

# Articulating Rhetorical Field Methods: Challenges and Tensions

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*Critical rhetoricians are increasingly adopting in situ rhetorical methods such as participant observation at protests, consumer sites, and memorials. Despite their value, the ad hoc development of central methodological and analytic commitments of such approaches is cause for concern. In this essay, we synthesize these efforts to name a methodological approach—rhetorical field methods—for analyzing everyday rhetorical experience and articulate the commitments and concerns that motivate this approach, thus creating a focus for debate about in situ rhetorical study. We elaborate on three commitments, articulate some critical problematics, and identify heuristic questions and possibilities of this approach. We conclude by discussing rhetorical field methods’ contributions to intradisciplinary communication research.*

*Keywords: Critical Rhetoric; Ethnography; Performance; Rhetorical Criticism; Rhetorical Field Methods*

In a reflection on critical rhetoric, McKerrow and St. John (2005) suggested that critical rhetoric (CR) operates as an orientation that allows the flexibility to respond to a diverse range of rhetorical experiences. One primary development of this flexibility involves scholars’ incorporation of useful elements of qualitative research into rhetorical studies. For example, Watts and Orbe (2002) used focus groups to identify how advertisements were consumed by viewers and, in particular, how those reading

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practices were shaped by issues of race and identity. Importantly, though, where Watts and Orbe relied on interview techniques and focus groups, more recent work by rhetoricians utilizes participant observation, and other in situ methods, to critique embodied, often mundane, forms of rhetoric (e.g., Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1991; Dickinson, Ott, & Aoki, 2005, 2006; Endres, Sprain, & Peterson, 2007, 2009; Hasian & Wood, 2010; Katriel, 1987, 1993; McCormick, 2003; Medhurst, 2001; Stromer-Galley & Schiappa, 2006; Taylor, 1998; Zagacki & Gallagher, 2009). Likewise, critics, including Blair (1999, 2001), Dickinson (1997, 2002, 2006), Pezzullo (2001, 2003, 2007), and Simonson (2010), have used in situ methods to focus attention on rhetorical places and performances expanding both the range of what counts as rhetoric and the critical vocabularies informing rhetorical analysis. While the critical rhetoric orientation invites a variety of methodological border crossings, it is the move toward in situ rhetorical methods that is of particular interest to us in this essay.

These efforts at in situ rhetorical analysis are valuable because they sharpen the ability for CR to engage seriously the voices of marginalized rhetorical communities and mundane discourses that often evade critical attention (Hauser, 1999; Ono & Sloop, 1995; Sloop & Ono, 1997). However, despite this value, these approaches also concern us due to their sometimes limited, ad hoc development of central methodological and analytic commitments that inform in situ rhetorical analysis. This scattered approach limits theoretical development and slows critical self-reflection. A more deliberate engagement of the questions posed by in situ rhetorical analysis can create a focused starting point for debate on the questions posed by a shift from analysis of objectified texts to critique of “live” rhetorics. If our entry into everyday rhetorical contexts indeed serves the dual function of cataloging often marginalized rhetorical action *and* representing these practices in ways that contribute to the emancipatory aims of CR (McKerrow, 1989; Ono & Sloop, 1992; Pezzullo, 2001, 2003, 2007; Sloop & Ono, 1997), a panoply of questions emerge that require vigorous interrogation as we establish our critical authority to speak about, with, and, sometimes, for these communities (Alcoff, 1995).

Given these opportunities and critical imperatives, our primary aim in this essay is to name a methodological approach for in situ analysis of everyday rhetorical experience and articulate the commitments and concerns that motivate this approach. *Rhetorical field methods*, we argue, refers both to the rhetorical intervention into rhetorical spaces and action in which we engage when we describe and interpret insights gained through in situ rhetorical study (like CR this descriptive and interpretive practice aims to contribute to emancipatory practice), and to rhetorical field methods focus on the processual forms of rhetorical action that are accessible only through participatory methods (and that are flattened when those forms of rhetorical action are reduced to exclusively textual representations) (Conquergood, 2002). Supporting this primary aim, we identify and critique extant efforts at in situ rhetorical analysis highlighting valuable contributions, isolating critical gaps, and accounting for these concerns within the methodological approach for which we argue. By naming this approach rhetorical field methods, our intent is to create a

focal point for debate about in situ rhetorical study and to argue for imperatives that we believe should motivate this type of research. Rather than declare a monolithic approach, our aim is to foster a generative discussion.

To facilitate this discussion, we further define rhetorical field methods in relation to their critical intersection among communication subdisciplines and elaborate on three commitments of rhetorical field methods as *an* approach to in situ analysis. Following this, we articulate some critical problematics central to rhetorical field methods and identify some heuristic questions and possibilities presented by this approach. Last, we discuss rhetorical field methods' contributions to intradisciplinary research efforts in communication.

### **Articulating Rhetorical Field Methods: Intersections & Commitments**

Most basically, rhetorical field methods are a practical and theoretical synthesis of CR, performance studies, and ethnography that function as an orientation that utilizes methodological tools from (but is not bound by) these subdisciplines in order to understand "live" rhetorics. For example, we see scholars engaging rhetorical field methods already to analyze ephemeral discourses of protest (e.g., Endres, Sprain, & Peterson, 2009; Pezzullo, 2001, 2003, 2007), coconstructed consumer places (e.g., Dickinson, 1997, 2002; Stewart & Dickinson, 2008), contested memorial sites (e.g., Blair, 1999, 2001; Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1991; Blair & Michel, 2000; Dickinson, Ott, & Aoki, 2005, 2006), and bodies engaged in mundane performance (e.g., Fenske, 2007). We also see potential for rhetorical field methods to analyze situations in which meanings depend on places, physical structures, spatial delineations, interactive bodies, and in-the-moment choices. For example, adjustments of one's protest rhetoric in response to a crowd's reactions, the renegotiation of one's movements through space based on materialized (and dynamic) discourses of power, and ways of apprehending others based on the embellishments and comportments enacted through their bodily performances.

