorical theory.

MARIA. I remember watching Malea give her CCCCs chair address in Saint Louis in 2012. I was particularly interested in her address for two reasons. One, this was my first CCCCs that I attended and was anxious to understand how this address would be received by the discipline. But even more intriguing was the fact that I had the pleasure of being enrolled in Malea's contemporary theory class during the time she was preparing to give her speech. During our class Malea revealed how her speech would be focused upon telling stories. "Interesting," I thought to myself as a perplexed first-year graduate student. One month later, sitting in the crowded room I listened to the stories Malea told about the Natives that inhabited the very space in which we were meeting, about the stories she had been told about the discipline, as well as multiple stories of decolonial practice. Her stories invited me to start to ponder the stories I carry with me, about the stories I could share with our discipline, and about the need to invite students to think about the ways they can share their stories. I learned from Malea at that moment how stories as a decolonial practice matter; stories, then, should be shared in our discipline. Cultural rhetorics, as part of our discipline linked to decolonial practice, allow for stories to be told and asks for others to deeply listen to them.

ANDREA. I remember reading Terese Monberg's "Listening to Legacies" for a research methodologies course. As a beginner oral historian, I was still trying to figure out how to make sense of my own research with a group of urban, Native women. As Terese talked about Dorothy Cordova's identity as "behind the podium," immediately I could understand what my participants meant by saying that they "remain in the background" and how "leadership is a masculinist construct" (p. 93). In that moment, I knew how to talk to our discipline about oral history, rhetorical theory, and American Indian women.

US. With Driskill, Powell, and Monberg's emphasis on listening as a necessary part of any scholar's work reminds us of the four components of a cultural rhetorics orientation we described earlier. For all three scholars, this kind of positioning creates a complicated web, becoming an intricate act of "listen[ing] for unheard stories, counter-stories, which are usually silenced by the narratives that construct 'life'" ("Blood and Scholarship" 2). Driskill, Powell, and Monberg each take approaches that prioritize the visibility of this web; regarding the intentionality of ignorance of this web—"accidental" or otherwise—both presume complicity in a colonialist agenda. NIIJ. This web makes sense when you're researching Indigenous cultures, but what if the subject of your scholarship isn't aligned with that "kind of worldview"?

US. In rhetoric studies, we're too used to thinking of our work as either mainstream (and thus applicable to *all* peoples) or marginal (and thus applicable only to *some* peoples). *All work in the discipline is already focused on or arises from specific cultural practices*—mostly dominant Euro-American practices, which go as the unmarked "mainstream" in our discourse about what counts in the discipline. Even as Powell's and Monberg's work has effected change in the manner in which the "subdisciplines" of American Indian rhetorics and Filipino/a rhetorics are engaged as intellectual activities, their theories of constellations, listening/telling, and cultural narrative have impacted the field of rhetoric studies as a whole. Powell's arguments about "how to learn about Indians" and Monberg's claims about feminist historiography may just as easily be reworked to include *any* site of inquiry. Indeed, we may just as easily say these theories of constellated rhetorics helps re-situate how to study rhetoric at all. Rather than thinking of Rhetoric (upper-case, intended) as a distant, objectified, fixed identity, these precedents open the door for rhetoric (lower case, intended) to be seen and heard as a series of stories, none of which can really be heard without listening for other stories, and all of which impact and are impacted by the relationships between them.

NIIJ. But surely, these aren't the only people that do this work? This is starting to sound a lot like the work of Jacqueline Royster and Victor Villanueva.

US. Exactly. This is no accident. We look to our relations all the time when practicing cultural rhetorics. We didn't get to this place on our own, we stand on the backs of our elders, work alongside other scholarly allies and relations—in academic parlance, we'd say this: our work follows from, builds on, and is connected to some important scholars in the discipline. The stories of our relations—elders, colleagues, youngsters, communities—constellate in multiple ways. Together, through these practices, we continually make and remake webs of relations.

Lights fade slowly to darkness. Sounds of scenery being rearranged can be heard by the audience.

ACT II, SCENE 3:

NIIJ, *asked in the darkness.* That's a weird way to talk about scholarship.

Lights come up as Us begins to speak.

US. Yes it is. We have been taught to separate academia from real life, and that academia is not a cultural community. We have been told that what we do in academia doesn't have a substantial impact on the kinds of

oppression brought about by colonization. That it's all in our heads. We put decolonial delinking at the center of our stories here as a way of addressing these misconceptions. We're interested in ancestors who've talked about our discipline as a community and have worked to make space for multiple practices and stories within that community.

Both Jacqueline Jones Royster and Victor Villanueva have worked across various aspects of our field, reminding us that none of us does just one thing, and that our work is interconnected and energizes us as a community, not just as individuals. In their scholarship, we hear particular teachings on how to shift the field, intervene, and critique from a place that sustains ourselves and our discipline.

MALEA. I remember hearing Jackie Royster deliver her 1994 CCCCs chair's address, "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own." Terese and I sat side-by-side, smiled, nodded our heads. I got teary-eyed at the recognition of *shared* struggle that I heard in Jackie's words. In that series of moments, the community of the discipline opened for me to enter.

