Comment:
Redirecting Attention, Again—and Hope

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I was sorry to have missed the University of Nevada, Reno's day-long symposium in conjunction with Naomi Klein's Forum on Excellence lecture, kairotically titled "Capitalism, Climate, and Public Discourse: The Limits and Possibilities of Rhetorical Intervention." I don't work on climate change issues and rhetorics, but I have worried, increasingly, over the role of rhetorical interventions in contemporary public spheres, our classrooms, and our material world. I risk seeming cliché in saying that, since the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, many of us have turned greater attention, perhaps a bit more pressingly, both to the state of our public spheres and to the complex ways in which opinions are formed, actions decided upon, feelings are expressed, and votes cast. If anything, our ecologies of communication and discourse seem thicker than ever, more opaque, and hence less open to obvious intervention. Indeed, some of us in the generally liberal enclave of the academy have been experiencing rhetorical complexity a bit more acutely right now, especially if we study, practice, and espouse "rhetoric" as a discipline—not just as a tool of persuasion, but as a set of methodologies and epistemologies that make more critically accessible the intertwined movements of discourses, affects, bodies, and materialities on our globe.

One of the most fundamental dimensions of a rhetorical approach is the necessity of fostering awareness of the contexts and situations through which those discourses, affects, bodies, and materialities move. And so we have questions: How did we get *here*? How have we arrived at this particular point in history? And where do—where *can*—we go from here? Given recent global economic and ecological events, the conference organizers, in coordinating their symposium with a talk by Naomi Klein, both (1) signal the pressing nature of such questions through attempts to address the problem

of climate change, and (2) assert the combined discursive and material complexities made apparent when confronting—and even trying to conceptualize—such a problem. At stake, as Klein might argue, is our very future. The symposium planners frame the issues this way:

> Saving the world, for Klein, requires us to change everything about the way we live from our habits of consumption to our economic, social, and political structures, to the way we imagine our relationships with the planet. In response, this symposium attempts to uncover the effects of capitalism on the climate and environmental policy by exploring how discursive practices within science, economics, politics, and culture manage public sentiment and shape public policy.

In this case, a particular culprit—capitalism—is identified, and Klein would likely agree where to start placing blame. But lurking also in and around the symposium is the problem of how we, as citizen-rhetoricians, can intervene in this extraordinarily complex and high-stakes issue. Again, the symposium planners are succinct in articulating the task at hand: "Though each panel will foster important academic debate in particular areas of rhetorical study, the symposium will more broadly address the role of the critical rhetorician as public intellectual and critically explore the ethical responsibilities of the University in knowledge and cultural production."

The role of the critical rhetorician as public intellectual—there's enough there for many lifetimes and careers of study. As such, I can only address in this comment a part of the "role" that we might play, and I will do so by responding to a strain of thought, perhaps more a note of feeling, that I detect in three panelists whose work is being published in this special issue: Nancy Welch, Rosa Eberly, and John Ackerman. Nancy and Rosa both presented on the "Institutional Critique" panel and John presented on the "Publics, Counterpublics, and Social Action" panel. I was drawn to each rousing talk because these scholars tackled head on questions about the role of the critical rhetorician as public intellectual, albeit from the particular issues and perspectives that each finds most compelling. At the same time, each also articulated—sometimes explicitly, often implicitly—the need to develop a capacity for hopefulness in the face of the daunting and often overwhelming challenges facing us politically and ecologically.

John Ackerman, who is Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Colorado, Boulder where he is also the associate director for Sustainability and Residential Learning in the Program

for Writing and Rhetoric, asked pointedly "how engaged scholarship might contribute to economic renewal?" He very much seems to believe in the value of collective organizing, asserting that "public protest must happen," but in his own presentation he also wanted to attune us to the importance of watching how "everyday life unfolds in perilous times." The work of Henri Lefebvre served as an obvious touchstone for Ackerman's thinking, particularly as Ackerman asked us to focus on the quotidian and wanted us to attempt to understand the spatial scale of climate change—globally *and* locally. For instance, how many of us actually know where our water comes from? Would we act differently, would we make other choices, if we knew the story of our water supplies? Might we handle this resource more preciously, or more *politically*? For Ackerman, the ethical choices are clear: "We have a choice as to which stories we tell," he argued. But even more pressingly, the ethics of the stories we tell *every day* in our *particular locales* assume even more force when we realize that "It's in the everyday that violence metastasizes." That violence can emerge in the form of actual violence to persons in the casual exchange of racist discourse or express itself spatially on a global scale through micro habits of thoughtlessness as, for instance, we take for granted the way things are, the daily turning on of the tap and failing to consider where what comes out comes from. We need perhaps not just other stories; we need to start telling stories about the everyday things that we can no longer afford to take for granted. As such, for Ackerman, rhetorical awareness, or making clearer our place in complex discursive and material ecologies, can contribute to public life by "redirecting critical attention" to the everyday—which might, Ackerman ultimately suggested, require that we "set capitalism aside" in the pursuit of other ways of living and being in and with the world.