Rhetorical field methods offer a productive articulation of the careful textual analyses characteristic of CR with the provocative insights uncovered by in situ research common in ethnography and performance studies. Specifically, we argue that influences from ethnography and performance studies ought to be more effectively pressed into the service of rhetorical criticism, especially insofar as the insights offered by these approaches can help shape the constitutive, strategic, politically motivated, and social justice-oriented readings of domination and freedom made by critical rhetoricians. By suggesting a conceptual articulation of these approaches, we are not suggesting that one displace the others, or that all criticism ought to adopt this perspective. Rather, by gaining contextually oriented insights through participant observation, CR oriented critics are able to make more productive assessments of how, as McKerrow urges, to "guide future actions." In this section, we will first locate rhetorical field methods at the intersection between CR, ethnography, and performance approaches to research. Then, we will introduce three commitments that characterize our conception of rhetorical field methods.

*Critical Intersections*

Rhetorical field methods operate at the intersections between CR, ethnography, and performance studies. Read in concert, these approaches reveal similar questions encountered by researchers and new possibilities for accessing (un)common—common in that they happen everyday, uncommon in that they are typically undocumented—discourses to theorize how rhetoric constructs everyday life. Our aim is to map how this intersection of critical approaches fosters provocative insights. These points of intersection are not exclusive, but demonstrate rhetorical field methods' commitment to utilizing and supplementing its practice with tools drawn from rhetoricians *and* critics in other communication subdisciplines.

Rhetorical field methods align closest with CR, embracing the critical spirit, demystifying function, committed critical practice, and desire to identify possible emancipatory alternatives that are its signature (McKerrow, 1989). Rhetorical field methods reflect these tenets in two ways: first, by attempting to create more equitable representations of marginalized voices and, second, by identifying how those voices are or can be deployed in ways that (re)construct more emancipatory power relations. By accessing embodied and “live” elements of rhetoric suppressed in textual representation, and by focusing on communities often excluded from critical analysis (e.g., the mundane, the oppressed, the oppositional) rhetorical field methods both challenge *who counts* as a rhetorical community worth studying, and *what counts* as a form of rhetorical action worthy of scrutiny (Ono & Sloop, 1995; Sloop & Ono, 1997). For example, by focusing on embodied utterances and performances by individuals, rhetorical field methods provide a lens for accounting for the corporeal and aesthetic dimensions of rhetoric that CR is beginning to interrogate (McKerrow, 1998; Ott, 2010; Whitson & Poulakos, 1993).

These relationships to CR motivate practitioners of rhetorical field methods to continue problematizing how and for what purposes we access marginalized voices (e.g., Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Hauser, 1999; Ono & Sloop, 1992, 1995; Phillips, 1996). Through close attention to how rhetoric influences local communities, rhetorical field methods strengthen CR by sharpening the focus on rhetoric's doxastic dimensions, as well as taking seriously the possible interventions (i.e., heterodoxical rhetorics) these communities enact. For instance, while the rhetorical construction of public space eliminates the ability for homeless individuals, who are nearly always in public, to actually appear in public—that is, to operate as intelligible subjects (Mitchell, 2003)—Middleton's current fieldwork in homeless communities demonstrates rhetorical field methods' utility for accessing local rhetorics and micropolitical practices that contest this erasure of homeless identity. For example, by researching alongside homeless individuals engaged in efforts to reclaim public space, demand recognition from civic officials, and build structures of self-governance that nurture transitions from homelessness, rhetorical field methods in this context help to identify the unrecorded experiences of reclaiming spaces of agency that mark experiences with subordination. Further, by cataloging the oppositional practices of local communities, rhetorical field methods support efforts to uncover possibilities for critical

intervention glimpsed in these communities that are often disciplined before exerting widespread political influence (Pezzullo, 2003; Ono & Sloop, 1995).

If CR contributes an impulse toward thinking about marginal, embodied, and material forms of rhetoric, then ethnography contributes to the means of locating such rhetorics. Participant observation allows critics to experience rhetorical action as it unfolds and offers opportunities to gather insights on how rhetoric is experienced by rhetors, audiences, and critics (Pezzullo, 2007). By utilizing ethnographic practice, rhetorical field methods expose the cracks and fissures in dominant discourses evidenced by the way people talk about or perform their experiences (Hodder, 1998; Saukko, 2005; Tilley, 2001). For example, rhetorical field methods in the area of outdoor recreation reveal how rhetorical constructions of environment and nature articulated in national parks are resisted by outdoor enthusiasts who sometimes depart from prescribed trails to show their authenticity. On the other hand, rhetorical field methods at a protest site offer a way to access the multiple interpretative experiences had by protestors, rather than the message intended by its organizers, as well as the ways rhetorical messages are reframed in “real time” in response to audience reactions (see also Endres et al., 2009). Using CR and ethnographic practice in concert creates dynamic artifacts that trouble both participant- and text-driven perspectives on rhetoric.