US. When we hear Royster say "Interpretive communities have to be persuaded, not just to notice that there is something more or different to know, but actually to incorporate the knowledge in their thinking and use it meaningfully in sense-making enterprises," we hear the need for decolonial practice in our own cultural community ("Disciplinary Landscaping" 161). Royster's work asks us to continue the project of "extending the boundaries" of our discipline, but even more importantly, it reminds us of the "remarkably resilient mechanism against which contemporary research must inevitably contend and must persistently resist" (150). Royster's work certainly attends to these very impulses, but we want to point out that Royster herself acknowledges the difficulty and effort this kind of attention entails. Even in *Traces of the Stream*, she remarks that she does not want to be a defender of Afra-American women's experiences, but an examiner of them. She admits that she too can get stuck in recuperation stories and has to intervene in her own practice so she can imagine another framework.

MALEA. I remember hearing Victor's 1999 CCCC chair's talk too. I guess that's means I'm officially the "elder" in this group. Anyway, the 1999 program said his talk was supposed to be "The Tree and the Woods: Racism in Multiculturalism," but what he delivered that day was called "On the Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism" instead—which I like a lot better. Again, a whole group of us Scholars for the Dream folks (current and former) sat together in the audience, listening. He told stories, held the discipline accountable, talked about the Americas in a way that confirmed my own decisions about engaging in scholarship focused on American Indians. More than that, Victor's talk revealed a process of making across and among scholars/writers/thinkers inside and outside the discipline. And everything he did implicated all of us as people who lived inside always already-raced bodies who were (and are) continuing participants in a racist society. People squirmed in their seats as he drew us all into the implications the pervasiveness of racist practices for our disciplinary stories. His comfort with our discomfort, his stretch from a sixteenth-century Franciscan to contemporary poets of color, his stories made a web of relations, and a practice of making that has stuck with me for all of these years.

US. One of the most compelling practices that Villanueva has consistently engaged—starting with *Bootstraps* and continuing in articles like "On Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism"—is story as methodology. When Villanueva says "Rhetoric, after all, is how ideologies are carried, how hegemonies are maintained. Rhetoric, then, would be the means by which hegemonies could be countered" (*Bootstraps* 121), we hear a call to engage in counter-hegemonic scholarly practices.

But even more important for our decolonial Cultural Rhetorics practice here is that he acknowledges—again and again—that the practice of story doesn't always feel good, and the stories produced in that practice aren't always happy celebrations of our community's accomplishments. When he asks, "Why do perfectly nice people...?" we hear decolonial delinking in practice—a practice that understands the discipline as a community with cultural rituals, ceremonies and beliefs. This opens space for those of us who feel alienated in those celebrations, barred from those traditional accomplishments. In this, Villanueva's ability to both critique the discipline *and* produce new ways to participate in it provides one model for how to participate in a disciplinary culture/community with diverse practices, rituals, histories, and futures.

NIJ. Surely Jackie, Victor, Malea, and Terese aren't the only ones who are important. It seems like there are so many people in our field who talk about culture, and even associate with this thing—cultural rhetorics.

US. You're right. There *are* so many folks who do interesting and important work that has changed how the discipline has talked about "culture" and "rhetoric." What we're interested in is not just their scholarship, but how these people have created professional opportunities for new generations of scholars, of practitioners. We mark Jackie and Victor as especially significant, as elders who opened doors, created space, provoked new thoughts, and took great risk. We also recognize that our discipline is made up of plenty of elders and allies, folks who are doing work that may not be explicitly aligned or named according to some of the theoretical frames we're outlining

here.¹⁷ Yet, their work and practices also contribute to so much of what we are hoping our discipline *can do*, interventions we, as members of this disciplinary community *can make* in order to sustain and survive it. As members of this collective, we recognize how these allies have impacted our scholarship and how we understand our relationship to the discipline and cultural rhetorics. They are not explicitly doing cultural rhetorics work the way we are saying, they've come to shape how we think cultural rhetorics work should be done. We understand these scholars as our neighbors. We can articulate things about their work that empowers *us* to identify this cultural rhetorics orientation.

JENN. I remember the first time I sat and talked with Julie Lindquist. I was just learning how to comfortably articulate my understanding of verbal traditions and language, and being in her effervescent space was intimidating. Her work with the language and culture of those at a bar in *A Place to Stand* was fascinating because it mirrored conversations that I had in situations when I explored voices of African American students and the cultural traditions of that group. I listened and agreed that when making sense of cultural traditions, no one wants to justify their experiences and have them validated through interrogations by academics. In talking with Julie, what made sense was exploring the conversations and the relationships that they created with the culture, people, and space in which the conversations occurred. Being able to discuss language and culture without being on the defense was a new experience and allowed me to realize that language was an integral component to understanding culture, and when language is attacked by those who demand a formal tone and "proper" construction, culture is attacked and made invalid because of non-comprehension of connections and relationships. As an ally, Julie offered me new words to better make my stance and move with more ease through arguments about this notion of language and culture and how we practice.