Redirecting critical attention becomes even more complex considering the sheer number of claims on any given attention, individually and collectively. Some of those claims aren't just requests to attend to particular content, but also to the *ways* in which one engages content and the varied subjects of discourse. Nancy Welch, who is Professor of English at the University of Vermont, worried over such claims in her provocative talk, "Their Civility and Ours." Seeing a general call at this particular time to maintain civility in discourse ("When they go low, we go high" is only one example we might cite since Welch's talk at the symposium), Welch wondered if such calls might actually serve to suppress views, perhaps even affects, that are

challenging and need to be heard—and felt. She broadly critiqued the field of rhetoric and composition, contemporary liberal politicking, and the current state of our public spheres for a tendency to play too nice at times (my words, not hers). A recent joke by comedian Jon Stewart summarized the problem for Welch on the liberal side of things:

What do we want? Respectful discourse.

When do we want it? Now would be agreeable with me.

Such agreeableness certainly felt frayed in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, with increasingly belligerent and accusatory language being thrown about from multiple sides during presidential debates, throughout the Twittersphere, and across many platforms of public discussion. But Welch's critique, particularly given Michelle Obama's call for dignified restraint, is worth attending to. There are many moments, she argued, when "careful, reasoned deliberation" resulting in "rhetorics of moderation" does not provide the forcefulness needed for divergent views to be heard, much less heeded. Questioning the value of scholarly and academic discourse grounded in civil Habermasian discourse, Welch unpacked useful examples of how calls for civility have frequently served as a "safeguard against strong democracy." They have been used, for instance, by corporations and political groups to quell or quiet dissent, to soften critiques and complaints to the point where they aren't heard at all. The danger of not listening and participating broadly, the danger of remaining civil, is that we will very likely miss the "big picture" issues and ways of thinking and framing issues that might lead to significant social justice—and planet justice. Moreover, civility can sideline complexity—not just particular voices or positions, but real complexity because of the exclusion of different voices and positions. And in the toning down of discourse to civility we overlook the rhetorical power of the disruptive, the unruly, the call to attend to voices, issues, perspectives, and concerns that need notice. Perhaps most interestingly, Welch suggested that what's often missing in civility and what's most present in unruly rhetorical acts, such as the Occupy Movement, is invention, creativity, playfulness—and even joy and hope.

Welch accused our field in particular of participating in such calls to civility, and I think she perhaps overstated her case here—though she's not totally wrong. Her previous work, especially in the impressive book *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World,* shows her to be a scholar-teacher and citizen-rhetorician deeply con-

cerned with how we might actually teach students to become the critical rhetoricians and even public intellectuals they will need to be to create change in the world. Such is a worthy aim, and one shared, I think, by Rosa Eberly, who spoke about the importance of turning attention to the potentially critical role of journalism in various public spheres. Eberly, who is Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences and English at Penn State, began with a personal story about her early work as a journalist and then turned quickly to considering the work of an undergraduate friend who has since become a full-time journalist. She considered the award-winning film *Spotlight*, about the reporting that resulted in widespread awareness of the sex scandals in the Catholic Church, and compared coverage of that scandal to the one involving Jerry Sandusky at Penn State, Eberly's current employer. In each case, Eberly worried over the disappearance of important and critical investigative journalism, particularly as some institutions, to protect themselves from scandal and bad press, demand the silence of loyalty, hushing up difficult subjects. Such policies, whether explicit or not, are weirdly akin to the kinds of "civility" that Welch critiques, in potentially silencing divergent and critical views. As such, Eberly asserted, we need "critical loyalty" to the various institutions with which we are associated. Such a stance requires that we educate ourselves about policies on secrecy and transparency, but also that we be willing to violate those when ethically necessary. Lives may depend upon such.

