

**ALTER ETHOS: FEMINIST RUPTURES IN DIGITAL DISCIPLINARY
SPACES**

by

S. Elizabeth McGhee Williams

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Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Kate Pantelides, Chair

Dr. Eric Detweiler

Dr. Julie Myatt

This project is dedicated to my father who was not able to see its completion and to my daughter who blessed me with her presence during its final stages.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation project uses genre-inflected critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine feminist ruptures within digital discourse communities in Rhetoric and Writing Studies that occurred in the wake of the 2017 #MeToo movement. These ruptures, often initiated or sustained by women, graduate students, and racially minoritized scholars, focus on specific instances of sexism and racism within our communities that represent concerns of discrimination within academia broadly. The corpus of texts includes listserv threads, spillover conversations into social media platforms, and statements published by pertinent individuals and organizations. Although this is not an exhaustive study of these ruptures nor the spaces in which they occurred, they are indicative of a broader gendered reckoning that continues to reverberate within academia and beyond. Using CDA to analyze these ruptures sheds light on how existing power dynamics reproduced through language serve to direct the conversations of our field by excluding or discriminating against certain members. Even though these ruptures occurred within various disciplinary spaces, each one is characterized by a discursive framework inductively developed from the research: a catalyzing event that prompts the dialogue, a text that acts as a breaking point, the dialogue surrounding the rupture, and then the larger impacts of the event on the discourse community and the field. This framework will allow scholars to discursively map what happens rhetorically during a rupture within their own disciplinary communities, and the accompanying heuristic in the conclusion can be used to further understand how and why these ruptures occur. Additionally, feminist discursive strategies such as rhetorical listening are suggested as important tools in moving forward from the ruptures and restoring community where it has been lost.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Despite their contributions to teaching, scholarship, and service, women working in academia continue to face routine challenges to their authority. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that many women feel unable to address them, whether from the risk of being unfairly stereotyped or the lack of a stable platform from which to speak. In a 2018 exchange on the Writing Program Administration listserv (WPA-L), for example, Rhetoric and Writing Studies scholar Michelle LaFrance suggested that she only felt compelled to call out “mansplaining” on the disciplinary listserv due to a trifecta of extenuating circumstances: “Full disclosure: I just had a whiskey with dinner, I’ve got a to-do list as long as anyone else, and national politics have me seriously pissed off and a little rankled lately, especially around gender-norms.” LaFrance followed this declaration with a backhanded apology for speaking out, which as she notes, is a behavior that women are often discouraged from doing: “Apologies if this makes me come off as—well, any of the things women who ‘talk back’ are accused of.” Unfortunately, her response exemplifies the sexism that many list subscribers felt was inherent within this digital space. Taking to Twitter to voice her concerns regarding the discriminatory culture within the WPA-L, scholar Leigh Gruwell aptly captured the shared sentiment of many women list users:

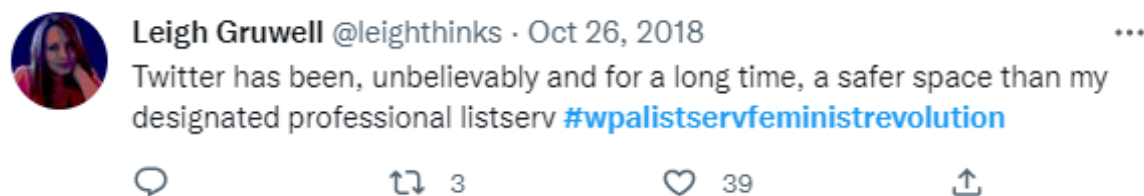


Figure 1: A Tweet containing a popular hashtag following the mansplaining rupture.

“Mansplaining” and other forms of gender discrimination within the academy are not new phenomena, of course, and the barriers that women face within its walls are well documented. In a recent report on the status of women in higher education for example, the *American Council on Education* found that even though women have generally attained higher levels of education than men, this fact is not reflected in the number of women who hold higher ranking positions or in their salaries (“Pipelines”). This report also found that women of color are even less likely to hold advanced positions in higher education than white women or men of color. These types of disparities are also reflected in anecdotal evidence in a 2018 review from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that features women’s voices from various academic ranks. This collection, titled “The Awakening: Women and Power in the Academy,” covers a range of topics pertaining to women’s lived experiences relating to race, sex, parenthood, and more while simultaneously navigating the ins and outs of higher ed.

Our field in particular, which is comprised predominantly of women, is no stranger to the heavy lifting and emotional labor often required from contingent and non-tenure track faculty. We have “fought the reality behind these numbers—particularly the devaluing of women’s labor, disciplinary expertise, and administrative leadership” (Alexander and Shaver 59). As Professor of English Sharon Marcus notes in “The Awakening,” “everyone seems to know how to find a female academic when it comes to requesting a letter of recommendation, finding an adviser for an undergraduate honors thesis, or seeking advice about a thorny situation.” And yet women in our field have continually risen to meet the challenge, even advising and mentoring others on how to “succeed as women academics in a sea of gender and disciplinary bias and to have a life,

as well” (Baliff et al.). For example, *Women’s Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition* relates the stories of successful scholars in the field to “serve as models for other women in the profession who aspire to ‘make it,’ too.”

Barriers to success are not just a problem for women academics however, as the workforce in higher education is overwhelmingly white. Based on a 2016 status report on race and ethnicity of higher education faculty published by the *American Council on Education*, “almost three quarters of the college and university faculty body is white.” And although many scholars in our field are interested in pursuing equity-minded research and implementing inclusive pedagogical practices in our classrooms, we are unfortunately not immune from criticisms regarding a lack of diversity. Take, for example, Asao Inoue’s 2021 call to boycott what he described as a “White supremacy culture in CWPA and its organs” (“Why I Left”). Such rupturing events in the field highlight the racism and barriers to success that many scholars of color face, which are compounded when those scholars also happen to be women. This lack of diverse representation in academia not only affects racially minoritized scholars but students as well, as they lack “people of color role models, especially women of color, in positions of power in higher education” (Alcalde and Subramaniam).

Because women and people of color are still struggling to have their voices heard in academia, it is imperative that scholars critically address the culture of higher education that allows for instances of exclusion and discrimination to continue. It is with this agenda that I approached my dissertation project which uses genre-inflected Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine what I describe as “feminist ruptures” captured within digital disciplinary spaces that occurred in the wake of the 2017 #MeToo

movement. These ruptures, often initiated or sustained by women, graduate students, and racially minoritized scholars, focus on specific instances of sexism and racism within the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies that represent larger concerns of discrimination within academia broadly. Although this is not an exhaustive study of these ruptures nor the spaces in which they occurred, they are indicative of a broader gendered reckoning that continues to reverberate within academia and beyond. These ruptures occurred within various disciplinary spaces, but each one is characterized by a discursive framework (see Figure 1 below) that I inductively developed from my research: 1) a catalyzing event that prompts the dialogue, 2) a text that acts as a breaking point, 3) the larger dialogue surrounding the rupture, and then 4) the impacts of the rupture on the discourse community and the field.

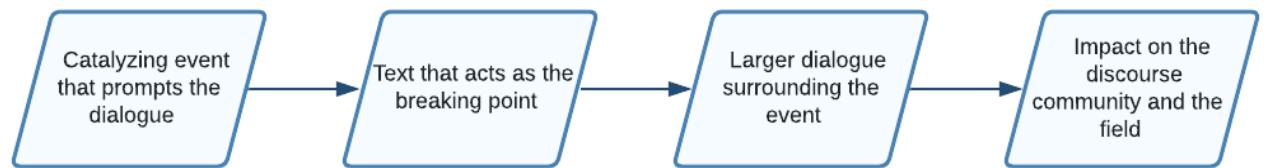


Figure II: Framework for discursively mapping ruptures

This framework will allow scholars to discursively map what happens rhetorically during ruptures within their own communities and can be used as a predictor of what can happen if we are not attentive to such events. Additionally, I argue that we need to embrace feminist discursive strategies such as rhetorical listening to move forward from these ruptures and restore community where it has been lost. This research is dedicated to the women—past, present, and future—who refuse to be silenced.

Overview of Project

In 2018, the Writing Program Administration Listserv (WPA-L), a digital water-cooler of sorts for Rhetoric and Writing Studies scholars, erupted in discord over a thread about sexism and misogyny in the profession. This particular discussion thread allowed for new ways of demonstrating one's ethos in this digital space, particularly for women who did not regularly contribute to list conversations. These subscribers, who in addition to being women were often contingent faculty, graduate students, and scholars of color, were praised—throughout the discussion thread and elsewhere on various other social media platforms—for standing up against the sexism that many felt was inherent within this online community. Of course, these power dynamics had long existed within the WPA-L, but the nature by which lurkers became active participants was a significant change to the previously unspoken “rules” of who could engage with or initiate responses in the list.

Although the “mansplaining” rupture had significant implications on the culture within the WPA-L, it was not the first of its kind to occur within this digital space. In March 2018 following the release of Vershawn Ashanti Young's CFP for the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), a conversation ensued regarding the program chair's use of codemeshing throughout the call. This list thread led to a larger discussion on the use of codemeshing and dialects other than Standard American English in academic and professional contexts. Upon commenting on the participation in “discourses and structures of power” that he noted in the conversation, a graduate student was met with some hostility in the list. As a response to this pushback, graduate students created the nextGEN listserv to offer a moderated disciplinary space for

those who felt unwelcome to participate in the conversations in the WPA-L. Its creation, coupled with the continuance of ruptures in the WPA-L, contributed to the employment of moderating guidelines within the WPA-L and its eventual dissolution in favor of the new WritingStudies-L.

Also in the wake of the #MeToo reckoning, a similar disruptive event occurred within the National Communication Association (NCA). In 2019, the NCA issued a statement regarding changes to the selection process for its Distinguished Scholar award with the intention of making the group more diverse. A fiery exchange of responses, most notably from the president of NCA and past recipients of the Distinguished Scholar award, ensued. Prominent organizations within the field, such as the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), also issued statements on the controversy, and the hashtag #CommunicationSoWhite began circulating on Twitter. Through the attention garnered from this communicative exchange, historically underrepresented rhetors were once again provided with an exigence to speak out against structural sexism and racism within the field.

The aforementioned discursive events that occurred within the WPA-L and NCA represent what I describe as “feminist ruptures” within each respective community. In the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, these ruptures—interruptions of dominant discourses often initiated by women, graduate students, and people of color—began to materialize throughout all facets of our society. As a result of this renewed attention to sexual violence and harassment in contemporary culture, women across various professions, academia included, felt empowered to speak out against other social

injustices. Using CDA as both a method and a theory,¹ my research analyzes the previously mentioned digital texts—discussion threads on professional listservs, organizational documents and their subsequent responses from members, and relevant social media responses such as Twitter hashtags—to investigate how each rupture occurred and the implications it had on the respective discourse community and the field at large.

Literature Review

The focus of this section is to provide relevant research on concepts and terminology that have been integral to the making of this project, as well as providing background information on its exigence in the #MeToo movement. Each individual chapter in this project also contains additional sections dedicated to the literature relevant to the rupture discussed in that chapter. For example, “‘Look Fellas’: From Lurking to Advocating Within the WPA-L” discusses Krista Ratcliffe’s conception of *rhetorical listening* and its applicability to the mansplaining rupture within the WPA-L. Underpinning this dissertation project is an attention to the intersectionality of the interlocutors involved in these ruptures. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, *intersectionality* has been defined as “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage” (OED). Thus, although the first rupture analyzed in this project focuses on an instance of social inequality in relation to gender, it also importantly highlights institutional power dynamics in relation to academic rank.

¹ CDA is both a theory, in that it represents a critical approach to understanding the uses of discourse to exert power and discrimination, as well as an empirical method used to perform qualitative and/or quantitative research to examine texts with a critical lens.

Complicating the matter further, a woman scholar of color noted how she did not share the same institutional power or privilege that was afforded to her white colleagues in this exchange on the WPA-L. The various intersecting—and at times conflicting—identities of the women involved in these ruptures capture the complicated nature of contemporary feminist inquiry.

#MeToo Movement as Exigence

The #MeToo movement that swept across social media platforms in 2017 actually began in 2006 by social activist Tarana Burke to raise awareness of sexual violence against girls and women of color (Issitt). After sexual harassment allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein began to surface in 2017, actor Alyssa Milano invited women who had been the victims of sexual misconduct to share the phrase “me too” on Twitter and within days received an overwhelming number of responses. To date, the movement has resulted in numerous high-profile men being held accountable for their actions, with some such as Weinstein serving time in prison. Additionally, more and more women have found the courage to speak out against sexual harassment and discrimination.

Although some have warned against the movement’s method of public shaming before due process of law, the effects of #MeToo still continue to reverberate throughout our culture. As evidenced through the movement’s public uptake and focus of critical scholarship, this kairotic moment gave many women a platform to call attention to social injustices that are still pervasive within society. Further, it is important to note that some have rightly expressed concern for the lack of action or attention when it comes to the grievances of women of color and women of lower socioeconomic status. For example, Maiysha Kai has described the inadequacy of #MeToo: “I, like many other black women,

am angry and tired of continuing to feel marginalized and unrecognized within a movement created with us in mind; of the colonizer constantly reminding us that she, too, has been oppressed. And that her rage is the one that should be heard the loudest.” The anger at the lack of intersectional attention within the movement has manifested in other recent race-related social conflicts as well. While not directly connected to the 2017 #MeToo movement, the sustained nationwide protests of the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 seemingly gained renewed momentum from this push for social reform, as even now we continue to see the societal impact of these protests. The most recent demonstration of which is the killing of Tyre Nichols by the hands of five Black police officers.

Given the level of discursive power afforded to this movement, it is not surprising, then, that many feminist scholars have found the #MeToo movement worthy of rhetorical analysis. In “Making Sense of #MeToo: Intersectionality and Contemporary Feminism,” for example, Caroline Dadas argues, “If we think of sexual harassment, misogyny, and patriarchy as institutions, #MeToo uses rhetoric to intervene in them, largely by naming the systemic practices of abuse and harassment—often gone unspoken—by which these institutions sustain themselves.” Using CDA, Dadas examines 100 popular press articles containing discourse commonly used in conjunction with #MeToo. She argues that the language used in the #MeToo movement is representative of *parrhesiastic* rhetoric, which Foucault describes as “a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)” (qtd. in Dadas). While Dadas’ research identifies limitations of the movement, such as the need for a

more intersectional approach, she found that “people who participate in #MeToo are using the power derived from speaking out and connecting with others who have had similar experiences to chip away at exclusionary institutions and norms.” This focus on the idea of the #MeToo movement as a “power disruptor” is central to my own research, as the ruptures within this project bring attention to imbalances of institutional power within discourse communities in the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies—particularly along gendered and raced lines.

The use of anger as a rhetorical strategy within #MeToo has also been a subject of critical interest to academics. Emily Winderman, for example, has written about how the volume of one’s anger “illuminates how the emotion is rhetorically rendered available for some to mobilize while simultaneously limiting the emotional expression—and thus the political power—of others” (329). Winderman’s analysis of public discourse using #MeToo draws attention to the previously stated notion that the movement does not equally validate the anger of women of color or other historically marginalized groups. By looking at the amplification and aggregation of public anger specifically, Winderman posits that “the shared ability to experience and deploy anger necessarily requires a critical orientation to whose anger is being publicly privileged in order to avoid homogenizing the emotion with a social movement” (342). As demonstrated in the next chapter, a discussion on the uses of anger as an effective rhetorical strategy and who is able to wield its power are key themes identified within the WPA-L mansplaining rupture.

Interruptions as Feminist Rhetorical Strategy

Interruptions have been important strategies of feminist activists throughout history as demonstrated through the second-wave feminist movement that swept across the United States in the 1960s and 70s,² and the ruptures analyzed in this project can be seen as large-scale disruptions to dominant discourses. Feminist rhetorical and composition theories have likewise acknowledged the importance of these types of disrupting strategies. For example, Nedra Reynolds' 1998 essay, "Interrupting Our Way to Agency," considers a theory of interruption as a means for women writers to enter into academic discourse and demonstrate agency. Reynolds argues that "agency is not simply about finding one's own voice but also about intervening in discourses of the everyday and cultivating rhetorical tactics that make interruption and resistance an important part of any conversation" (898). Using interruptions by women writers (such as bell hooks) in cultural studies as her example, Reynolds argues for the necessity of a similar strategy to be used in composition. She posits, "Despite the obvious role of interruption in oral discourse, it seems necessary in the academy to pursue the implications of this tactic in written discourse as well" (907).

In *Rethinking Ethos: A Feminist Ecological Approach to Rhetoric*, editors Kathleen J. Ryan, Nancy Myers, and Rebecca Jones argue that interruption has been a discursive strategy used by both historical and contemporary women rhetors in order to establish a platform for their voices. Interruptions, which are defined as disruptions or breaks in dominant discourses, have provided women with the ability to insert themselves

² For an analysis of the women's liberation rhetoric, see Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron" in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (1973).

into public debate and attempt to redirect the focus away from dominant narratives. The chapter on interruptions highlights feminist thinkers throughout history, such as Andrea Dworkin, who have disrupted the status quo—with both their bodies and their words. As demonstrated through the example of the #MeToo movement, “interruptions from members of counterpublics [such as women of the second-wave feminist movement] become agentive ways to transform values” (Ryan, Myers, and Jones 25). I will further explore these types of feminist interruptions described by Ryan, Myers, and Jones in the Methodology section, as it was through these types of rhetorical tactics that I first approached the research conducted within this project.

Swales' Discourse Communities

The ruptures examined within this project occurred within prominent *discourse communities* in the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies. Largely credited to linguist John Swales, discourse communities are “sociorhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals” (*Genre Analysis* 9). Simply put, discourse communities are groups of people who share goals and purposes and use language to achieve those goals. In his germinal work *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*, Swales identified the following six characteristics of discourse communities:

1. A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.
2. A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members.
3. A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback.
4. A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.
5. In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis.

6. A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursal expertise. (24-7)

Understanding the inner workings of the discourse communities that are the foci of my research will be integral to uncovering the exigence behind the ruptures and learning from their aftermath. For the purposes of my project, I use Swales' updated characteristics of discourse communities presented in volume 37 of *Composition Forum* (2017). This newly adapted list of characteristics contains two additions: 1) "a discourse community develops a sense of silential relations" and 2) "a discourse community develops horizons of expectations." In particular, the former characteristic plays an integral role in my analysis of the ruptures discussed in this project. For example, it was a breach of the "silential relations," or unspoken rules of engagement, in the WPA-L rupture that resulted in graduate students speaking out and gaining rhetorical agency after LaFrance's accusation of mansplaining.

Methodology

My scholarly identity as a feminist researcher and pedagogue undoubtedly informs my approach to investigating the ruptures discussed throughout this project.

Scholar Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber defines feminist research in the following terms:

[it] positions gender as the categorical center of inquiry and the research process. By using a variety of research methods—quantitative, qualitative, mixed—feminist researchers use gender as a lens through which to focus on social issues. Research is considered "feminist" when it is grounded in the set of theoretical traditions that privilege women's issues, voices, and lived experiences. (3)

Aligning with this understanding of what it means to conduct feminist research, one of the original goals of my project was to investigate how the voices of women in the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies were being excluded or undervalued within prominent

discourse communities in our field. However, as previously discussed, this project also takes an intersectional feminist approach to examining the data, as I demonstrate an attention to how gender also intersects with other identity markers such as race and academic standing. As I began becoming more familiar with the ruptures I was analyzing, it became increasingly clear that it would be neither possible nor fruitful to delineate my research agenda in terms of gender alone.

As a feminist researcher practicing CDA, which entails investigating hot button issues such as sexism and other forms of discrimination, it is also important for me to practice reflexivity throughout my research process. Reflexivity is defined as “a process by which [researchers] recognize, examine, and understand how their social background, location, and assumptions can influence the research” (Hesse-Biber 3). Practicing reflexivity requires me to be transparent in acknowledging how my identity and situated knowledge as a white Southern woman working in the feminized field of composition affects not only how I interpreted my data but what was selected as data and how it was presented as well. Elsewhere throughout the chapters I also discuss how my positionality, such as my contingent academic status as a graduate student for example, affects my interpretation of and relation to the data discussed in that specific chapter.

The texts that I selected for my corpus are all indicative of what I describe as feminist ruptures within each respective discourse community. The majority of these ruptures occurred within email, but I also examine formal statements published by pertinent organizations in response to the ruptures. I selected these specific texts, in part, because of the significant amount of uptake that each received from the community and the field, with many conversations spilling over into other digital platforms such as

Twitter. Each of the selected ruptures also focuses on instances of sexism and racism that members of the community find problematic and indicative of larger institutional and cultural concerns. And lastly, all of the texts occurred in the aftermath of the 2017 #MeToo movement, which I argue is the exigence for these ruptures across academia.

The three chapters that contain analysis of the ruptures follow the IMRaD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) organizational structure. Additionally, each chapter contains a visual representation of the stages of the rupture in question. The purpose behind these two choices is to aid in clarity and cohesion of the project. I will now turn to specific theories and frameworks of knowledge-making that informed my approach to analyzing the textual data within these ruptures.

Critical Discourse Studies

In this project, I use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze my corpus of selected texts. Critical Discourse Studies, or Discourse Studies more broadly, focuses on the study of language *in use* relative to its social, political, and cultural contexts. In other words, language is not studied in isolation from how it is used in the “real world.”

Scholars involved in Discourse Studies understand that language is not simply a neutral medium for transferring information and knowledge but instead a power, a cultural currency, that has the ability to *create* knowledge. Discourse Studies is multidisciplinary, borrowing theories from linguistics, philosophy, and cultural studies, and it has been taken up and built upon by scholars in Writing Studies.³

³ For example, see Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior’s edited collection *What Writing Does and How It Does It* (2004).

Taking a critical orientation, Discourse Studies has the ability to highlight how interlocutors use discourse to exercise power over others, such as by hurting or excluding them. Norman Fairclough, who many dub as the “father” of CDA, has noted that discourse is invested with ideologies and shaped by power structures. Therefore, practitioners of CDA must be acutely aware of how institutions are exerting discrimination or dominance through language in both explicit and implicit ways. Scholars involved in Critical Discourse Studies often focus on issues of racial and gender inequalities, exposing the ways that such inequalities are maintained and reproduced through dominant discourse.

As a method, CDA is empirical, firmly grounded in the data, and uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. There is no one way to perform a CDA reading of a text, but it must involve becoming intimately acquainted with the text—going beyond content analysis to investigate the rhetorical situation surrounding it. In fact, in their essay on the intersections between CDA and Rhetoric and Composition, Huckin et al. argue that CDA complements our field because it attends to rhetorical features such as purpose, genre, diction, and style. Regardless of the disciplinary orientation however, a CDA reading should begin with a critical reading of the text in order to discern emerging themes and patterns, and then culminate in an understanding of how the findings function/what they mean. The goal of such analysis should be to investigate how power dynamics are invested within the discourse itself.

Framework for Feminist Ecological Ethos

The framework for examining ethos provided by Ryan, Myers, and Jones in *Rethinking Ethos* has been central to my analysis of the aforementioned feminist ruptures,

as the ruptures exemplify the rhetorical strategies identified by the editors in this collection. However, it is important to note that Ryan, Myers, and Jones' conception of a feminist ecological ethos is much different from classical definitions of the term, such as the one provided by Aristotle. In his treatise on rhetoric, Aristotle describes *ethos* as one of the three means of persuasion available to a rhetor. He argues, "There are three things which inspire confidence in the orator's own character—the three, namely, that induce us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it: good sense, good moral character, and goodwill" (*Rhetoric* 108). However, contemporary rhetorical theory, often of a feminist background, attempts to challenge this classic definition of the term. Many scholars, for example, have deemed Aristotle's conception of ethos as not indicative of the ways in which women and racially minoritized rhetors, who have historically been denied the right to speak in public platforms, construct their identities.

In the preface to *Rethinking Ethos*, Ryan, Myers, and Jones describe how traditional Aristotelian conceptions of ethos (simply as a rhetor's "character" or credibility") do not encompass the ways that women construct their *ethē* in contemporary public discourse. In opposition to this individualist, authoritative ethos⁴, the editors argue that women often construct ethos through an ecological habit of mind that "takes into consideration the entire ecology of a given rhetorical situation" (viii). The ecology, for example, encompasses the rhetor's subject position, as well as relevant material, cultural, and historical factors. According to the editors, this need for an alternative theory of ethos stems from the inability of "socially determined *ethē*," such as mother, whore, or bitch, to

⁴ In *Rhetorical Listening*, Krista Ratcliffe argues that "reducing ethos to individual ethical appeal is metonymically linked to a rugged-individualist ideology" (124).

provide women with rhetorical agency and authority in the male-dominated public sphere.

In *Rethinking Ethos*, Ryan, Myers, and Jones describe three overarching rhetorical strategies, or maneuvers, in which women demonstrate this notion of a feminist ecological ethos: interruption-interrupting, advocacy-advocating, and relation-relating. Interruptions are defined as “breaks, divides, hitches, disruptions, disturbances, ruptures, or breeches—counters to traditional ways of behaving or conversing—to change the status quo of dominant values and practices” (23). As such, interruptions and interrupting attend to the ways in which women establish agency to speak and challenge dominant discourses. Next, advocacy involves women rhetors speaking for their own rights, as well as for the rights of others. Advocating as and for historically marginalized voices requires a negotiation on the part of the rhetor in terms of speaking from the position of a perceived lack of authority, as well as acting responsibly when speaking on behalf of other underrepresented communities of which one is not a member. Advocating inevitably involves practicing what Jacqueline Jones Royster has described as “home training”—or “the idea that when you visit other people's ‘home places,’ especially when you have not been invited, you simply cannot go tramping around the house like you own the place, no matter how smart you are, or how much imagination you can muster, or how much authority and entitlement outside that home you may be privileged to hold” (32). Finally, the strategy of relation and relating highlights how “women’s *ethē* are socially constructed” and how “rhetors construct their identities and texts in relation to others and their environments” (195). Relation-relating involves working with others and fostering relationships through connection and alliances.

The aforementioned rhetorical strategies identified by Ryan, Myers, and Jones will act as a starting framework for my own analysis of the interlocutors involved in the feminist ruptures that are the focus of this study. However, I must also take into consideration the unique affordances and constraints of digital environments in which these ruptures occurred. The only chapter in *Rethinking Ethos* that explicitly examines how women engage and enact their *ethē* in digital spaces is “Changing Audience, Changing Ethos” by Beth Daniell and Letizia Guglielmo, which is included in the *Ethē* as Interruption-Interrupting section. This chapter addresses “how digital spaces facilitate contemporary women rhetors’ opportunities to disrupt normative political discourses” (x). Daniell and Guglielmo argue that, in comparison to their 19th and 20th century counterparts, women rhetors of the 21st century demonstrate a different kind of *ethos* that benefits from the “the opportunities for sustained collaboration and community-building” provided by digital environments (99). These new benefits to contemporary women rhetors stem from the affordances of online communication platforms that allow participants to be both producers and consumers of information on the Web—achieving a level of dual engagement not available to early feminists.