US. Julie believes that "language works to create, manage, and situate culture" (4). When we hear her say, "To understand culture as a narrative formation means that it cannot be regarded as an isolated, or isolatable, entity. It must be understood as relational as well as distinctive, as a site of action and reaction" (5), this is what we hear: studying culture is a relational practice, requiring interaction with and investment in the communities whose practices are being investigated. She acknowledges that interplay among local practices, material conditions, and identity performances are all part of rhetoric. Her work is intensely committed to recognizing and honoring the relationships between herself, her scholarship, and the people she works with. She is our ally because she does not objectify the people she works with. She's working with them and not on them. This practice is central to her scholarship and intellectual activity, not just because it's ethical or good or to meet Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards. For our purposes in this article, we would like to also remember our desire not to erase people's bodies from our community and disciplinary practices.

DAISY. I remember sitting in the audience of the third Octalog at the 2010 CCCC, remember being hurried, remember not having looked closely at the program. I remember being there for the event of it, being unsure of my own personal connection to this discipline. It's not that I wasn't invested in the politics of historiography, but how I would ever find a way into that conversation was completely beyond me. As a movement educator, I had been taught to identify meaning as located in the body, but in my recent five years in the academy, I was being disciplined into this other teaching—that bodies didn't matter. That morning in the Octalog audience, I remember Jay Dolmage on the dais, *urging* us to see bodies and history and circulation of stories as *necessarily connected*. It wasn't enough, he said, to change things, to "find new stories." We needed new ways of *doing*. I remember something opening in my chest when he said that; I was no longer there for the Octalog simply as a marked event for other people. In that moment, I felt my body in that room, listening to the other bodies. I remember feeling everything I had ever been taught about meaning and bodies could actually *help me* find my connection to this discipline.

US. When Dolmage says that he "see[s] rhetorical history as the study not of just a selected archive of static documents or artifacts, but a study *also, always* of the negotiations, valences, shifting claims and refutations, canons and revisions that orbit any history" (p. 113), we hear him calling attention to how our discipline talks about the history of rhetoric as static and disembodied. He asks us to use an embodied rhetorical methodology "to find new ways to circulate these stories in order to generate a new ontology, a new epistemology, a new rhetoric" (114). We understand this to be an important alliance with our work in cultural rhetorics, to remember that, like bodies, histories are alive and interconnected. Remember that the decolonial project, as we see it, also recognizes the multiple coexisting stories, bodies, histories. Our alliance with Dolmage rests on his call for an embodied methodology. He is not just asking for new stories. He's asking for new ways. This feels similar to decolonial practices like doubleweaving or the decolonial imaginary or relationality.

NIIJ. So, is this the constellating thing that you've been talking about?

US. Exactly! Yes!

NIIJ. Then, can any scholar be an ally? Is all scholarship useful to cultural rhetorics? As long as you exist in the constellated field of rhetoric, does that make you an ally? How do I learn how to do this?

US. Good questions. Remember the pieces of this story so far—decolonial practice, story, relations, constellations. We think the best way to answer your question is if we tell another story about two very different pieces of scholarship to show how this process works: Royster and Gesa Kirsch's *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* and Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony*.

In *Research is Ceremony*, Wilson builds an indigenous research paradigm using indigenous practices such as relationality and relational accountability. For Wilson, to enact relationality means to understand one's relationship: to land, people, space, ideas, and the universe as interconnected and fluid. Relational accountability is *how* one is respectful and accountable to those relationships (i.e.: practices). Under an indigenous research paradigm, Wilson understands epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology as relational concepts that are stronger as a whole and not the sum of its parts. He builds this paradigm by sharing previous conversations he has had with his colleagues, reflecting on his experiences as a First Nations person in academia who works with and for his tribal community, and discussing the importance of this paradigm to his two young sons through letters. He argues that "relationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality" (7).

Although Wilson primarily discusses an indigenous research paradigm in the context of working with indigenous American people, we see the possibilities of enacting relationality and relational accountability to work with *all* cultural communities. Through relationality and relational accountability, our objects of study do not provide meaning, but our relationships to those materials *do*. Remember our discussion of disciplinary practices in rhetoric and composition to treat all materials, including bodies, as objects used to gather and excavate meaning from? Relationality, as a rhetorical framework, gives us a way to do something besides objectify. This framework provides another option to emphasize meaning as made within and among multiple contexts, histories, and knowledge systems.

US. Royster and Kirsch's *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* is another model for how to maintain a cultural rhetorics orientation. In this book, they offer a framework, rather than a prescription or a blueprint for knowledge making. They emphasize the "feminist" in their description of rhetorical practices, encompassing methodology, textual/artifact production, pedagogy, and mentorship; we see a kindred association in this description—an orientation that requires the same elements we've been talking about here. Their "feminist informed operational framework" (18) means accepting a "set of values and perspectives [...] that honors the particular traditions of the subjects of study, respects their communities, amplifies their voices, and clarifies their visions" (14). We see this as a serious alliance with our proposed cultural rhetorics orientation in the following ways, some of which may seem obvious to you at this point. First, Royster and Kirsch are intent on recognizing the subjectivity of the sites of study—these are people, after all, and come with all the complexity and richness that people bring. Second, to study in such a way, the researcher must recognize the community/-ies in which the subjects of study participate, engage, belong. These communities are vital and interesting players; the people can't be dislocated away from them.