Indeed, listening to these citizen-scholars discuss their rhetorical concerns, I get the impression that the life of the planet itself might very well ultimately depend upon not just what stories we are telling but how we tell them—and the courage to keep telling difficult stories. Ackerman, Welch, and Eberly, despite their diverse interests and foci, seem each deeply concerned with the ethical shape and scope of the stories that we tell, particularly as those stories arise out of local encounters and events that are often tied to or are emblematic of larger systemic problems. The water coming out of your tap, or your local newspaper reporting on a local case of sexual abuse—both are likely part of systemic issues that are difficult to conceptualize but whose difficulty should in no way be a deterrent to the ethical necessity of thinking through them. Calls to remain calm about such issues only exacerbate the severity of them by potentially diverting attention away from difficulty and by silencing perspectives and views that might actually help ameliorate or solve some of our most pressing problems.

The tasks at hand are daunting. Ackerman reminds us that our everyday actions often make us complicit in the problems we face. We turn on the tap; what story are we telling? I will admit myself to feeling stymied here. I'm not sure I cannot *not* turn on that tap, and ceaseless reminders of the ravages potentially resulting can be stultifying. I *am* complicit, no doubt. But is this the only lesson of awareness? I want to connect my everyday life to the issues facing us collectively, and I want to have the courage to risk civility and speak out as I can—*but how can I—how can any of us—do so?*

I have no obvious answer or magic bullet solution. But the persistence of Ackerman's, Welch's, and Eberly's critiques speaks to an implicit hopefulness—an underlying affect to which I'd like to be more attentive. Indeed, we have heard before various calls for redirecting critical attention. Nothing new there. But perhaps what *is* surprising to me in listening to these three scholar-citizens discuss their work within the context of rhetoric and the role of the public intellectual is the sense of hope that each has maintained. Granted, it is hope rarely articulated or named as such, but it is hope nonetheless. At the very least, each presenter believes things *can* be better—that in fact they *must* be better. And each approaches the necessity of *hoping* for that better world as a potential, if unmarked, starting point. Perhaps Welch is most explicit about the affects necessary to cultivate and sustain critique and just worldbuilding when she talks about joy and playfulness in protest. I want to know more about those affects of worldbuilding.

With that point in mind, I would complement Ackerman, Welch, and Eberly and their necessary work of critique (itself a choice to tell a particular kind of story) with an active search for moments of hopefulness—with an emphasis on looking for those moments, for cultivating them, for nurturing them, as I have tried to do in listening and attending to these colleagues' thoughtful and moving comments. Such work, such attunement to the hopeful, is itself a part of the legacy of critical pedagogy, at play in the work of Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of Hope,* Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed*, and Mary Zournazi's collection *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*.

But I also learned this move from my students recently. I was with them the morning in November after Trump was elected, and I don't believe I'll ever forget their faces, their shock, their questions. Surely some of them may have voted for Trump. But in the relatively liberal enclaves of coastal California, I think that many of them

couldn't quite wrap their heads (or their hearts) around what other parts of the country had done. They were somber, a few visibly heartbroken. I couldn't proceed with the lesson for the day myself so I paused our class to ask them how they were doing and to give them time and space to talk about whatever they wanted to talk about. The move felt risky; I had no idea what might emerge, what comments or outrages or weirdness might occur. But it felt right to be open, and to model that openness.

The overwhelming affect of the room was, from what I could perceive, one of caution and anticipation. Students were upset, yes, but also on guard for what might happen next. And the question of one of them, followed by vigorous nods and spontaneous exclamations of approval, was simply this: *Can you tell us it will all be alright?* Obviously, I couldn't. No one can justly make such a promise. But I still loved the question—not because it was a request for reassurance (which it touchingly was) but because the question left open the possibility that, despite what had happened, things might still be okay. All could turn out right. The question reminded me—and helped me remind them—that no great and grand reassurance could be counted upon, that none of us had a guarantee that things would work out the way we wanted, much less that they would be just and fair.

Indeed, no human has the birthright of fairness and justice—*unless we make it so*. So I gave my students back the question they had given me, thanking them for reminding me that the most important thing to do when a seeming injustice or unfairness or awfulness has emerged is to question it (as Ackerman, Welch, and Eberly model for us) and then to remember the feeling of hope implicit in the question. For it may be that hope—the desire for something better—is one of the best starting places for undertaking critique. It may be the *best* reason *to critique*.