Rhetorical Genre Studies

A discussion of my methodology would be incomplete without a mention of rhetorical genre studies, as the genre of these digital discursive ruptures informs my critical analysis of them. Notably, contemporary genre studies does not focus on the classification of features and forms but instead derives from Carolyn Miller’s definition of genre as social action (1984). In this landmark essay, Miller argues that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse

but on the action it is used to accomplish” (151). Building from Miller’s rhetorical conception of genre, Amy Devitt argues, “Studying genre is studying how people use language to make their way in the world” (9). These nuanced understandings of genre emphasize the role that discourse plays in shaping reality, not just reflecting it, and this theory of discursive power is an integral component of discourse studies as well. For example, the genre in which a text is composed, whether on a listserv, through standard email, on a personal blog, etc., inherently contains certain expectations for both the author and the audience in terms of how the message is delivered and received.

Like print genres, digital genres possess their own unique set of affordances and constraints, and an understanding of those parameters is essential to analyzing the discursive interactions that they contain. In “Digital Genres and Processes of Remediation,” Theresa Heyd argues, “Genre analysis... provides an essential and useful way to make meaningful abstractions about online discourse, and to uncover and describe its structural features and their communicative purposes and effects” (88). In this essay, Heyd identifies key components of digital genre theory, the most important being digital genre ecologies. Thomas Erickson is largely credited with this theory of genre ecologies, which highlights the interplay of how genres coexist and overlap.⁵ Heyd notes how this interplay “simply seems to resonate with the communicative environment of the Internet”—meaning that the design of the web allows for texts to continuously be in flux and seamlessly borrow from and build upon other texts (97).

⁵ See Erickson’s “Making Sense of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC): Conversations as Genres, CMC Systems as Genre Ecologies” (2000).

Despite being an outdated technology, listservs remain popular digital genres for many academic disciplines and special interest groups, such as the (now defunct) WPA-L. Critical studies of interactions on the listserv have been undertaken by many scholars interested in digital communication. David Elias and Deborah Brown, for example, have studied how participants on an academic listserv interact with one another. Noting the unique features of the genre (which draws on Erickson's idea of genre ecologies), they affirm:

E-mail represents a hybridized rhetorical space, a mix of letter-writing, telephone conversation, and writing from sources. It allows [users] to quote and comment on other... messages. It allows, though it does not require, editing and proofreading as well as reflection by the writer. Yet it has an element of spontaneity and personal exchange, like the telephone, in its timeliness. E-mail lends itself to brevity and informality, in tone and form.

Like other forms of digital communication, listserv allows users to collaborate with one another instantly. This affordance of online interactions is particularly significant for feminist rhetors who value collectiveness and the contributions of multiple voices. As scholars who have studied online communication have noted, "comment sections and tools for sharing these texts allow readers to add their voices to a discussion, often borrowing the original author's ethos and speaking from personal experience, sometimes disagreeing with or refining the original author's position" (Daniell and Guglielmo 100). Listservs provide users from all over the world a common space to come together to share ideas and connect with others in an easily accessible space.

Although listserv provides users with a timely space to connect and engage, which are hallmarks of digital media generally, it has several drawbacks compared to more contemporary social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. For example,

not all list subscribers are interacting with the conversations synchronously, as users are given the option to receive list emails in digest form rather than being alerted of individual messages. Even if subscribers are not using the digested version of the list, their inboxes are filled with emails which they must sift through, often missing certain posts. Speaking to the constraints of the genre, WPA-L subscriber Michael attests to the “severe limitations of listservs as a community tool” stating that “heated topics are excessively amplified via the number of emails, and the tools to isolate manipulative posts or block/mute participants at the user level are largely absent” (propeliea@gmail.com). Additionally, since the listserv platform operates through standard email, it does not allow users to engage in more low-stakes ways of interaction, such as through “liking” posts or tagging friends as do other social media platforms.

So, although digital communication allows for a high level of interaction between interlocutors both synchronously and asynchronously, it is important to understand the limitations of the genre—paying critical attention to how the unique nature of conversations on the Internet can affect the content and trajectory of the discourse. Understanding how members of particular digital discourse communities, such as the WPA-L, interact with one another is also crucial in analyzing these spaces and the ruptures within them. Therefore, key to my practice of genre-inflected CDA will be examining how these rhetors maintain or break genre conventions to disrupt dominant narratives or community expectations.

Chapter Overviews

The following chapters are organized by unique ruptures within prominent discourse communities in the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies, as well as in adjacent

fields such as Communication. Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to my corpus of texts, I examine each rupture paying particular attention to the outcome of the discursive event—whether that outcome be institutional policy change, an individual being removed or fired from an organization, the creation of a new discourse community, etc. To aid in clarity and cohesion, each rupture chapter follows the IMRaD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) format and includes a visual representation of the stages of the rupture in question.

The first chapter, “‘Look Fellas’: From Lurking to Advocating within the WPA-L,” analyzes a rupture that occurred within the Writing Program Administration listserv, or WPA-L, in October 2018 in response to a woman list subscriber’s accusation of “mansplaining” and its prevalence within the space. The conversation that ensued allowed women of the WPA-L, particularly contingent faculty and graduate students, to demonstrate their institutional ethos and gain rhetorical agency in this digital space that had previously excluded their voices. Applying CDA to this rupture demonstrates how exclusionary practices are maintained through discursive strategies such as tone policing, redirecting, and silencing of voices.

The second chapter, “‘Y’all Treating Power as Static’: Creating a Disciplinary Space for Graduate Students,” focuses on the digital community nextGEN that was created in response to what the founders described as the “toxic” environment of the WPA-L. The establishment of the nextGEN listserv itself serves as an example of a rupture, as it was created by graduate students in response to “a need for a safe(r) space for graduate students to contribute, inquire, and respond to conversations in our field” (Johnson). Applying CDA to selected texts produced in response to this rupture

highlights how members of the field have differing expectations and needs regarding issues of safety and engagement within the community. Additionally, the creation of nextGEN demonstrates a need for moderated spaces of interaction in our discipline.

The third chapter, “‘These Are the Facts’: Challenging Institutional Privilege in the NCA,” examines the series of discursive events that followed after the National Communication Association (NCA) issued a statement regarding changes to the selection process for its Distinguished Scholar award with the intention of making the group more diverse. Key to this analysis are responses from past recipients of the award and NCA administration. The texts produced from the Distinguished Scholars represent examples of what happens when long-standing systems are confronted with criticisms regarding exclusionary practices. Further, the CDA reading indicates a lack of clear communication channels between the interlocutors involved in this exchange.

In the conclusion, I expound upon the discursive framework that I developed for mapping what happens rhetorically during a rupture. In addition to the framework as a starting point of inquiry, I also offer a heuristic to help scholars make sense of the ruptures occurring within their own discourse communities. This heuristic is divided into preventive, mitigative, and restorative actions that coincide with the stages of a rupture. Accompanying guiding questions are also provided to help members achieve their desired outcomes when navigating rupturing events within their communities.

Chapter 2: “Look Fellas”: From Lurking to Advocating within the WPA-L



Figure III: A Tweet demonstrating the impact of LaFrance's response to the mansplainers.

Introduction

In October 2018, the Writing Program Administration Listserv (WPA-L), a popular digital community among Rhetoric and Writing Studies scholars, erupted in discord over a thread about sexism and misogyny in the profession. Sparked by a post from then Assistant Professor of English Michelle LaFrance, who wrote about the “kerfuffle” she started on the WPA-L in “Failure to Wake?,” the thread that ensued brought about a critical conversation on the prevalence of “mansplaining” within the listserv. Mansplaining, which has officially been added to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is defined as “explain[ing] (something) needlessly, overbearingly, or condescendingly, esp. (typically when addressing a woman) in a manner thought to reveal a patronizing or chauvinistic attitude.” As others on the list have unfortunately noted, the WPA-L is “famous for mansplaining responses.” It is what happened *after* this accusation, however, that would have a lasting impact on the WPA-L and beyond (although the listserv is no longer operating under this name).⁶

⁶ In 2021 after a string of particularly heated threads and the retirement of its owner, the WPA-L was effectively abandoned. However, a new iteration of the list is now available under the name WritingStudies-L, complete with new rules for posting and new moderators.

As this chapter will demonstrate, this accusation of mansplaining brought about new ways of demonstrating identity and gaining rhetorical agency within the digital space of the WPA-L, particularly for graduate students, contingent faculty, and women list subscribers who did not regularly contribute to its conversations. Examining this thread through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals how oppressive structures are maintained through discursive practices such as tone policing, silencing, and redirecting. As a CDA scholar, I am interested in not only the discourse itself but also the power dynamics surrounding the discourse, as this accusation of mansplaining on the WPA-L allowed subscribers who were typically lurkers to become active participants in the conversation and changed prior unspoken “rules” of who could engage with or initiate responses in this digital disciplinary space. The goal of this analysis is to question how forums that direct our field, such as disciplinary listservs, function and whose interests they do or do not serve.

Event Prompting the Dialogue

In October 2018, Michelle LaFrance⁷ posted a seemingly harmless request on the WPA-L titled “Rubrics to Assess Writing Assignments.” Receiving a total of 162 messages, LaFrance’s post generated more responses than any other post on the list during 2018. To help put this number into perspective, the average number of responses to a post on the WPA-L for October was approximately 3.6—excluding responses to LaFrance’s original post and the post that generated the next highest number of responses (89) which grew out of the original thread. LaFrance’s post read as follows:

⁷ Aside from LaFrance’s, all other participants’ names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect identities. My reasoning behind this choice is explained in-depth in the Method section of this chapter.

Hi all,

I'm looking for example rubrics that could be used to assess the writing assignments faculty produce.

Any/all examples would be helpful for our campus conversations, but we are particularly interested in those that may be similar to the AAUP rubric for written communication typically.

Thank you!

-M

The post generated two replies that answered LaFrance's request for example rubrics. Then the following three responses—all from men list subscribers—occurred. Notably, these three particular posts did not offer example rubrics but instead provided unsolicited opinions and advice. Although lengthy, these posts are included almost in entirety because their content demonstrates what other subscribers in the group subsequently critiqued as a type of “patterned response” on the WPA-L. The third reply to LaFrance's request is a post from WPA-L subscriber, Michael:

M: In my long experience, I have usually found it a bad idea to adopt someone else's rubric for your own assessment. If you can find the time and a small committee to articulate just what you are seeking to find out, you are much better off than you would be with even a good rubric from elsewhere. The extra time gives you a group with buy-in for your own document, a good fit for your program, and even a chance to pre-test and refine your own work. I suggest you avoid the attractive short-cut. -Michael

The next reply came from WPA-L subscriber, Thomas. Note that Thomas began his post in response to Michael—not LaFrance who was the original requester of information. For the sake of brevity, Thomas' post has been edited to contain the main points of his position. He replied:

Good point, Michael.

The positive of generic rubrics:

- They can provide a starting point for teachers to think about what they may tacitly expect or be teaching but haven't made explicit ...
- Used very judiciously, they can express expectations within a closed system ...

The negative of generic rubrics:

- They reduce teacher agency and creativity ...
- They don't work across diverse assignments, curricula, disciplines, or occasions for writing ...

Last was the post from subscriber Brian who was an active participant in WPA-L conversations. Brian continued Michael's derailment of the conversation, perhaps adopting the most condescending tone of the responses from the three men. Again, lengthy explanations have been omitted for the sake of brevity. Brian wrote:

Michael is so right here. DO NOT adopt an outside rubric... To really construct a professional scoring guide (a preferred term), have members of the scoring team write in response to the writing task, read each others' essays and discuss characteristics that seem to work--and other writing issues that may have impeded responses; construct a highly tentative scoring guide and then go to reading the 50 or so essays etc.

If you adopt an external rubric, I'll be clear--that's simply bad practice. You are also freezing the concept of genres (genres are NOT frozen).

My take: if you can't assess as I've described (and Michael, José, and I described in [redacted]), you really shouldn't be engaging in a counter-productive assessment. Sorry for being so upfront about this, but we can assess productively, but cookie-cutter assessments give assessments a deservedly bad name.

These three posts from men subscribers will be significant to my CDA reading of this communicative exchange because they represent what other women subscribers of the listserv have described as examples of “mansplaining”—a typical type of condescending or patronizing explanation from a man most often directed at a woman.⁸

⁸ I acknowledge that there are issues associated with the use of this term, as it genders, and consequently makes static, a particular discursive pattern. Thus, the gendering of this term creates a problematic binary that doesn't productively contribute to altering the behavior behind the label.

For example, in response to this controversy, a noteworthy scholar in Rhetoric and Writing Studies pointed out that “this is a pattern, not a one time thing ... This listserv is famous for mansplaining responses and I, for one, am tired of letting them go.” A chorus of voices would echo hers, conveying shared expressions of anger and solidarity. However, there would also be attempts to repress the unfolding conversation as well, through strategies such as tone policing, redirecting, and silencing.

Breaking Point Text

The following post is LaFrance’s response to the three men, which I refer to here as the “breaking point” post. This post contains the initial accusation of mansplaining, and it is the responses after this post made primarily by women subscribers that will be central to my analysis. A day following her original post, LaFrance responded to the “fellas”:

Okay.

Look fellas.

Full disclosure: I just had a whiskey with dinner, I’ve got a to-do list as long as anyone else, and national politics have me seriously pissed off and a little rankled lately, especially around gender-norms.

BUT WOW, I’m feeling just a little “mansplained” here.

So, I’d just like to note that 1) I hold a PHD in the field and I have a pretty noteworthy academic appointment.

Also, 2) I asked for examples—that doesn’t mean I’ve broken any sort of ideological code around our assessment norms.

I’d sure like to have taken all of your classes when I was still a grad student and new to our field, but since I’m just crossing off an item on my long to do list so that I can have a conversation that includes everyone at our current assessment table (including those who don’t share out values), I’ll say that it’s exactly this sort of behavior that keeps many of us from ever posting to this list. . . there’s no

actual conversation starter here and no benefit of the doubt. Your responses suggest that I don't know what I'm doing and. . . frankly, it's insulting.

Apologies if this makes me come off as—well, any of the things women who “talk back” are accused of. (And see, look at that—I'm apologizing for setting a boundary, if that's not gendered communication. . .) I really do appreciate each of your voices (at the right time) and pretty major contributions to the field, but, I'm done with the pile on.

For now, I thank everyone who sent examples my way and encourage others to send more, should you have them.

Good night,

-M

Through the responses that followed LaFrance's “breaking point” post, I will demonstrate how this accusation of mansplaining brought about new ways of demonstrating one's ethos and gaining rhetorical agency within the digital space of the WPA-L, particularly for graduate students, contingent faculty, and women listserv subscribers who did not regularly contribute to the conversations. In addition to disrupting listserv conventions, these responses also serve to highlight social issues within the listserv such as the unequal distribution of institutional power and privilege afforded to members of the community. This thread undoubtedly had lasting repercussions on the prior unspoken “rules” of who could engage with or initiate responses on the listserv, as these types of ruptures continued to occur until the listserv's dissolution in early 2021.

Method

In this chapter, I will examine the aforementioned thread from the WPA-L using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in order to understand existing power dynamics within the listserv and how the accusation of mansplaining disrupted these dynamics.

Teun van Dijk, one of the founding scholars of CDA in the 1990s, defines CDA as “a – critical – perspective on doing scholarship: it is, so to speak, discourse analysis ‘with an attitude’. It focuses on social problems, and especially on the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination.” As one of the principles of CDA outlined by Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak (1997), CDA addresses social problems which involve an examination of the discourse—both implicit and explicit—in addition to the social and cultural processes that surround it. Wodak’s work in particular has critically investigated gender issues within discourse, such as the analysis put forth in this chapter. Finally, CDA is problem-oriented, acknowledging that discourse is a form of social action (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997) and proposing possible strategies for reform.

In order to discursively map the occurrence of this rupture within the WPA-L, I apply the following framework to the timeline of events: 1) a catalyzing event that prompts the dialogue, 2) a post that acts as the breaking point that sparks the controversy, 3) the dialogue that follows, and then 4) the larger impacts of the event within the discourse community and the field at large. As outlined in the introduction, Michelle LaFrance’s post “Rubrics to Assess Writing Assignments” and the responses that followed from men list subscribers represent the event that prompted the larger dialogue. LaFrance’s reply to the men with an accusation of mansplaining serves as the breaking point post that sparked the controversy. The dialogue regarding this rupture was not limited to the listserv itself, as conversations quickly spilled over into other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Finally, the impact of this rupture on the WPA-L is evident through the displays of disrupted power dynamics that occurred (and continued to occur) within the wake of the mansplaining accusation. These disruptions will be

categorized and explored in the following sections. It is also worth noting that a number of similar controversies continued to occur within the WPA-L until its abandonment in the spring of 2021. The rebranding of the listserv itself is another example of the impact of the rupture, as the newly formed WritingStudies-L is heavily moderated with no space for open discussion.

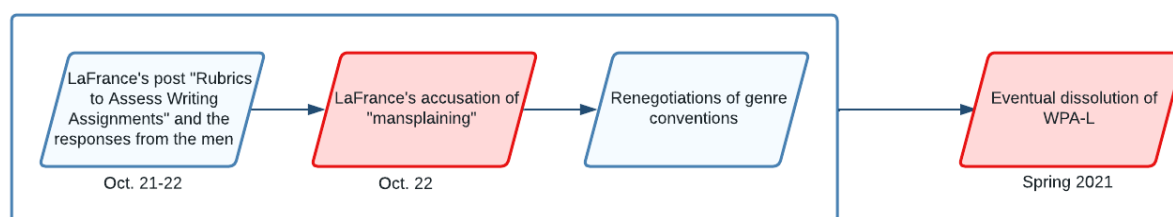


Figure IV: Stages of WPA-L rupture

As a scholar practicing CDA, I am interested in examining the *discourse* that occurred within this particular listserv thread, as opposed to the individual *persons* involved in the exchange. However, as someone conducting research on digital writing, I'm aware of the ethical concerns and privacy issues that are involved with such work. Informing my research of the WPA-L is the heuristic provided by Amber Buck and Devon Ralston (2021) in regard to ethical use of public data. In an effort to focus more on the discourse within this thread and less on the identities of the interlocutors, I use pseudonyms instead of real names to protect those involved in this conversation—although the WPA-L archive is openly accessible by the public, and list subscribers' full names and institutional affiliations are often visible within the archive. As a member of the discourse community that I am researching, the goal of my work is not to target individuals for critique but to shed light on the discursive strategies that resulted from an accusation of mansplaining within the list. Similarly, the results of my research are

intended for members within that same community, as a tool for understanding how this rupture occurred as well as how we might productively move forward from its aftermath together.

The only participant who I do not use a pseudonym for is Michelle LaFrance, whose initial accusation of mansplaining brought about the critical conversation that is the focus of this study. LaFrance has written about her role in this conversation publicly in her article “Failure to Wake?” featured in the *Failure Pedagogies* collection; therefore, I chose to use LaFrance’s real name as she has openly discussed this event with the academic community. I acknowledge and admire her bravery for speaking out.

Results

After examining this thread using CDA, several important themes began to emerge within the dialogue, such as expressions of solidarity and gratitude toward LaFrance for calling out an injustice that is common to many women in the workforce. However, for the purpose of this chapter, I chose to focus my attention solely on responses to the original rupture that broke prior listserv conventions and the subsequent imbalances of institutional power and privilege within this discourse community that these responses indicate. Specifically, I identify the following three trends within this list thread that all focus on breaches of consent of unspoken rules regarding who is allowed to post within the listserv: 1) expressions of vulnerability and first-time posting from graduate students, 2) expressions of anger from faculty and subsequent backlash, and 3) attempts at tone policing, redirection, or silencing. In summary, my analysis indicates an overarching issue of repression of certain voices and certain behaviors within this prominent digital discourse community in our field.

Expressions of Vulnerability and First-Time Posting from Graduate Students

After several senior faculty members had spoken out against the prevalence of mansplaining within the list and responded to LaFrance's post with shows of gratitude and solidarity, graduate students felt emboldened to add their voices to the conversation. Despite their expressions of vulnerability as new members of the disciplinary community, and even some admissions of first time posting to the list, women graduate students played a vital role in continuing this critical conversation on issues of sexism and misogyny within the listserv. Using CDA to examine key posts from graduate students demonstrates how these list members broke the prior unspoken "rules" of this discourse community regarding who could engage with or initiate responses in the list, as they clearly felt they did not have the agency to do so prior to this rupture.

It is important to note that these unspoken guidelines for posting were not only felt by a few members of the community. Several members spoke out, one a faculty member who expressed regret that she had told graduate students not to post on the list because that was the advice she received when she was a graduate student herself. This member also noted being mansplained to after posting innocuous posts such as CFPs or job ads. Through the conversation that ensued, it became clear that these new voices on the list would likely have remained silent if the accusation of mansplaining from LaFrance had never occurred. To demonstrate this trend of lurkers becoming active participants in the list, I have selected the following posts from women graduate students to highlight.

The first highlighted post comes from Brittany, who interestingly did not identify her positionality until a later post. In response to a man subscriber who asked for a

definition of mansplaining, Brittany interjected to explain. She provided an explanation of the term, but she also offered up her own experiences of being mansplained to and a general summary of how it makes women feel as recipients. Below is an excerpt from Brittany's post:

Women are "mansplained" to every day of our lives. Men often assume that they know more than us even when we are experts in our fields, and that is frustrating. Many of the women on this listserv have incredible academic and professional backgrounds, but they are not taken seriously because they are women. To be frank, that sucks. What sucks even more is that when we speak up about it, we are belittled, told we're imagining it or told we're being too sensitive. On top of that, people start questioning us even more and talk about us to others. It's an all around horrible circle ...

The number of women voicing their support of Michelle's response, should tell everyone on this listserv how important taking that moment to stop and think is and how important it is to take female academics seriously.

As a graduate student, Brittany made a bold decision to respond directly to a man subscriber's inquiry. As noted throughout this thread, several women expressed a hesitancy to post, or even a refusal to post, due to the prevalence of mansplaining within the list and the fear of having their scholarly credentials questioned. By responding, Brittany willingly opened herself up to the possibility of being scrutinized or rebuked by other subscribers, particularly those of higher academic rank. As she later admitted, Brittany intentionally did not admit to her positionality for fear that it would negatively impact the reception of her post: "When I made my first post in this thread, which was coincidentally my first post in this listserv, I made the conscious decision to not note that I am a grad student, particularly a female grad student because I felt I would not be taken very seriously on this thread if I did announce this." The fact that Brittany felt compelled to share her positionality is further indicative of how this conversation worked to change

the unspoken rules for posting within this discourse community. By detailing the gender discrimination that many women encounter, Brittany's post exhibited an acute vulnerability by identifying herself as a member of this community. LaFrance's original accusation laid the groundwork for other expressions of vulnerability like Brittany's to follow—particularly from subscribers who identified as not having the courage to speak up until now.

This trend of vulnerability expressed by graduate students is also demonstrated in Francesca's post—the first self-identified graduate student to contribute to the conversation. Francesca directed her post to one of the original three men accused of mansplaining to LaFrance. Although Francesca expressed an initial hesitancy to get involved in the conversation, she posted to the thread a total of six times, more than any other graduate student in this thread. Francesca began her initial post by calling out Brian's privilege as she found it demonstrated in his responses:

Very respectfully, Brian, I would like to call attention to the privilege you hold in being able to call this discussion of mansplaining "off the rails" and a "downward spiral of conversation." To be clear: your privilege lies in being a man and not having experienced mansplaining in the same ways Michelle and others have, and of not having experienced what it feels like to read women (and men) calling it out and taking a stance against something that you've negatively experienced in your professional life ...

Whether from an attempt to soften the blow that she was about to deliver or from a position of precarity within academic ranks, Francesca preceded her critique of Brian with a qualifying phrase that made known her intentions. However, Francesca's post was certainly bold in addressing what she described as Brian's privileged position in the conversation as never having been the recipient of this type of gender discrimination directed against women. Francesca's post highlighted a key component of feminist

standpoint theory that contends that knowledge is socially situated and that members of historically underrepresented communities (such as women and people of color) have access to knowledge that is not accessible to members outside of the community who hold certain amounts of privilege and authority (Naples and Gurr).

Francesca also addressed Brian's attempt to halt the conversation on mansplaining and gender discrimination—a trend that will be explored in a subsequent section of this chapter. Periodically throughout the conversation, various other members called for the conversation to end or to be moved elsewhere (for reasons of comfortability, safety, decorum, etc.), and each time advocates such as Francesca spoke out against squashing these types of critical conversations about gender discrimination simply because some members felt uncomfortable or under attack. Brian and other proponents of calling off the discussion did not seem to understand the irony in that women on the list had also been made to feel uncomfortable or disrespected in the past due to mansplaining and continuously being silenced or overlooked.

To further demonstrate her vulnerability, Francesca went on to discuss the collective experience of women in academia in relation to mansplaining, echoing the sentiments already expressed by Brittany and other women list subscribers. It was not until the middle of her post that Francesca admitted to her positionality as a graduate student, paving the way for others to disclose their positionalities in subsequent posts. She wrote:

... I almost didn't write this and will likely be regretting it because, beyond being a woman, I am also a graduate student. I face certain rhetorical nuances and vulnerability here. I don't have my PhD yet; I don't have that much experience with assessment and rubrics. I feel out of my league in so many ways here.

But as a woman in academia, I have direct experience with mansplaining, and I've had enough rhetorical training to follow along and be disappointed in some of these replies. And I feel strongly enough about it to write here ...

Several participants expressed the possibility of regret regarding posting to this thread, including faculty. However, clearly for many, the possibility of regret outweighed the consequences of not contributing to this critical conversation.

The next highlighted post comes from Rachel. Her post, which contained an admission that she is a first-time poster, represented the collective experience of many women graduate students regarding the culture of the WPA-L. An excerpt of her post read:

As someone who's been on this list for nine years but has never posted ... I can only speak for myself, but: I know a number of grad students on this list who do not post because we don't want our expertise and professionalism scrutinized and questioned--and the majority of those grad students are women ... It's safer to read and lurk than invite a certain kind of patterned response.

Within her post, Rachel spoke to her vulnerable position within this community as well as the WPA-L's repressive nature toward certain voices and groups. The first line excerpted here is an admission of lurking, or reading posts made on the listserv but never actually contributing to the conversations because as she claimed, "it's safer to read and lurk." By breaking this behavioral pattern and posting to the WPA-L, Rachel demonstrated the ability to overcome her fear of being scrutinized by other professionals in the field, and she also opened herself up to become a victim of the "kind of patterned response" that so many list subscribers have spoken out against in this thread. However, Rachel's post also offered commentary on the culture that has been cultivated within the community by alluding to its lack of safety for women and graduate students. The fact

that certain list subscribers do not feel protected from harm or risk within its confines is certainly problematic.