But also Royster and Kirsch help their readers to imagine "new paradigms" for our disciplinary community's work (14), one that reveals "more clearly where and how we stand, how we interpret what we see, and consequently how we make sense out of the chaotic effects of various encounters and observations in creating new knowledge" (15). They are acknowledging our discipline's ancestors while simultaneously encouraging us to recognize the manners in which our well-rehearsed patterns of assessment and valuation have limited our scope and vision (Royster and Kirsch 16). Feminist rhetorical practices, as drawn for us by Royster and Kirsch, have been doing this work for decades; their project is not to take credit for the work that's been done already, but to help their readers see for themselves how this work has accumulated towards "the consequence of creating volatility in research and practice, tectonic shifts on the rhetorical landscape" (17). To help us see these shifts, Royster and Kirsch offer "critical engagement, strategic contemplation, social circulation, and globalization" (19). These terms, detailed more extensively in the book (we really think you should read this book if you haven't already), are interesting corollaries to some of the ideas we've been talking about here. For instance, critical engagement emphatically asks how a story is told, *how* a person's experience is honored, how a scholar sees and doesn't see. Strategic contemplation is a continuation of the kind of work we engage critically, to *consider the space our intellectual work creates*, where space is understood as a real, lived entity, with consequences and impact on all kinds of people and other spaces, both present and past, and future. When we talk about a cultural rhetorics orientation requiring an awareness and recognition of our ancestors, all of them, the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, we believe we're engaging in a kind of strategic contemplation that encourages a new paradigm.¹⁸

End scene. Curtain down. A spotlight appears stage right.

MALEA. Up to this point, we've been *telling* you a lot of stories. Now, we want to *show* you how those stories emerge in individual practice. We'll do this showing in four voices: three individuals and one collective.

[17](#) Due to limitations of space and for the sake of narrative movement, we had to make tough decisions on "who" to name as our allies in the main narrative. Clearly, there are a number of folks in rhetoric and composition whose scholarship encourages the discipline to (re)think "culture" and "rhetoric" as well as intervenes on particular disciplinary and professional practices. Here is a longer, but certainly not exclusive list of allies: Jonathan Alexander, Joyce Rain Anderson, Kristin Arola, Adam Banks, Will Banks, Anis Bawarshi, Samantha Blackmon, Ralph Cintron, Collin Craig, Keith Gilyard, Angela Haas, Franny Howes, , Lu Ming Mao, Staci Perriman-Clark, Stacey Pigg, Gwendolyn Pough, Margaret Price, Dora Ramirez-Dhoore, Jackie Rhodes, Jim Ridolfo, Elaine Richardson, A. LaVonne Ruoff, Trixie Smith, Geneva Smitherman, and Morris Young.

[18](#) We also see our own practices reflected in their understanding of "social circulation" — "mediated legacies of thought and action, such as things that we absorb even without conscious awareness rather than a static sense of direct inheritance" —and "globalization" in the concern we take from Mignolo to build a world in which many worlds may coexist (23).

[◀ Act I up Act III ▶](#)

Act III

ACT III, SCENE 1:

Lights up. Andrea is seated at a kitchen table, stage left. She is preparing food.

ANDREA. For over five years, I have worked on a series of oral history projects with a group of urban, multigenerational Native women. They have served as resources, friends, aunties, elders, and inspiration for *doing* rhetoric. Their stories function in so many ways: as theories of visibility, as rhetorical histories, or as theories on how to do community-based research—to name a few.

We met each other because of a series of requests and preexisting relationships. As a first year PhD student in American Studies, I made an appointment with my anthropology professor, Susan Applegate Krouse, to talk about a degree completion plan. At the time, I knew I wanted to write about American Indian women and their roles and responsibilities. But, I didn't call it that. Instead, I used words like "leadership" and "activism"—knowing that I was wrong, but I wasn't sure *how* yet. I mean, this is why I moved away from creative writing to American studies to work with and for Native peoples (spoiler alert: a year from that conversation, I realize that I am actually doing rhetoric and apply to the rhetoric and writing program and start all over again). After we came up with a plan, Susan told me that she knew of an elder who was interested in recording her oral history.

"Her name is Geri and she's looking for a graduate student to help her write her life history."

I found myself sitting in Geri's living room with Susan, once a week listening to stories—laughing, crying, keeping silent. Months later, after I figured out how to form relationships with Geri and Susan, after I told them how I was grateful for these weekly meetings, how they became more than just work, Geri requested that Susan and I get more Odawa women together for a group of talking circles (an indigenous approach to communication).

"There are more of us in Lansing, and you two should get them together."