Utopian Studies has taught me a great deal about such hopefulness—not in the sense of offering concrete plans and outlines for the future; utopian scholars are quite clear that the value of utopic thinking does *not* lie in that direction. Rather, in embracing the nowhereness of utopia as a hermeneutic, we have the opportunity to imagine, to play, to re-conceive the status quo—and to hope. Ruth Levitas calls this "utopia as method," a way of questioning that is both critique *and* worldbuilding, a dual recognition that we need gestures of interrogation *and* imagination. Yes, there are some common aims amongst many utopianists. Levitas identifies a few: "the aboli-

tion of the division of labor, the development of individual potential, the transformation of work and the increase in material prosperity (made possible by the social ownership of the means of production)…" (49). These are vaguely Marxist, neo-Marxist, socialist, collectivist, and not unlike the gestures of Ackerman and Welch, the former questioning capitalism directly, the latter drawing on the work of Trotsky and collectivist protesters. And while the details are important, devilish as they are, just as important is maintaining the hope to go back again and again to work out those details, to launch ourselves once more into the fray. Miguel Abensour calls such cultivation of hopefulness *the education of desire*—a phrase I have come to love. Levitas uses the literary critic Edward Thompson to gloss Abensour and the education of desire this way:

> [I]n such an adventure two things happen: our habitual values (the "commonsense" of bourgeois society) are thrown into disarray. And we enter utopia's proper and new-found space: *the education of desire*. This is not the same as "a moral education" towards a given end: it is rather, to open a way to aspiration, to "teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way." (141)

I will admit to feeling some risk of naiveté in focusing so much attention on hopefulness, but perhaps we haven't focused on it enough. Perhaps what's needed now, in addition to the very pressing need to haggle over the details of problems such as climate change and economic injustice, is a reassertion of hopefulness in our ability to work together for the betterment of all and our planet.

How so? Ackerman's attention to the everyday confirms my sense of how to proceed *through hope*. Living in a liberal enclave of coastal California, it's all too easy at the moment to lull myself into thinking that, despite the election of Trump and the insistent denial of climate change (amongst other outrages), things really haven't changed all that much —yet. My day-to-day life isn't drastically different. Everything seems strangely normal. My *everyday* hasn't changed. That is, my experience of the everyday, my turning on of the tap, is weirdly disconnected from the larger systemic issues I know are facing my state, my country, my world. As a member of a rather privileged class, I could fool myself into believing, into cultivating the *feeling*, that everything is okay. So part of the utopian education of my desire needs to be a studied reconnection with the world at large, with connecting my everyday to the issues facing the state, the

country, the world. I need the courage to tell a difficult story. But I also need the hopefulness to tell that story in ways that don't overwhelm me with despair or a sense of futility.

A related story: A friend, even a liberal one, once mocked me for my persistence in recycling. In a bad moment, she quipped, "Do you really think you're changing the world? Do you really think recycling that bottle is going to make a difference?" I admit that I couldn't answer her positively. I know for a fact that so much more goes into landfills than goes into the recycling bins. But I also couldn't help but think that, even if I wasn't changing the world, I was changing *myself in the world*. I was choosing hope.

Referencing the neo-Marxist theorist Herbert Marcuse, Levitas notes that, in an age of advanced capitalism, "There is less and less space in which individuals can develop their own demands and decisions, although they may have the illusion of having an increasing amount of choice" (159). We all experience this—the choices that don't seem to count, many of them focused on consumerism. I have come to know better, though. Every consumer choice counts. Every click to purchase, every item browsed, every moment spent participating in this economy is a vote cast through money, time, and attention to sustaining—or potentially remaking, depending on our choices—the status quo, the world as it is, and the world as it could be.

Consumer choice is hardly our only way of participating in (or questioning) the global atrocity of advanced capitalism, but connecting our everyday choices about where we put our money, time, and attention can be the beginning of our reeducation of desire. The trick is to recognize first how we are lulled into believing that *any* of our choices might be illusions. No, they are *all* consequential; they are *all* contributing to a worldbuilding of some kind. The balance must come in recognizing the consequentiality of our choices and then continuing to choose *better*. We express our desires through our choices, so in proposing that we start by looking at our everyday choices, I'm actually proposing a difficult thing: that we interrogate those choices, but that we also teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way so that we can choose with hopefulness in building a better, more just, more equitable world.