By adopting the practices of ethnographers in communication, rhetorical field methods resonate with the interpretive and critical traditions in ethnography. Critics using rhetorical field methods attempt to identify and critique rhetoric in local communities both by utilizing representational means that “crack open the [rhetorical] culture” being examined to demonstrate how meaning functions in a bounded context, *and* by selecting contexts based on how they are “strategically situated” to illuminate experiences of marginalization or oppression (Van Maanen, 1988, pp. 101–103, pp. 128–129). In other words, rhetoric is the operative term in rhetorical field methods at two levels. First, the selection of rhetorical sites is based on the critical commitments to contribute to emancipatory practice characteristic of most critical rhetorical research. Second, however, rhetorical field methods press these contributions further by asking how rhetorical experiences can be “brought back from the field” and utilized to shape future rhetorical action. For example, whereas Ono and Sloop (1995) contended that “vernacular discourses” offer insight on rhetorical strategies that affect cultures-at-large through influence on local communities, practitioners of rhetorical field methods aggressively seek out intimate (i.e., living with, struggling with, and learning with) interaction with marginalized communities to understand how sedimented ways of doing rhetoric and power can be reconfigured based on the invention of minor rhetorics by these communities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Smith, 1997). By fusing these critical approaches, both CR and ethnography benefit: CR benefits from a broad range of tools for accessing insights from the interstices of lived experience *and* ethnographers benefit from the focus on how lived experience functions rhetorically to reinforce or challenge the distribution of images, discourses, identities, bodies, and institutions onto a field of action (Greene, 1998a).

Performance studies research also contributes to rhetorical field methods by offering a more deliberate focus on the contingencies of rhetoric and power. Performance

studies, by taking as “both its subject matter and method the experiences of *bodies* in time, place and history,” recenters everyday rhetorical exchanges as an indispensable part of a critical research praxis (Conquergood, 1991, p. 187). By wagering its promise on proximity to rhetorical experience (Conquergood, 2002, p. 149), a performance framework attunes rhetorical field methods to “dynamic, intimate, precarious *embodied* experience grounded in historical process, contingency, and ideology” that is focused less on outcomes and more on provocative possibilities (Conquergood, 1991, p. 187).

Instead of assuming that rhetorical action is the all-or-nothing game between effective/progressive tactics and tactics that are not effective/not-progressive-enough lamented by Ott (2004) and Fiske (1986), a performance paradigm challenges rhetorical scholars to examine how marginalized communities forge contingent reconfigurations of power from which to build larger oppositional communities (Conquergood, 1991; Scott, 1990). As a consequence, performance attunes rhetorical field methods to moments when rhetorical intervention might improvise within, and attempt to change, the constraints of social practice. On the other hand, rhetoricians sharpen the effort by performance studies to think about how bodies operate as technologies of deliberation and make “unruly arguments” (Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Brouwer, 2005; Deluca, 1999a, 1999b).

### *Critical Commitments*

Rhetorical field methods parallel CR by operating as an open orientation for critiquing rhetorical action. Three practical commitments foster this openness and commitment to meaningful critiques of relationships of power.

#### *Rhetoric is best understood as a part of social practice*

Viewing rhetoric as a part of social practice (Bourdieu, 1990, 1972/2008; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; de Certeau, 1984; Fairclough, 2001; McKerrow, 1989; Rufo, 2003) means that rhetoric is not constituted simply by texts or textual fragments, but through a combination of material contexts, social relationships, identities, consciousnesses, and (interrelated) rhetorical acts that produce meanings and that are coconstructed between rhetor, audience, and particular contexts. Focusing on rhetoric as a part of social practice enables a conceptualization of rhetoric that combines “the perspective of structure and the perspective of action” shaping a view of rhetoric that is “a relatively permanent way of acting socially . . . and . . . a domain of social action and interaction which both reproduces structures and has the potential to transform them” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 122). Approaching rhetoric as a part of social practice accounts for its relationships with other elements of human experience: relationships that both discipline and enable opportunities for rhetorical action.

Glimpses of the productive possibility of rhetorical field methods appear in nascent efforts at in situ rhetorical analysis. For example, Dickinson’s (1997) and Stewart and Dickinson’s (2008) participatory engagement in the construction of (sub)urban

identity and memory at places of consumption, and Blair's (2001) reflections on embodied and material dimensions of memorial rhetoric, all point toward growing efforts to engage the nettlesome challenges posed by conceptualizing rhetoric as a part of social practice influenced by a range of discursive and nondiscursive factors. Further, these approaches take seriously the material imperatives that influence how differently situated bodies engage in and respond to rhetorical acts. For example, Blair (2001) identifies how even mundane differences, like whether one attends a rhetorical event in a group or alone, with a gendered lens or without, shape in significant ways the rhetorical meanings produced by that site. However, while these extant approaches offer a strong first step toward the mode of criticism we envision, they fail to account for important considerations of rhetoric as a constituent of social practice.

Primarily, these scholarly efforts fail to seriously engage the dimensions of social practice for which rhetorical field methods are well suited. For example, while identifying how material environments make rhetorical claims on audiences, observing how audiences manipulate the rhetoric of those spaces, and considering how such rhetorics might be practiced otherwise, they fail to unpick the constellation of identities, relationships, and other components of *actually lived* social practice that shape how "live" rhetorics are differently experienced. Rhetorical field methods aim to address these critical absences. For instance, rather than simply "being there," more formal modes of participant observation (including interviewing and other techniques for in situ analysis) enable practitioners of rhetorical field methods to glean more nuanced data about the diverse identities and interpretations shaping "live" rhetorics. For example, Endres et al. (2009) illustrated how, by attending, observing, participating in, and interviewing participants engaged in the rhetorical actions of social movements, rhetorical field methods enable critical researchers to develop more subtle insights about how audience members' identities, cultural values, social relations, and other characteristics shape oppositional environmental rhetorics' influence. The critical difference, we argue, lies in the difference between endeavoring to more thoroughly account for one's reading position as a critic (carefully and compellingly examined by Blair, 2001) versus engaging *interactively* with other participants, in part making them interlocutors in one's analysis.