Susan and I spent months organizing the talking circles. The stories these women told during those events and the relationships I formed with them became the theoretical framework for my dissertation a few years down the road. When beginning these projects, I never intended to use them in my dissertation, something I didn't intend when I began the circle work. But, as I progressed in coursework, I realized that I couldn't stop talking about the women. I carried their stories and our relationships with me while I inhabited academic, institutional, and non-institutional spaces. As I sat in graduate seminars, I couldn't help but re-tell the stories told during the talking circles as a way to make connections to the course objectives or position myself within the discipline. And, in the act of re-telling, I started to articulate a language about how these American Indian women made themselves visible, how I made myself visible in academia, and how our discipline can learn from them/us.

To be clear, when I talk about relationships, I mean approaching the development and maintaining of research, teaching, and collegiality the same way you would develop and maintain relationships with people, land, spaces you inhabit, and the universe. I mean developing and maintaining relationships that encourage accountability and reciprocity. I mean being present within the spaces and places we belong to and continue belonging to. The Native women with whom I work with theorize this as: *to be there*. I argue that these relational approaches are rhetorical practices. Of course, these stories—these practices will look different depending on the community—on the relationships formed between participants and on your relationships to the material and the people who make it.

Through relationality, we have to exhibit patience, understanding, and willingness to slow down, to wait, to dwell. As a discipline, we struggle with teaching each other and talking to each other about how to do this work and what it looks like. I believe that a language of relationality is our way into these conversations. I practice relationality in my writing as well as in the process of gathering and listening to stories (i.e. data analysis/gathering). While working with these women, what became clear is that relationships are always uneven, or at least they always go through periods of unevenness. Here, I've shown glimpses of what my relationships looked like, at a specific time,

with Susan and Geri. But, that's just one set of stories, one set of glimpses of what those relationships looked like then, and it doesn't even scratch the surface.

Here's the thing: this is seriously hard work. In fact, for the first two years I was working with Geri on her oral history and as I was forming relationships with the stories for my dissertation, I really struggled. I didn't know what I was hearing, but I knew I heard something. I didn't know how to talk about what I heard and when I did; I was too busy explaining why it was important rather than offering a theoretical discussion.

What I need to emphasize, dear readers, is that relationships *can* create research opportunities; relationships dictate methodology and questions and structure. This is a far different approach than the idea/practice that researchers should venture out of academia with a research idea in mind in search of a community to work with until the project is over. Earlier, I told a story about how Geri asked Susan and I to "get the women together." This request helped me realize how Geri is my research partner as well as my elder and my advisor. Geri and I are still working on her oral history. In fact, as I write this, I keep reminding myself that I owe her a revision and a phone call. Through relationality, her work becomes visible—without her relationships, without her intellectual practices, there would be no project. And, who knows, maybe, I would have taken those exams in American studies and never applied to rhetoric & writing.

While working on my dissertation, I was also drafting chapters for Geri's life history. I used to joke that I had two dissertation advisors for two different projects: Malea and Geri. On the same day that I would meet Malea to talk about the job market and the dissertation, I would also meet with Geri to talk about her book. When chapters or market materials were due to Malea, chapters, transcript materials, or book proposal drafts were due to Geri. When my chair handed back revisions, Geri handed back revisions. Sometimes, I would leave one meeting thrilled and energized and another meeting with hands full of balled up tissues.

These meetings and the stories were intellectually relational. When I struggled with my dissertation, especially as I tried to communicate how a certain rhetorical theory was created, I would go back to a meeting with Geri as it was "data" to analyze and dwell on it to see if there was something there. I used these moments as markers to examine my relationship to the women, to the material, or to the spaces we shared. I *began* there instead of ended there. After my dissertation defense, I contacted the women and told them that I had passed and that the committee thought I have a strong project. I sent each one of them the final copy of the dissertation and let the women know they could "read it or not." And that "I would welcome the opportunity to further talk, answer questions, or listen to any feedback." My inbox was full of congratulations and minor revision requests. They shared stories about reading the dissertation and these stories helped me understand their perceptions of me as a researcher, storyteller, and relative.

Malea, Maria, Jenn, Daisy, and Mari walk on from stage right, carrying food that they place on Andrea's table.

US. Here, we want to recall something we claimed earlier—that people make meaning through relationships that are always constellated. Remembering this helps us to mark our own cultural practices and objects as scholars as fundamental to the knowledge we are actively making and distributing. Cultural rhetorics as a scholarly orientation, necessitates our attention to how relationality exists in different ways and at every step of a scholarly project's process. The *practice* of relationality changes throughout that process, and is made visible in multiple ways. In Andrea's case, this practice entailed a conscious departure from the traditional "dissertation model," and in some of the other stories we are telling, the practice might suggest other choices, too. Certainly, relationships are important because they are about people. But we want to be clear that they're also important because they tell us stories that live in between data, in between other stories, in between ourselves as scholars, in between the institutional products, and in between stories of our various projects.