In addition to expressing their vulnerabilities and positionalities as graduate students, these women also played an important role in keeping this critical conversation going. After one subscriber suggested that posters “answer the [original] question” or “start a new thread” in order for the list to move forward (notably following posts from graduate students Francesca and Rachel although it was seemingly a direct response to neither of these), Francesca once again spoke up to use this moment to validate her voice—making her list debut by speaking back to another subscriber.

Again, respectfully here, because I just think it's important to say: it's also posts like this (suggesting people move on) written directly after two people--two graduate students, no less--express their vulnerabilities and insecurities about posting that make us feel less welcome to contribute. This makes us think, "oh, gosh; we shouldn't have posted. We shouldn't have followed other scholars' leads and continued an important conversation. We do not belong here. We must not know how it works. Shame on us. Let's retreat." Timing matters, but unfortunately, some of us come to the conversation late because we fight so hard to garner the courage to participate.

But does our input still matter? Can we still have a seat at the table?

Francesca’s post served to poignantly highlight exactly why graduate students in the past—particularly women graduate students—had been reluctant to add their voices to list conversations. However, this time, the previous power dynamics that would have prevented Francesca from posting or caused her to retreat in shame or silence from speaking out and being rebuked had been ignored. Other graduate students would follow the examples put forth by Francesca, Brittany, and Rachel by adding their voices to the conversation and simultaneously expressing the vulnerabilities associated with their professional identities.

Expressions of Anger from Faculty and Resulting Backlash

While graduate students were often praised for their bravery, other senior faculty members who spoke out on this list—either in agreement with or opposition to the unfolding conversation on mansplaining and sexism—were not always extended the same amount of grace. After a string of disagreements on the nature of the treatment of one of the “mansplainers” who continued to post to the thread (sparked in part by a parody of his post by a woman faculty member), the conversation heated up to include a discussion on the uses of anger as a rhetorical strategy. Although a few list subscribers expressed displeasure toward the “personal attacks” against this poster, other subscribers noted that the critiques being offered were not meant as individual critiques but as overall criticisms of the prevalence of mansplaining within the discourse community. To highlight this trend, I selected the following posts from faculty members who either mentioned anger within their posts or who called out the use of anger as an effective or ineffective communicative strategy. This discussion of anger is enveloped within a larger discussion on the nature of open forums and repression regarding women speaking out against gender discrimination and oppressive structures.

First, I offer the following post from associate professor Alice which was written in response to a woman graduate student who noted the disrespectful tone she was witnessing in some of the responses. This post from Alice laid the groundwork for the discussion on the uses of anger of which I will analyze subsequently. Alice, who previously called for list subscribers to “stop further attacks [against Brian] in the name of ‘solidarity,’” again addressed the manner in which Brian was being treated within the conversation. Although her post was written directly to the graduate student previously

mentioned, Alice clearly addressed the entirety of the listserv within her post. Using bold and all caps to highlight key thoughts, Alice wrote:

A few of my thoughts to hopefully add another perspective to those you have witnessed. We know that oppression has long been a problem, and it continues to be—everywhere, all the time. Paulo Freire taught that you cannot escape oppression by turning into the oppressor; doing so only serves to further the oppression machine. The simple but profound message is this: do not attempt to alleviate the offense by replicating the behavior that offends you.

Those of us who are offended by the rhetorical power of someone else's language should not fight fire with fire. You are correct: the tone was not respectful. As someone nearing retirement, I can tell you that I have a lifetime of horror stories about what we now term "mansplaining." But as an educator, I also know damn well that you cannot treat what you find as ignorance with an explosive response that—even unwittingly—replicates the damage, at least not as a first attempt to communicate. I suspect the responses that [Brian] got were greatly unexpected—okay—but we all know what an unexpected blow of anger feels like, and I don't think it as instructive as we would like to believe. **Of course we would never respond to our students that way, so why should we respond to each other that way?**

Another lesson I may offer: when you witness what you believe is inappropriate behavior, **speak up in a timely fashion**. There are ways to do this. Please learn now, while you are young, to do this. It is not helpful to anyone, including yourself, to allow yourself to be a silent victim, letting what very well have been a misunderstanding eat away at you until you explode. **It just does not make sense**. Don't sit quietly doing nothing and hoping ANYTHING will get better on its own, and don't just abandon a space that you have right to occupy because offensive behavior was at play but you said and did nothing. Abandon only after you have done your best. Work NOW to find ways to express yourself that work for you. It is far more effective to claim and maintain your personal sense of power consistently that way.

And, be cautious about telling someone else that they don't know what risk means because they aren't sharing your particular experience; NOBODY enjoys being generalized. Pain is pain, regardless of how it happens. Pain is indeed personal. ANYONE who gets blindsided by a lashing has a right to feel at risk. TRUE solidarity means that we walk together and learn about what makes us alike instead of fighting against each other over our differences.

If you endeavor to "be the change," I hope you do it intelligently and thoughtfully.

Within this post, two key themes emerge that guided the list's following responses. First, as scholars and educators, we cannot "fight fire with fire" by engaging in the same types of rhetorical strategies used against us, even if we are offended by something or someone, because according to Alice it "replicates the damage" caused by the original offense. As she noted, anger is not "as instructive as we would like to believe," and it is certainly not a strategy that we would use in interacting with students. Second, and this point is ancillary to the discussion of anger as a rhetorical strategy but still relevant because it deals with our interactions with one another, we must speak out against injustices *in the moment* instead of letting the pain and anger build up inside of us until it no longer has a productive outlet for expression.⁹

Several of the responses immediately following Alice's post delved into the effectiveness of anger as a rhetorical strategy, which spoke to the community's problem at hand of who is allowed to contribute to list conversations and who is forced to instead "stay silent and angry" (as noted by a woman subscriber in an earlier post). It is clear that many list subscribers felt that Alice's post was an attempt at diminishing the voices who had spoken up against mansplaining and that anger *is* an appropriate response to the types of gender discrimination felt within this community. For example, as one woman associate professor noted, "Sometimes anger is righteous," to which Alice was quick to point out that there is a difference between righteous *anger* and righteous *indignation*. Her post would be followed by others that remarked on the uses of anger as a rhetorical

⁹ It is worth mentioning that not all list subscribers are interacting with the conversation synchronously. Some might be following the conversation in real time, but many others are checking their emails only periodically, engaging with emails in digest form rather than being alerted of an individual post, or otherwise experiencing the conversation in an asynchronous manner. Thus, reacting "in the moment" is not always possible here.

strategy utilized by historically minoritized groups.¹⁰ The following excerpt from one of these posts demonstrated this insight:

On the subject of anger, expressions of anger, and the uses of anger, there is much to be said--such as the histories of how women, people of color, queer people and others have used their anger about systemic oppression (and personal experiences of same) to incite change; the culturally patterned ways in which women, people of color, queer people and others have also been taught to suppress their/our anger, to hide it, to not let it seep out; the ways in which we have been shamed and chided for expressing anger or for expressing it at the wrong time, in the wrong context, or in the wrong ways (e.g., any way that challenges the status quo); and more--what I'll say briefly here is that we, as people who study language, writing, and rhetoric, should be careful and thoughtful about telling others how, why, when, and where to express their anger.

Others would speak to this idea, pointing out how questioning anger serves to devalue the voices that spoke up against discrimination within this listserv thread and beyond. And still others questioned the rhetorical effectiveness of anger, especially when it is practiced without empathy (as noted previously by Alice) or when it is overused or abused by the same person or group. One man list subscriber, for instance, argued, "The use of anger is always a power move no matter who is using it. I would argue that it is best used sparingly because the more it is used[,] less impact it has and the more likely it gets used inappropriately" warning that the "regular use" of anger "would [not] not lead to productive conversations."

But, importantly, some didn't view the conversation as invoking anger at all. In response to a participant describing the current happening on the list as "crowds shouting for more anger," a woman professor with a notable record in our field countered this position. Instead of anger or "agonistic modes of communication" and the like, this list

¹⁰ One subscriber suggested that everyone revisit Audre Lorde's "The Uses of Anger," for instance.

subscriber claimed she had witnessed “people who face systemic discrimination (in this case, women, but in earlier threads, people of color) share that actions/behaviors/responses are problematic, hurtful, exclusionary, and so on.” Her post, excerpted below, exemplifies how women—and consequently other historically underrepresented groups—who are assertive or speak up for themselves are often coded as angry or overreacting. The excerpt began with the subscriber’s observations of how women voicing their displeasure in the list have been responded to over the course of the conversation:

And the responses to stating this out loud have included

- 1) telling us we are too angry/sharing our anger too much/not using our anger at appropriate times
- 2) telling us we are not clearly defining the problem and could we please spend our time providing more details on something that is well-documented
- 3) telling us we are not being respectful of those who have engaged in the behavior, and don't show enough concern for their feelings
- 4) moving the attention to the people (in this case men, but in earlier cases white people) who engaged in the problematic behavior and their feelings, and making the subject of attention those feelings, instead of the initial problematic behavior.

And the women telling other women that they are too angry and not being nice enough or respectful enough of men's feelings is a particularly difficult strand of the above.

All of us with privilege do things at times that are problematic and we need to hear about it. It's not easy to hear that what we have done with perhaps the best of intentions is harmful or shortsighted or exclusionary or enacting particular norms and values that perpetuate systemic oppression. But we need to hear it ...

The difficulty is that those who face systemic discrimination have no good options for sharing concerns about particular instances of discriminatory or oppressive behaviors, whether they be larger or small. In the case of women, we can't be too loud about it, too upset about it, or too softspoken about it; we can't be funny about it but we also can't not take a joke; we can't talk too much, but if we say too little we aren't clear.

Whatever rhetorical methods we use, there will always be a criticism of them. Why? Because the problem is not that things would be fine if only we had done a better job **explaining** what systematic oppression and discrimination are. The problem is systematic oppression and discrimination. And the rules of the game in this system will ensure that those who have power and privilege keep it, and those who don't will always fall short when they try to change things. But we have to keep trying, because that's the only option.

In addition to addressing how women in the list had been wrongly rebuked for simply speaking out against the prevalence of mansplaining, this post also spoke to the idea of how oppressive structures are maintained—a theme that emerged within one of Alice's earlier posts in which she stated, "You cannot escape oppression by turning into the oppressor." This post directly engaged with Alice's previous statements by calling out her and others for being complicit in maintaining the system that serves to keep women's voices silenced. This post also called attention to a catch-22 dilemma that women often face in the workplace in which they are either criticized as being too aggressive for speaking up or as too passive if they do not voice their opinions ("Women Face Backlash"). Accentuating the privilege that certain members of the list hold and the inability of said members to perceive how their words and actions are interpreted by historically underrepresented groups were also recurrent themes within this conversation.

Attempts at Tone Policing, Redirection, or Silencing

While many list subscribers praised LaFrance and others for calling out gender discrimination within the list and academia more generally, not all found the conversation to be productive—some women subscribers included. I have categorized the responses in this section into three classifications, although some responses exhibit features of all three: tone policing, redirecting, and silencing. The observations within this section illustrate how list subscribers attempted to maintain a sense of status quo through

responses that expressed displeasure regarding the current rupture and changes to the listserv's unspoken rules of engagement.

As previously noted, many women in the conversation called out the critiques of their responses as a form of tone policing meant to suppress their anger toward the gender discrimination so prevalent within the list—a tactic described by many as a way of maintaining these types of oppressive behaviors and policies. However, still others brought up the impediments that disrespectful and hurtful words can have toward open forums where true dialogic interactions are the goal. One graduate student, for example, expressed her discomfort in the following post:

At great risk, this female graduate student would like to offer a very short comment.

I appreciated Michelle's post. However, some of the subsequent comments make me uncomfortable. The tone doesn't always sound respectful to me. I'm not afraid to post here, but if I start thinking people might respond to me the way they have to Brian, I will change my mind.

While this post demonstrated an expression of vulnerability from a graduate student, it also spoke to who is welcome to contribute to the conversations within the listserv—but this time from a different angle. This graduate student felt compelled to add her contribution to the conversation (even admitting the “risk” that such an action imposed on her), but she also felt empowered to address a concern that she noticed within some of the other subscribers' responses. She admitted that the disrespectful nature of some of the posts could prevent her from posting in the future, which is ironic given that so many graduate students' posts that expressed their hesitancy to contribute to the WPA-L were met with an overwhelmingly positive response from list subscribers.

While the aforementioned post from a graduate student regarding the tone of the conversation was not met with a harsh reception, similar calls for civility by faculty were not as well received. The post from Alice reproduced previously was an example of a critique of the conversation's tone that resulted in a heated exchange, particularly between Alice and another woman professor. It is clear throughout the conversation that there was an awareness of the poster's positionality that guided subsequent responses to the post, as some subscribers' unpopular opinions were not met with the same level of pushback as others.

In addition to tone policing, some subscribers attempted to redirect the focus of the conversation. Shortly after the conversation regarding the rhetorical uses of anger had begun, Brian suggested that, although the resulting anger from his original post needed to be recognized, perhaps it should be "turned toward assessment practices with a focus on how these practices affect our students." Although Brian seemingly tried to offer an out for those "who have said they have been emotionally exhausted by this conversation" and attempted to remove the spotlight from his previous transgression, his post was perceived as insensitive to many subscribers and indicative of larger concerns regarding the silencing of women's voices. In response to Brian, one woman subscriber wrote:

A lot of us are interested in why women feel silenced or hesitant or ignored, when we bring up issues that matter. A lot of us wonder why a simple request for sample assessment rubrics results in long explanations about why we aren't doing things "the right way" where assumptions are laid out about our methods and motives without actually asking any questions about the rationale for our requests.

A lot of us get that structural inequities are exemplified in the responses we get when we make requests - or - speak out on this listserv. This is not to say that discussions about assessment and data don't matter. This is to say that this thread is about something else. Something important. I ask that we keep that in mind.

Brian's attempt to redirect the conversation to assessment practices was unsuccessful, as many list subscribers agreed with the sentiments expressed in the above post. To illustrate, a graduate student followed up with the statement, "Asking for a re-direction of the 'anger' in this particular thread would circumvent the entire point of it." Given the persistence by so many to continue the conversation, women of the WPA-L had clearly grown tired of being silenced.

One man subscriber even called for the listserv to be shut down immediately, citing the terror it had caused women subscribers. However, this post was quickly followed by a flurry of voices reiterating the need for such critical conversations to occur. As one woman subscriber quipped in response, "If so, see also: Earth. This thread is a microcosm of society. None of this is new to women. This is the status in quo, this is ubiquitous, this is presented as natural, normative, and inevitable. What *is* new, is that many women are refusing to keep their silence, refusing to keep their secrets, refusing to sit down and shut up and pretend that misogyny and sexism don't exist, or that if they exist they're not that bad." Another woman subscriber echoed this same sentiment in a following post: "Shut the listserv down? Why the hell should we do that when so many (new) voices are chiming in now?" It was evident that to most women on the list, the risk of feeling uncomfortable or making others feel uncomfortable did not outweigh the benefits of actually having the conversation.

Discussion

The original 162-response post also sparked subsequent threads in the WPA-L during October 2018—"A request to all list members," "An Open Letter from a Grad Student," "What we do next [Emerging from "A request to all list members"]," and "How

to listen on a listserv without being ‘invisible’”—as well as conversations that extended to Facebook and Twitter. Within these conversations, more and more lurkers found the courage to let their voices be heard, no longer remaining passive listeners in important scholarly conversations. What was initially an unpleasant exchange resulted in an opportunity for contingent members of this particular online community to carve out their own rhetorical agency within the list and for *some*¹¹ women to have a space to speak out against mansplaining and other forms of gender discrimination. This conversation allowed women of the listserv to call attention to systemic oppression that results from discursive practices, such as attempts at tone policing or criticisms against expression of anger, that serve to keep them silenced or underrepresented. In the following, I will discuss the lasting repercussions this rupture had on the WPA-L and Rhetoric and Writing Studies more broadly, as well as what knowledge the field can glean from its occurrence in the hope of moving forward together.

Larger Impacts of the Event on the Listserv and the Field

The rupture that occurred within the WPA-L in October 2018 had a lasting effect on the culture of this listserv community, undoubtedly playing a role in its eventual dissolution. As a result of this rupture, the prior unspoken “rules” of who could contribute to conversations within the list had clearly been challenged, as voices who had previously been hesitant to post no longer felt the need to remain silent. These new conventions of the listserv were demonstrated through the fact that similar ruptures kept occurring, with subsequent ruptures becoming increasingly more heated and focusing on other social

¹¹ I will explore this idea in a subsequent section.

issues such as racial inequality. As Zachary Beare noted shortly before the WPA-L's shutdown in 2021, "many had been questioning the usefulness of the platform and some had already suggested dissolving it entirely, arguing the hostility, racism, and sexism exhibited on the listserv left it unredeemable." A rupture that occurred in June 2020, for example, resulted in a larger discussion about systemic racism and the acute need for anti-racist pedagogical practices.

While the 2018 rupture did result in new ways of demonstrating identity and gaining rhetorical agency for *some* list subscribers, this same opportunity was not afforded to all. As one subscriber noted in a subsequent thread titled "Silenced vs. Heard Voices in Academia," historically minoritized women academics do not hold the same level of institutional power as their white counterparts.¹² The creator of this thread, a scholar who self-identified as having a "complicated identity," wrote, "I would be mortified to say what the original post said because I don't have that kind of institutional or disciplinary power or privilege as do many of my female colleagues who aren't minority women. I would fear not being hired or published somewhere in the future for being the angry female minority voice." She went on to say that "it has consistently been my male professors, and my international fellow graduate students who listened without judgment and supported my efforts to develop a voice and be heard more often than my white female colleagues. So I am frustrated at the power and privilege I hear in this conversation." This critique of modern feminism from this scholar is a common one, as many cite how fourth-wave feminism in the U.S. is dominated by the voices and lived

¹² Read about this poster's experiences working as a minoritized woman in academia in "Discovering Our Mothers' Gardens: Cultivating Diverse Resources for The Emergence of a New Paradigm In Higher Education" in vol. 50, no. 1 of *Urban Review*.

experiences of progressive middle-class white women, excluding the voices of historically minoritized individuals that the movement purports to protect. Modern feminism has also been critiqued for excluding conservative women and other groups who hold more traditional values such as stay-at-home moms, and as this poster's response observes, it is due time we make the movement inclusive of *all* women's unique subjectivities, backgrounds, and lived experiences.¹³

One of the most significant impacts the accumulating ruptures in the WPA-L had on the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies, however, was the creation of the listserv nextGEN. In response to the "toxic culture" many felt inherent within the WPA-L, a team of graduate students and one faculty member created the nextGEN listserv in April 2018 to offer a safe disciplinary space for graduate students in the field who did not feel welcome on the WPA-L.¹⁴ As defined in a recent "Where We Are" article in *Composition Studies*, nextGEN is "a networked advocacy space for graduate students and those who actively support graduate students to build a social justice-oriented community" (205). This listserv has grown in popularity and has carved a distinctive position within the discipline, but perhaps its most notable contribution was urging the WPA-L Reimagining Work Group to consider creating participation guidelines for the new iteration of the WPA-L (WritingStudies-L does in fact have such guidelines).

¹³ The subject matter of feminist rhetorical scholarship is limited as well. As Lynne Lewis Gaillet posits, "I think feminist studies often omit female subjects who don't fit a certain mold. The scope of feminist/women's studies ought to be more inclusive" ("Afterwords" 285).

¹⁴ After a heated debate on the WPA-L in March 2018 in which graduate students challenged white language supremacy, the nextGEN Start Up Team was formed to create the listserv, whose launch was announced in April ("Where We Are").

Moving Forward

As graduate student Francesca argued in one of her posts, “We should think carefully about how to listen and be respectful to our colleagues, which includes listening and being respectful when people share that they feel angry or undervalued or ignored or vulnerable and when you personally may not have experienced it/understand why they feel that way.” This statement regarding the rupture within the WPA-L demonstrates the importance of practicing rhetorical listening within our everyday conversations—not just studying its theoretical implications within the confines of our classrooms or suggesting it as a practical discursive strategy only relevant for communities outside of our own. Defined by Krista Ratcliffe in her influential work, *rhetorical listening* “signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture,” particularly those of different cultural groups or identifications (1). She additionally posits that “any definition of listening” should account for how “power differentials of particular standpoints and cultural logics influence our ability to listen” (3). If members of the WPA-L had been practicing such conceptions of listening prior to and during the rupture, perhaps some of the resulting damage could have been mitigated. The rupture was a direct result of a woman not being listened to, and even as various women list members spoke out against this shared problem, certain members—notably men from various positions of institutional power within the community—continued to demonstrate an inability or unwillingness to listen to the voices of those historically underrepresented.

In her discussion of rhetorical listening, Ratcliffe also promotes *eavesdropping* as an additional strategy for relating to others. As such, eavesdropping should be conceived

“not as a gendered busy-bodiness but as a rhetorical tactic of purposely positioning oneself on the edge of one’s own knowing so as to overhear and learn from others and ... oneself” (105). This rupture within the WPA-L illustrated the importance of more men list subscribers becoming purposeful eavesdroppers of this conversation in order to learn from those whose experiences as women they can never fully understand—essentially reversing the roles of lurkers versus active interlocutors. However, a few men did identify the importance of listening to and learning from women within this thread, which is a step toward achieving Ratcliffe’s definition of rhetorical listening. The following post from a man subscriber, for instance, acknowledges the gendered power dynamics at play within our scholarly discourses and validates the voices of the women who have spoken out against such injustices:

I just felt the need to validate [redacted] and others to let them know that I, for one, want to hear these kinds of condemnations of sexism here or anywhere else. This cannot be an open forum if it is not open to passionate condemnations of the inequities that still serve to silence women. We [men] have to own our participation in systemic inequality intentional or not, and sometimes we can't do it till we recognize the justified anger of those harmed by it.

Thank you.

If others had followed the above example instead of continuing insensitive remarks or refusing to acknowledge the feelings and experiences of others within the discourse community, then perhaps the “kerfuffle” would not have escalated to the point of irreparable damage.

While one of the goals of the nextGEN listserv was to offer a welcoming alternative to the WPA-L aligned with the ideals put forth in Ratcliffe’s conception of rhetorical listening, and the question of whether to reform our communities or simply create new ones remains, it is only a matter of time before the next rupture within our

discipline occurs. Thus, it is imperative that we continue to critically investigate the power dynamics within our disciplinary platforms in order to understand whose voices are and are not being heard.

Chapter 3: “Y’all Treating Power as Static”: Creating a Disciplinary Space for Graduate Students



Jennifer Nish
@jennifernish



Once again, @nextGEN_RC is showing #TeamRhetoric how to respond to injustice. Thanks to all who contributed to this statement.



nextGEN @nextGEN_RC · Jul 8, 2020

The nextGEN community is calling for #TeamRhetoric and others to join us once again in advocating against atrocities faced by international students:

"Advocacy Call to Challenge Institutionalized Xenophobia Against International Students"

#StudentBan

docs.google.com/document/d/1GC...

[Show this thread](#)

Figure V: A ReTweet highlighting the impact nextGEN has had on the larger rhetoric and composition community.

Introduction

The rupture initiated by Michelle LaFrance’s accusation of mansplaining was not the first of its kind to take place within the digital space of the Writing Program Administration listserv (WPA-L). In March 2018, several conversation threads running concurrently within the list addressed the topic of white language supremacy—prompted by the release of Vershawn Ashanti Young’s CFP for the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in which the program chair codemeshed throughout. With the annual CCCC convention as its exigence, the conversation that ensued brought about a critical, and at times heated, discussion on the uses of dialects other than Standard American English (SAE) and codemeshing in academic and

professional settings. It is this rupture that occurred predominantly on March 23, 2018, that prompted some graduate students on the list to abandon the WPA-L in order to create their own disciplinary space aptly titled nextGEN. As defined by the listserv's startup members, nextGEN functions as "a networked advocacy space for graduate students and those who actively support graduate students to build a social justice-oriented community" ("Where We Are" 205).

The creation of nextGEN is just one of many outcomes produced as the result of a string of rupturing events that occurred within the WPA-L. Assessed cumulatively, these events illustrate structural inequities within the digital environment of the WPA-L that work to exclude members in precarious positions of institutional power, such as graduate students and non-tenure track faculty, from participation. Thus in this chapter, I use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the listserv policies created by the nextGEN startup members, as well as the participation guidelines created by the WPA-L in response to the self-acknowledged "hostile and combative environment" of its own space ("Where We Are" 204). In addition to these rules of engagement created by each community, I also apply CDA to the "Listserv to Listserv" response from nextGEN posted to the WPA-L in November 2018, which the WPA-L Reimagining Work Group cited as using in the development of their own community policies. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications that the creation of nextGEN and the controversial events on the WPA-L had on the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies, such as the eventual abandonment of the WPA-L in favor of the heavily moderated WritingStudies-L. The need for nextGEN's existence and participation guidelines for

other disciplinary spaces demonstrates the lack of inclusionary practices in our digital communities.

Events Prompting the Dialogue

Immediately following the 2018 CCCC convention, a list subscriber posted to the WPA-L under the following subject line: “2019 CCCC CFP: Is this the first CFP for a major/‘flagship’ conference to use AAVE extensively?”. The first response to the posed inquiry was from a self-identified black male scholar who expressed his displeasure at Vershawn Ashanti Young’s use of codemeshing in the call. He wrote:

I am not aware of AAVE being used in a call. What's more, I am not very happy about it. I presented at C's on the inefficacy of code-meshing as a pedagogy and its utter negligence of *kairos*. What's more, as a black man, I find the use of code-meshing in the conference a bit gimmicky, cosmetic (as opposed to semantically or rhetorically relevant), and a little offensive. I appreciate code-meshed language in interpersonal communication and as a kind of genre, but the whole code-meshing movement is beginning to feel contrived. The term "blaxploitation" comes to mind. These are just some of my issues with code-meshing.

I am seriously considering skipping the conference next year. If I do attend, I won't be quiet about this.

The above post initially sparked a lively, civil discourse on linguistic diversity and racism and the role of nonstandard dialects of English in the classroom and beyond.¹⁵

Subsequent threads on this topic would follow, with the conversation central to this chapter occurring on March 23 under the thread titled “2019 Call for Proposals” (see the threads “Accents are a form of performance” and “Aren’t Most on the List ‘Working Class’ Background?” as well).

¹⁵ One poster even remarked, “hurrah for reasonable, measured conversation about this topic, even though it’s made a lot of us productively (IMO) uncomfortable” which would soon become ironic.

