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## Looking Back, Looking Forward: A Dialogue on “The Imperative of Racial Rhetorical Criticism”

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A number of things in Lisa Flores’ article spurred our thinking and discussion as we prepared for the special panel at RSA.<sup>1</sup> In preparation for the conference, we began communicating over email corroborating overarching themes of our contribution. However, we found that our embodied, face-to-face conversations at the conference significantly shifted and re-shaped our provocations for the panel. Sharing our experiences and backgrounds, sitting on the same couch in the Hilton lobby, our conversations about “the imperative of racial rhetorical criticism” broadened to encompass not only issues of theory and methods but also personal struggles, victories, identities, and emotions. This experience, our creation of what Cherríe Moraga once termed “theory in the flesh,<sup>2</sup>” likely resonates with other scholars of race, and is reflected in Flores’ article.

Our overarching take-away is a recognition that the “imperative of racial rhetorical criticism” necessitates challenging canons, theories, and methods, as well as the forms of education, knowledge production, and circulation that structure Rhetorical discourse. It is in this spirit we decided to continue our conversation, here, in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*. We seek to perform this embodied and collaborative approach in the format and content of this essay as we discuss “the imperative.” Over the course of the ensuing conversation, we address the following questions: *Why is it important to acknowledge work on race as an imperative? How do we frame and push this “imperative” beyond the community of scholars*

*who already are committed to race work? How do we as scholars impress the importance of racial rhetorical criticism so that others follow and take up arms?*

**David Cisneros:** One of the things that struck me about Flores' essay is her naming of work on race within rhetorical studies as an "imperative." An imperative is an act that involves or expresses a command. So, this is striking to me because Flores makes a bold claim that racial rhetorical criticism, or rhetorical criticism of raced rhetoric, is something that must be done, presumably, by all of those in our field, and not just the so-called "race scholars."

Work on race continues to be positioned as an ancillary or secondary concern within the field of Rhetoric. Despite the vibrant legacy and "abundance" of work on race, it remains a peripheral and "marginal" area within our field -- the domain of specialized scholars who bring rhetoric to bear on race, or bring race into the domain of rhetoric. While in graduate school, as I developed my interest and identity as a scholar of Latinx rhetoric, senior scholars remarked on my "professionalization" as a particular kind of ("Hispanic"? "Latino"?) rhetorical critic, as if this was some variation from a "default" setting. How many would consider race (as well as gender, sexuality, nationality, and ability) core concerns of the field of Rhetoric? For those of us on the Communication side, it is probably both surprising and unremarkable that a recent study of journal publications and citation practices found Rhetoric to be the whitest of a very white field. As Flores writes, "While we can almost easily trace a historical conversation on race, it has often been sporadic and limited. . . . Edited volumes and special editions of journals reflecting on the field . . . often leave racial analysis out of the primary focus of the field, naming it only a newer development, an add-on."

Thus, for me, recognizing race as central to Rhetoric--in fact, as an imperative--is a crucial take away from Flores article. What about you, Alexis?

**Alexis McGee:** I was reprimanded, for a number of years, for centering race and gender in my studies. As a graduate student, I often felt I didn't belong to the field of Rhetoric. At times I felt my attempts to bridge raced and gendered rhetorical performances ““foreclose[d] the possibility”” of my academic advancement, as Flores suggests. I asked myself if my commitment to intersectionality is worth the added stress of pushing traditional, discursive boundaries. However, I came to understand what Flores wrote, “that rhetorical scholars write and think at the intersections of race and rhetoric today, and their work calls us to intellectual, social, and political action and to disciplinary intervention.” Acknowledging the work I do as an act of political engagement reshaped my personal narrative. These sites of contention and moments of disillusionment represent the undervalued but imperative work of racial rhetorical criticism with which I and other emerging scholars grapple. Studying race—or intersectionality more broadly—consistently challenges normative practices, making my choice to continue my research more “imperative” in the hopes of changing the possibilities of rhetorical studies and experiences for other graduate students of color.