#### *Rhetorical texts and lived experience are dialectically related*

Additionally, rhetorical field methods explore the dialectic between rhetorical texts and the lived experiences through which those texts are encountered and come to have significant meanings. Notwithstanding CR's substantial reframing of text-audience relationships, rhetorical field methods offer a way to inflect this commitment in provocative ways. For instance, numerous CR analyses explore how discursive fragments reveal logics of cultural discipline (e.g., Sloop, 2004), attempt to map the possibilities for audiences to develop resistant readings (e.g., Ott, 2004, 2010), and aim to trouble "texts" as a critical concept by critiquing things clearly *not* stable or documented (e.g., Pezzullo, 2001, 2003). But, CR's serious engagement with the

experiences of actually existing audiences and rhetors navigating a sea of fragments and mundane rhetorical experiences has been slow to develop. While critics vigorously theorize the changing possibilities of texts and audiences' interactions with those texts, sustained engagements with and critical analysis of communities engaging with rhetorical experience and developing ways of interacting with that experience are substantially less developed. Consequently, much contemporary CR takes only a half step away from the "textocentrism" motivating criticisms from our performance colleagues (Conquergood, 2002, p. 151).

Rhetorical field methods identify a critical practice aimed at understanding how texts and embodied, lived experiences interanimate one another. Engaging the symbolic economies of local communities and identifying local practices of reading that flow from these contexts empowers critics to better understand how particular "reading formations" inflect texts with different, unpredictable, and politically charged meanings (Bennett, 1983). By placing critics within these formations, rhetorical field methods aim at mapping the relationships and practices of reading and speaking that make texts mean differently. For example, as Sprain et al. (2009) illustrated, criticism aimed not just at observing protest speeches or closely analyzing speech texts, but rather at exploring how those speeches are interpreted by and integrated with the existing knowledge and commitments of audiences, positions critics to theorize how contemporary rhetorics resonate with audiences' lived experiences.

#### *Participatory epistemology supplements critical knowledge*

A commitment to embedding critical analysis within the material and discursive constraints that shape rhetorical experience contributes to rhetorical field methods' reliance on a participatory epistemology. By participatory epistemology, we mean ways of interacting with and experiencing the rhetorics we study that participate in the meaning-making and the material contexts of the rhetors that draw our attention. Whereas Sloop and Ono (1997) suggested that ethnographic methods might supplement CR, practitioners of rhetorical field methods contend that participation in local communities is irreplaceable when trying to understand "live" rhetorical exchanges. As a consequence, rhetorical field methods avoid bracketing out insights that fail to gain the status of objectified texts and include more careful attention to the extradiscursive elements of rhetorical action. As Blair (2001) has discussed, without having been to the place where rhetoric happens, our criticisms inevitably look much different. For practitioners of rhetorical field methods, that difference is vitally important to understanding rhetorical experiences on the margins. But, as we suggest above, rhetorical field methods push gains made further by engaging coparticipants as interlocutors who offer "real time" readings, explanations, reactions, translations, and other perspectives on the rhetorical action on which our research focuses.

Rhetorical field methods' participatory epistemology expands what counts as evidence in rhetorical analysis in two ways. First, a participatory epistemology implies the importance of the rhetorician's body for bringing into focus elements of rhetorical experience occluded by a spotlight on texts or textual fragments. By placing our



bodies within the rhetorical situation we analyze, practitioners become accountable to the affective, sensory, and aesthetic dimensions of rhetoric. Moreover, it also demands critical accountability about what that presence, sometimes uninvited and often undeclared, means for the rhetorical activity that unfolds. More so than other approaches, rhetorical field methods require careful attention to how our entry into a rhetorical context is a “move on that context that changes it in some way” (Blair, 1999, pp. 30–34).

Second, participatory epistemology acknowledges the merit of analyzing the lived experiences of vernacular communities by seeking out opportunities “to witness and record discourses that are left out of traditional written records” as instances of rhetorical invention (Pezzullo, 2003, p. 351). Thus, participatory epistemology goads scholars to engage communities we critique “co-productively” as *differently* “thinking, theorizing, [and] culture-processing human beings” by developing approaches that attend to rhetorical tactics that often “fly under the radar” (Johnson, 2004, p. 10). In short, rhetorical field methods ask communities being critiqued to build theory with researchers, not in the presence of researchers.

### Analyzing “Live” Rhetoric: Critical Problematics

Rhetorical field methods navigate the critical shift from objectified texts or fragments to a critique of “live” rhetoric guided by a focus on rhetoric’s relationship to other dimensions of social practice, attention to the dialectical relationship between texts and lived experience, and a commitment to participatory epistemology. This methodological configuration generates a similar shift in the critical problematics that guide analysis. We have divided these problematics into two categories. First, we consider influences on practitioners of rhetorical field methods efforts to locate “live” rhetorics; in particular, we discuss the embodied, material, and everyday dimensions of rhetorical experience; second, we identify influences on critical claims made about everyday rhetorical experience addressing how rhetorical field methods can account for performative, aesthetic, and consequential dimensions of rhetorical action (Conquergood, 1992). Guided by these problematics, rhetorical field methods synthesize and improve on earlier approaches to in situ rhetorical analysis. Accordingly, our aim is to highlight how these dimensions shape efforts at critically evaluating lived rhetorical experiences.

#### *Locating “Live” Rhetoric*

Lived rhetorical experiences emerge in and emanate from embodied, material, and everyday activities. In this section, we focus on how rhetorical field methods attend to lived rhetorical experiences that manifest and circulate in everyday discourses enacting identities and communities, developing social movements and ideologies, and communicating normative and resistive messages.