Breaking Point Text

On March 23, Kyle Larson, a self-identified PhD student and future founder of nextGEN, posted under the “2019 Call for Proposals” thread—the first graduate student to add critical commentary to the conversation. Larson wrote:

Hi Everyone,

I echo Karen’s concern with the discussion here. Seems like some people here are performing a whole bunch of rhetorical gymnastics based on investment in and alignment with white supremacist discourses that place value in only Standardized White, Middle/Upper-Class American English. Although, they probably won’t admit that—but intentional or not, it’s the truth... And critical self-reflection needs to take place.

As educators, we have a responsibility to assist students in developing their functional, rhetorical, and critical literacies. These literacies together account for students having the widest discursive possibilities available to them so that they can choose for themselves how they wish to navigate and even resist (!) the rhetorical situation—which is always deeply informed by power dynamics and, more specifically, white supremacy.

Instead of rehashing arguments already addressed, I’ll leave you with a quote from Vershawn Young’s #4C18 performance—a quote that talks back to many central arguments illustrated against this wonderfully vibrant CFP and a quote that speaks to what Karen wrote too:

“One of the feats I routinely witness as I speak to teachers across the nation is this: Teachers say that they recognize the importance of language diversity for students, but they tell their students that they have to get ready for the teacher in the next class who might not understand them as well or the employer who might prejudge and not hire them based on their American linguistic variety. The feat here is that the teacher wants to present herself as an antiracist, a promoter of diversity, one of the few folks on the students’ side—while, at the same time, she is the one enacting the very prejudice on the student that she is asking the student to imagine he will experience somewhere else. In other words, the teacher is saying, ‘I’m not racist, but I’m going to teach you in a way and grade you in a way to prepare you to be acceptable to the racist next door.’ The teacher then becomes the stand-in, the proxy, the would-be racist herself. Now that’s a feat: that one can be both antiracist and a surrogate racist at the same time, be both simultaneously a promoter of linguistic diversity and a surrogate against it. Come on? Really? When teachers use this discourse, the only racism they know for sure is their own.”

Y'all treating power as static. What you're doing is participating in these discourses and structures of power, whether intentionally or not.

Best,

Kyle Larson

Larson's post was immediately met with backlash. One poster retorted, "Did you just try to shame people, Kyle Larson? People are trying to have a genuine discussion about the purpose of academic discourse and the role of language and you burst out with shame? That's what you have to contribute? Shaming people?" Another poster, obviously feeling directly attacked, addressed Larson's post: "... Are you implying then that I'm a white supremacist? Are you suggesting I'm not self-reflective or self-critical? Please, feel free to educate me on this matter." And yet a few others offered support for Larson's post, with one simply stating, "Thank you, Kyle." Larson never publicly responded to any of the posts on the listserv, and the ongoing conversation continued without much further explicit mention of Larson. However, the startup members of the nextGEN listserv divulged in a dialogue with the WPA-L Working Group that listserv members made "private comments to graduate students' directors, professors, and mentors" in regard to the controversy ("Where We Are" 205).¹⁶ On April 5, a graduate student posted to the WPA-L announcing the creation of nextGEN citing, "the production of nextGEN was influenced by both a kairotic moment in recent conversations that have transpired on the WPA-listserv as well as a need for a safe(r) space for graduate students to contribute,

¹⁶ Regarding his post, Larson wrote, "Consequently, senior scholars publicly shamed me and privately wrote a 'mentor' of mine, who subsequently distanced themselves from me and with whom I no longer work" (Kumari et al.).

inquire, and respond to conversations in our field” (Johnson). Larson’s name was the first listed under the nextGEN startup committee members.

Method

In this chapter, I use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine three texts relevant to the aforementioned rupture: 1) the listserv policies created for nextGEN, 2) the “Listserv to Listserv” response posted by nextGEN to the WPA-L in November 2018, and 3) the participation guidelines created by the WPA-L Working Group in Spring 2019. As a method, CDA investigates discursive occurrences of discrimination and exclusion, particularly those instances involving imbalances of power within social groups (Fairclough 1989, 1993; Wodak 2014; van Dijk 1992). Thus, I apply CDA to my corpus of texts in order to understand how the culture within the WPA-L contributed to the creation of nextGEN and moderation guidelines for both disciplinary spaces. Scholars such as Teun van Dijk contend that CDA is problem-oriented, and to demonstrate its ability to enact change within discourse communities, I explore productive ways for interlocutors to move forward together in the latter sections of this chapter.

The three texts that I examine using CDA are reproduced in their entirety in the appendices of this chapter. Although there are other texts and conversations pertaining to this rupture, I chose my corpus based on its relevance to the creation of nextGEN and the exigence behind it. Additionally, I decided to include the guidelines created by the WPA-L Working Group because they demonstrate how the accumulated impact of the WPA-L ruptures and the call to action from nextGEN sparked change within the listserv.

To discursively map the nextGEN rupture, I apply the following framework to the timeline of events: 1) a catalyzing event that prompts the dialogue, 2) a post that acts as

the breaking point that sparks the controversy, 3) the dialogue that follows, and then 4) the larger impacts of the event within the discourse community and the field at large. As discussed in the Introduction section of this chapter, the catalyzing event that prompted the dialogue is the WPA-L post titled “2019 CCCC CFP: Is this the first CFP for a major/’flagship’ conference to use AAVE extensively?” that initiated the conversation on the use of AAVE and other dialects of English in academic and professional settings. The breaking point text is graduate student Kyle Larson’s response to the debate that was met with some hostility both within and outside of the listserv. The dialogue surrounding this rupture was not contained solely to the listserv, as the nextGEN startup members noted that private conversations took place between graduate students and their mentors. As such, these conversations are beyond the scope of my analysis. Finally, this rupture had a significant impact on the structure of the WPA-L, as a number of similar ruptures sparked the creation of moderated guidelines for the listserv. Furthermore, the WPA-L was eventually “renamed” and “rebranded”¹⁷ as the heavily moderated WritingStudies-L. The nextGEN listserv has undoubtedly left its mark on the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies with features in disciplinary journals such as *Composition Studies*, a presence at CCCC, and as a recipient of the 2019 *Kairos* Service award (Kumari et al.). The goal of applying this framework is to gain a better understanding of what is happening discursively when one of these ruptures occurs within our field.

¹⁷ As described by one of WritingStudies-L’s current list owners, Holly Hassel, in a recent “Annual Overview” email sent to listserv subscribers.

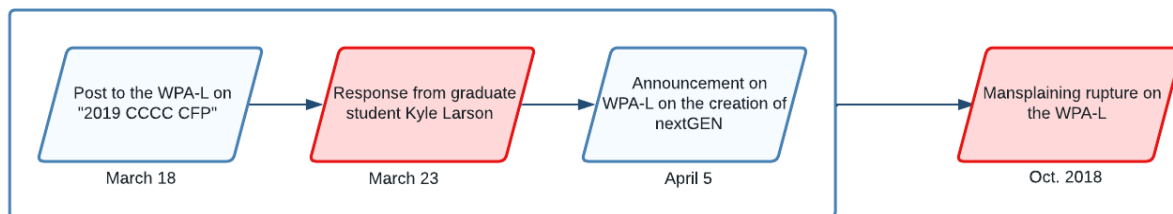


Figure VI: Stages of nextGEN rupture

I use the aforementioned framework as only a starting point of inquiry into the rupture that served as the exigence for nextGEN, for this rupture itself serves as a smaller rhetorical event within the larger WPA-L rupture. Thus, the creation of nextGEN is but a steppingstone to the eventual dissolution of the parent listserv, with the chain of events occurring in multiple spaces over a longer period of time and accumulating strength as more fracturing events occurred within the space. A central, yet indirect, part of this nextGEN rupture is its effect on the creation of the WPA-L Participation Guidelines. Additionally, the “Listserv to Listserv” response posted by nextGEN in response to the mansplaining rupture on the WPA-L is also an indirect result of the rupture that has a significant impact on how the two listservs interact and work to solve the problems of discrimination within the field. As such, this rupture is multifaceted and bleeds into the WPA-L rupture discussed in another chapter of this project. Because these two texts, the guidelines created by WPA-L and the “Listserv to Listserv” response from nextGEN, are integral parts of a longstanding problem that originated within the WPA-L, I have selected them for analysis in this chapter.

Aside from Kyle Larson, I have omitted names from the pertinent conversation on the WPA-L, as I am interested in analyzing the discourse pertaining to this event instead of bringing attention to the actions and words of individuals. This decision was made in

keeping with the goals of CDA that first and foremost focus on the uses of the discourse itself. I chose to identify Larson because he, along with the other startup members of nextGEN, have written about this rupture publicly and cite it as the exigence for the creation of their social justice-oriented digital platform.¹⁸ The decision to omit names was also informed by recent research pertaining to the ethical use of public data by Amber Buck and Devon Ralston (2021). Although their work relates specifically to social media data, it offers researchers working with public data such as myself an important heuristic to guide decisions regarding disclosure of identities.

Results

Each text in my corpus—the listserv policies created by nextGEN, the “Listserv to Listserv” response posted by nextGEN to WPA-L, and the posting guidelines created by WPA-L—is represented by its own analysis. I then assess my results cumulatively at the end of this section. Although only the nextGEN policies were created *directly* in response to the breaking point text, taken together my corpus demonstrates how the discriminatory environment of the WPA-L continued to wreak havoc on the field until its eventual abandonment and allowed other fracturing rhetorical events to occur within its platform. The culmination of ruptures within the WPA-L and the continued call for participation guidelines unquestionably contributed to the creation of the heavily moderated WritingStudies-L to replace the old version of the listserv. Thus, the texts in my corpus represent important discursive components of the WPA-L’s trajectory into desolation.

¹⁸ See “The Necessity of Genre Disruption in Organizing an Advocacy Space for and by Graduate Students,” for example.

nextGEN Policies

In contrast to the WPA-L's unspoken rules of who was welcome to contribute to its conversations, the creation of explicit policies and rules of engagement by nextGEN was significant within itself. This document, albeit brief, represents a larger effort on behalf of the nextGEN startup members to create a moderated space that is distinctly different from the feral nature of the WPA-L that did not referee users' contributions. One of the nextGEN startup members posted the policies to the WPA-L listserv in April 2018 after the launch of the new digital space, prefaced with an announcement of the launch and the reasoning behind its creation (see below for the policies). Interestingly, the post did not receive any uptake within the WPA-L. The attachment containing the policies is notably short, containing a brief paragraph at the introduction and then a bulleted list of prohibited activities based on the listserv's affiliation with the University of Texas at Arlington:

The nextGEN listserv is publicly available to search engines; therefore, consider the rhetorical situation when replying to another user. Is the response enhancing the conversation, or merely engaging with it on a personal level? Engagements may be more appropriate in replying to the person directly versus through the public-facing listserv. For example, reply directly to the original post rather than using "reply all" to spam the listserv with a message such as "thanks for the article" or "great insight." Also, please exercise judicious restraint for people who access the listserv with limited data plans by limiting posting university logos in signature lines AND excessive signature lines.

By subscribing to the nextGEN listserv, users agree to the terms and conditions of these guidelines.

Since The University of Texas at Arlington hosts the nextGEN listserv, please do not post:

- Political messages advocating for support of a particular political candidate. This listserv is provided by The University of Texas at Arlington funded in part through taxpayer funds. As such, UT-Arlington

handbook of operating procedures forbids using university resources to support political candidates or political campaigns.

- Any message, information, data, illustrations, graphics, text, audio and video clips (“Content”) that is abusive, defamatory, harassing, harmful, libelous, pornographic, obscene, threatening, vulgar or invasive of privacy that would constitute a criminal offense or violate local, state, or federal laws and regulations.
- Any harmful Content knowingly and willfully including without limitation viruses, malware, super- or zombie cookies, worms, Trojan horses or any computer code that exploits, intercepts system, program, and personal data.
- Any Content that defames or disparages another person or group based on culture, race, ethnicity, country of origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, size, and/or ability.
- Any Content such as advertising or soliciting for funds, pyramid schemes, and/or promotional email spam.
- Anonymous messages to the listserv or assume another’s identity or attempt to conceal your identity.

The introductory paragraph of the policies immediately calls attention to the public nature of the listserv and creates a distinction between “appropriate” responses for personal engagement versus public ones. This is a defining characteristic of the paragraph that directly correlates to the exigence behind the listserv’s creation. For example, Larson’s aforementioned breaking point post in the WPA-L was met with several messages directed solely at him. This is a common occurrence within the WPA-L, with users even accidentally “replying all,” sometimes to disastrous ends (see the threads in the “mansplaining” rupture within the listserv’s October 2018 archive for a particularly unfortunate example). In the case of Larson, the responses directed solely to him were of a combative nature, but this is not always the case.

It is clear that the purpose of the policies is an attempt to limit the rhetorical posturing that was so prevalent within the WPA-L. The “spamming” that the policies note as not “appropriate” for public responses are arguably a way for list members to flex

their ethos within a digital space where users' identities (academic rank, prestige, etc.) might be less known within the discourse community. A one-line comment from Roxane Gay or Elizabeth Wardle, for example, certainly has enough impact to sway the trajectory of a conversation or leave a lasting impression on readers. To support this assertion of limiting rhetorical posturing, the new policies also call for "limiting posting university logos in signature lines AND excessive signature lines" which was a way for list members to identify their affiliations and academic positions for a digital public who might not otherwise be able to identify them. This attempt to strip users of their ethos demonstrates the social justice-oriented goal of nextGEN that focuses on rectifying power imbalances within professionals working in the field. This problem of identity disclosure came to a head in October 2018 during the mansplaining rupture on the WPA-L, as many list users who had never posted spoke up for the first time. Many of these former lurkers cited that they did not previously feel welcome to comment on the list given their precarious positions within academia.

In addition to eliminating some of the ways that WPA-L users had historically used to demonstrate their ethos within the space, the other defining characteristic of nextGEN's policies document is its lack of concision. The bulleted list of prohibited activities that follows the introduction paragraph contains only five points, and the majority are boilerplate as they deal with the listserv's affiliation with its host university and the pertinent legal ramifications. For example, the first point prohibits advocating for political candidates. The list does prohibit discrimination based on "culture, race, ethnicity, country of origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, size, and/or ability," and yet, given the exigence for nextGEN's creation, one would expect to see a statement

geared toward prohibiting discrimination based on academic rank or standing. Regardless of the policies' brevity, however, the mere creation of rules speaks directly to the problematic nature of the WPA-L's open forum.

“Listserv to Listserv” Response

In November 2018 following the “mansplaining” rupture discussed in a previous chapter of this project, nextGEN posted “Listserv to Listserv: A Response from nextGEN” to the WPA-L (see the Appendices for the post in its entirety). This post, although a direct response to the October 2018 rupture, addresses the type of “oppressive discourse that created the exigence for nextGEN’s founding in April 2018” and has thus been included in this nextGEN-focused chapter for analysis. Unlike the original policies created in April, this response from nextGEN contains a much more thorough demonstration of the new listserv’s practices and the beliefs underpinning those practices. While the overarching theme of this response is the “misuse of professional power and privilege” and how it contributes to the “toxic environment” of the WPA-L, the text contains other important themes that are central to the discussion of the presence of the two listservs.

Most notably, this “Listserv to Listserv” response represents a call to action for the WPA-L. A key component of this response is nextGEN’s perceived sense of responsibility of those who hold institutional power and privilege in the field toward “those who already exist and speak from the margins.” The response makes it clear that the startup members of nextGEN do not feel as if the culture of the WPA-L is upholding this responsibility or sense of duty to the contingent and historically underrepresented members of its field, at one point calling the WPA-L “rhetorically irresponsible.” This

responsibility stems from the fact that this is not a space with a wide, general audience but one composed of “professionals in Rhetoric and Composition” and “teachers” in which the stakes for effective communication are higher. The imbalance of power between individuals in the field is made distinct by the section titled “Moving Forward” in which the nextGEN members offer practices they believe the WPA-L would benefit from enacting. The following suggestion, for example, demonstrates different responsibilities for members from varying positions of institutional power: “Ensuring that senior scholars are not relying on graduate students, NTT faculty, women, and people of color to do the work, repeat themselves, and put themselves at risk.” Practices such as this one suggests that there are different rules of engagement for different members of the community, although axes of intersectionality will provide further complication.

At times the writers affiliate themselves with the WPA-L (“We ask that the WPA-L community pay attention to how *we* use and define anger ...”) and at other times disaffiliate themselves as the separate discourse community nextGEN (“we write to urge the WPA-L community to reflect on issues of audience and consider the effects of *their* rhetoric and tone on graduate students ...”). Given that nextGEN was created in order to give graduate students a space in which to feel safe and acknowledged, it is interesting that the writers at times try to position themselves as contributing members of the WPA-L community through the use of the pronoun “we.” However, the messaging makes it clear throughout who the nextGEN writers are accusing of acting with hostility and indifference toward other members, as this text was written in direct response to the mansplaining rupture in which women graduate students and contingent faculty spoke out against not feeling welcome in the space.

The public nature of the listserv and the consequences of the conversations there is a key theme enveloped within the larger discussion of institutional power and privilege. The response goes to great lengths (over six references) to denote that the listserv and the conversations it contains are public, and thus all list users share a sense of responsibility to ensure that their interactions are suitable for a wide audience (students, their parents, department chairs, potential employers, etc.). For scholars whose work is invested in effective and ethical communication practices, it is telling that so much emphasis must be placed on reminding its members to act decorously and be mindful of audience and their rhetorical choices. However, special attention is also paid to the repercussions of senior faculty “devalu[ing] the public work done by graduate students, NTT faculty, and other members of the precariat,” such as what happened to Larson in the March 2018 conversation on the list.

In addition to the rhetorical responsibility of those who hold positions of institutional privilege within the field, this response also calls attention to the use of implicit or “invisible burdens” on the WPA-L, particularly in regard to vulnerable members such as graduate students and non-tenure track faculty. While a majority of the response asks interlocutors on the list to reflect on how their *words*, such as through the use of “adversarial academic argumentation,” affect others, a noteworthy portion of the response focuses on the use of *tone* and how it conveys meaning as well. For example, the response notes how the use of “intentional sarcasm that sidesteps the issue” contributes to the ongoing problem within the WPA-L that devalues or ignores the voices of those who do not speak from positions of institutional power. The document refers to the “tone” used by list members a total of three additional times, asking list users to

carefully reflect on how implicit communication tactics such as a sarcastic tone have just as detrimental an effect as “explicit language.” While the importance of tone is undoubtedly related to the infamous “parody post” in the mansplaining rupture, its emphasis invites the question to what degree are we responsible for how others perceive our words and actions, particularly in online spaces where meaning is often misconstrued.

Interestingly, however, even though the response asks list users to be mindful of their own tone (essentially asking users to “police” themselves), the response also asks users to pause and reflect before “insisting on ... tone-policing” other conversations on the list. For example, nextGEN asks that “as rhetoricians, we collectively consider and reflect upon exigence and kairotic interruption before insisting on quarantining or tone-policing expressions of anger and dissatisfaction with rhetorical choices on the listserv and with social, ethical, and professional issues in the field.” This creates an interesting conundrum in which privileged list users are asked to police their own tone while simultaneously asked not to police the tone of others. While context and other external factors delineate the rules of engagement within a particular conversation, I will explore the implications of this quandary in the Discussion section of this chapter.

WPA-L Participation Guidelines

The WPA-L Reimagining Working Group was formed in Spring 2019 to address a string of concerning conversations that had occurred on the list. Thus, the *Writing Program Administration List (WPA-L) Community Participation Site* was created and houses, among other administrative documents, the WPA-L Participation Guidelines which were approved by its members. According to the working group, the goal of the new participation guidelines was to ensure a “supportive, collegial, and respectful

experience for our community” (WPA-L Participation). The working group also noted that they drew upon the advice and practices suggested by nextGEN in their “Listserv to Listserv” response in the creation of their own community guidelines (“Where We Are” 207). For this reason, I have decided to include my analysis of the WPA-L Participation Guidelines in this chapter pertaining to the impact of nextGEN.

Interestingly, the WPA-L Participation Guidelines published on the website are incomplete. The new guidelines state that disciplinary action in the form of warnings and suspensions will be carried out on those who violate list policies. However, under the “Warnings” section, the document reads, “A poster who receives (X) amount of warnings will be temporarily suspended from the list. Repeated suspensions will result in a permanent ban from the list.” The placeholder “X” for the number of warnings allowed to a user is problematic for several reasons, the very least of them being that an incomplete document weakens the ethos of its creators. It is unknown whether the number of offenses was not decided upon at the time of publication, or if a draft version of the document was published instead. Without a set number of warnings permitted, however, the warnings themselves become useless, as offenders are able to repeat with no consequences. In addition to the placeholder “X,” there is another glaring absence in this section of the document: “Any member of the listserv who experiences DMing of such content on another platform should contact <INSERT MODERATOR EMAIL ADDRESS> and include a screenshot or other copy of the inappropriate direct message, noting the nature and level of concern (e.g., from discomfort to fear for physical safety).” Without an actual email address provided, users of the listserv will not be able to contact the appropriate channel to have their problem addressed.

In the section titled “Suspension Evasion,” a key logistical piece of the suspension procedure is missing. The last sentence reads, “A record of past warnings and suspensions shall be kept by the moderators (*we need the how of this*).” The writers’ notes in italics demonstrate the working group’s lack of a clear plan for enacting these new policies. Unfortunately, the incompleteness of the document calls into question the robustness of the effort and whether the guidelines were ever enforced.

Like nextGEN’s “Listserv to Listserv” response, the WPA-L Participation Guidelines represent a massive undertaking to be more social-justice oriented. While this effort is one to be applauded, one particularly problematic component of the guidelines is the attempted censorship of individuals on platforms *outside* of the listserv. In the “Warnings” section of the document, the moderation board asks that “[a]ny member of the listserv who experiences DMing of such content on another platform should contact <INSERT MODERATOR EMAIL ADDRESS> and include a screenshot or other copy of the inappropriate direct message, noting the nature and level of concern (e.g., from discomfort to fear for physical safety).” Aside from exercising a seeming overreach of power to police speech outside of its own space, this practice also seems difficult to verify and not very feasible. If everyone on the listserv who has once said something on the Internet that made another feel “discomfort” was banned, then the WPA-L may find itself lacking any participants. Additionally, feeling uncomfortable has been discussed on the listserv as a productive means of learning from others’ lived experiences—particularly those of historically underrepresented communities.

Summary of CDA Readings

Assessed in tandem, the CDA readings demonstrate the complicated nature of the open forum of the WPA-L in which members of the discourse community had different expectations and needs relating to issues of engagement, safety, and conflict resolution. For example, the creation of the nextGEN listserv represents the need for alternative digital spaces for contingent members of the field to feel valued and represented in important academic conversations. The development of listserv policies by nextGEN additionally reflects graduate students' need for a "rhetorically responsible" alternative to the WPA-L, and the continuance of ruptures within the longstanding space (coupled with the eventual creation of its own guidelines) supports the idea of the need for reform. This corpus of texts examined in this rupture also highlights important questions regarding what is the appropriate level of intervention by moderators, as well as ethical concerns such as the public nature of list interactions and whether or not tone or other implicit conveyances of meaning should be "policed" by the community.

In the next section, I will discuss the larger implications that this rupture had on our field, such as the creation of the heavily moderated WritingStudies-L which replaced the WPA-L as its new disciplinary listserv. Since the purpose of applying CDA is to enact social reform, I also offer a possible strategy for mitigating damage when future conflicts arise between different subsets of a discourse community (such as between graduate students and senior faculty).

Discussion

The nextGEN rupture is unique because, although the listserv was created just weeks after Larson's post on the WPA-L, it took *several* ruptures happening within the

WPA-L for any substantive change to be brought about to the latter's environment. For example, Larson's post received little uptake within the WPA-L, as he was essentially silenced by reprimands outside of the list. It was not until a string of concerning rhetorical events occurred (including the mansplaining rupture initiated by Michelle Lafrance) that the WPA-L started to address any problematic behavior within its space. This equates to many fracturing events occurring before any real healing could take place—whether in nextGEN or the WPA-L. Undoubtedly, Larson's position as a graduate student played a role in how his criticism was received within the community of the WPA-L. He had “stepped out of line,” broken the unspoken rule that prohibited graduate students from engaging in conversations on the list, and it was not until the accumulation of ruptures combined with *faculty* members voicing their concerns that the wheels of change began to move. Thus, the smaller rupture that sparked the creation of nextGEN is itself one of a series of events that contributed to the dissolution of the WPA-L. Instead, the chain of events occurred in multiple spaces over an extended period of time, and the rupture accumulated strength as more and more polarizing rhetorical events demonstrated the need for change within these intersected communities. In the following sections, I address some of the outcomes of the continued “toxic” environment of the WPA-L and the implications for nextGEN, as well as what the aftermath of this rupture has taught us about ourselves as a discipline.

Larger Impacts of the Event on the Field

As discussed throughout this chapter, the most significant impact of this rupture was the creation of the nextGEN listserv itself, a self-described “safe(r) environment for graduate student conversation” (Johnson). However, the discriminatory environment of

the WPA-L that was the exigence for nextGEN had other significant impacts on the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies as well. The habitual problematic behavior within the WPA-L sparked the listserv to create a working group to address the issues brought forth by its members and nextGEN. As demonstrated in a recent edition of *Composition Studies*' "Where We Are," critical conversations about institutional power and privilege of different members in the field are continuing to occur between the two communities. While not a direct result of the nextGEN rupture, after a string of similar ruptures and the retirement of the listserv's owner Barry Maid, the WPA-L was eventually abandoned and a new disciplinary listserv, WritingStudies-L, took its place in June 2021.

WritingStudies-L is heavily moderated as opposed to the previous version of the disciplinary listserv, as "[a]ll posts are held, reviewed and approved before being distributed to the listserv. As of February 2022, there is no open discussion" ("WritingStudies-L"). Users of the new list must use approved tags (such as #JOB for position announcements) when submitting posts.¹⁹ These new moderation guidelines have curbed any controversy from occurring within the list.

A critical analysis of the nextGEN rupture begs the question whether unmoderated online forums such as the WPA-L are the appropriate genres for these types of important, critical conversations that direct our field. The success of WritingStudies-L in terms of mitigating controversy perhaps demonstrates the need for more heavily moderated spaces, particularly when the stakes of public interaction are high. However, the current version of the listserv does not allow for open discussions. Just as academic

¹⁹ For a complete list of tags, see the [WritingStudies-L Tags for Subject Line](#).

conferences provide scholars with a space to present research, workshop ideas, and learn about new and exciting developments within the field, the listserv has historically been a digital space for our members to connect on a more regular basis. However, the online disinhibition effect remains a problem for such digital spaces, as John Suler notes how factors such as dissociative anonymity and asynchronicity contribute to problematic behaviors that would not occur in face-to-face interactions.