We recognize that, at this point, in the discipline of rhet/comp, many scholars still consider that they don't have any need to learn from the intellectual practices of scholars of color, dismissing it as irrelevant, or separate from the "mainstream" of the discipline. The way that many of us have heard this is through a question like "What does *this* (Native rhetorics, queer rhetorics, feminist rhetorics, etc.) do for the rest of *us*?" Our intention here is to intervene in this presumption, to insist that methodological practices like the ones Andrea is describing, can enable all rhetorics scholars to study all people, places, and spaces.

Lights dim. All players leave the stage except for Mari.

ACT III, SCENE 2:

Lights up. Mari sits in a comfy chair, stage right. She's crocheting

MARI. For two years now, I've been a member of a crafting group. The group is composed, primarily, of women who are graduate students in humanities programs at Michigan State University. We call ourselves the Crafty

Beavers. Individuals in the group, Beavers, make a lot of different things. Some crochet, some knit, some draw, some bake cookies to share at our meetings. I asked them if I could study the ways in which the crafting, gathering, and other practices that happen within the Crafty Beavers are rhetorical and place-making practices. As a whole, the Beavers seemed happy to oblige, and a few members were especially enthusiastic. They agreed to interviews about their crafting histories and their histories and experiences with the group. They also agreed to my (video-recorded) observations of the group. They've been cheerful and kind, open and honest. So, like Andrea, I've engaged in a project that began with oral history.

My dissertation, *Crafting Place: Rhetorical Practice and the Everyday*, situates and theorizes place-making as a rhetorical act by exploring the ways a crafting group makes, maintains, and manipulates space and place through the practices of gathering, crafting, remembering, and talking. Space and place are often seen as empty material, physical locations. Instead of focusing on space and place as merely physical and material entities, I focus on the relationship between the cultural, social, intellectual, and physical components of space and place. The Crafty Beavers are an excellent group for this research, since they do not consistently meet in the same physical space/place. To study them, I must study space/place as something that goes beyond the physical/material. The most difficult part of the project was using their stories, my experiences, and my observations of our interactions as a group to write about the ways in which the group makes space and place and, from that, theorize about place-making as rhetorical. And, it scares me. I have three data chapters about the ways that the group members acknowledge how they work within the group, what they think about the group, how their crafting and personal histories affect their relationship to the group. Some of this information is rather personal, tied to family history, individual stories of depression and loss, and difficult experiences with graduate school. I spent about two months just arranging and rearranging the stories that Beavers told me when I needed to be writing "data chapters" of my dissertation. I wasn't sure how to theorize about rhetoric and place-making with the stories and observations I'd collected. I wanted to honor their stories and use as much information from the stories as possible without making claims that I felt might upset group members. I conducted one group interview and six individual interviews as well as film three of our meetings; that's a lot of data to wade through. Those are a lot of stories.

Researchers who use ethnographic methods often talk of data overload—having collected so much information that they are daunted by the prospect of putting together something meaningful with it. There is a lot to read and look at, a lot to process and analyze. But, it's not just about having a lot of information; it's about being responsible with that data, too. Some folks might say, "It's just data, not people." But, that's just the thing, those stories belong to people. People I know. People I spend time with. People I care about. People who have not only been kind enough to share their stories, but people who might not have shared those stories had I not been connected to them through the communities of the craft group and of graduate school. These concerns aren't unique to cultural rhetorics; they're concerns that anyone who has done participant-observer research or ethnographic methods thinks about, but a cultural rhetorics orientation leads me to linger over these concerns and think differently about the relationships in play—those between me and the group that I am part of and study, those between me and the "data," those between the participants and their own stories, and so on.

Malea, Maria, Jenn, Daisy, and Andrea enter, stage left, and gather around Mari's chair.

US. Earlier, we made the argument that cultural practices are built, shaped, and dismantled based on the encounters people have with one another within and across particular systems of shared belief. Mari provides an excellent example here of how responsibility is not a set of static practices but is dependent on the encounters we have in particular communities.

MARI. For instance, it might seem that the responsible thing to do is to provide each participant with a pseudonym of her choosing to "protect" her identity. Of course, I offered this option, but I am also of the mindset that a more responsible and respectful approach is to give them the option to use their own names, should they choose. Wilson discusses this approach in *Research is Ceremony*: "I would like to use the real names of everyone I worked with on this research, so that you will know exactly whom I am writing about. This goes against the roles of most university ethical research policies. However, how can I be held accountable to the relationships I have with these people if I don't name them? How can they be held accountable to their own teachers if their words and relationships are deprived of names?" (63). Although sometimes it might be necessary to protect participants with pseudonyms, it makes a great deal more sense to use their real names. When we do cultural work, we do work with *people*. Our work needs to be situated within the communities we work with and responsible to them. And, we need to recognize that, ultimately, research in rhetoric is research with/of/about people, humans, cultures. This emphasis on responsibility is deeply tied to a concern with relationality. When we work with groups of people, we are forming a relationship with them. As someone who studies rhetoric through the concept of place and

place-making, I am consistently interested in the surroundings, the environment, the places and spaces of the communities I work with and within. Those places are not just physical and material, but also social, emotional, and intellectual. They are classed, raced, and gendered. And, most importantly, they are all in relationship with one another. Rather than demarcate these kinds of relationships away from one another (e.g. just focus on physical place or just focus on gendered place), I want to emphasize their connections, and a cultural rhetorics orientation and methodological foundation helps me attend to these relationships responsibly.