The special panel organized at RSA, from which this dialogue stems, further validated the importance of race as an “imperative” for rhetorical studies and encouraged me to keep moving forward.

**DC:** Thanks so much for sharing your experience and perspective. Because of our scholarly and personal backgrounds, we both concur with Flores' statement that racial—and, more specifically,

as you note, *intersectional*—rhetorical criticism is imperative. But *how do we push the “imperative” of racial rhetorical criticism, especially beyond the community of scholars who already are committed to this work?*

**AM:** Restructuring education would be my best suggestion at this point. I know this seems too easy an answer—and perhaps reductive or redundant—but I think critiquing and pushing the boundaries of how we discuss and utilize “texts” as viable research and pedagogical resources can exacerbate the complexities of intersectionality surrounding racial rhetorical criticism in a positive way.

By restructuring education I am specifically thinking about expanding how we discuss and understand methods of research in and out of educational settings; who we cite and why; and the politics sculpting (or not) emerging scholars’ practices and research methodology. Why do some still cringe when students use popular culture, like Hip Hop, as research material? These are important sites of research and practice. Angela Y. Davis noted that Blues music, specifically regarding Black women, “could serve as a rich terrain for examining a historical feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black communities. That their [Black women] aesthetic representations of the politics of gender and sexuality are informed by and interwoven with their representations of race and class makes their work all more provocative.”<sup>4</sup> Even as Davis suggests that these recordings are primary sources and should be treated as such, some traditional scholars do not hold music, in this case, with such high regard as valid and reputable sites of information.

Valuing alternative texts like songs asks us as scholars, students, mentors to re-evaluate and acknowledge the raced and gendered politics mediating ruptures between traditional (read

classic or canonized Western traditions of) rhetorical methods, theory, and criticism. This highlights the very necessity of difference, of racial rhetorical criticism, in order to build and navigate fruitful hermeneutic dialogic(s). At the very least, this realization of contention surrounding sources (and citation practices) lets us begin to see the disconnect between methods of communication, discourse, and the possibilities of rhetoric. When we start having discussions in class, between scholars, with administrations, about the problems and possibilities accompanying the absence or restricted praxis of racial rhetorical criticism—either as *topoi* or discourse—we can have more critical and relative dialogues about agency, politics, theory, and methodology. As it stands now, these traditional rhetorical paradigms often stymie people of color’s rhetorical agency.

**DC:** I agree with you that pushing the “imperative” of racial rhetorical criticism demands we reconsider and “restructure” (to use your word) the educational and research practices of our field, from the way we teach rhetorical methods to the kinds of “texts” we valorize and feature in our research and classes. But when I think about this question of pushing the “imperative” of racial rhetorical criticism, I keep coming back to Flores’ comment that “rhetorical studies is fundamentally—at its core—the study of race.” This is a provocative statement. Flores is highlighting a broader point that the subject of rhetoric (as field of inquiry and as the prototypical figure of address) is fundamentally, at its core, raced (and gendered, sexed, and embodied in many other ways). Insofar as all of our studies of rhetoric—whether visual rhetoric,<sup>5</sup> sonic rhetoric,<sup>6</sup> or material rhetoric<sup>7</sup>—involve the voice, the flesh, seeing, and/or hearing, all rhetorical work needs to wrestle with race. Moreover, our very notions of voice, speech, and the speaking subject themselves are raced.<sup>8</sup>

So, I think pushing the imperative of racial rhetorical criticism should also mean pushing the point that rhetoric and rhetorical studies are fundamentally (as in, conceptually, ontologically) raced. In addition to, as you suggest, pushing to restructure the educational and research practices and norms of our field, we need to continually demonstrate the foundational ways in which rhetorical studies is rooted in raced notions of voice, the body, speech, and sight. This means that all rhetorical criticism is, or should be, work on race (and all its intersections) even when it is not about Black or Latinx or Asian rhetors. As rhetorical scholars committed to racial rhetorical criticism, in our publications, talks, and interactions with other rhetoricians, we should be pushing the point that rhetoric is “fundamentally—at its core—the study of race,” and so it will no longer do to keep work on race siloed in special divisions or the “race week” on the semester syllabus. Our whole conception of rhetoric (voice, speech, the body, address) needs to grapple with the reality of race. And I guess this takes us back to your point above that, part of that change has to also happen at the institutional and structural level of the field, in terms of the classes taught, the texts that are worthy of analysis, and the research that is regularly cited.