Moving Forward

In a 2019 installation of *Composition Studies*' "Where We Are," members of the nextGEN Start Up team and the WPA-L Reimagining Work Group were invited to enter into dialogue with one another regarding the string of digital ruptures that had occurred within the WPA-L in the past year. This interaction demonstrates the importance of *invitational rhetoric* as a discursive strategy that differs from traditional conceptions of rhetoric which emphasize persuasion, and consequently winning or dominating, as the end goal. As put forth by Sonja K. Foss & Cindy L. Griffin in their germinal work, invitational rhetoric "constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor's world and see it as the rhetor does. In presenting a particular perspective, the invitational rhetor does not judge or denigrate others' perspectives, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor's own" (5). According to Foss and Griffin, in order for invitational rhetoric to have a mutual impact on both the rhetor and the audience, two factors must be at work: 1) the offering of perspectives, and 2) external conditions built around safety, value, and freedom. While changing the audience's perspective is not the objective of invitational rhetoric, a change may very well occur "in the audience or rhetor or both as a result of new understanding and insights gained in the exchange of ideas" (6). Thus, this feminist

rhetorical strategy values open dialogue among interlocutors over one party “winning” the argument in a disagreement.

Although the dialogic interaction between nextGEN members and the WPA-L working group in the “Where We Are” article resulted in a productive conversation regarding the past, present, and future state of the two communities’ relationship, engaging in invitational dialogue as soon as the fracturing within the WPA-L began to occur would have perhaps mitigated some of the irreparable damage that the listserv’s members suffered. However, it was clear that the external conditions for effectively implementing invitational rhetoric—safety, value, and freedom—in order to achieve mutual understanding between parties was not present within the WPA-L’s digital environment. While nextGEN was explicitly created with the first two conditions in mind, there is certainly a lack of freedom within this space, just as with the newly created WritingStudies-L. According to Foss and Griffin, freedom requires that “rhetors do not place restrictions on an interaction. Participants can bring any and all matters to the interaction for consideration; no subject matter is off limits, and all presuppositions can be challenged” (12). Conversely, the WPA-L offered freedom but was severely lacking (at least in some members’ opinions) in terms of providing safety and value. The differing needs and expectations of the two communities demonstrate that while there is no cookie cutter solution to establishing a successful disciplinary listserv, dialogic interaction between members of a community is crucial for its health and longevity.

Chapter 4: “These Are the Facts”: Challenging Institutional Privilege within the NCA



Figure VII: A Tweet following the NCA rupture that features the popular hashtag #CommunicationSoWhite.

Introduction

In June 2019, the field of Communication suffered a disciplinary rupture²⁰ over an editorial composed by Martin Medhurst for *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, the academic journal that he had served as editor for over 20 years. This editorial was written in response to changes made by the National Communication Association (NCA) to the selection process for their Distinguished Scholar award, of which Medhurst is a recipient. In this editorial, which never made it to publication but was posted by its author to the disciplinary listserv CRTNET and subsequently circulated widely online, Medhurst accused the NCA of “substitut[ing] identity for scholarly merit” (“Editorial”). Responses to Medhurst’s editorial began to surface immediately, and the majority were in overwhelming disapproval, citing the false binary that Medhurst attempted to set up

²⁰ As Comm scholar Sarah Tracy pointedly described, “The communication discipline is bleeding. Pus oozing. Vomit erupting.”

between the categories of “diversity” and “intellectual merit” and his tokenizing attitude towards historically minoritized groups (see the Statement Co-authored by the Elected Leadership of NCA’s Women’s Caucus and Feminist & Women Studies Division, for example). As a result of the controversy, the hashtag #CommunicationSoWhite began trending on Twitter, the Facebook group “Open Letter on Diversity in the Communication Discipline” was created to house a petition asking Medhurst to resign (along with other requests), and a blog post²¹ containing a critical rhetorical analysis of the editorial was circulated within academic communities—among numerous other responses. Like the WPA-L rupture before it, this particular rupture would have lasting effects on Rhetoric and Writing Studies, as many scholars’ work in these fields crosses disciplinary lines between the study of written and spoken communication and, to a larger extent, on our ideas regarding diversity and inclusion in higher ed.

This discursive event brought greater attention to the lack of diversity that many have perceived within the NCA and the Communication field more broadly, and it also provided an exigency for scholars of color and white allies to bring about a renewed call for change within the discipline. As Communication scholar Mohan Dutta has noted, Medhurst’s editorial provided an example of what happens when the “the old White guard of the discipline” is held accountable for maintaining oppressive structures. In order to critically examine these accusations, this chapter will provide a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reading of Medhurst’s editorial in order to shed light on how members of majority groups (such as the predominantly white and male Distinguished

²¹ See Mohan J. Dutta’s blog post “Whiteness, NCA, and Distinguished Scholars” (2019).

Scholars) use language to exert power and discrimination over others, as well as David Zarefsky's letter to the NCA Executive committee, which was endorsed by 66 of the Distinguished Scholars, because this text also demonstrates what happens when long-standing systems are threatened with change that highlights implicit biases of the structure. Finally, as part of the larger effect of the rupture on the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies, I will use CDA to examine a personal statement published by Gerard Hauser, the Executive Director of the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA) and Distinguished Scholar, in response to the controversy. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the aftermath of the rupture: the steps the NCA has taken or pledged to take in order to diversify its membership, as well as the larger effects the controversy has had on the field. Because CDA is a method used to enact social reform, I will also discuss what knowledge can be gained from the occurrence of this rupture and what insights we can take into future discursive interactions.

Events Prompting the Dialogue

The events²² that led to Medhurst's editorial and this rupture within the field began almost a year prior when over 120 members of the NCA wrote a collective email to the then NCA officers to "share [their] extreme frustration with the consistent lack of diversity in journal editorships of the National Communication Association (NCA) journals" ("Petition"). In addition to critiquing the field's lack of diverse representation within editorial boards, the signatories also expressed concern that "despite nominations

²² I have included the timeline of events for context as well as data. Just as the timing of each rupture in this project is significant due to its occurrence in the wake of the 2017 #MeToo movement, the timing of the events leading up to and following each rupture affect its response and uptake within the field.

of senior scholars of color, NCA's Distinguished Scholars remains an overwhelmingly white institution" ("Petition"). In order to rectify these concerns, the members proposed a number of addresses, which included the creation of a working group composed of NCA members of color in order to take an active role in holding the NCA accountable to its stated but, to many, not proactive commitment to diversity and inclusion.

In October 2018 in response to the growing calls for diversifying the organization, Trevor Parry-Giles, NCA Executive Director, sent a memo to the Distinguished Scholars titled "Diversity, Inclusion, and the NCA Distinguished Scholars Program" in which he stated he is "writing to address the persistent issue of diversity and inclusion as concerns the NCA Distinguished Scholars Program" ("Memo"). In this memo, Parry-Giles recounted the history of the Distinguished Scholars selection process and included data that reflects the group's demographics, which is composed predominantly of white men. In order to align the group with NCA's commitment to diversity and inclusion, Parry-Giles concluded the memo by informing the members that "the Executive Committee would like to convene a meaningful conversation with the DSs soon concerning reforms in the nomination and selection process that may yield a more diverse and inclusive future for the NCA Distinguished Scholars Program" ("Memo").

In March 2019, changes were made to the selection process of the Distinguished Scholar award, which essentially transferred selection power from the Distinguished Scholars themselves to a newly created committee of NCA members. Notification of the changes was sent to the Distinguished Scholars through an email from Parry-Giles on behalf of the NCA Executive Committee. Parry-Giles wrote:

Beginning this year, the new Distinguished Scholars will be chosen by a selection committee of NCA members appointed by the Leadership Development Committee (formerly the Committee on Committees). The selection committee will be approved by the Legislative Assembly. In this way, the Distinguished Scholar award will more fully resemble NCA's other awards. The EC took this action in response to repeated calls for greater diversity, inclusion, and equity in the Distinguished Scholar award program and because it felt that the proposed actions suggested at the DS meeting in Salt Lake City (e.g., greater promotion of the DS call to increase the nominations) were inadequate to achieve the diversity, inclusion, and equity goals of the association. ("Notification")

Additionally, the Executive Committee decided to change the call for nominations for the Distinguished Scholar award, by adding the following statement: "The Distinguished Scholar selection process should reflect NCA's mission statement with regard to those honored: 'NCA supports inclusiveness and diversity among our faculties, within our membership, in the workplace, and in the classroom; NCA supports and promotes policies that fairly encourage this diversity and inclusion'" ("Notification").

Parry-Giles' notification of the changes sparked a flurry of responses from members of the Distinguished Scholars, beginning with seasoned scholar David Zarefsky. On March 29, 2019, Zarefsky wrote a heated letter addressed to Parry-Giles and NCA President Star Muir in which he vehemently expressed his displeasure with the changes. Subsequent letters were sent to Muir and Parry-Giles on April 2nd and 4th and were signed by over 50 Distinguished Scholars (although some would later ask to have their names removed). In addition to conveying indignation in regard to the transfer of selection power, the letter dated April 2 also asked the Executive Committee to "reconsider its recent action and instead to adopt one of [the Distinguished Scholars'] approaches, with the goal of achieving a mutually satisfactory solution" ("Letter from

David”). The letter dated March 29 will be examined using CDA in a subsequent section of this text.

On May 8, 2019, Muir penned a letter to the Distinguished Scholars in which he addressed the recent events and the responses received from Zarefsky et al. The purpose of this letter, according to Muir, was to “offer a perspective on the concerns felt about the Distinguished Scholars award and about the recent changes made to the selection process, discuss the consultation efforts made by the Executive Committee and the National Office, and explore constraints on finding a way for all of us to move forward” (“Letter from NCA”). After recounting the lack of changes in diversity over a twelve-year period and calls from the NCA community to implement substantive change, Muir made it clear that the NCA Executive Committee would not follow Zarefsky’s advice to revoke the decision to change the selection process for the Distinguished Scholar award.

Breaking Point Text

On June 10, 2019, Martin Medhurst—one of the Distinguished Scholars who collectively signed Zarefsky’s letter to Muir and Parry-Giles on April 2—drafted an editorial for *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* and emailed it to several NCA members.²³ On June 12, Medhurst posted the editorial to CRTNET preceded with a qualifying statement on why it would not be featured in volume 22.3 of the journal as intended.²⁴ The editorial spread like wildfire and sparked outrage from NCA members, Communication scholars

²³ In addition to documents published by NCA, posts on CRTNET, and various other platforms containing pertinent texts of this conversation, the website “2019 #CommunicationSoWhite Controversy” aided my recreation of the timeline of events of this rupture.

²⁴ Medhurst stated that “because the NCA leadership has now made public the documents concerning the decision to remove the Distinguished Scholars from their role as electors, the chief purpose of the editorial has been achieved... [and he is], therefore, pulling the editorial from the journal.”

and scholars in adjacent fields such as Rhetoric and Writing Studies, and academia more broadly. In the days following the post, numerous NCA caucuses and divisions posted statements in response to the rupture condemning Medhurst's and the Distinguished Scholars' actions. The editorial was also circulated on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and continued to receive negative criticism. A Facebook group originally titled "Open Letter on Diversity in the Communication Discipline" was created on June 13 in response to the editorial and the need for the field to become more diverse. The purpose of the group (now titled "Communication Scholars for Transformation") upon its creation was to "facilitate signatures to an open letter in response to the recent editorial drafted by Marty Medhurst, letters drafted/endorsed by NCA Distinguished Scholars, and broader concerns regarding diversity and social justice in our discipline" (Communication).

Within a few short days of Medhurst's editorial going viral, scholars of color and white allies also began to resign from the editorial board of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* in protest of Medhurst's actions. Notably, Kirt Wilson, who was supposed to guest edit a special issue of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* on "The Politics of 'Merit' in Academic Disciplines," decided to rescind his decision after openly soliciting advice from colleagues on a Facebook post. Numerous scholars in Communication and adjacent fields began to call for a boycott of the journal. Along with individual scholars' expressions of condemnation for Medhurst's and the Distinguished Scholars' response to the changes made to the selection process for the award, prominent organizations in the field also followed suit in articulating a renewed commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion within their memberships.

To address what he referred to as this “current firestorm that is sweeping the discipline,” Medhurst issued an apology on CRTNET on June 17. However, it is clear that the damage was already done. Calls for Medhurst’s resignation from *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* had begun to spread, and, like Zarefsky’s anger following the Executive Committee’s decision to change the selection process for the Distinguished Scholar award (“I have waited to see if my anger would dissipate with time. Instead, the reverse has occurred”), public outrage only seemed to strengthen over the coming weeks.

Method

Using the identifying framework of ruptures established in the introduction of this project, this chapter offers a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reading of selected texts in order to understand how implicit biases are maintained and reproduced in language to contribute to systems of discrimination. This framework used to discursively map the rupture includes 1) catalyzing events that prompt the dialogue, 2) a text that acts as the breaking point, 3) the dialogue itself, and then 4) the larger impacts of the event on the organization and pertinent fields, demonstrated through backlash, boycotts, and policy changes. For this rupture within NCA, changes to the selection process of the Distinguished Scholar award act as the catalyst for the rupture, and the editorial from Medhurst (and to a lesser degree, the collectively signed letters from David Zarefsky and the Distinguished Scholars) serves as the breaking point that sparks the larger controversy. The dialogue regarding this rupture is widespread and includes but is not limited to conversations on social media, disciplinary listservs, and academic blog posts that all express disapproval of the editorial and call for greater attention to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the field. The impact of the rupture on NCA and on

both Communication and Rhetoric and Writing Studies is also broad but perhaps most evident through boycotts of Medhurst's journal *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* and the cancellation of the Public Address Conference (PAC) at the University of Georgia. The goal of applying this framework (see Figure 2 below) is to gain a better understanding of what is happening discursively within our discipline when these ruptures occur.

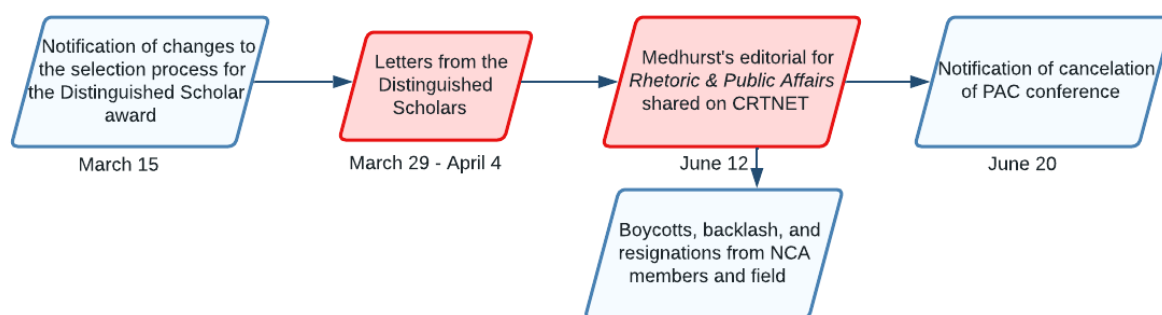


Figure VIII: Stages of NCA rupture

The collectively signed letter from Zarefsky, the editorial from Medhurst, and the personal statement from RSA Executive Director Gerard Hauser published in response to this rupture serve as the corpus of texts that I examine using CDA. Ruth Wodak, whose work has contributed significantly to the field of Critical Discourse Studies, defines CDA as “fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language... [it] aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use.” Thus, as other CDA scholars such as Teun van Dijk have noted, CDA is *problem-oriented*, addressing important social inequities resulting from discriminatory practices such as sexism and racism. CDA, as it is practiced within this chapter, highlights issues of social inequalities that are maintained

and reproduced within my corpus of texts—in both explicit and implicit ways. For example, I examine the texts from Zarefsky and Medhurst paying acute attention to the way the two men use language to demonstrate institutional privilege as members of a majority group and exert dominance over historically minoritized members. The goal of this analysis is to investigate how power dynamics are invested within the texts and to understand how these dynamics are indicative of larger institutional practices. I examine the response statement from Hauser on behalf of RSA in order to understand how prominent organizations within the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies responded to such a consequential event and how these organizations use language to position themselves within the growing call for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Because CDA is a method used to enact social reform,²⁵ I explore suggestions on how to move forward from the rupture in the final section of this chapter.

As someone external to NCA who studied this rupture asynchronously, I acknowledge that my interpretation of the events may differ from those who experienced or participated in the rupture in real time. However, CDA requires practitioners to examine texts in whole after their creation in order to understand the social context that surrounds the text, such as why and how the text was produced and how it was consumed by interlocutors. Therefore, the timeline of events serves as both context and as data, for the responses to the rupture and when they occur are often just as telling as the rupture itself. For example, I examine responses from three different Distinguished Scholars—one pre-rupture, one that sparked the greater controversy, and one post-rupture—to

²⁵ As discussed by Norman Fairclough, who many dub as the “father” of CDA, and others.

demonstrate how the timing and other external factors of each text play an important role in its reception. As a feminist researcher practicing reflexivity, I recognize that, in addition to being an outside observer of the event, my unique subjectivities and lived experiences as a woman working in academia influence my research methodology and interpretation of the data.

In acknowledging my relationship to this rupture within NCA, I also feel it is important to recognize my role as a graduate student and consequently my vulnerability in examining such sensitive issues. My interest in analyzing this event using CDA is not to shame any of the interlocutors; I use names of the individuals involved simply because the texts containing this conversation have been made public by the individuals themselves. I recognize that we are all human beings and make mistakes. My main interest in undertaking this project is the discursive phenomenon that keeps repeating itself within these ruptures in our field. The purpose of such a project is to investigate what knowledge can be gleaned from these ruptures and then offer takeaways as to what we, as a discipline, can do going forward to enact social reform within our communities.

All of the texts that I examine using CDA are presented in full in the appendices. Although there are numerous other texts associated with this rupture, I selected my corpus because of these particular texts' relative uptake in the field. Other texts associated with this communicative exchange, such as Star Muir's response to Zarefsky's collectively signed letters, can be found on the "Distinguished Scholars" webpage housed within NCA's official website.

Results

After using CDA to inductively read Medhurst's editorial and the collectively signed letter from Zarefsky, the following trends began to emerge within the texts. Since these two texts serve as the catalyst for the rupture, the respective findings for each text will first be reported independently and then assessed in tandem as representing a larger response from the Distinguished Scholars as a whole. The CDA reading of the statement from Hauser on behalf of RSA will be reported separately as indicative of the field's response to the controversy and concerns regarding its lack of diversity and inclusion. This statement also represents a response from a Distinguished Scholar that occurred in the wake of the controversy as a form of damage control, and its timing will be considered in the analysis.

Zarefsky's Letter from March 29

The defining feature of Zarefsky's letter addressed to Star Muir and Trevor Parry-Giles on March 29 seems to be indignation. Within the first two sentences of the letter, Zarefsky explicitly states his anger towards the Executive Committee's decision to change the selection process for the award: "Since receiving Trevor's email announcing the Executive Committee's decision regarding the selection of Distinguished Scholars, I have waited to see if my anger would dissipate with time. Instead, the reverse has occurred." This anger is also implicitly expressed in the letter through accusatory statements toward the NCA's Executive Committee ("your failure," "your actions," etc.), as well as through statements that reflect the insult Zarefsky and the Distinguished Scholars felt as a result of the NCA's decision:

Frankly, I do not know which reading of your actions is worse: that the EC has decided that I and over 75 of my most respected colleagues are prejudiced individuals who do not share NCA's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity; or that the EC has decided that we are incompetent to identify and select a group of diverse scholars from the pool of nominees.

It is clear the Distinguished Scholars felt that this decision to strip them of selection power was a personal critique against their own character and integrity. Zarefsky argues that "the effect of your actions is, first, to issue an egregious insult to a group of scholars who up until now have been regarded as the intellectual leaders of the Association." By labeling this decision as an "insult" to the Distinguished Scholars and that it is "first" in his list of grievances, Zarefsky is signaling that the offense taken by him and the group is at the crux of his ire. That the Distinguished Scholars were offended by this decision is a running thread throughout the letter.

In its demonstration of anger at this insult, the letter draws upon several different discursive strategies, such as signals to ethos, insinuations of repercussive actions, and binary thinking regarding the outcome of the decision. The insult felt by the Distinguished Scholars is a direct effect of the Executive Committee's decision to change the selection process for the award—an action that Zarefsky emphatically labels as "one of the biggest mistakes [he has] seen" in the second paragraph of the letter. Before calling the decision a mistake, however, Zarefsky makes several rhetorical moves to boost his ethos and lend credence to his position. For example, he recalls that he has "been a member of NCA for 51 years and [has] had the privilege of serving the organization as president, director of two boards, member of the Legislative Assembly for multiple terms, chair of a division, and chair of several committees and task forces." By establishing his experience working within the organization and positioning himself as a

longtime member, Zarefsky presents himself as someone intimately acquainted with the inner workings of the organization and qualified to speak on—and critique—administrative decisions such as the one at hand. He goes on to acknowledge that the NCA “often has made good decisions. Sometimes it has made errors but has had the good sense to correct them.” This statement, coupled with his previous declaration of experience, works to present Zarefsky as attempting to act in good faith in his decision to call attention to this “mistake” made by the NCA Executive Committee, while also inviting the committee to exercise that “good sense” in rectifying the situation.

Zarefsky also highlights how this decision, or “disastrous error,” is problematic because of several reasons, aside from just insulting the members of the group (the letter explicitly mentions an insult or offending action at least five times). He notes how this insult from the Executive Committee is “compounded by [their] failure to consult with any of [the Distinguished Scholars] in advance,” as well as their failure to “consult with Mark Knapp, the founder and principal donor of this award.” Zarefsky contends that if the Executive Committee had addressed the lack of diverse representation within the group by first meeting with the Distinguished Scholars, they would be “aware of the depth of attention [the Distinguished Scholars] have devoted to this topic over the years or the measures [they] have proposed to produce a more diverse pool of nominees without distorting the selection process.” However, the fact that the Distinguished Scholars have devoted attention to solving the group’s lack of diversity and inclusion for years (12 years, according to Muir) and no real result has come from it seems to be unacknowledged. Thus, the letter confirms the exact problem that caused the Executive Committee to change the selection process for the award in the first place.

Although Zarefsky makes it a point to first address the “egregious insult” the Distinguished Scholars felt by the Executive Committee’s action, he also notes how the decision “will compromise the selection process itself, since no scholarly credentials are stipulated for members of the new selection committee that the Leadership Development Council is charged to appoint.” Since the Distinguished Scholars themselves will no longer be able to select new members, Zarefsky et al. are concerned that the caliber of the group will be detrimentally affected. The letter further states that it is erroneous that this selection committee is “charged specifically to name a diverse group of Distinguished Scholars, not as the happy byproduct of fair review of all candidates in a rich pool but as an a priori instruction,” which it claims is “the only such specific instruction that is stipulated in Trevor’s report.” The juxtaposition that the letter sets up between a “fair review” process and an “a priori instruction” to select members of particular groups is more fervently expressed in Medhurst’s editorial analyzed in the next section. This binary thinking between the relationship of diversity and merit is characteristic not only of the texts examined in this corpus but of other concerns in academia as well.

It is additionally problematic that the letter calls the “claim that the [Distinguished Scholar] selection [process] will now ‘resemble’ the other NCA awards” a “red herring.” Zarefsky argues that this award “was never intended to resemble other awards” and instead was designed to resemble “the process by which those who have achieved the rank of full professor evaluate colleagues for tenure and promotion.” Similar to the unrealized acknowledgement of the lack of results after trying to make the Distinguished Scholars more diverse for “years,” the letter here, albeit unknowingly, admits to a structural flaw within the award’s selection process. The lack of women and scholars of

color in tenured and high-ranking positions in academia is well documented in current research.²⁶ Studies show that even though women working in academia have generally achieved higher levels of education than men, they hold a disproportionately lower number of prestigious and stable positions, and scholars of color are at an even greater disadvantage.

The closing of the letter is characterized by demands and implied threats if the proposed rectifying actions from the Distinguished Scholars are not taken. Earlier within the letter, after condemning the Executive Committee for not considering the wishes of the award's founder, Zarefsky notes this oversight as "not inspir[ing] confidence in NCA's stewardship of philanthropic gifts." This statement is laden with the implication that future monetary donations from himself or other members of the Distinguished Scholars may be withheld, negatively impacting the organization's sustainability. However, the second to last paragraph of the letter shifts into outlining specific actions to be taken by the Executive Committee and then repercussions if those actions are not fulfilled. Zarefsky tells the Executive Committee that in order to "correct this disastrous error," they must "restor[e] the practice that prevailed before the EC's actions, ... tak[e] seriously the recommendations proposed by the Distinguished Scholars at their meeting in Salt Lake City, and ... apologiz[e] to the Distinguished Scholars whom [their] action has alienated from the Association." Laden in the issuance of this command lies a certain level of institutional privilege and power held by the Distinguished Scholars.

²⁶ For example, see the American Council on Education's *Pipelines, Pathways, and Institutional Leadership: An Update on the Status of Women in Higher Education* (2017).

In the final paragraph, the letter attempts to put weight behind the aforementioned requests by naming possible repercussions if the Executive Committee does not act according to the Distinguished Scholars' wishes. For example, Zarefsky muses,

Despite the intensity of my convictions on this matter, I have not yet decided what actions I will take personally in response. I hope that I will not need to. There are metaphysical problems with an attempt to resign either as a past president or as a life member. But there are other tangible ways in which I can make clear how dissonant the EC's action is with my own values and principles.

Considering the prior warning of a halt to philanthropic gifts made to the organization, it is probable that the "tangible ways" he mentions here refers to monetary donations—which the Distinguished Scholars and other senior members of the organization undoubtedly contribute a substantial portion of. However, Zarefsky closes the letter by again stating his "hope" that no disciplinary actions toward the Executive Committee or the NCA will need to be taken, if the "weight of [his] argument and the recognition of the intense ill will [they] have aroused will impel [them] to take the appropriate corrective action without delay."

Medhurst's Editorial

Medhurst's editorial was circulated after Zarefsky's initial letter to the NCA Executive Committee was sent, but it undoubtedly drew greater critical attention from the field. While Zarefsky's letter focuses mainly on the indignation and offense felt collectively by the Distinguished Scholars as a result of the Executive Committee's actions, Medhurst's editorial—while acknowledging the perceived "attack" against the Distinguished Scholars—is predominantly focused on what he describes as "prioritizing diversity in place of intellectual merit." Throughout the editorial, Medhurst sets up a binary between "diversity" and "identity" on one hand, and "intellectual" or "scholarly

merit” on the other. This finding has been reported by other scholars who have critically examined the editorial, such as Mohan Dutta and various other NCA members and caucuses, but this chapter will use CDA to critically examine how the presentation of this binary works to discursively maintain and reproduce discrimination within the organization.