US. Earlier, we said that in the discipline of rhetoric studies, often, human practices become objects of study that are reduced to texts, to artifacts, to objects, in a way that elides both makers *and* systems of power. Mari has emphasized how her training encourages her to pause and think about this. Andrea talks about this as well, when she makes the decision to include methodology discussions throughout her dissertation instead of siphoning it off to one chapter. So, when we talk about cultural rhetorics as an orientation to methodology that constellates, rather than one which "siloes" and alienates, we are partly talking about how our discipline has trained us to demarcate and draw clear borders. We are talking about acknowledging the interconnectedness of research and its location in our bodies.

Lights dim. All players leave the stage except for Daisy.

ACT III, SCENE 3:

Lights up. Daisy slowly dances and moves around the stage.

DAISY. You should know that I came to rhetoric studies from dance and movement education. I also want to admit that phrase—"movement education"—is one I culled together from various disciplines—physical therapy, kinesiology, yoga, Alexander Technique, pilates, Bartenieff Fundamentals, Rolfing, massage, etc. As a field, it's not quite as clearly drawn as we tend to expect in the university, but it encompasses any systematic approach to studying the body, how it functions and moves, and how to teach it to other bodies. I have a history as a professional in this field, as well as being a student. I've rebuilt a shoulder and a knee and have worked with people trying to rebuild similar and other joints, as well.

Here's the thing I've learned about bodies—you can't look at one piece of it without seeing all the others, can't manipulate a part without having to negotiate every other aspect of that body too. You can try, but you can't do it. It just won't happen. It's not how bodies work.

I must have been about halfway through taking history of rhetorical theory in my first seminar as a PhD student when it occurred to me that when I said "body" I was intending something different than what the other folks in the room were hearing. I wasn't articulating myself well, I realized. I wasn't taking into account all the ways I had become used to thinking of bodies that other people in the room either didn't know about me, didn't share with me, or both. Bodies seemed to be somehow outside of the conversation for most of my peers, or afterthoughts, whereas I couldn't think about these theories without also thinking about arms and legs and bones and muscles. Where were they? I felt like I could see them—old, dead ones, and young, living ones gesturing and speaking and living day to day with all their needs and desires, doing things, making things happen *with their bodies*.

How was it, I worried, that this whole other discipline had come to separate the makings and distributions of knowledge from the makings and distributions of bodies? And somewhere in here, my project began taking shape. It's not an easy question to answer, I came to find out; in fact, it's one I think will take me a long time to satisfy, but here's where I've arrived so far and how I've gotten there. First, I committed myself to trying to listen to our discipline—to what scholars in our discipline are saying about bodies, how they think of them as relevant, as well as who and which traditions they are relying on to help them inform those views. Then, I had to listen to those traditions. "Those" traditions, as we've already suggested in earlier pages, are primarily ones from European adaptations of ancient Greco-Romans, so I listened particularly close to them. What I heard, over and over again, was a generalized list of assumptions about the relationship between body and mind: 1) that the body is subservient to the mind; 2) that the body needs salvation and redemption; and 3) that bodies are understandable as always better or worse than other bodies. Simple enough to identify, I thought, and in some ways all these statements infer one model of relationality.

However, that model is based on only one worldview, one that is tied to historical, cultural, social, political, economic, and religious practices. Those practices *influence* the particular sense of the role or value of physical bodies, but too, they carry out the *work* of it, in turn dictating other practices. These practices could include legislation and governance, but could also be less "visible" forms of punishments and valorizations, like representations of body types in the media, or cultural norming for particular groups of bodies. And, as we know, all these practices weave together to make a messy, layered, systemic practice. One such practice, of course, is colonialism. All of these practices, systemic or otherwise, dictate that any behavior or action outside of the conceived "normal" body is a mis-practice—a perversion, distortion, deviation, disease, and malfunction. These

mis-practices can only be seen this way because our bodies are intended to be predictable, understandable, and more importantly—controllable.

This belief about the role of bodies as controllable, subservient, predictable things wasn't consistent with beliefs I had accepted from other communities, and so I felt a revision was in order. I know that embodiment necessitates an action. It requires movement. It's not the body's relationship to the mind that marks something as embodied, but the body's relationship to space, time, and other bodies or objects. While rhetoric studies' traditional insistence that "relationality" depended on the spatial arrangement of over and under, I knew that movement theorists articulated it as between/among. Of course, there are lots of rhetoric scholars who are also emphasizing these relational proportions, many of whom we've already mentioned in this article.