A focus on embodied rhetoric attends to how messages are spoken through and circulate on and with bodies. Fortunately, a recent windfall of theorizing in CR concerning bodies supports this aim (e.g., Blair, 1999, 2001; Brouwer, 2005; Butterworth,

2008; DeLuca, 1999b; Fenske, 2007; Hawhee, 2005; McKerrow, 1998; Pezzullo, 2007). However, this focus on bodies predominantly concerns itself with rhetors' bodies as opposed to audiences' and critics' bodies. For example, despite claiming that theories of public argument benefit from considerations of body rhetoric and rhetoricians' bodies, DeLuca (1999a, 1999b) focused primarily on the bodies of activists. This primary focus on rhetors' bodies to the exclusion of critics' bodies limits understanding of the embodied nature of doing rhetorical criticism. Similarly, the contemporary focus on bodies in rhetorical criticism is often approached through examination of mediated bodies (e.g., Brouwer, 2005; DeLuca, 1999a, 1999b).

Rhetorical field methods, on the other hand, focuses on locating bodies of rhetors, critics, and audiences in situ and embraces the challenge of representing how those bodies perform rhetorically. For example, Fenske (2007) articulated how the "body in performance," through the rhetorical site of tattoo conventions, resists and recuperates historical discourses seeking to normalize tattooed bodies (pp. 51–53). Essays by Blair (1999, 2001) and Pezzullo (2003, 2007) further reveal how in situ rhetorical analysis can also take into account the body of the rhetor. Analyzing embodied rhetoric means taking living bodies into account by coupling textual hermeneutics with a hermeneutics of experience that risks "*listening to and being touched by*" rhetorical action (Conquergood, 2002, p. 149).

This alternative hermeneutic practice requires critics acknowledge their own bodies during in situ critical engagement. For example, both Fenske (2007) and Pezzullo (2007) discuss the paths that brought them to their projects, revealing some demographic characteristics as well as personal history. Disappointingly though, how their bodies collide with and experience the identities of those they research often recedes into the interpretive background. For instance, while Pezzullo (2003) recounts the touching moment between a street protestor and Ravenlight (another protestor who bears her mastectomy scar), the aesthetic, emotional, and ethical experience of being open to the touch of this emotionally charged event fails to surface in Pezzullo's analysis. The shift to in situ analysis that is occurring among critical rhetoricians demands more consistent attention to these concerns, and not simply as a sequestered discussion of self-reflexivity in our method discussions or introductions. Rhetorical scholars could learn much from our performance colleagues by more rigorously considering our own bodies and how they interact with the interpretive frameworks and situations we enter when critiquing lived rhetorical experience.

Another critical dimension of rhetorical field methods is materiality, a contested term in rhetorical study. For Cloud (1994), materiality refers to a particularly confined set of concerns that form the sociopolitical and economic conditions rhetoric inhabits, reveals, and obfuscates. Many CR scholars (McGee, 1990; McKerrow, 1989; Ono & Sloop, 1992) see discourse itself as material in that it constructs the social realities we inhabit. Others (e.g., Greene, 1998a) take a middle ground, suggesting rhetoric is not exclusively material, but shapes the conditions of possibility with which material realities are engaged. For Blair (1999), rhetoric is always discursive and material—the carved stones of memorials, the paper and ink of documents, and the vibrations of the air produced by a speaker.

Rhetorical field methods offer an appropriate lens for addressing each of these perspectives on materiality; however, it uniquely supports efforts to understand rhetoric's physicality. On the one hand, rhetorical field methods allow closer access to the physical sensations that accompany interacting and participating with a street march, museum tour, or other activity. By participating in and with a community/place, rhetorical field methods allow critical rhetoricians to interrogate how smells, sounds, time, space, and other factors excluded by a focus on text or their fragments shape rhetorical experiences (e.g., Pezzullo, 2003). For instance, by spending days with homeless individuals waiting for access to services, marching from service centers to safe camping sites, hauling gear around town by hand and in borrowed vehicles, using rhetorical field methods to study homeless activism helps ground the rhetorical evaluations made of their strategies and aims as rhetorical agitators. On the other hand, it allows rhetoricians to account for how the spaces where we encounter rhetorical messages—semimodified landscapes, buildings, streets—and how our body's physical comportments, ways of moving about space, and other "practices of everyday life" exert influence on rhetoric (de Certeau, 1984). Rhetorical field methods engage the material consequences of cultural structures and bodies that shape identities and relationships in rhetorical communities.

Additionally, while some scholars analyze materiality or bodies, they often do not focus on mundane rhetorical experience for which rhetorical field methods are also well suited. And, when scholars do critique mundane discourses, they fail to explicate their methods in ways that allow for critical scrutiny and development. For example, Dickinson's (1997, 2002) and Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki's (2005, 2006) research regularly necessitates and references qualitative methods, but both are missing a developed discussion of the methodological considerations of analyzing everyday discourse that might ground a critical dialogue about this approach. Further, other scholars (e.g., Ono & Sloop, 1995) laud a focus on vernacular/marginalized discourses, but often focus on already documented discourses leaving other critics to imagine what attention to everyday, and especially "live," discourse really looks like.

Without these articulations, rhetoricians must rely on other disciplines for critical dialogue about the methodological implications of embodied forms of rhetoric. For example, compared to a dearth of methodological discussion among rhetoricians, ethnographer Jonathan Jackson's (2005) analysis of "racial sincerity" reveals not only the ability to read embodied rhetoric in situ but also the benefits of and techniques for doing so. Utilizing a reflective style, explaining his anxieties as a researcher, and discussing experiences he had during the research practice, Jackson provides a careful analysis of how people negotiate one another's race, and how he located, parsed, and analyzed meaningful behaviors. Likewise, other critics such as Seigworth (2000), Morris (1998), de Certeau (1984), and Bourdieu (1990) have addressed with conceptual complexity both the production of everyday life and the conceptual tools and processes with which it can be effectively scrutinized. Rhetorical criticism has yet to investigate these forms of rhetoric in the ways it does best—namely, theorizing the rhetorical strategies of everyday experience that shape social relationships.