Medhurst begins his editorial by simultaneously flexing his ethos and qualifying his forthcoming position. He states, “Over the past 22 years, I have seldom used the pages of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* to make editorial statements. I have not done so because I wanted to avoid the politicization that inevitably accompanies strong positions on important issues.” The opening sentence serves to establish Medhurst’s longtime presence within the field and his control over one of its reputable journals. However, Medhurst also uses this statement to position himself as acting in good faith, attempting to secure his audience’s trust from the outset of the editorial. He reassures the reader that making politicizing statements is uncharacteristic of his behavior and that he has not abused his power as editor over the past couple of decades in an attempt to make his forthcoming “strong position” more palatable. This rhetorical strategy of qualifying his actions or words before presenting them to the reader is a strategy utilized by Medhurst throughout the course of the editorial and often perhaps induces the opposite of the intended response—especially when coupled with the condescending tone that underlies the text.

Switching from first person singular to first person plural, Medhurst then attempts to present himself and the editorship of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* as open minded and

accepting of individuals from various backgrounds and experiences.²⁷ He claims, “The pages of our journal have been open to all perspectives—left, right, and center—and scholars of all identities—gay and straight, men and women, black and white and brown, believer and atheist, Christians, Jews, and other faith traditions, graduate students and full professors, and even a couple of undergraduates.” It is interesting to note that in presenting what he claims to be representative of “all perspectives,” Medhurst is often working in binaries: gay and straight, men and women, believer and atheist, etc. This binary thinking will prove to be even more problematic as the editorial unfolds. In a further attempt to present himself and the journal as inclusive, Medhurst makes the following claim: “We recently received a submission from a scholar who identifies as trans.” He goes on to say, “That scholar will receive the same consideration as any other—her scholarship will be judged on its merits, not on the identity category of its author. And that's the way it should be.” These last two statements serve to set up a straw man argument in which Medhurst is able to present himself in a positive light (as someone who selects journal submissions based solely on their quality) while circumventing the actual issue raised by the Executive Committee and their reason for changing the selection process for the award (a lack of diverse representation in the membership of the Distinguished Scholars).

After establishing “the way it should be” and proving that he and the editorial board of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* have a history of acting with propriety, Medhurst then calls out the Executive Committee as not acting according to what he deems to be

²⁷ Although Medhurst claims in this editorial that he consulted with seven members of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*’ editorial board regarding its content, he later apologizes to the editorial board for speaking on their behalf without first consulting the entire group.

conventionally accepted standards. He claims, “Unfortunately, a recent policy change by the Executive Committee (EC) of the National Communication Association (NCA) is based on precisely the opposite premise—that identity ought to control in areas where it has historically not been prioritized.” Aside from critiquing the actions of the Executive Committee and distorting the new selection process for the Distinguished Scholar award, this statement also acknowledges the exact issue that caused the committee to strip the Distinguished Scholars of their selection power: the fact that attention to “identity” or diversity (or, the lack thereof) has not previously been considered. Medhurst then claims, “The change is being pursued under the banner of ‘diversity,’ which is, of course a god-term of our age, and rightly so.” The use of scare quotes in this statement serves to undercut the significance of the term, yet Medhurst follows it with an affirmative statement (“and rightly so”) in an attempt to position himself as a concerned individual. In fact, he explicitly states that he “believe[s] in diversity,” and condescendingly acknowledges that the reader “probably [does], too.”

After attempting to establish his ethos and assure his reader of his good intentions, Medhurst begins to assert the “strong position on important issues” that he warned about in his opening statement:

But there is a difference in trying to promote diversity within a scholarly consensus about intellectual merit and prioritizing diversity in place of intellectual merit. There is a difference in running an issue of a journal that features two female scholars, a black scholar, and a graduate student, all of whose work has been accepted through the process of blind review versus saying to oneself, “I need to publish some female scholars and black scholars and graduate students so everyone will know that I believe in diversity.” Along that pathway lies disaster, for once we substitute identity for scholarly merit as the first consideration, we have lost our reason for being academics.

Within this paragraph, Medhurst begins to set up a straw man argument in which he will accuse the Executive Committee of “prioritizing diversity in place of intellectual merit” through changing the selection process for the Distinguished Scholar award. However, the updated procedure for 2019 still contains the original language that “a distinguished research career is operationally defined as a person who has at least 20 complete years of scholarly contributions since their Ph.D. was awarded. Breadth and quantity should be considered in the selection process, but it should not in any way override considerations of depth and quality” (“2019”). The newly added language to the procedure simply reorients the selection process to align with the organization’s mission statement on diversity, equity, and inclusion: “NCA supports inclusiveness and diversity among our faculties, within our membership, in the workplace, and in the classroom; NCA supports and promotes policies that fairly encourage this diversity and inclusion” (“2019”).

Medhurst distorts the argument at hand by accusing the Executive Committee of emphasizing diversity as the sole criterion in choosing new recipients of the award. Not many scholars would dispute that there is a difference between publishing work from historically minoritized groups that has been peer-reviewed versus publishing certain scholars for the sake of appearing to be inclusive. By setting up this faulty comparison, Medhurst attempts to make his position seem irrefutable. However, as Mohan Dutta has pointed out, there are scholars of color, such as Thomas Nakayama, who qualify for the Distinguished Scholar award, and the problem lies in the fact that he and others are not being nominated or selected. This is the issue that the Executive Committee aimed to address when updating the selection process for the award.

After outlining this straw man argument, Medhurst critiques the Executive Committee for going against what he has set up to be “the way it should be”: “This is precisely what the EC of NCA is currently in the process of doing.” Medhurst then recounts his history of the events that led up to the change in the selection process of the award, which he argues “began with an attack on the association's own Distinguished Scholars.” It is clear that Medhurst is either unaware or unable to admit that the controversy began years earlier with increasing calls for the organization to become more diverse and inclusive. In his brief history of the award’s selection and nomination process, Medhurst, like Zarefsky before him, is quick to point out the fact that even when the nomination pool for the award was expanded to include all NCA members with the hope of addressing the lack of diversity in the group, no real results came about. After shifting the blame to NCA members more broadly, Medhurst concludes his history lesson with “These are the facts”—continuing his attempt throughout the editorial to present what he views as irrefutable truths. This shift of blame from the Distinguished Scholars to the organization as a whole is also belabored elsewhere in the editorial.

Medhurst then identifies what he describes as “accusations” the Executive Committee has made against the Distinguished Scholars: “scapegoating the entire group of NCA Distinguished Scholars, blaming them for the lack of diverse nominations, and implicitly accusing them of racism for not selecting more people of color.” The personal critique felt by Medhurst as a result of the Executive Committee’s action is evident within these statements (he uses “attack” and “attacking” a total of seven times throughout the editorial) and is reminiscent of the sentiments of Zarefsky’s collectively signed letter to the committee on March 29. However, Medhurst attempts to couch his

disdain for being stripped of selection power in a larger argument that he deems will be more relevant to the field broadly—the issue of prioritizing diversity of intellectual merit—to garner more support for his position. It is clear that the Distinguished Scholars’ response to the decision is driven, in part, by the perceived personal criticism they felt to their character and integrity as respected scholars within the field. Understanding the source of the Distinguished Scholars’ anger will be important to understanding the nature of the rupture itself and will be discussed in the next section of this text.

The above set of accusations comes with “multiple problems” that Medhurst clearly outlines for his reader. These problems include placing all the blame for the group’s lack of diversity on the Distinguished Scholars when the nomination pool has been opened up to the entire organization for the last several years and removing the Distinguished Scholars’ “one and only remaining responsibility and removing from the selection process the field’s most qualified judges of scholarly merit.” Allowing an appointed committee to select new members of the Distinguished Scholars, according to Medhurst, is additionally problematic because he claims there are no “scholarly credentials” for these committee members; Zarefsky also noted this “problem” in his letter. However, these problems seem to be of a lesser order when considered with what Medhurst has to say next. He claims,

In attacking their own Distinguished Scholars, [the EC] has apparently overlooked the fact that most of the current group come from Research 1 and Research 2 institutions, where most of the minority, female, and other diverse populations obtained their doctoral degrees. It is the very group that the EC is attacking and implicitly accusing of racism that mentored, and taught, and advised, and published with the scholars they are now being accused of abandoning.

The language used in these statements is laden with white savior industrial complex²⁸ and, as is characteristic of this editorial, attempts to reassure the reader of Medhurst's commitment to matters of diversity and inclusion. However, it is also important to acknowledge the "implicit accusation of racism" that the Distinguished Scholars felt as a result of the Executive Committee's decision and its role in the creation of their responses.

However, the crux of Medhurst's argument, which also happens to be the most controversial statement within the editorial, received the most backlash from the field. In identifying his position, he asserts,

The EC chose to attack the Distinguished Scholars first because that group is the epitome of intellectual merit. The attack currently being waged is not just on the Distinguished Scholars. The attack is on using intellectual merit as the chief criterion, not only for the selection of Distinguished Scholars, but also for the selection of journal editors, and presumably, the selection of what those newly diversified journal editors will choose to publish—it is an attack on the very foundations of Communication as a research discipline.

There are myriad problems associated with the accusations leveled here by Medhurst. For example, he charges the Executive Committee with "attacking" the Distinguished Scholars based on the premise that the "group is the epitome of intellectual merit." Given the critiques against the group for its lack of diversity, it is problematic to label the exclusionary group as such. If that statement wasn't insensitive enough, however, Medhurst goes on to argue that the "attack" is also against "using intellectual merit as the chief criterion" for selecting journal editors. He warns against "what those newly

²⁸ White savior industrial complex is a term coined by author Teju Cole. A "white savior" can be defined as "a white person who seeks to help nonwhite people, not out of a true sense of altruism, but in a manner that is seen as self-serving. The underlying assumption is that nonwhite people in need of aid are helpless to solve their own problems and can only be 'saved' with the assistance of a white person" (Sheposh).

diversified journal editors will choose to publish”—implying that the “diversified” editors will not publish the same type or caliber of scholarship that the field is accustomed to from the “epitome of intellectual merit.” Additionally, the last statement, that the current attack being waged is “on the very foundations of Communication as a research discipline,” is further evidence that Medhurst is attempting to hold on to the established systems and practices that the NCA was trying to upend when changing the selection process for the Distinguished Scholar award.

After demonstrating that he has the support of the majority of the Distinguished Scholars, Medhurst moves into addressing his major concern as a result of the recent turn of events: “what sort of organization the NCA will be” if identity is prioritized over scholarly merit. Having built up to this sentiment throughout the course of the editorial, Medhurst now poses a series of rhetorical questions to warn against the repercussions that will occur if the Executive Committee’s actions are implemented organization-wide. He muses, for instance, what sort of organization the NCA will become if, when selecting editors for a journal, “the color of one's skin or one's gender trumps everything else.” He asks, “Will we be a field in which journal submissions are judged by competent reviewers who are blind to the identity of the author, or a field where editorial boards are filled with the ‘right’ number of people from the ‘right’ categories?” In doing so, however, Medhurst sets up a binary between identity/diversity and intellectual/scholarly merit, implying that the two ideas are mutually exclusive, and it is this faulty logic that drew so much critical ire from the field. That Medhurst cannot envision a reality in which diversity and scholarly merit are coherent concepts is indicative of a larger concern of discrimination and exclusion within the field’s institutions and practices.

Acknowledging that his values and motives may be challenged, Medhurst makes it a point to share his stance on issues of diversity and inclusion: “I strongly support diversity and recognize that social, cultural, and racial perspectives make a difference in what is studied and how it is studied. The work of the field has been enriched as it has become more diverse.” However, if he is sincere then it is puzzling as to why the Distinguished Scholars have not “been enriched” by becoming more diverse in their membership. Regardless, Medhurst assures the reader that the Distinguished Scholars, “[he] is sure,” share this belief. Instead of ending his editorial with his statement of support, Medhurst again reiterates the point that he and the other Distinguished Scholars “support diversity, but not at the price of displacing scholarly merit as the chief criterion for selecting Distinguished Scholars, choosing journal editors, and evaluating research.”

To conclude his editorial, Medhurst goes so far as to call on the entire organization to stand up in support of his position, even calling for members to write to the Executive Committee with their concerns. He asserts, “Only the concerted effort of the entire NCA membership can stop identity from displacing scholarly merit as the governing norm of the discipline.” It seems to be lost on Medhurst that scholars of color and other historically underrepresented groups have been fighting to have their voices heard for years, yet he expects to move an entire organization to action with just one post on a disciplinary listserv. The level of perceived institutional privilege in this text is extremely telling of the power dynamics that exist within the field and is indicative of the need for structural change—the type of change that the Executive Committee was seeking to implement when this rupture began.

Hauser's RSA Statement

Although many organizations within Communication and adjacent fields published responses to this rupture, I chose to analyze statements from the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA) because of its prominence within the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies. Additionally, I chose to include the personal statement from the Executive Director of RSA, Gerard Hauser, in my corpus because he is also one of the Distinguished Scholars who cosigned Zarefsky's letter dated March 29. His statement, which was published on RSA's website on June 14, 2019, represents a *reactive* response from a member of the Distinguished Scholars. In other words, the field had already begun to respond negatively to Medhurst's editorial and to a lesser extent the Zarefsky letter and the collectively signed letter dated April 2, and Hauser had the opportunity to gauge how the field reacted to these texts in crafting his own response to the controversy. Therefore, his statement reads as more thoughtful, reflective, and most importantly, less angry. Given the timing of his statement, it seems that it was published in an attempt to address his role in the controversy before a critical eye turned to RSA, especially in light of the backlash that Medhurst and his journal *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* suffered. Although Hauser's statement reaffirms his and RSA's commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion, the RSA President and Board of Directors published another statement a few days following Hauser's reiterating the organization's values.

Unlike Zarefsky and Medhurst who started their responses with strong assertions, Hauser begins his statement in a matter-of-fact way by acknowledging the "controversy" that is currently embroiling the field and his involvement in it. He remarks, "The last few days have witnessed controversy over a letter written by the Distinguished Scholars of

the National Communication Association, of which I am one, in response to a change in the process for selecting its Distinguished Scholars, of which I was a signatory.”

Although Medhurst’s editorial had already begun to circulate widely online and receive critical attention, Hauser does not immediately address its uptake. Instead, he frames the issue in terms of taking responsibility for his own actions. It is also worth noting that from the outset of the statement Hauser’s tone is less combative than those of his predecessors.

After setting the context for his writing, Hauser, like Zarefsky and Medhurst, offers a brief history and background of the Distinguished Scholar award, working his way up to 2005 when he became a member of the group—a year in which “the 52 honorees included only 8 white women and no scholars of color.” Acknowledging this “imbalance” within the group of Distinguished Scholars, Hauser argues that “several measures” (without explicitly naming them) were put into place to address this issue, one of which was allowing all NCA members to nominate scholars for the award. He claims that the results of this action “have been positive but not stellar in the case of women scholars, with 14 of the 50 selected since then being white women, but only one male scholar of color,” and he admits that the Executive Committee’s recent decision to appoint a committee to select new Distinguished Scholars going forward was done in order to address “this glaring absence” within the group’s demographics. In recounting the timeline of events, Hauser then conveys the heart of the debate: “The DS group took this action of being informed without consultation as a vote of no confidence in its ability to address the problem all agree exists.” That the Distinguished Scholars felt personal offense by the Executive Committee’s action is clearly represented within Zarefsky’s

letter and Medhurst's editorial, yet these two texts do not explicitly state acknowledgment of "the problem" that Hauser concedes to here—although Medhurst did make a few statements (that many interpreted as pandering) regarding his belief in diversity.

Hauser then states that the Distinguished Scholars "responded with a letter to refute the action" taken by the Executive Committee, referring to the collectively signed letter dated April 2. However, Hauser does not mention the heated Zarefsky letter that he and others endorsed on April 4 after it was sent—although that is perhaps because this letter echoes many of the same phrases and sentiments as the Zarefsky letter. He then identifies "two key responses" to the letter, one of which is Medhurst's recent editorial.

In regard to this text, Hauser asserts,

Medhurst's intended editorial, unfortunately, instantiates how a position of privilege can make us blind to the consequences of actions that reproduce that privilege. That letter has led me to reflect on my own commitments and, because I signed the DS letter and also have an official capacity in RSA, recognize this is an important moment to publicly address RSA's commitments and my own.

Although Hauser attends to the problematic nature of Medhurst's editorial, this is undoubtedly easier to see *after the fact*, given the numerous critical responses to the editorial's content. If the field hadn't called attention to the level of institutional privilege and power invested within Medhurst's text, it is worth questioning whether Hauser and the rest of the Distinguished Scholars would remain "blind to the consequences of actions that reproduce privilege," for this "position of privilege" that Hauser accuses Medhurst of demonstrating is also evident in the collectively signed letter from the Distinguished Scholars. Clearly, Hauser capitalizes on the exigency of the situation by publishing this statement in an attempt to stave off the coming controversy from targeting himself or

RSA, as he acknowledges “this is an important moment to publicly address RSA’s commitments and my own.” A few days following Hauser’s statement, RSA would publish another statement on behalf of the entire organization addressing its predominantly white, male demographics in groups such as the RSA Fellows: “This is an important moment for RSA’s officers and members to consider their own institutional practices and take ownership of a process that addresses the lack of inclusion and equity that exists across multiple levels of the Society and the manner in which power and privilege continue their exclusionary work” (“Statement”). While acknowledging important truths, it is evident that, in publishing these statements, RSA is taking measures to minimize any further damage to the organization’s reputation in the wake of this controversy with the NCA Distinguished Scholars.

Hauser also addresses his positionality as “a white male in his 70s” and the privileges that accompany such a position, and he vows to reassess that privilege “every day.” Pertaining to the current controversy, he writes, “I did not succeed in this particular case because I lost sight of the problem that transpires when a homogeneous group of predominately male and almost exclusively white scholars assess the impact and contribution of scholars whose work may address issues outside a white person’s experience.” This is an important acknowledgment—not found in the editorial or letters—of the problem that the NCA Executive Committee sought to address in revoking the Distinguished Scholars’ selection power for the award. Continuing his personal reflection, Hauser expresses,

As one who has been named a Distinguished Scholar of NCA I am less concerned with how that designation is made than I am that NCA be welcoming, supportive, open, and fair to all its members. That value can only be lived if I learn from

scholars whose research reflects the full range of lived experience. My signature on the original DS letter did not reflect that value.

Within these statements, Hauser reflects on his own value system in which he claims to regard inclusivity over his position of power to select new Distinguished Scholars and takes responsibility for his role in the controversy. He also acknowledges the importance of learning from those whose “lived experiences” are different from his own as an older white man who holds a position of institutional privilege within the field. Although Hauser’s commitments to reassess his privilege and learn from others with different positionalities are somewhat general and vague in nature, he does acknowledge the problem that exists and seems to be genuine in his approach to address his oversights.

Hauser additionally addresses his role as Executive Director of RSA and his commitments to the organization. He asserts, “it is important that my commitments to inclusivity, to a welcoming Society, and to learning from perspectives beyond my experience are reflected in my own actions and in the exercise of my influence as a person in a position to strengthen RSA in these regards.” In an attempt to demonstrate the organization’s prior commitment to inclusive practices and boost its ethos, Hauser notes how “RSA now has the most diverse board in its history.” As the organization’s Executive Director, he ensures the reader that he “strive[s] to aid the board and officers to make its processes, its committee composition, its events, and its publications reflect these values, and where there are perceived problems, to address them.” However, it is important to note that RSA has a longstanding reputation among Rhetoric and Writing Studies scholars as being representative of a boys’ club.²⁹

²⁹ A boys’ club can be defined as “any situation or organization dominated by white men and excluding women, people of color, etc.” (Macmillan).

However, just as he previously acknowledged that, as an individual, he “does not always succeed,” he concedes that “RSA is not perfect; it is a work in progress.” As an example of this lack of perfection, Hauser notes how “two weeks ago the board charged its president to examine its awards structures to address concerns of bias.” This statement is further evidence of the organization’s attempt to do damage control in the wake of the controversy, as this action took place after the collectively signed letter was sent to the NCA Executive Committee. Without Medhurst’s editorial and its subsequent violent reception from the field, prominent organizations such as RSA perhaps would not have felt the need to reassess the lack of inclusion within their memberships and how their practices and policies reinforce this lack.

Hauser concludes his statement not with an apology for signing the letter in question but with an expression of regret for its repercussions: “Regardless of my intent at the time, I regret that signing the DS letter was not conducive to expressing the principles that I value or the aims that I seek as Executive Director of RSA.” By taking this position, Hauser is standing by his conviction that the Executive Committee should have first consulted with the Distinguished Scholars about the decision to revoke their selection power, but he seemingly apologizes for the fact that signing the letter caused some scholars to question his commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion within his organization. Gauging from the field’s reaction (or lack thereof), Hauser’s statement was much more palatable than the other texts.

Summary of CDA Readings

The texts in this corpus represent three different stages within the larger rupture of NCA: the collectively signed letter from Zarefsky represents a response at the outset of

the controversy, Medhurst's editorial represents the text that acted as the breaking point that sparked the larger controversy, and Hauser's personal statement represents part of the dialogue (specifically, a form of damage control) surrounding the event. The sentiments expressed by Medhurst and Zarefsky in their respective texts represent those whom Communication scholar Mohan Dutta has described as the "old White guard of the discipline," in other words, those resistant to change. As the CDA readings demonstrate, the language used by Medhurst and Zarefsky is embedded with representations of institutional privilege and power—from their positions as older, white men professors with years of experience in the field to their standings as Distinguished Scholars, a group that Medhurst describes as "the epitome of intellectual merit." Additionally, Medhurst's and Zarefsky's admissions that the Distinguished Scholars felt "attacked" and "insulted" are indicative of what happens when long-standing systems are challenged by critiques that bring attention to the system's inherent exclusion of outside members. Medhurst's editorial, arguably the most problematic of the texts, provides an example of binary thinking that devalues the work of historically underrepresented scholars. While Hauser's statement is less accusatory and more reflective than the other two texts, as it explicitly acknowledges the lack of diverse representation in the Distinguished Scholars' demographics as a serious problem, it is important to keep in mind that this statement was published in *response* to the already unfolding controversy.

The CDA readings also indicate a communication barrier between the Distinguished Scholars and the NCA Executive Committee. As evident through the collectively endorsed Zarefsky letter, the Distinguished Scholars' anger at being stripped of the selection power for the award seemed to cloud their initial response to the

Executive Committee. This anger was coupled with the insult the Distinguished Scholars felt from being implicitly accused of racism and sexism. Subsequent responses from the Distinguished Scholars (such as the statement from Hauser) recognized the lack of diversity within their membership as a problem, but because of heated emotions they were unable to keep this issue at the forefront of their initial response. Muir acknowledged prior issues of communication between the Distinguished Scholars and the Executive Committee in his response to the group on May 8, 2019, and perhaps this played a role in contributing to the inception of this rupture.

Because CDA is a method used to enact social change within discourses and ultimately the power structures that they are invested with, in the next section I will explore how we can take the knowledge learned from this controversy and apply it toward a possible solution for minimizing the damage associated with these types of ruptures. As a field that devotes itself to the theory and practice of effective communication, we would do well to demonstrate an understanding of how discursive conflicts can be resolved using effective and practical means. Such open and critical conversations are necessary if we are to truly achieve a diverse and inclusive field.

Discussion

The final section of this text is divided into the following categories: 1) larger impacts of the event on NCA and pertinent fields such as Communication and Rhetoric and Writing Studies and 2) strategies for moving forward and learning from the rupture. This rupture had significant, and likely long lasting, impacts on what it means to actively promote diversity and inclusion within our organizations and what happens when we don't. While not every repercussion of the controversy is explored here, my hope is that

we can learn from this rupture—why it happened, how it happened, how it continues to reverberate within our communities—in order to challenge the field to be the best possible version of itself.

Larger Impacts of the Event on the Organization and Field

Undoubtedly, this rupture within NCA brought about greater attention to the lack of diversity and inclusion in Communication and adjacent fields such as Rhetoric and Writing Studies. As a result of this controversy, several scholars and organizations in the field began to take repercussive actions, most often in the form of backlash, boycott, or policy change. In direct response to Medhurst's editorial, for instance, scholars serving on the editorial board of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* began to resign in protest, including Kirt Wilson who was supposed to guest edit an issue on "The Politics of 'Merit' in Academic Disciplines,"³⁰ and many expressed intentions of boycotting the journal altogether. A petition³¹ was created by Communication scholars that called for Medhurst's immediate resignation from *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* and for the University of Georgia to cancel the upcoming Public Address Conference (PAC) in which Medhurst was to serve as the honoree. The petition also outlined proactive steps for organizations in Communication, such as NCA, RSA, and the International Communication Association (ICA), to take in order to diversify their memberships and address the problems of hegemonic thinking exemplified in Medhurst's editorial.

³⁰ *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* featured a special issue on "Merit, Whiteness, and Privilege" edited by Amardo Rodriguez, Mohan J. Dutta, and Elizabeth F. Desnoyers-Colas in 2019.

³¹ This petition can be found on the "Communication Scholars for Transformation" Facebook group.

Perhaps surprisingly given higher ed's historical reluctance to take immediate action, the petition's requests were met with an overwhelmingly positive response. Although not immediate, Medhurst *did* resign from his journal at the end of 2019. On September 10, 2019, Rod Carveth announced Medhurst's resignation on CRTNET, concluding his post perhaps insensitively with the statement that "the next editor of Rhetoric & Public Affairs will have his/her/their work cut out for him/her/them as Dr. Medhurst set a high bar to meet." The PAC conference was also canceled, as almost half of the participants began to withdraw from the event as a result of Medhurst serving as the conference's honorary guest. In the statement sent to conference participants on June 20, the UGA Department of Communication Studies stated that "the public dialogue of the last week leads us to believe the proposed conference no longer serves the needs of the Public Address community ... and it appears that conference attendance will not support our anticipated costs" ("Statement on 2020 PAC").

The organizations outlined in the petition (NCA, RSA, and ICA) each responded with a statement addressing the controversy and the steps that it would take in order to promote a more diverse and inclusive presence within the field. Since NCA is at the heart of this rupture, I will provide a more in-depth overview of its response to the controversy and to its lack of diverse and inclusive representation. However, other organizations in adjacent fields, such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication, also posted statements in the weeks following the rupture to publicly take a stance on the controversy and support NCA's decision to change the selection process for the Distinguished Scholar award.