Of these scholars, I looked particularly to Royster and Kirsch to ally my methodological choices and my theoretical premise. In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, Royster reflects on her own theory of "disciplinary landscaping" as "a springboard from which [she] started thinking in a more coherent way about the need in RCL (Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy) to incorporate deliberately into our theoretical and methodological approaches mechanisms for moving beyond the constraints of habitual paradigms in order to notice conceptual and ecological features that might otherwise go unnoticed." (11). This need that Royster articulates reflects a complex system of relationality; that I think we don't often notice in our scholarship—the way our cultural community's practices shape and are simultaneously shaped by the multiple and shifting processes, habits, and artifacts within and without that community. This helped me understand how powerfully embedded was our traditional perspective on rhetoric and the body.

In my own research, my own attempt to "notice conceptual and ecological features that might otherwise go unnoticed," I began to see a useful model illustrating exactly *how* relationality worked, in the body. In my conversations with Barbara Mahler (a prominent movement educator, theorist, and practitioner) and in listening to the published works of Irene Dowd (a contemporary of Mahler's), and those of Mabel Todd (also a prominent theorist and practitioner from the 1930s), I heard the body being articulated as an entity which is always understood as deeply connected, through gravity, to the ground, and through the ground to other bodies. This connection moves through bodily tissues, through bones and nerves and other matter, connecting the physical objects as well as the abstracted ones—the consciousness—via the nervous system. One of Todd's foundational premises is that the way a person understands her or his relationship to the universe occurs at the level of the bones. She argues that the bones' relationships to each other instigates postural patterns, which then allow for neurological transmission, which engage muscular support and movement, which feed the body's cognition—about place, about relationship, about the universe. When I could hear and see this, I felt I could see as Royster had called me to see; embodied rhetoric was in the bones, I understood, but not only there.

In my interviews with Barbara Mahler, I learned how she emphasizes the bones as "the deepest and densest tissue [that] conducts the most energy, gravitational force." She is talking about harnessing gravitational force falling down through the skeleton into the floor and back up; we might understand this as Todd would ask us to—as a force which connects us to the universe, and as a force which allows our body to make meaning from this connection. What we can understand from such a connection includes the distinction between our self and other selves, or our self and the rest of the world, but also, importantly, our relationship to the world, to other bodies in the world. When I say in the previous paragraph that embodied rhetoric is not only in the bones, this is what I mean. Embodied rhetoric travels through the bones, into the ground, and through all other organic things, which also harness physical energy. This underscores for me the single most important thing I have learned: that bodies are always in relation to the world around them, to the other bodies, and that, truly, there is no good or bad body.

Malea, Mari, Jenn, Andrea, and Maria enter, stage left, and begin to dance with Daisy.

US. Unlike the movement of the body, in scholarship we *can*—and often do—look at one piece of a system of communication without seeing its relationship to others. It is also true that we *can/do* manipulate a part of a project without having to negotiate every other aspect of the associated body of knowledge alongside it. However, as Daisy's work asks us to consider, what is lost in such a deliberate extraction? In the practice of cultural rhetorics we emphasize a deliberate and purposeful methodological movement across disciplines and fields (read *communities*) because we wish to acknowledge our relations via what we mutually share. It is one thing to ask, "What makes scholarship between disciplinary communities different?" It is another to ask, "What do we learn when we understand what they have in common?" This is the heart of our project.

Lights remain on as players assemble center stage.

[‹ Act IIupEpilogue ›](#)

Epilogue

EPILOGUE:

US. It's late August now—the dog days of summer, as those Romans used to say. Despite the busy-ness of each of our individual transitions from summer to the academic year, we're gathering again. This time, not at physically shared rooms and tables and beaches. Today, we're trying to use technology to build a virtual space in which to finish this work, but as much as ethernet and wifi allow this, they're inconsistency seems to have become a new member of our collective. Mari has a hard time getting invited to the hangout, so she and Jenn and Maria text and IM to troubleshoot. Malea sits in the conference room with Maria and acts as an information conduit. Andrea joins in the midst of this confusion, feeling a little ill. Daisy's wifi connection introduces some funny audio effects and keeps dropping her out of the conversation. Jenn's two sons pop on and off camera to say "hi" or make requests of their mother.

And yet, we are all here. Laughing and joking about the audio-twang of Daisy's connection, waving back to Jenn's kids, trying to get Mari into the space, offering various remedies to Andrea about her queasiness, all while we work and write together. Writing this article has been a remarkable event—at times, it just seemed like it wouldn't happen. Getting this many people to articulate their ideas and listen to each other and commit to a plan and agree on a structure—well, it hasn't been easy. Why are we telling you this? Because the messiness of our process—the coming together and going apart and general chaos of—are as much the point of this article as the article itself. What you've read here is not just a text, you see. It's a living part of us—a living part of a community of scholarship that stretches beyond us too. Cultural rhetorics scholarship is never a practice of individuals making knowledge on their own; it's always a part of a larger community, a larger conversation, a network of relations.

MALEA. So, while our part of this performance is at its end now, your responsibility has just begun. These stories we've told are yours now.¹⁹ Do with them what you will. Re-read them. Cite them. Build upon them. Argue with them. Disagree with them. But don't ever say that you would've practiced your scholarship differently if only you'd heard these stories. You've heard them now.

¹⁹In the spirit of Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories*.

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