*Critiquing "Live" Rhetoric*

Beyond attention to embodied, material, everyday discourse, rhetorical field methods anticipate an analytic lens sensitized to several underemphasized dimensions of lived rhetoric. In particular, the performative, aesthetic, and consequential dimensions of rhetoric necessitate more deliberate attention by critics interested in analyzing everyday rhetorical experience. Rhetorical scholars have long grappled with the implications of a "performance paradigm" for rhetorical study. Reconciling rhetorical criticism with questions posed by bodies, positionality, contingency, and other extra-textual dimensions of rhetorical experience both necessitates expansions of what types of rhetorical actions scholars examine and shapes how those artifacts are engaged by critics (e.g., Blair, 1999, 2001; Brouwer, 2005; Conquergood, 1991, 1992; Corey & Nakayama, 1997; DeLuca 1999a, 1999b; Fenske, 2007; Nakayama & Corey, 2003; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Pezzullo, 2003). These efforts to integrate a performance lens into rhetorical criticism are a positive development. First, by embracing embodied rhetorical agency, critical rhetoricians have laid the groundwork for a "rhetoric of the body," or what McKerrow (1998) calls a "corporeal rhetoric," that presences "[rhetoric's] practice in . . . lived experience." Second, by recognizing the physical, spatial, embodied, and sensorial dimensions implied by this focus, critical rhetoricians have opened space to consider rhetoric's effectiveness in terms of affect and pleasure alongside its influence through argument and influence (Ott 2004, 2010; Poulakos & Whitson, 1995; Whitson and Poulakos, 1993). For instance, Ott (2010) demonstrates how rhetoric operates to produce visceral (read: embodied) rather than cerebral (read: rational) responses among rhetorical audiences.

However, while we support this contemporary engagement, we hesitate to embrace its loose use of performance as a critical lens, especially when considering everyday rhetorics. As Strine (1998) reminds us, while performance generates much critical foment across various communication subdisciplines, it is important to maintain distinctions between "performance as a 'specially marked mode of action' and performance understood as 'any act of communication'" (p. 313). She argues that performance's critical edge resides in its attention to "the historically situated interplay of performance's contractual, provisional nature; its condition of social reflexivity and critique; and, its improvisational and transformational potential [that] forms the energizing, destabilizing center of performance as a focus of study" (p. 313). In other words, Strine contends that performance offers a lens with which to identify moments of "thought-in-action" in lived rhetorical experiences when sedimented social structures and practices are improvised on and sometimes transformed. Accordingly, just as every act of communication is not necessarily *performance*, everyday rhetorical actions are not *necessarily* without the provisional and transformational potential that marks *performance*. Rhetorical field methods enable rhetoricians to more effectively parse these differences.

First, rhetorical field methods are well suited for evoking the "specially marked modes of action" characteristic of performance. However, extant efforts at in situ

rhetorical research and much CR grappling with performance fail to reconstruct the social, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of these rhetorical experiences even when vaunting their rhetorical import and, more troublesome, fail to *evoke* the claims made by the performance on the cognitive, emotional, and ethical capacities of the performance's audience. For example, Pezzullo (2001) and Blair (1999) suggest an emotional dimension may be present in their rhetorical encounters, but neither attempts to evoke these emotions in their critical writing. While extant efforts at in situ rhetorical analysis, like these, largely rely on traditional forms of critical prose, we contend that practitioners of rhetorical field methods are well positioned to utilize forms of performative writing (Pollock, 1998) to evoke these dimensions of rhetorical experience. For example, in her examination of Black feminist thought as related through oral history narratives, Madison (1993) weaves her interlocutor's personal narratives and her reactions, analysis, and insights together in a manner that evokes the emotional density of the experience for both women.

Closely related to this focus, rhetorical field methods extend efforts by rhetoricians to develop an aesthetic perspective on rhetoric (Ayotte, Poulakos, & Whitson, 2002; Greene, 1998b; Hariman, 1991, 1998, 2000; Poulakos & Whitson, 1995; Whitson & Poulakos, 1993). In particular, "aesthetic rhetoric" commits to a focus on the "human body as an excitable entity, an entity aroused by language" where language "operates rhetorically because it highlights only one out of countless perspectives and . . . transforms perceptual limitations into significations" that structure a sensible reality amidst chaos (Whitson & Poulakos, 1993, pp. 139–142). More directly, an "aesthetic rhetoric counts on, attends to, and takes into account the body and its senses" (Poulakos & Whitson, 1995, p. 382). As a consequence, rhetoric so configured trades the ability and desire to discover truth for an effort to glimpse how rhetoric operates to construct a vision of reality, subjectivity, and the relationships between the two. Greene (1998b) captured the thrust of an aesthetic perspective on rhetoric arguing it is concerned with "how rhetorical practices generate 'fictions' or worlds that subjects might inhabit" (para. 2).