What we’ve discussed so far sounds like a daunting set of changes to bring to the field of Rhetoric. How do we push this imperative? *How do we as scholars impress the importance of racial rhetorical criticism so that others follow and take up arms?*

**AM:** I constantly find myself asking this very question. My understanding of race, rhetoric, politics all stem from navigating spaces as a Black woman, so it is easy for me to say racial rhetorical criticism is important and therefore you should, of course, want to be involved with its discussion. Flores notes, “race is foundational to the work of rhetorical criticism and that any criticism void of this consideration is incomplete, partial, if not irresponsible.” So, in that sense,

it is hard for me to answer this question because it seems, to me, that one's intersectionality is always in conversation with, or always informs, the theorizing or projecting of experiences, thus being an easily recognizable site for rhetorical criticism and engagement.

At the same time, the push back of accepting issues of race, gender, class, etc. as factors in rhetorical criticism and methodology illustrates the active participation of keeping canons of rhetoric, communication, and composition white—or at the very least privileging white as a major contributor to its framework. Therefore, I understand the imperative of racial rhetorical criticism to be necessary in the dismantling of solipsistic practices in academia and beyond. I would hope this logic and narrative were enough to persuade students and scholars to take up arms, but the personal isn't political for everyone nor can we dilute such a complex and multifaceted debate.

We see this conundrum in my previous reflection on education. Some scholars invested in race work may argue against the canonization of people of color's research, like the critiques made by Baugh-Harris and Wanzer-Serrano in this forum, and others for it. Both arguments serve important, critical disruptions: does canonization actually work against the very goal we are trying to achieve—that is expansion and representation. Some scholars call for intervention in their research but fall short of their activism when text selection for their classroom reflects traditional, white approaches to rhetorical studies.

Our investment in mentorship, discussion, and course construction can act as crucial sites of investigation for those not persuaded in the racial rhetorical imperative. For instance, I was creating a reading list for a dissertation course focusing on gender and American Blues. I turned in the reading list to my professor only to have it returned to me. While looking at the initial list, my professor said “I don't see any Black women on this list. Surely Black women have written

something about the blues.” She was right. It was so easy for me to put together a reading list maintaining the status quo—continuing a discursive practice of white, male patriarchy. It completely rejected the very argument I was trying to make. Without active, political, and critical reflection of myself as a scholar, the construction of this list eliminated the very foundations of my work. How can I begin researching the influence of Black women in American blues when my research practices and materials already (and inadvertently) privilege white, male, heteronormative scholars? Paula Chakravarty et al. argue that: “we are socialized to perform, practices based on perceived attributions of authority, quality, rigor, and topical fit,” which ultimately can “continue to institutionalize whiteness.” This quote, along with my anecdote, highlight the level of ease at which Black women (people of color more broadly and even whiteness as an intersectional identity) become silenced in research and research methodologies because of discursive practices and training. As a result, I was constantly reminded and asked who I was citing: #didyouciteablackwomantoday.<sup>9</sup> “One thing remains constant, raced bodies—bodies that *look* other—will be contained” Flores suggests, and she is right. “If we must canonize racial rhetorical criticism, which *we must*, then we must do so through an intentional politics of inclusion. Intellectually, morally, and politically, scholars of color engaged in racial rhetorical criticism cannot be marginalized.” The evidence of raced rhetorical criticism interjects voice into the chasms of silence creating possibilities of scholarly growth across disciplines and within discourses. If we are not seeing ourselves in the research, if we are being guided away from texts and practices that resonate with our personal experiences, then how can we ask others to join us, to take up arms and continue fighting for the imperative of racial rhetorical criticism?