Despite the Distinguished Scholars' plea to rescind the new selection policy for the award, the NCA Executive Committee stood by their decision. On May 8, 2019, NCA President Star Muir penned a response letter to the Distinguished Scholars. Identifying the exigency, Muir wrote,

In response to the petitions recently delivered to the NCA Executive Committee by Professor Zarefsky, this report will offer a perspective on the concerns felt about the Distinguished Scholars award and about the recent changes made to the selection process, discuss the consultation efforts made by the Executive Committee and the National Office, and explore constraints on finding a way for all of us to move forward. ("Letter from NCA President")

These concerns include those of both the Distinguished Scholars and the larger community of NCA. It is clear that Muir attempted to establish a common ground throughout the letter and to repair some of the damage done to the working relationship between the Distinguished Scholars and the Executive Committee, while also reiterating the need for change within the organization. For example, Muir acknowledged the "anger" and "frustration" felt by the Distinguished Scholars as a result of the policy change, but he also provides an explanation for the "sources of frustration and concern" felt by the Executive Committee in an attempt to clarify why they made the change to the selection process for the award. To do so, Muir provided a timeline of the award's history, detailing the Distinguished Scholars' lack of diverse membership and the unsuccessful steps previously taken to remedy it. Muir emphasized that "after 12 years of consideration on this issue, and three years of open nominations, we are at this juncture: *104 Distinguished Scholars since 1992, 81 (78%) are males, 23 (22%) are females, and 1 (.96%) is a male of color.*"

After reaffirming NCA's commitment to diversity and inclusion, Muir outlined why the Distinguished Scholars' suggestion on how to solicit more nominations for the award was not enough to correct the lack of diversity because the "exclusionary structure" set up since the award's founding was the crux of the problem. However, Muir made it clear that "whether an individual person is racist or sexist is not at issue. Racist and sexist structures do not require individually racist and sexist people to work the way they work." This statement was in direct response to Zarefsky's allegation that "the EC has decided that [he] and over 75 of [his] most respected colleagues are prejudiced individuals who do not share NCA's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity." In his response, Muir addressed other additional concerns raised in the Zarefsky letter, such as the Executive Committee not consulting the award's founder and answering the question if the award's purpose is now solely about promoting diversity, in order to repair the relationship between the two groups.

In his response, Muir also identified ways that the organization was working to improve the selection process of the award going forward, such as planning to undertake a quality improvement assessment.³² Although the Executive Committee did not implement the petitions outlined in Zarefsky's letter, Muir's letter clearly strived to acknowledge the concerns of all parties involved (the Distinguished Scholars, the Executive Committee, the diverse membership of NCA) and to be transparent about their decision making process, in order to establish a common ground from which all could move forward together. This response seems to be indicative of the clear channels of

³² See the "NCA Executive Committee Statement: NCA Moving Forward, 7-18-19" for other ways the organization has pledged to take specific action to promote diversity and inclusion in its membership.

communication that were needed prior to the controversy, which Muir also acknowledged.

Moving Forward

Regarding the NCA controversy, Terry Newman ironically notes in “The Culture War in Communication Studies” that “these scholars are experts at communication, apparently—just not with each other.” This statement begs the question as to how intellectuals who study the practice of rhetoric and communication as their lives’ work can find themselves involved in such logjam exchanges. While the answers to such a question are multiple, and undoubtedly include the current social and political climate in the U.S. in which we often listen to respond as opposed to listen to understand, one possible solution to resolving these types of communication barriers is a greater emphasis on stasis theory. With origins in classical rhetoric, stasis theory is a heuristic that provides interlocutors with four stasis questions (fact, definition, quality, and policy) that help to find the point of disagreement between them. In other words, stasis theory can be used to find common ground in a dispute. As Carter notes, “the principle of stasis not only encompasses the temporary impasse of opposing positions and the action that is sparked to overcome that impasse, but it also provides a *direction* for action—toward the resolution of the conflict” (100).

As demonstrated through the texts in this corpus and the larger conversation surrounding the controversy within NCA, stasis had not been reached between the Distinguished Scholars and the Executive Committee regarding the former’s lack of diverse membership. Most if not all the Distinguished Scholars acknowledged the lack of diversity within the group and agreed that it was a problem that needed to be addressed.

However, it is clear through Zarefsky's endorsed letter and Medhurst's editorial that the Distinguished Scholars and the NCA Executive Committee disagreed as to the *cause* of the group's homogeneity, as well as what corrective action or policy change should be taken to remedy it. Perhaps if a critical conversation outlining the exclusionary structure of the award's selection process, such as the one initiated by Muir in his letter to the Distinguished Scholars on May 8, had taken place in the years prior to the rupture, a satisfactory resolution could have been reached sooner—with less damaging effects.

While this rupture did bring about critical attention to the lack of diverse representation in Communication and Rhetoric and Writing Studies, effectively “canceling” Medhurst and many associations he had within academia, time will tell if these repercussions are long-lasting and if relationships (such as the one between the Distinguished Scholars and the NCA Executive Committee) can be repaired. While reflecting on the occurrence of this rupture, it is important to note that the controversy had significant impact on individuals and organizations not directly involved in the matter. Racially minoritized scholars were undoubtedly hurt by the editorial's message. To no fault of their own, UGA lost funding and over a year's worth of preparation for a conference that was trying to “find a slate of diverse scholars to participate in eight plenary sessions” (“Statement on 2020 PAC”). Instead of having to cancel the conference, perhaps the event could have instead been used as an opportunity for learning and critical dialogue to address the lack of inclusion within the field and its communities.

Whether one agrees with the cancellation of the PAC conference and the other indirect outcomes of the controversy, it is clear that this rupture within NCA was intensified due to impediments to communication channels between the Distinguished

Scholars and the NCA Executive Committee, as well as a lack of stasis regarding the cause of the former's lack of diverse membership. Engaging in critical conversations about the group's homogeneity, which according to Muir is a direct result of the exclusionary structure inherent within the award's original selection process, would perhaps have allowed the NCA to reach a satisfactory result sooner. As practitioners of rhetoric, we must be exemplars of effective communicators, for if we do not actually use the strategies that we study and teach to our students, we run the risk of erroneously portraying to outsiders that our field has no practical use.

Chapter 5: Re-Envisioning Our Disciplinary Spaces

The three data sets examined in this project—the controversy surrounding the selection process for the NCA Distinguished Scholar award, the mansplaining accusation within the WPA-L and the subsequent list conversation, and the creation of the new disciplinary listserv nextGEN—are indicative of the wave of digital ruptures that occurred within Rhetoric and Writing Studies following the 2017 #MeToo movement. While this research project is not an exhaustive study of these types of ruptures nor the digital spaces in which they occurred, it offers a starting point for examining the impact that such events have had on the field in light of growing calls for diversification and inclusion. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine these ruptures provides insight into how institutional power structures embedded within language serve to discriminate against or exclude certain members within prominent discourse communities in our discipline. In the rupture within the NCA, for instance, Medhurst's editorial and the collectively signed letter from the Distinguished Scholars provide discursive examples of what happens when long standing institutions or processes are threatened with change in relation to diversifying membership. The statement from Hauser on behalf of RSA additionally represents a response from the field that occurred in the wake of the controversy as a form of damage control. LaFrance's accusation of mansplaining within the WPA-L and the rupture that followed demonstrate the ability of language to enact change to the rules of engagement within a discourse community. Like the NCA rupture, this discursive event was met with various attempts to challenge the newfound agency of previously silenced members, as demonstrated through the calls for tone policing, moving the conversation elsewhere, or shutting it down altogether. Lastly, the creation of

the new disciplinary listserv nextGEN as a safe space for graduate students acutely represents the need for alternative disciplinary spaces that meet the varied needs of the diverse group of scholars within our field. Through the application of feminist discursive strategies such as rhetorical listening and invitational rhetoric, we can take proactive steps to foster inclusive cultures within our disciplinary spaces and, when needed, retroactively use these strategies to mitigate some of the hurt and damage to community members in a rupture's aftermath.

Framework for Discursively Mapping Ruptures

By applying CDA to examine these ruptures, I have inductively developed a framework for mapping what happens rhetorically during such an event. The rupture framework (see Figure 1 below) is comprised of four major components: 1) a catalyst prompting the dialogue, 2) a text that acts as a breaking point, 3) the larger dialogue surrounding the rupturing event, and 4) the impact of the event on the discourse community and the field. As my contribution to the field, I offer this framework to scholars to help identify ruptures within their respective disciplines and communities. The goal of applying such a framework is to serve as a starting point of inquiry into understanding why and how these ruptures occur and continue to impact our academic communities. Aligning with the tenets of CDA, this framework is meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, as I invite scholars to adapt its flexibility to meet the needs of their respective discourse communities and unique rupturing events. Using this framework and the accompanying heuristic in a subsequent section, scholars can begin to critically examine the “pressure points” within their own digital disciplinary platforms

and use the examples discussed throughout this project to decide on the most productive course for moving the community forward in the aftermath of a rupture.

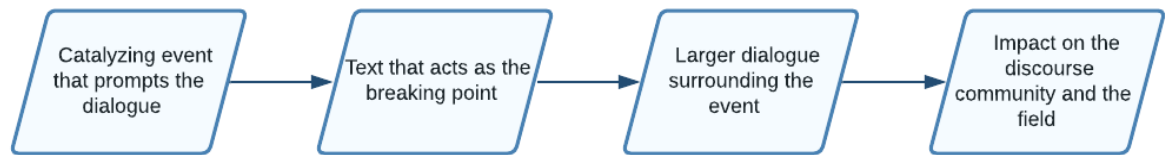


Figure IX: Framework for discursively mapping ruptures

Applying this discursive framework allows us to see how the ruptures resolved in different ways: boycotts, backlash, and calls for resignations; formations of new disciplinary spaces and the dissolution of others; and agency given to some members of the community while simultaneously being taken away from others. The varied impacts of the ruptures are due in part to the severity of the individual ruptures, the occurrence of previous rupturing events within the platform and/or community, and the ethos markers of the individuals involved in them. In the next section, I will review the impacts of each rupture and then discuss the implications of these outcomes in order to provide greater insight into the nature of these events and the overall effect they have had on our digital disciplinary spaces.

Assessing the Impact: Different Paths to Healing

In addition to providing a way to visualize and label the aftermath of the ruptures, the discursive framework also illuminates the level of impact the ruptures had on their respective communities and the discipline more broadly. For example, some ruptures sparked immediate change within the platform while others took time to accumulate strength through a series of problematic events affecting more and more individuals.

Some ruptures resulted in tangible, widespread repercussions on the discipline, such as with the “cancellation” of Medhurst and the academic journal which he edited.³³ The following sections outline key outcomes of the three ruptures discussed in this project as well as what lessons can be gleaned from the different trajectories that each respective community took post-rupture.

WPA-L

As a result of LaFrance’s accusation of mansplaining within the WPA-L in October 2018, this particular discourse community witnessed a renegotiation of genre conventions in which previous lurkers were enabled to become active participants and gain rhetorical agency within the list. This rhetorical event illustrates the ability of language to enact change to the rules of engagement within a discourse community. This rupture also resulted in challenges to the newfound agency of previously silenced members through attempts at tone policing, moving the conversation to another platform, and shutting it down altogether. Additionally, the mansplaining rupture contributed to the eventual abandonment of the WPA-L in favor of the new WritingStudies-L which includes participation guidelines and heavy moderation in response to the previous list’s uncensored and sometimes hostile environment.

The lessons to be gleaned from this rupture are additionally as impactful as the dissolution of the WPA-L and the creation of new rules for participation. For instance, this particular rupture demonstrated the fact that the needs and expectations of the WPA-

³³ Using Britt Starr’s definition provided in *Peitho*, “cancel culture” is “the contemporary American cultural practice of shaming and/or ostracizing a member of the public or of a particular community—professional or otherwise—for making offensive remarks, for engaging in offensive behavior, or for having remarked or behaved offensively in the past, whether intentionally or not.”

L list members varied in terms of issues relating to engagement, safety, and conflict resolution. List members were clearly at odds regarding who should be able to actively participate in the list, and members possessing institutional power were unconcerned or unaware that contingent members of the field lacked a safe and welcoming space within its digital walls. Because list members disagreed on the best course of action to respond to problematic events within the space, an alternative disciplinary platform was created for some members of the group while the original listserv remained for those who preferred to “stay and attempt to reform the space into something more hospitable” (“Where We Are” 203).

In contrast to the March 2018 rupture that resulted in the creation of nextGEN, the mansplaining rupture resulted in *immediate* action taken by WPA-L members through the disruption to genre conventions. There are several possible reasons behind this outcome but two that seem most likely. First, the wheels of change were perhaps already in motion given that the nextGEN rupture had recently occurred in March. By the time of LaFrance’s mansplaining accusation in October, some list members were becoming more disgruntled at the unwelcoming environment that was continuing to grow within the WPA-L. Second, and arguably more likely, the mansplaining rupture involved the support and advocacy of higher-ranking faculty members and well-known scholars in the field. Lending their ethos to the movement undoubtedly contributed to the traction the conversation gained in and off the list. This second factor illustrates an important takeaway from the impact of these ruptures within the WPA-L: the need for scholars with institutional power and privilege to become actively involved in ensuring contingent and

historically underrepresented scholars have their support, especially when engaging in public dialogue.

However, the act of advocating on the behalf of others is not without complications. In their discussion of advocacy as a strategy for women to demonstrate their ethos, Ryan et al. note, “Since advocacy requires continuous ethical consideration and adjustments to power, relationships, experiences, and imagined versus real needs, rhetors speaking from privileged positions must take special care when they speak for others to avoid misrepresenting or co-opting others for their own ends” (111-2).

However, adopting feminist discursive strategies such as rhetorical listening and eavesdropping will provide inroads into how to successfully navigate the complexities associated with advocating for historically underrepresented groups. For example, by purposefully allowing space for more vulnerable members of the community to be heard, members with different vantage points can become better attuned to their needs.

The eventual dissolution of the WPA-L in its original form is indicative of the need to periodically assess the usefulness of our disciplinary communities—especially those spaces such as academic listservs where the stakes are high due to public interactions between faculty. The newly created WritingStudies-L and its implementation of participation guidelines and moderation board are conceivably the result of a longstanding community no longer being able to productively serve its members. Due to its previous discriminatory practices, the WPA-L had heard from the same select voices for too long, and perhaps the social justice reckonings in the wake of the #MeToo movement were just the exigence needed for new voices to start speaking up. The former version of the WPA-L ceased to be sustainable, as the needs of its members had changed

dramatically since the list was first created in 1991 and served around 150 members (Flaherty). The listserv having outgrown its usefulness is also demonstrated through the fact that only 213 of the 4,344 list subscribers participated in a survey administered by the WPA-L Reimagining Working Group in 2019. These figures indicate that around 95% of list subscribers were inactive at this time.

nextGEN

Like the mansplaining rupture, the rupture that occurred within the WPA-L in March 2018 was one of the many events that contributed to the list's eventual move to the WritingStudies-L. The most impactful outcome of the March 2018 rupture, however, was the creation of the new disciplinary listserv for graduate students, *nextGEN*.

Although graduate students created *nextGEN* to provide a welcoming space for the “next generation” of Rhetoric and Writing Studies scholars, no digital platform is without its conflicts. However, the participation guidelines created by the startup members of *nextGEN* serve as an effective example of how a community implemented rules of engagement that met their specific needs by explicitly prohibiting certain behaviors.

Notably, *nextGEN* also published a response to the mansplaining rupture in the WPA-L in 2018. This email, titled “Listserv to Listserv Response,” was essentially a call to action for the WPA-L to critically investigate its discriminatory environment and lack of protection for vulnerable members of the field. In addition to providing the WPA-L with a useful reflection on how to combat its hostile environment, this response also allowed *nextGEN* an opportunity to solidify its own stance on the practices and beliefs underpinning their new community. As such, *nextGEN* members detailed a much more

thorough rendering of their guidelines for community engagement which the WPA-L did consider in the development of their own participation guidelines.

When assessed in tandem, the policies created for nextGEN, their “Listserv to Listserv” response, and the participation guidelines created by the WPA-L highlight important questions regarding what is the appropriate level of intervention by moderators in an open forum. Such a discussion encompasses the ethical concerns associated with the public nature of listservs and whether things like tone should be policed by a governing body. Communication scholar Anna Gibson investigated the level of moderation inherent in online forums deemed as “safe spaces” and “free speech zones.” Gibson described how moderation in these forums functions as both censorship (high levels in safe spaces and low levels in free speech zones) and as a mechanism for maintaining an equitable environment based on the needs and expectations of the community. For example, members of an online community wish to “save face” (or keep one’s respect intact) with other members, but this action looks different in safe spaces versus free speech zones. For example, providing a trigger warning would be expected in a safe space but not in free speech zones where it would be deemed as inappropriate or offensive to members (Gibson). The graduate student listserv nextGEN was created with the explicit intention of being a safe space—in stark opposition to the (somewhat) free speech zone of the WPA-L—which again illustrates the different needs and expectations of community members.

NCA

The impacts of the rupture within the NCA are multiple but are most explicitly demonstrated through boycotts and calls for resignation. For example, in response to

Medhurst's editorial, scholars began to resign from the editorial board of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, as well as call for his resignation from the journal. Additionally, the Public Address Conference (PAC) to be held at the University of Georgia was canceled in response to the backlash aimed at Medhurst, as he was supposed to serve as the conference's honoree. Ultimately, this rupture within NCA resulted in greater calls for diversifying the field of Communication, and many prominent organizations such as RSA and ICA responded accordingly to the petition that was being circulated with statements outlining future rectifying actions. The outcome of this rupture is indicative of the power of a movement to enact change in response to social inequities.

Similar to the WPA-L mansplaining rupture, the rupture within the NCA illustrates what happens when outdated practices within a group no longer respond to the needs and expectations of its members. For instance, the Distinguished Scholars' continued inability to address its lack of diversification—despite numerous warnings from the NCA Executive Committee—resulted in damage to the group's reputation. More importantly, however, this rupture hurt racially minoritized scholars within the field, as evidenced through conversations on social media platforms and the Twitter hashtag #CommunicationSoWhite. Thus, not only were these scholars being excluded from recognition within the Distinguished Scholars' membership, but they were also negatively impacted from the language put forth in Medhurst's editorial and the collectively signed letter from the group.

However, unlike the WPA-L, the NCA was able to effectively recover from their rupturing event. There are several possible explanations for this outcome, one of which is the fact that the Distinguished Scholars were immediately held accountable for their

hurtful actions by the NCA but also the field at large. As such, this rupture demonstrates the role that timing plays when responding to controversy. The targeting of Medhurst as an individual and the extreme backlash he received in response to his editorial conceivably signaled to the rest of the Distinguished Scholars the error in their previous approach to the changes in the selection process for the award. Following the field's response, many of the signatories of the letter removed their names, and Hauser issued a statement on behalf of RSA apologizing for his involvement in the hurt that was caused. Since this was the first major rupture to occur within the NCA in the wake of the #MeToo movement, the cordiality among members of the organization and the field of communication were perhaps still strong enough to withstand the blow.

This rupture indicates a need for regular review of the institutional policies and procedures of prominent organizations in our field. Although the NCA Executive Committee had repeatedly brought the issue of representation to the attention of the Distinguished Scholars, no real corrective action was ever implemented to rectify the problem. This lack of action allowed the homogeneity of the group to continue for a number of years, but it also undoubtedly led to less-than-ideal working relations between the Distinguished Scholars and the NCA Executive Committee. When the NCA Executive Committee did finally decide to step in and take corrective action, the Distinguished Scholars clearly felt blindsided by the action as the proper channels of communication had not been in place prior. In the wake of the controversy, the Executive Committee proposed the idea of implementing quality assessment measures of selection processes going forward, and this move would contribute to the goals of transparency and correcting problems when they first arise.

Controlled Burn: Ruptures as Sites of Productivity

Arguably, the digital ruptures that occurred in our field in the wake of the 2017 #MeToo movement served as productive means for moving the respective communities forward to include more voices from historically underrepresented scholars, as evidenced through the listserv conversation that followed LaFrance's accusation of mansplaining in which graduate students felt emboldened to post to the list for the first time. Thus, disruptions to genre conventions opened new possibilities that were not available prior to the rupturing event. Just as controlled burns use fire to maintain the overall health of a forest, these ruptures—although carrying the potential for disaster if not executed properly—can similarly spark productive measures and healthy conversations within the community that benefit the group as a whole.

However, there clearly comes a time when the impact of the rupture, or rather, the culmination of too many rupturing events, has detrimental effects on the survival of the discourse community. As stated before, *controlled* burns can be effective in maintaining the health of a forest; similarly, a rupture can help spark change within a community by ridding it of vestiges of discriminatory practices. However, too much fire will destroy the forest, and too much fracturing within a community will similarly destroy its viability. The WPA-L is a prime example of how too many rupturing events can negatively impact the relationships among community members. As Zachary Beare noted in his reflection on the old disciplinary listserv: “Over the last several years, I have seen the WPA-L referred to on Twitter and Facebook as, among other things, ‘a dumpster fire,’ ‘a car crash you can’t look away from,’ and ‘an irredeemable cesspool of everything that is toxic in the academy’” (42). The toxic environment of the WPA-L had long been

documented before the list was finally dissolved in 2021 and WritingStudies-L took its place with moderating guidelines. At this point however, the effects of deeply problematic events, such as the hurtful presence of a troll who identified themselves as the “Grand Wizard Scholar” in 2019, impacted the community beyond repair. Thus, to prevent this type of devastation from occurring, the heuristic developed from this research aims to provide readers with cautionary signposts regarding when the consequences of a rupture may begin to negatively impact members of the discourse community, such as with the repeated fracturing of the WPA-L.

Heuristic for Responding to Ruptures

In addition to the framework for discursively mapping ruptures, I also offer the following heuristic to help scholars assess the climates within their own communities and disciplinary platforms to ensure that a culture of inclusion and open communication is present within these spaces. The heuristic (see Table 1 below) is arranged by three different stages of a rupture—before, during, and after—because our communities are perpetually in one of these states of existence. Correspondingly, the left side of the table contains a list of preventive, mitigative, and restorative actions for members of the community to take in response to certain rhetorical events, and the right side contains a list of accompanying guiding questions to help members better achieve their desired goals.

Table 1: Heuristic for responding to ruptures

Preventive actions to use <i>before</i> a rupture occurs:	Guiding questions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Periodically “take the temperature of the room” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are members using the space to productively communicate with one

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for increased uptake • Foster the use of feminist discursive strategies in everyday interactions 	<p>another? Do members seem generally satisfied with the current participatory mechanisms? Are there frequent comments or criticisms regarding the culture of the space or toward one or more members? Are members from a wide variety of backgrounds and academic ranks participating in the conversations?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a particular post, comment, or member receiving more responses and/or attention than is typical for the community? Are there current events (political, social, cultural, environmental) that are causing an uptake in responses/interaction? • Which members are being excluded from conversations and need reconnection? Whose voice is not being heard or listened to? Is there evidence of misunderstanding or disagreement that is causing friction among members?
Mitigative actions to use <i>during</i> a rupture:	Guiding questions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the breaking point post • Employ feminist discursive strategies to mitigate damage and open clear channels of communication to resolve conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What post, text, etc. sparked a dramatic increase of responses, or is being met with hostility or pushback? Who is the author of this post? • Does the situation warrant a public response or reprimand? Can the issue be resolved in private communication between key interlocutors? Would the community benefit from an open discussion on the matter? Is everyone's voice being heard? • Is the occurrence of the unfolding rupture necessary to productively move the community forward? If so, what level of intervention (if any) is appropriate?

Restorative actions to use <i>after</i> a rupture:	Guiding questions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ feminist discursive strategies to restore a sense of community among members • Reflect on the impact of the rupture and implement new policies and/or procedures as necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who has been negatively impacted by this rupture? Where have channels of communication been hurt or destroyed? Who would benefit from additional mediation? • After identifying the breaking point post, ask the following questions: did the rupture occur because of unfair policies or practices? What actions (such as moderating guidelines) can be taken to prevent another rupture from occurring?

Along with this set of guiding questions, I also encourage scholars to adopt a growth mindset in their approach to conflict resolution and engaging with others, particularly in discussions for which interlocutors come from varying positionalities. Defined by Carol Dweck, a growth mindset is “based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others. Although people may differ in every which way—in initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (6). A fixed mindset, in contrast, is the belief that traits and qualities are fixed or set in stone. According to Dweck, embodying a fixed mindset “creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over” (6). Thus, when individuals with fixed mindsets engage in conflict, judgments and evaluations of themselves and others are always involved. Their goal becomes to “win” the argument, to appear smart or intellectually superior, or otherwise “succeed” in the matter. Alternatively, when faced with mistakes, failures, or conflict, individuals who have adopted a growth mindset view the event as an

opportunity for change and personal development. Asking questions of oneself such as “What can I learn from this?” or “How can I improve?” are central tenets of this philosophy.

In the *aftermath* of ruptures, especially, adopting a growth mindset over a fixed one will be essential in allowing the community to move forward together productively. Such a mindset will allow for productive reflection and alleviate some of the blame and defensiveness associated with the actions of the individuals or groups responsible for the controversy. Aligning with feminist inquiry, the goal of examining these ruptures is to learn from them instead of to punish certain individuals. Viewed in this light, ruptures will be opportunities for growth and development instead of catastrophic events that risk tearing the community apart. The continued occurrence of these types of ruptures within our discipline, such as the exigence that sparked Asao Inoue’s recent 2021 call to boycott the Council of Writing Program Administrators, demonstrates the acute need for teacher-scholars in Rhetoric and Writing Studies to adopt this growth mindset model in their professional interactions and practices.³⁴

Moving Forward

It is my hope that the ruptures discussed in this project will provide insight to other scholars on how to effectively navigate their own rupturing events. As we move forward, it is imperative to keep in mind nextGEN’s declaration that our “long-standing institutions are not infallible and often need to be rethought, redefined, and re-established,” and such reflective activities “should be commonplace in a field that claims

³⁴ See Inoue’s blog post titled [“Why I Left the CWPA \(Council of Writing Program Administrators\)”](#) dated April 18, 2021.

to value revision and metacognitive practices” (“Where We Are” 206). By drawing upon rhetorical strategies that emphasize dialogue and understanding, such as invitational rhetoric and stasis theory, we can be better equipped to respond in ways that are helpful instead of hurtful and learn from the backgrounds and lived experiences of those who do not share our same identities and positionalities.

While discursively labeling the aftermath of the ruptures can help us understand how different discourse communities and organizations in our field have responded to such polarizing events in different ways, there are no clear-cut solutions on what is the most effective path forward. Some communities, such as the WPA-L, implemented strict moderation in response to the hostile environment that was allowed to breed within the space over time. However, several list subscribers expressed concern at placing restrictions on free speech in an open forum. For example, one subscriber noted the difficulty in trying to police someone else’s tone. He argued, “This significant difference in interpretation [of acceptable participation in the list] is what concerns me about the guidelines. One person’s idea of ‘toxicity’ is another’s idea of acceptable academic argumentation. One person’s ‘engaging’ content is another person’s trigger” (Smith). Although the WPA-L Working Group sent out a survey in June 2019 soliciting feedback on whether or not to implement participation guidelines and a moderation board, only 213 of the 4,344 list subscribers participated (WPA-L Working Groups). The lack of participation in the survey, and more broadly in the list discussions, was perhaps indicative of it no longer serving as a productive space for scholars in our discipline. But there are other concerns regarding a small fraction of the group controlling how the entirety of members interact within the space.