However, while an aesthetic rhetoric focuses primarily on the constitutive dimensions of rhetoric, burgeoning efforts by practitioners of in situ rhetorical criticism limit this critical potential by remaining tied to models of influence. For example, both Pezzullo (2003) and Brouwer (2005), who practice in situ research and focus on bodily aesthetics respectively, struggle with a focus on how bodies, relying on Hauser's (1999) view of counterpublics, might generate the political capital necessary to enter the "public sphere." Lost in this approach is a consideration of how these marginal rhetorics posit new social fictions for subjects to inhabit irrespective of the political influence they exert. For example, utilizing rhetorical field methods for examining homeless activism, one of the researchers encountered efforts to articulate a political subject position that emboldens further collective and individual action by homeless individuals. The approaches to protest in this community focus on moments of emancipatory practice that, while failing to lead to immediate, material social change regarding

access to the public sphere available to homeless individuals, help shape new forms of community outside traditional “publics.” Failing to engage the on-the-ground experience of homeless individuals renders invisible these small gains that sustain an ongoing form of collective struggle, and that are deemphasized by a focus on rhetorical influence.

Rhetorical field methods can sharpen the insights gained from thinking about rhetoric aesthetically and can contribute to utilizing rhetoric as a critical practice by resisting domesticating efforts embedded within logics of influence. Rhetorical field methods enable the suspension of these logics by focusing on how marginal rhetorics support, bring pleasure to, or sustain local communities. In other words, by asking how local rhetorics operate as a political praxis of “intervention in the visible and the sayable” (Ranciere, 2010, p. 37). For instance, by focusing on toxic tours as acts of *naming* a problem (Pezzullo, 2007), aesthetically sensitized rhetorical field methods foster considerations of “minor rhetorics” that enact new social “fictions” that might be inhabited and that reveal possible “seeds of becoming” capable of transforming oppressive power relations (Smith, 1997, p. xiii; see also Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Finally, rhetorical field methods encourage critics to account for the consequentiality of everyday rhetorical experience (Blair, 1999, 2001; Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1991; Blair & Michel, 2000; Dickinson, 1997, 2002, 2006). Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki (2005, 2006) demonstrated that, by focusing on spatial and material texts, critics can begin to take seriously the materiality of rhetoric and the rhetorical consequences of lived experience. They, and others, contend that focusing on rhetoric’s consequentiality reminds critics not to lose sight of the fact that “we use rhetoric in order to accomplish goals” (Blair, 2001, p. 21).

Rhetorical field methods further refine these critical insights. By participating in the rhetorical communities from which “live” rhetorics emerge, critics are better able to locate those practices within the material and discursive contexts, what Bourdieu (1990) might call “the field” or “pitch,” that inform their efficacy and consequences. Moreover, critics are able to identify how those contexts make claims on rhetors in marginalized communities. This is crucially important for two reasons. First, as Sloop and Ono (1997) contended, acknowledging that “judgment happens” and identifying the material and symbolic realities that inform those judgments are central to making sense of vernacular rhetorics. Rhetorical field methods enable critics to contextualize such practices ensuring that critical assessments are carefully grounded in local, lived experience to identify how marginal rhetorics operate to recalibrate, often subtly, the symbolic, rhetorical, and political capital of vernacular communities. Second, rhetorical field methods focus on the consequentiality of rhetoric by uncovering “outlaw discourses” that can potentially challenge the mainstream relationships of power that govern economic, racial, and gendered inequalities by offering alternative logics of judgment (Sloop & Ono, 1997). In sum, rhetorical field methods offer a tool for situating oppositional logics within a lived set of rhetorical experiences that inform and shape them, and which those practices challenge and transform.

### Critical Questions: Refining Rhetorical Field Methods

Our aim has been twofold: first, to name an approach to in situ rhetorical criticism and theorizing that resonates with but also challenges contemporary ad hoc approaches for analyzing “live” rhetorics; and, second, to create a focused starting point for debate on the questions posed by a shift from analysis of objectified texts to critique of “live” rhetorics. To develop this conversation further, we identify three questions and tentative answers vital to the practice and development of this research agenda. These questions and our discussions are meant as heuristic challenges to be debated and struggled with by those embracing rhetorical field methods.

#### *How do Rhetorical Field Methods Affect Critics’ Ability to Make Sense of Overlapping Communities of Shared Meaning and Power Relations?*

By focusing on rhetoric “as it happens,” rhetorical field methods offer a means for interrogating the dynamics of social experience that influence the (in)effectiveness of lived rhetorics. An example clarifies this possibility: if critics wish to understand the rhetorical dynamics of efforts to combat climate change, rhetorical field methods contend that an important piece of understanding this rhetorical endeavor requires critics to assess the dominant cultural discourses and practices regarding the environment. From there, critics would embed themselves in actual efforts to intervene rhetorically on behalf of responsible environmental politics. This would include, on the one hand, attending rallies, protests, image-events, performances, acts of street theater, and other events to *collect* rhetorical responses to dominant constructions; but, on the other hand, it includes interacting with other audience members, *participating* in rallies, and engaging in structured interviews and unguided conversation. The aim is to develop a critical appreciation for the rhetorical strategies that constitute such an event, as well as the rhetorical sensibilities brought to the event by audiences. Sensibilities that contribute to shaping how those messages are interpreted and acted on.

More provocative analyses of how rhetoric unfolds differently depending on how one is situated within regimes of power, texts, meanings, and social relations are fostered by rhetorical field methods’ critical practice. By drawing on influences from performance studies, ethnography, and other communication subdisciplines, rhetorical critics can more insightfully access the embodied, dynamic, contingent, and ideological concerns that shape and regulate lived rhetorical experience. And, in doing so, facilitate an effective cross-pollination of communication perspectives.

