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A Tale of Two Travelers: The Divergent Journeys of Critical Scholars and Rhetorical Theorists

Karen A. Foss & Sonja K. Foss

The authors describe the divergent approaches of critical scholars and rhetorical critics as two different kinds of travelers, making their way through critical analysis in different ways. The two approaches are contrasted in terms of intended destination, itinerary, luggage, jet lag, and mementos from the journey.

Keywords: Critical/cultural; Rhetoric; Theory

Of the diverse travelers who populate airports, two types stand out. One hauls a precariously balanced stack of luggage on a baggage cart, clutches an itinerary, and pays close attention to the travel guide who waves a yellow flag high in the air. The other travels with just a backpack or small carry-on and charts an independent path, away from the must-see sites and recommended stops. For the purposes of this essay, we are calling these divergent travelers *critical scholars* and *rhetorical critics*; critical scholars typically apply a theory or set of theories to what they are studying, while rhetorical critics typically try to create new theory out of what they are analyzing. We contend that these two scholars make their way through critical analysis in very different ways.

We ourselves have chosen the journey of the rhetorical critic, and our personal preference undoubtedly has caused us to characterize the differences between the two travelers more starkly than actually is the case; for that we apologize. We also want to make clear that our preference for the traveling style of the rhetorical critic does not mean that we believe that the insights of cultural scholars are not

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valuable. Few scholars fit exclusively into one category or the other, and, indeed, our scholarship has benefited greatly from the work of critical theorists. We turn now to the primary differences we see in the journeys between critical scholars and rhetorical critics.

Intended Destination

Critical scholars begin their journeys with specific destinations in mind. They want to go to a particular place, they take the most direct route to get there, and they reach it. They know their destinations because their essays are driven by a particular objective—to expose how structures challenge, disrupt, produce, maintain, and/or reproduce oppressive power relations. They often choose artifacts to analyze because they know those artifacts will allow them to reach their desired destinations. At the ends of their journeys, they have produced yet another illustration of how power relations operate unequally, thus reaffirming the theories that guided them to their conclusions. They know the route, and they know what awaits them because they have been there before.

Rhetorical critics begin analysis of their artifacts without knowing where and when they will arrive. This is particularly true of those critics who use an emic or a generative method of criticism. But even if they choose to use a formal method of criticism and thus know that they are going to produce, for example, a rhetorical vision or a pentad, they do not know the nature of the vision or the pentadic drama they will develop from their analyses—they do not know exactly where their trip will take them. When the kids in the back seat ask, “Are we there yet?” rhetorical critics can only shrug, unable to answer the question until they have created an explanatory schema or theory from their artifacts. They know they have arrived only when they can provide new theoretical insights into their artifacts.

Itinerary

The itineraries of critical scholars are carefully planned. They reserve their flights so that they arrive at their desired times, arrange for their preferred types of rental cars, book particular hotels for predetermined numbers of nights, and dine in restaurants that have become beloved after repeated visits. Their itineraries are arranged so that they tour through the theories that they know will enable them to answer their questions about power relations. They are likely to stop off at ideology, marginality, intersectionality, critical race theory, feminist theory, queer theory, performance, privilege, oppression, and social justice, although individual scholars may choose to spend more time in some sites than others because of personal interests and preferences. Because the sites explain the issues of critical theory in standard and accepted ways, there are few surprises. The coffee shop is oppressive, organizational dynamics are marginalizing, and pedagogical practices are exclusionary. Critical scholars are not likely to conclude that the power relations they make visible in artifacts do not oppress or that those relations might even enable innovation and the enactment of agency. Instead, having visited the sites

they always visit, they conclude that the itinerary developed for the journey was a good one—that unequal power relations *are* visible—and they resolve to go again soon on another journey.

Rhetorical critics head off on unplanned adventures, typically prompted by artifacts or experiences that are intriguing or puzzling. As they take off down the road, they are open to whatever they encounter; stopping to explore whatever makes a claim for their attention. They veer off down side streets they never noticed before, see paths that look interesting and follow them, and end up experiencing things they never could have imagined when they started out. As much as possible, they try not to impose their expectations onto their experiences and are open to multiple interpretations of their artifacts.

Luggage

On their scholarly journeys, critical scholars are weighed down with suitcases, guidebooks, and maps. Their luggage is full of familiar and favorite theories from home that explain how power relations work. Their guidebooks are carefully marked and cross tabulated so they make sure they see and do what they are supposed to see and do. They review advice from former travelers, seeking to follow it precisely so that the theories they carry with them properly explain their artifacts.

Rhetorical critics travel light, their carry-on suitcases packed only with a basic set of tools. These tools allow them to dig into communication phenomena and to uncover expected treasures—to see and think about communication in new ways. The tools provide them with basics about how to code artifacts, how to balance between letting the data speak and categorizing the data, how to be patient, and how to create a theory. Their tools are flexible, malleable, and facilitative rather than determining.

Jet Lag

The confidence born of adherence to a well-traveled set of theories means that critical scholars are clear and resolute as they engage in their analyses and reach their conclusions. Because they have not really left home—the home base of theories that guide their analyses—they feel no jet lag during or following a journey. They experience no fuzziness in the brain and no questioning of their abilities to find what they are seeking. They are alert and confident because they know they are reaching the proper conclusions.

Rhetorical critics often experience jet lag or periods of fuzziness when their analyses seem to be leading them nowhere, when they get lost in their data, and when they cannot figure out what contribution to communication theory an analysis makes. After much mucking around in their data, however, the eureka moment comes, the fog of jet lag clears, and clarity arrives. The critics are back to normal, no longer under the sway of an artifact and its inexplicability.

Mementos from the Journey

The two types of scholars collect different kinds of mementos from their journeys. The souvenirs that critical scholars bring home from their travels faithfully record the world in known ways. They buy their souvenirs at souvenir shops, choosing from the options the shops offer. They take their photos at Kodak Photo Points—locations recommended by top photographer—to tell the story of their visits in pictures. As a result, critical scholars reproduce the world. At the ends of their journeys, they illustrate theories and point once again to what others have seen before.

Rhetorical critics return from their journeys with candid and spontaneous photographs, often acquired by crawling under bushes, aiming their cameras at odd angles, and capturing nooks and crannies that have not been noticed before. Their souvenirs are not found in souvenir shops but consist of items picked up from beaches, forests, roadsides, and quirky local shops. Rhetorical critics, then, make new worlds. At the ends of their journeys, they see where they have been in a new way.

The Journey's End

Two types of travelers on divergent journeys: Two destinations, two itineraries, two kinds of luggage, two experiences of jet lag, and two types of mementos. Although we have portrayed the two types of travelers quite differently and clearly align more with the rhetorical critic than the critical scholar, we believe there is a place for both kinds of travelers in the world. When we want to know what we currently understand about the world and want to clarify and refine that understanding, critical scholars are the preferred type of traveler. These scholars clearly understand how the world is and can use that understanding to explain its dynamics insightfully and articulately. When we want to discover how the world can be and want new options for perceiving and acting, rhetorical critics have the most to offer as travelers. Because they refuse to believe that the way the world currently is understood is the only interpretive option, they look for new ways to frame existing knowledge, new insights that produce new knowledge, and new possibilities for communicating. When the two meet on their travels, as the critical scholars and rhetorical critics are doing in this dialogue, all of our journeys are richer, and we all benefit.