The call to work with and through desire reminds me of Chela Sandoval's "hermeneutics of love" in *Methodology of the Oppressed*—a

love that remains open to each other despite the injuries we face in encountering one another; as Sandoval puts it, "love provides one kind of entry to a form of being that breaks the citizen-subject from the ties that bind being, to enter the differential mode of consciousness, or to enter what Barthes perhaps better describes as the gentleness of the abyss,' the utopian nonsite, a no-place where everything is possible—but only in exchange for the pain of the crossing" (141). To be open to change is to risk, to risk in particular, the pain of your own assumptions and values being questioned, critiqued, and overridden. And to undertake the crossing into the unknown requires at times that we encounter at times the pain of turning the spotlight on abuse and injustice. But we might also be surprised at how everyday experiences—even painful ones—can become motivation for systemic critique, not just personal resentment and injury. As a gay man, for instance, I think of the It Gets Better Campaign, established in part by columnist Dan Savage in the wake of a rash of gay teen suicides. The campaign's message was simple: things might be difficult for you now, but hold on: they get better; as adults, you might have more agency and sense of self-determination. Whether the latter is true, several of us gay activists felt that, however well intentioned, the campaign missed an important point: it's our responsibility not just to remind young people that things might get better when they are older, but that we should also be actively helping them *make their worlds better right now*. That is, as opposed to holding on and persevering, why not actively and collaboratively engage in world transformation? While I still believe that critique is right, I've also come to respect the intentions—and the groundbreaking work—of It Gets Better in recognizing that, before we can transform the world to make it a safer place for diverse young people, we need to first believe that such transformation is *possible*. And *that* belief is the result of no small amount of work. As the victim of intense homophobia while growing up in the 70s and 80s in the Deep South, I carry with me to this day the psychic scars that continually invite me to mistrust other people, that prompt me toward the masochism of self-hatred, and that have made at times death seem a welcome relief from the lingering pain of rejection and ostracization. Reflecting on such pain and keeping alive hope for a future has been no simple task for me. Indeed, cultivating hope and educating desire—once you start to take such tasks seriously—are hardly naive. They might be amongst the most difficult endeavors we can undertake and that we can invite each other and our students to attempt.

Educating ourselves, each other, and our students to desire such change is slow and arduous, particularly as such work often cuts against so much focus on individual choice and agency that is cultivated by a consumer-driven society increasingly bent on making individuals independently, rather than collectively or mutually responsible for their own well-being. Doing so requires that we not linger in our own pain, that we not relish or fetishize either our victimhood or our complicity. By the same token, we must also relinquish the narcissism that expects us individually to be world transformative. We must resist the narrative that invites us to desire our individuality as our most precious commodity. While we recognize the power and complicity of our choices, we also need to begin desiring the collectivity—the work together, that, in aggregate, might multiply our choices into transformative power. And then we need to desire together something better for the collective, for the whole of who we are.

To further such an education of desire, I have moved more and more of my pedagogical efforts into collaborative assignments, attempting to teach students—and to continue to learn with them—about how to work with each other to imagine generative change. In a recent class on science fiction and rhetorics of sustainability, my students and I read work that actively imagined dystopic, utopic, and alternative futures based on ecological awareness and climate change, and my assignments asked students to work together to create teaching materials and videos that would introduce local high school students to some of the imaginative work that most inspired them. I was impressed with the students' engagement with these assignments and their willingness to connect with other young people about their own growing passion and enthusiasm for the subject. One group in particular focused on Frank Herbert's remarkable story "Seed Stock," about a group of human columnists who have to learn how to work with the flora and fauna of an "alien" planet if they are to survive, rather than simply colonizing it with their own preferred food stock. This group ambitiously wanted to film the entire story, but realizing they didn't have time to do so, the group instead created a video trailer that served as the documentary for the film they wanted to make. The compromise was, on one hand, a clever way through genre to accommodate the assignment and the limitations of time. On the other hand, though, the students' willingness to think large, to imagine themselves as making a movie about a project important to them, and to work collaboratively toward their goal seemed an important

part—if only a part—of their own education of desire. They couldn't realize their largest ambition, but they still created a fun and engaging short video that introduced other students to an important and politically vital story and the students' interpretation of it. I note that this video was made just two weeks after the November 2016 presidential election. These students reminded me that the capacity to imagine transformative change might flourish in difficult times. They also reminded me that the education of desire might require small steps, and that our largest ambitions might lie yet further in the future. But we take the steps we can now. We hope for that future.

Surely there's a danger in hope. We are inevitably disappointed. At times, we will be outraged. We will be uncivil. Our lives and the lives of others might depend on that incivility. But we also learn to recognize that outrage as the expression of hope itself. And in the process we educate our desires to want *better*—for ourselves, for each other, for the planet itself.

Works Cited

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Afterword