#### *How do Rhetorical Field Methods Challenge Our Conceptualizations of Texts, Critics, and Criticism?*

A central feature of the shift to in situ analysis is accounting for the relationship between text and critic, and especially the role of the critic’s identity. Likewise, this question parallels critical rhetoricians’ extant focus on the identity of the critic as a central plane of analysis in rhetorical criticism (Blair, 2001; Blair, Brown, & Baxter,

1994; Davis, 1998; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Accordingly, our argument is not that identity and attendant questions are not addressed by critical rhetoricians, but that new considerations emerge around identity and become increasingly vital when rhetorical critics begin participating in and critiquing everyday discourses. Two questions, in particular, deserve continuing critical scrutiny. First, what are the consequences of representing the communities we study as we begin forging texts out of the cultural milieu in which we participate? Second, how do critics remain accountable about which and in what manner marginal voices are made heard?

Fortunately, communication scholars engaged in critical ethnography have outlined the characteristics of a commitment to ethical responsibility that can usefully guide practitioners of rhetorical field methods. "Ethical responsibility," Madison (2005) contended, is driven by a commitment to resisting domestication and implicating the positionality of the critic. "Resisting domestication" means pursuing criticism that seeks to make marginalized voices accessible and to contribute "to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice" (Madison, 2005, p. 5). A "politics of positionality" (Madison, 2005, p. 6) recognizes the potential for domination reflected in the move toward "being there" by "forc[ing] us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing power structures that surround our subjects." Accordingly, rhetorical field methods driven by "ethical responsibility," acknowledge the need to contribute to efforts toward social justice while remaining open to the fallibility of our own critical judgment. In practice, this means offering a rich set of insights into local communities of protests, homelessness, and outdoor identity in each of the present authors' research that accounts for their strengths and weaknesses as rhetorical interventions, while remaining open to the possibility that those assessments are not without their own perspectival limitations.

### *How do Rhetorical Field Methods Contribute to the Practical Goals of a Critical Research Agenda?*

Rhetorical field methods engage in praxis-oriented forms of research that expand "what makes critical rhetoric unique from other methods of rhetorical criticism . . . . A critical rhetoric [and rhetorical field methods] asks the critic to take an interpretive position for the purpose of both understanding *and* political change" (Zompetti, 1997, p. 71). Rhetorical field methods contribute to this growing concern with praxis among CR scholars (Endres et al., 2007; Farrell, 2008; Frey & Pearce, 1996; Ono & Sloop, 1992; Shanyang, 1991; Zompetti).

Rhetorical field methods do this by laying sturdy foundations for dialogic forms of knowledge building that contribute both to the experiences of participants and rhetorical scholars. By analyzing "live" rhetorics, critics are able to bring to the fore and capture rhetorics whose everyday nature renders them fleeting at best. This invites opportunities for critical scrutiny of these texts and begins to build a library of minor rhetorics to guide future rhetorical interventions. More importantly, because of the (co)production of texts between critic and participants encountered in the field, the possibility for identifying different ways of knowing and interacting with social



reality can be uncovered. For example, in their research about the Step It Up global warming protests, Endres et al. (2007) met with action organizers to present their findings and get feedback before publishing their research. These meetings informed researchers about the constraints and goals of the actions that may not have been immediately apparent from their participant observation and textual analysis, and contributed to a more thoroughly contextualized set of critical judgments. As this example demonstrates, if “engaging in research as a form of praxis requires actually getting our work outside the academy to the people involved in organizing campaigns and events” and “requires a commitment to conversations with practitioners” that develops meaningful links between academic publications and material practice, then rhetorical field methods offers an avenue to create and sustain those relationships and conversations as part of critical research practice (Endres et al., 2007, p. 238).

### Conclusion

Our aim has been to bring into focus a constellation of approaches to CR that reflect a growing interest in in situ rhetorical analysis and to name an approach that accounts for and offers supplements and correctives to this burgeoning area of theorizing. In this sense, our essay serves as both as a touchstone for efforts to push this movement forward and an effort to create a locus of critically needed debate about the commitments and consequences of this approach. In addressing the latter aim, several implications are raised by this theoretical and methodological position.

CR seeks to critique systems of domination and freedom, identifying power imbalances and suggesting more equitable conditions. Rhetorical field methods share in this critical perspective while seeking to push this impulse further by utilizing proximity to the communities we research, vulnerability to having our identities and ideals challenged, and understandings of power as not only operating through registers of domination and freedom but through overlapping, counterintuitive, veiled, and highly complex webs of relationships. Along similar lines, rhetorical field methods has the potential to show how rhetoric is a constituent of social practice—contested and complicated in on-the-ground situations. This approach insists that texts are not as simple as we tend to portray them. As scholars such as McGee (1990) and Blair (2001) have suggested, the process of constructing those things we study is more complicated than conventional approaches to rhetoric would have us believe. By expanding what constitutes texts into the embodied, enacted, and lived performances and theories of those we study, rhetorical field methods expand the scope of what materials are cobbled together to form a text suitable for criticism.

Similarly, CR has long championed a *bricoleur* methodology that builds a framework of power and a text suitable for analysis from the materials ready at hand (Charland, 1991, pp. 73–74; Gaonkar, 1993, p. 153). Rhetorical field methods further capitalize on this commitment of CR. By embracing intradisciplinary relationships both within and outside of communication studies, rhetorical field methods promise the possibility of revitalizing the theoretical logics and methodological commitments

of all participants in the dialogue. In much the same way that rhetorical field methods require researchers to consider their identities and roles as researchers as part of a negotiation and dialogue with research participants, this approach also situates methodological practice as a dialogue that seeks to draw on the most appropriate tools to facilitate its efforts to resist domestication, give voice to marginalized communities, and affirm subordinated subjectivities. More broadly, this relationship strengthens communication studies by developing cooperative relationships with other disciplines that facilitate a stronger traffic of ideas within each discipline, as well as fostering the emancipatory potential of any particular project's critical claims by expanding its potential audience.

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