**DC:** I appreciate your points about both the concrete research practices, like the politics of citation, and the forms of self-reflexivity and accountability that a community of scholars can provide. I also think that racial rhetorical criticism can help to problematize the rhetorical canon by pointing to the ways that, like all of society, it is structured by forms of whiteness, anti-blackness, and coloniality as noted by scholars like Bernadette Calafell, Ersula Ore, and Wanzer-Serrano, to name a few.<sup>10</sup> This dovetails with the points I made above—the presumptive whiteness of rhetorical studies remains un(re)marked and invisible to many within the field.

This conversation has left me with a renewed commitment to fight against the deeply-rooted structures and ideologies within Rhetoric that continue to marginalize scholarship on race and to amplify the voices of scholars of color who aim to do the same. What are your concluding thoughts, Alexis?

**AM:** The imperative of racial rhetorical criticism is powerful enough to center people of color's voices and invoke ethical responses to real world exigencies, as Flores suggested. Like you, I continue to be excited by the conversations and statements proclaimed in this (larger) conversation.

**DC & AM:** We recognize the act of writing this informal and collaborative piece is, in itself, an attempt to disrupt common approaches to writing, publishing, and thinking within academic spaces. As racial rhetorical scholars, we want to emphasize the community building supporting our growth as writers, critical thinkers, and mentors—that which often gets taken for granted or overlooked. In writing this piece, we created a bond between scholars, supported the work of racial rhetorical criticism both for each other and discursively, and we marked this conversation

as a political and critical intervention. It is in this type of communication and reflection that we uphold Flores' outlook. To conclude, we hope to re/invigorate you—the readers, the emerging scholars, the NTT/TT faculty—to reflect and ask similar questions. Now, we ask: What are you doing?

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<sup>1</sup> This and all other references to Flores are taken from her 2016 article. Lisa A. Flores, "Between Abundance and Marginalization: The Imperative of Racial Rhetorical Criticism." *Review of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 4-21.

<sup>2</sup> Cherrie Moraga, "Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh." In Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1981), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Paula Chakravarty, Rachel Kuo, Victoria Grubbs, and Charlton McIlwain. "# CommunicationSoWhite." *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 2 (2018): 254-266. This, and other references to Chakravaty et al., refers to this work.

<sup>4</sup> Angela Y. Davis. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), xiv-xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Anjali Vats and LeiLani Nishime. "Containment as Neocolonial Visual Rhetoric: Fashion, Yellowface, and Karl Lagerfeld's "Idea of China." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99, no. 4 (2013): 423-447.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan W. Stone. "Listening to the sonic archive: Rhetoric, representation, and race in the Lomax Prison recordings." *Enculturation* 19 (2015). <http://enculturation.net/listening-to-the-sonic-archive>

<sup>7</sup> Kelly E. Happe. "The body of race: Toward a rhetorical understanding of racial ideology." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99, no. 2 (2013): 131-155.

<sup>8</sup> Eric King Watts. *Hearing the hurt: Rhetoric, aesthetics, and politics of the new Negro movement*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Special thanks to Jocelyn Moody, Kinitra Brooks, Sonja Lanehart, Adam Banks, and Marco Cervantes for bringing citation practices to the forefront.

<sup>10</sup> Bernadette Marie Calafell. "Monstrous femininity: Constructions of women of color in the academy." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (2012): 111-130; Ersula Ore. "They Call Me Dr. Ore." *Present Tense* 5, no. 2 (2015): <http://www.presenttensejournal.org/wp->

content/uploads/2015/12/Ore.pdf; and Darrel Allan Wanzer-Serrano, "Delinking Rhetoric, or Revisiting McGee's Fragmentation Thesis through Decoloniality." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 15, no. 4 (2012): 647-657. (Originally published as Darrel Allan Wanzer).