The creation of nextGEN as an alternative disciplinary space also illustrates another dividing factor in the aftermath of these ruptures: whether repairing existing spaces is the best response or if sometimes a “fresh start” is needed instead. While the WPA-L list subscribers initially voted to keep the name in the June 2019 survey, it was in fact eventually changed to WritingStudies-L to better reflect the broader interests of the community. It was also apparent that, even after nextGEN explained the exigence behind their new disciplinary listserv, some members of the WPA-L simply did not understand the alienation within the discourse community felt by graduate students and other contingent and historically underrepresented scholars. This inability to understand the experiences of others—particularly “knowers whose vantage point has been ignored or discredited for producing knowledge”—again illustrates an acute need for implementing feminist discursive strategies such as rhetorical listening and eavesdropping in our conversations with one another (Naples and Gurr 25).

Another path toward healing, as demonstrated by the response to the NCA rupture, involves implementing repercussive actions to hold responsible parties accountable for the hurt they’ve caused to the community. By calling for policy change within their organizations and boycotting certain entities and individuals, Communication scholars were able to quickly come together to take proactive steps in making their field more inclusive of diverse identities and perspectives. Regardless of how a community decides to respond to their unique rupture—whether by reforming the current group, starting a new one, ousting problematic individuals, or something else entirely, the process will inevitably involve critical (and at times uncomfortable) conversations concerning the varied needs and expectations of its members.

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APPENDICES

nextGEN Announcement

The following text was attached to a post titled “Announcing nextGEN graduate student listserv!” by Lucy Johnson. It was posted to the WPA-L on April 5, 2018. Visit the WPA-L archives for the body of the message.

The nextGEN listserv is publicly available to search engines; therefore, consider the rhetorical situation when replying to another user. Is the response enhancing the conversation, or merely engaging with it on a personal level? Engagements may be more appropriate in replying to the person directly versus through the public-facing listserv. For example, reply directly to the original post rather than using “reply all” to spam the listserv with a message such as “thanks for the article” or “great insight.” Also, please exercise judicious restraint for people who access the listserv with limited data plans by limiting posting university logos in signature lines AND excessive signature lines.

By subscribing to the nextGEN listserv, users agree to the terms and conditions of these guidelines.

Since The University of Texas at Arlington hosts the nextGEN listserv, please *do not post*:

- Political messages advocating for support of a particular political candidate. This listserv is provided by The University of Texas at Arlington funded in part through taxpayer funds. As such, UT-Arlington handbook of operating procedures forbids using university resources to support political candidates or political campaigns.
- Any message, information, data, illustrations, graphics, text, audio and video clips (“Content”) that is abusive, defamatory, harassing, harmful, libelous, pornographic, obscene, threatening, vulgar or invasive of privacy that would constitute a criminal offense or violate local, state, or federal laws and regulations.
- Any harmful Content knowingly and willfully including without limitation viruses, malware, super- or zombie cookies, worms, Trojan horses or any computer code that exploits, intercepts system, program, and personal data.
- Any Content that defames or disparages another person or group based on culture, race, ethnicity, country of origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, size, and/or ability.
- Any Content such as advertising or soliciting for funds, pyramid schemes, and/or promotional email spam.
- Anonymous messages to the listserv or assume another’s identity or attempt to conceal your identity.

nextGEN's "Listserv to Listserv" response

The following email, titled "Listserv to Listserv: A Response from nextGEN," was posted to the WPA-L from nextGEN on November 6, 2018.

To the members of the WPA-L and the wider Rhetoric & Composition community:

We, the members of nextGEN*—a graduate-student listserv created for and by graduate students and allies—recognize that the recent conversations on WPA-L are yet another manifestation of an oppressive discourse that created the exigence for nextGEN's founding in April 2018. We collectively respond here to the perceived tendency toward minimizing, if not outright belittling, issues on the listserv and in the field pertaining to sexism, racism, ableism, professional power and privilege, among other axes of intersectionality. We respond here—listserv to listserv—because the culture cultivated on WPA-L directly impacts and, at times, even restricts the culture that is allowed to be cultivated on nextGEN due to the realities and consequences of misused professional power and privilege.

The existence of structural inequities—often compounded by tendencies toward adversarial academic argumentation that purposefully obscure the real issue or intentional sarcasm that sidesteps the issue—creates a toxic environment and places an invisible burden on those who already exist and speak from the margins. This preemptively devalues the public work done by graduate students, NTT faculty, and other members of the precariat. It also discounts their voices in public spaces that are prone to perpetuating power dynamics and public-facing hostilities, whether through explicit language or as a consequence of tone.

Given this reality, we find the culture of WPA-L to be structurally inadequate and rhetorically irresponsible. We share deep concerns about the witnessed misuse of professional power and privilege, which can have chilling effects and material consequences for members of nextGEN.

We stand in support of those who have expressed their experiences and concerns with the lack of intersectional structures and those who have supported these testimonies. And we welcome the broader range of perspectives that has emerged. Accordingly, we write to urge the WPA-L community to reflect on issues of audience and consider the effects of their rhetoric and tone on graduate students (both domestic and international), independent scholars, and others in the field who are disenfranchised, many of whom regularly face the realities signaled or encapsulated in recent rhetorical choices made on this listserv.

We ask that the WPA-L community pay attention to how we use and define anger, civil discourse, and critical debate in the field, attending especially to the rhetorical purpose of anger and whose anger, culturally, is discounted as irrational and temporary or constructed as threatening, violent, and uncivil. Most importantly, considering where we conflate direct, unanticipated disagreement by women and people of color with anger.

We ask that the WPA-L community consider how we, as teachers, cannot ethically continue to reproduce the structural power imbalances we experience and observe on the listserv and in our everyday lives. As graduate students, we often must teach according to someone else's ideas about "good" or "correct" writing, content, and praxis. This forces graduate students to acquiesce to a power structure that is predicated on our exploitation and reify that power structure in our classrooms by taking advantage of our students' desire to learn. How can this conversation and the obstacles we have encountered move us toward a more open and ethical praxis?

We ask that, as rhetoricians, we collectively consider and reflect upon exigence and kairotic interruption before insisting on quarantining or tone-policing expressions of anger and dissatisfaction with rhetorical choices on the listserv and with social, ethical, and professional issues in the field.

We encourage those who are made aware to resist retreating from perspectives and experiences at odds with their own. Retreating in this way blocks intellectual growth and reinforces the injustices to which the rhetor is responding.

Instead, we encourage those who are made aware to listen and remain mindful toward personal growth and the expansion of your horizons of knowledge-building practices as we build more inclusive spaces by taking these beginning steps in future discussions:

- (1) apologize for what was said, not for how it was perceived;
- (2) acknowledge and appreciate that someone shared their perspective with you; and
- (3) make a plan to educate yourself and those around you about that perspective, without placing additional burden on those who may have been harmed by your language and/or behavior.

As professionals in Rhetoric & Composition, we have a responsibility to ensure that our language creates and sustains learning environments—on and offline—where graduate students, independent scholars, NTT faculty, women, and people of color feel welcome, safe, supported, and able to engage in critical dialogue and intellectual endeavor without fear of censure or fear of interpersonal, institutional repercussions. This recent discussion, along with previous threads and subsequent discussions, has revealed the need for effective practices for open, equitable dialogue.

Moving Forward

The following are some practices and principles that the nextGEN listserv adheres to and hopes that WPA-L will adhere to including (but are not limited to):

- Acknowledging and examining the position from which you speak and the privileges it holds;

- Understanding how emotional labor—such as emails that transpire in a system of overwork and fatigue—does not necessarily contribute to promotion or tenure and should be valued in material ways, as a real form of knowledge-making;
- Acting purposefully and regularly to remove those institutionalized, discursive, and affective barriers to diversity, inclusivity, participation, and justice;
- Pausing to resist reactionary defensiveness and retreat from perspectives and experiences at odds with your own;
- Ensuring that senior scholars are not relying on graduate students, NTT faculty, women, and people of color to do the work, repeat themselves, and put themselves at risk;
- Refusing to exploit and not allowing others to exploit—through listservs, backchannels, hiring committees, etc.—people in precarious positions who engage in public, critical discussions and therefore become vulnerable to the risk of professional retaliation;
- Working actively to ensure that spaces like listservs are valued as safer professional public spaces where all the members showcase a respect for one another, learn from one another, and uplift one another's positions and identities;
- Using your positionality for the inclusion and promotion of marginalized voices;
- Ongoing critical self-reflection on who may be excluded or discouraged from participation and for what reasons.

We hope that our professional public spaces can more actively and collaboratively develop critical praxis as we develop and disseminate knowledge as a field.

Sincerely,

The nextGEN Listserv

*nextGEN stands for both the “next generation” of Rhetoric & Composition scholars as well as “Graduate Exchange Network” to connote the listserv as a diverse community of support, knowledge-sharing, and networking. The creation of nextGEN offers a social justice-centered space that values and creates productive, engaged, critical conversations among graduate students and those who actively support graduate students. Its founding responded to how grad students have historically been discounted and talked over (and challenged in unfair ways) on WPA-L, creating a fear and hesitance to post among and on behalf of graduate students, especially those in further vulnerable and marginalized positions.

WPA-L's Participation Guidelines

The following text was taken from the *Writing Program Administration List (WPA-L) Community Participation Site*. See the Works Cited for the web address of this Google site. This website also houses other pertinent information, such as guidelines for the moderation board.

WPA-List Participation Guidelines

The goal of the WPA-listserv is to provide an inclusive space where scholars and educators of all backgrounds and rank can interact safely. While we expect and encourage members to engage in difficult and even potentially uncomfortable conversations, members should be able to do so with the confidence that they will not be insulted, mocked, or marginalized as a result of the perspectives, feelings, or concerns they share or pushed to respond to others' posts should they choose not to do so. To achieve this goal, we ask that all listserv members participate in such a way that promotes a supportive, collegial, and respectful experience for our community.

The following guidelines are designed to help our community achieve these goals and apply to all content shared on the listserv. The guidelines are a living document that we will annually update to account for changes in rhetorical online practice and the needs of the listserv.

To protect the integrity of our community, the listserv moderators reserve the right to take disciplinary action in response to conduct that we determine to be inappropriate or harmful. Such actions may include removal of content, a tag of past violations, and/or suspension of posters(s). The end of this document provides a Glossary of terms used.

Posting Etiquette

Posters should seek to engage with each other in a mindful, considerate, and open manner. To achieve this goal, we recommend reviewing your messages for the following:

Tone: Many messages can quickly turn toxic when posters are not considerate of tone. We encourage all posters to write with respect and consideration for other members of the listserv, especially those who may not share the same experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives. Posters are encouraged to use their best rhetorical judgment when discussing issue that are contentious or charged. Repeatedly sending impolite, condescending, and disrespectful messages may lead to a warning.

Man/Race/Able/Other/splaining: A type of condescension that derives from the original term “mansplaining.” Mansplaining involves a man interrupting a woman to explain a topic that a) was not asked to be explained, b) she is already an expert in, or c) he is not an expert in but assumes he can speak with authority on. The “splaining” also occurs when white individuals explain topics to people of color that they are not experts in, abled people to disabled people, and so on. We encourage you to reflect on the relationships between the positions of power you hold, the expertise you have, and what your audience is asking of you before you attempt to “explain” in this way.

Content: Online communities often distinguish between high-quality content and low-quality content. High-quality content refers to content that is thoughtful in its address of a specific topic, meaningful in the value it brings to the community, and engaging in what can be done with

it/what further conversations can emerge from it. Low-quality content refers to things like “copy paste,” referring to content that is copy and pasted from elsewhere without curation or contextualization, posts with the express purpose of agitating or trolling other posters, or posts that express an opinion with no elaboration (for example, sending “wrong” to the list as a response to another poster). This content would also not engage with the needs/requests of other listserv members

Drive-by messaging (“DMing”): A subset of low-quality content, drive-bys enter a conversation simply to say something provocative and then disappear. We encourage you to ignore the thread rather than derailing or disrupting conversation simply for the sake of irritating other posters.

Warnings

Posters who repeatedly violate any of the above Etiquette Guidelines or rely on tactics defined in the glossary may be issued a warning. A warning serves to notify the poster that they are engaged in behavior that is not conducive to the professional environment and objectives of the listserv. A poster who receives (X) amount of warnings will be temporarily suspended from the list. Repeated suspensions will result in a permanent ban from the list.

Depending on the severity of the violation (for example, DMing list members with aggressive or unwanted sexual content), we may decide to issue a full ban with no warnings. Any member of the listserv who experiences DMing of such content on another platform should contact <INSERT MODERATOR EMAIL ADDRESS> and include a screenshot or other copy of the inappropriate direct message, noting the nature and level of concern (e.g., from discomfort to fear for physical safety).

Suspension Evasion

Suspensions are binding until expiration or removal upon appeal. Any attempt to circumvent a suspension by using other email accounts, identities, personalities, or presence on another user's account will also result in suspension. Suspension evasion will not only increase the length of suspension, but it may lead to an indefinite suspension. Violence, threats (direct or implicit), impersonation, and hateful conduct are considered zero-tolerance offenses; for other offenses not considered zero-tolerance (e.g., distributing unauthorized advertisements or posting large amounts of repetitive, unwanted messages or user reports):

- For a first-time offense, a suspension will last 48 hours.
- For a second-time offense, a suspension will last 7 days.
- On the third offense, the user will be indefinitely suspended.

Suspensions must be agreed upon by at least three moderators, at which point action will be taken to officially suspend the account. Notice of suspensions, plus their expiration/removal date/time,

shall be given by a moderator via email. A record of past warnings and suspensions shall be kept by the moderators (we need the how of this).

Violence and Threats

Acts and threats of violence will be taken seriously and are considered zero-tolerance violations and all email accounts associated with such activities will be indefinitely suspended. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Threats to physically harm or kill others
- Invoking the ideologies of hate groups

Threats to hack, Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS, which attempts to paralyze an online service by overwhelming it with traffic), or SWAT others (by calling 911 to report a fake emergency at another person's street address, often by obtaining the physical location through the other person's Internet Protocol, or IP, address. Typically any device that can access the internet uses an IP address).

Hateful Conduct and Harassment: Hateful conduct is prohibited. It is defined as any content or activity that promotes, encourages, or facilitates discrimination, denigration, objectification, harassment, or violence based on: race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, medical condition, physical characteristics, social class, or veteran status. Any hateful conduct is considered a zero-tolerance violation and all accounts associated with such conduct will be indefinitely suspended.

Harassment is any content or activity that attempts to intimidate, degrade, abuse, or bully others, or creates a hostile environment for others, and is prohibited. Depending on the severity of the offense, the offender's listserv access may be indefinitely suspended on the first violation.

We prohibit using WPA-listserv to facilitate hateful conduct or harassment, whether the targets are on or off the WPA-listserv. Individuals, communities or organizations that do so are not allowed to use our listserv. We may take action against users for hateful conduct or harassment that occurs off the listserv that is directed at listserv users.

Impersonation: Content or activity meant to impersonate an individual or organization is prohibited.

Posting under pseudonyms or false identities is considered impersonation (as well as evasive). Please use your authentic name when participating on the WPA-listserv. (For the purposes of this listserv, your "authentic name" is the one you use professionally.)

Any attempts to misrepresent yourself as a member of the moderation team is a *zero-tolerance violation* and will result in indefinite suspension.

Spam, Scams, and Other Malicious Conduct

Any content or activity that disrupts, interrupts, harms, or otherwise violates the integrity of the WPA-listserv or another user's experience or devices is prohibited. Such activity includes:

- Vulgar, crude, and excessive and inappropriate use of foul language aimed at readers
- “Trolling” participants
- Posting large amounts of repetitive, unwanted messages or user reports
- Distributing unauthorized advertisements
- Phishing
- Defrauding others, speaking for them, or “calling them out,” either directly or indirectly, and instead reporting harmful or inappropriate or offensive posts to moderators
- Ad hominem attacks
- Spreading malware or viruses
- Intentional misinformation

How to Address Listserv Toxicity and Harassment

Bystander Intervention Training : While bystander intervention training is mainly used for in-person harassment and problems, it’s a useful framework when you see any signs of harassment or toxic behavior. There are several different ways to help (the five Ds), some of which may not be useful for online behavior, but are still important to know.

Lehigh University: <https://studentaffairs.lehigh.edu/content/what-bystander-intervention>

Hollaback Girl: <https://www.ihollaback.org/resources/bystander-resources/>

Different ways to help:

- Direct: Involve yourself by directly addressing the situation. Step in and say or do something to stop the situation (Lehigh University). You may want to directly respond to harassment by naming what is happening or confronting the harasser. This tactic can be risky: the harasser may redirect their abuse towards you and may escalate the situation (Hollaback).
- Distract: Interrupt the situation through distraction. Find a way to redirect the attention of those behaving inappropriately toward the topic being discussed; making a simple (or elaborate) distraction to diffuse the situation (Lehigh). Distraction is a subtler and more creative way to intervene. The aim here is simply to derail the incident by interrupting it. The idea is to ignore the harasser and engage directly with the person who is being targeted. Don’t talk about or refer to the harassment. Instead, talk about something completely unrelated (Hollaback).

- Delegate: Initiate help by working with someone else to do a part and you do a part so you are not in it all by yourself or find someone else to address the concern (Lehigh). Delegation is when you ask for assistance, for a resource, or for help from a third party (Hollaback).
- Delay: Even if you can't act in the moment, you can make a difference for the person who has been harassed by checking in on them after the fact. Many types of harassment happen in passing or very quickly, in which case you can wait until the situation is over and speak to the person who was targeted then. Here are some ways to actively use the tactic of Delay:
 - Ask them if they're okay and tell them you're sorry that happened to them.
 - Ask them if there's any way you can support them.
 - Offer to accompany them to their destination or sit with them for awhile.
 - Share resources with them and offer to help them make a report if they want to.
 - If you've documented the incident, ask them if they want you to send it to them.
- Document: It can be really helpful to record an incident as it happens to someone, but there are a number of things to keep in mind to safely and responsibly document harassment. Check out this tip sheet from WITNESS for more details. (Hollaback). ALWAYS ask the person who is being harassed or the behavior is targeting if they are okay and what they would like you to do with that documentation.

Glossary

- Ad hominem attacks - "a fallacious argumentative strategy whereby genuine discussion of the topic at hand is avoided by instead attacking the character, motive, or other attribute of the person making the argument, or persons associated with the argument, rather than attacking the substance of the argument itself" (Wikipedia).
- Baiting - Similar to trolling, baiting a user includes "calling them out," placing words in others' mouths, using language that targets an individual or group, or asks offensive leading questions.
- Brigading - using followers or an online community to target/attack and individual (<http://femtechnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Control-color.png>)
- Cyberbullying - We define "cyberbullying" as communication that threatens, humiliates, embarrasses, or shames someone, especially when practiced with the intent to silence. (<https://cyberbullying.org/>)
- Dog Whistle - Coded appeals to discriminatory rhetoric, beliefs, and ideas. (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog-whistle_politics)
- Doxxing - Finding and sharing, as well as extorting, personal information of location, family, and work often as a revenge tactic. (<http://femtechnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Control-color.png>) (<https://www.fastcompany.com/3046772/why-online-harassment-is-still-ruining-lives-and-how-we-can-stop-it>)
- Hacking: Intrusion into a private network / database that violates privacy and attempts to steal personal information.

- Harmful language - hate speech, destructive language, policing language and culture (<http://femtechnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Control-color.png>)
- Hate speech - Attacking someone on the basis of identity, such as race, gender identity, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, social class, or disability. Comments will target one's character or attributes to deflect or hinder discussion of various issues and topics. Additionally, hate speech often attempts to aggressively undermine and question the validity/value of one's identity and subjectivity as a means to discredit their ideas and experience.
- Gaslighting - Coined by the 1938 play *Gaslight*; a form of psychological abuse in which the abuser selectively alters information so that the victim doubts themselves, becomes less confident, and instead increasingly dependent on the abuser. (<http://femtechnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Control-color.png>)
- Malware - Any software intentionally designed to cause damage or unauthorized access to a computer, server, client, or computer network. Users can begin to protect themselves from malware by ensuring that antivirus software is up-to-date, never approving unexpected requests for information, and never downloading files from an untrusted source.
- Mob Attacks - The use of collective force to overwhelm and pressure individuals out of their beliefs/position. (<https://www.npr.org/2016/07/06/484987245/jewish-reporters-harassed-by-trumps-anti-semitic-supporters>)
- Non-consensual Media - Sharing media of people as well as others' media without their consent in a way that makes one feel threatened, antagonized, or shamed.
- Online Impersonation - Creating hoax accounts to post offensive and inflammatory messages as someone else. In attempting to tarnish one's ethos, impersonation may attempt to mobilize allies against the individual being impersonated. See sockpuppeting. (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/02/what-happened-confronted-cruellest-troll-lindy-west>)
- Online Sexual Harassment - Often presented as hate speech and threats, online sexual harassment takes many forms. These forms include:
 - Non-consensual media: Publicly distributing media of others (and others' media) without their consent
 - Exploitation and Coercion: Being forced into sexual behavior / sexual content
 - Sexual Bullying: Use of sexual material and content to exclude one
 - Unwanted Sexualization: Receiving unwanted sexual requests, comments, and content
 - (https://www.childnet.com/ufiles/Project_deSHAME_Executive_Summary.pdf)
- Online Stalking - Unwarranted and unwanted contact, messages, and surveillance (especially from people in positions of power/privilege to those in more vulnerable positions) that makes the individual feel threatened, emotional distress, anxiety, fear, and humiliation. (<https://www.wired.com/2016/02/ive-had-a-cyberstalker-since-i-was-12/>)
- Phishing - We define phishing as any fraudulent attempt to obtain sensitive information from others.

- Sockpuppeting - From Wikipedia: “A sockpuppet is an online identity used for purposes of deception. The term, a reference to the manipulation of a simple hand puppet made from a sock, originally referred to a false identity assumed by a member of an Internet community who spoke to, or about, themselves while pretending to be another person. The term now includes other misleading uses of online identities, such as those created to praise, defend or support a person or organization, to manipulate public opinion, or to circumvent a suspension or ban from a website. A significant difference between the use of a pseudonym and the creation of a sockpuppet is that the sockpuppet poses as an independent third-party unaffiliated with the puppeteer.” See online impersonation.
- Trolling - We define “trolling” as “intentionally baiting, antagonizing others online by posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content” See Lifewire’s “Internet Trolling” for more information on this

Zarefsky’s Letter to NCA

The following text was taken from the “Distinguished Scholars” web page (www.natcom.org/distinguished-scholars) that is housed on NCA’s website. The letter is dated March 29, 2019, although the web page itself was created in June in the midst of the controversy. This web page also houses the other texts in this larger communicative exchange between the Distinguished Scholars and the NCA Executive Committee.

March 29, 2019

Dr. Star Muir, President
National Communication Association
George Mason University
Fairfax, Virginia 22030

Dr. Trevor Parry-Giles, Executive Director
National Communication Association
1765 N Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Star and Trevor:

Since receiving Trevor’s email announcing the Executive Committee’s decision regarding the selection of Distinguished Scholars, I have waited to see if my anger would dissipate with time. Instead, the reverse has occurred.

I have been a member of NCA for 51 years and have had the privilege of serving the organization as president, director of two boards, member of the Legislative Assembly for multiple terms, chair of a division, and chair of several committees and task forces. I have seen the Association up close. It often has made good decisions. Sometimes it has made errors but has had the good sense to correct them. I hope that good sense will yet be evident in this case, which I must say is one of the biggest mistakes I have seen.

Frankly, I do not know which reading of your actions is worse: that the EC has decided that I and over 75 of my most respected colleagues are prejudiced individuals who do not share NCA's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity; or that the EC has decided that we are incompetent to identify and select a group of diverse scholars from the pool of nominees. The fact that not a single member of the Association (including the EC members themselves) chose to place any such diverse scholars into the Association-wide nomination pool seems to have escaped the EC altogether.

Consequently, the effect of your actions is, first, to issue an egregious insult to a group of scholars who up until now have been regarded as the intellectual leaders of the Association. The claim that the DS selection will now "resemble" the other NCA awards is a red herring, as the Distinguished Scholar Award was never intended to resemble other awards. What it does resemble is the process by which those who have achieved the rank of full professor evaluate colleagues for tenure and promotion.

Your insult to the Distinguished Scholars is compounded by your failure to consult with any of us in advance, so that you were not aware of the depth of attention we have devoted to this topic over the years or the measures we have proposed to produce a more diverse pool of nominees without distorting the selection process. The fact that you did not consult with Mark Knapp, the founder and principal donor of this award, and that you gave no consideration to his wishes in this matter, does not inspire confidence in NCA's stewardship of philanthropic gifts. This is an additional problem.

I fear that your action, in addition to offending the current Distinguished Scholars, will compromise the selection process itself, since no scholarly credentials are stipulated for members of the new selection committee that the Leadership Development Council is charged to appoint, and that selection committee is charged specifically to name a diverse group of Distinguished Scholars, not as the happy byproduct of fair review of all candidates in a rich pool but as an *a priori* instruction – the only such specific instruction that is stipulated in Trevor's report to us.

There is still time to correct this disastrous error -- by restoring the practice that prevailed before the EC's action, by taking seriously the recommendations proposed by the Distinguished Scholars at their meeting in Salt Lake City, and by apologizing to the Distinguished Scholars whom your action has alienated from the Association. Toward the goal of resolving these matters, a delegation of Distinguished Scholars will be ready to meet with the EC, to develop more fully the proposals crafted in Salt Lake City, or to act in whatever other manner might be helpful. If it is

the judgment of the EC that the necessary restorative actions cannot be taken in time, then we should put this award on hiatus for 2019 and restore the former program for 2020 and beyond.

Despite the intensity of my convictions on this matter, I have not yet decided what actions I will take personally in response. I hope that I will not need to. There are metaphysical problems with an attempt to resign either as a past president or as a life member. But there are other tangible ways in which I can make clear how dissonant the EC's action is with my own values and principles. I hope instead that the weight of the argument and the recognition of the intense ill will you have aroused will impel you and your colleagues to take the appropriate corrective action without delay.

Sincerely,
David Zarefsky

Medhurst's Editorial

The following text was taken from Martin J. Medhurst's post on the now defunct disciplinary listserv CRTNET on June 12, 2019. Personal email addresses have been redacted. The CRTNET archives can be accessed online at lists.psu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A0=CRTNET.

The following editorial was originally scheduled to run in volume 22:3 of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*. Because the NCA leadership has now made public the documents concerning the decision to remove the Distinguished Scholars from their role as electors, the chief purpose of the editorial has been achieved.

The secondary purpose--to open a dialogue on issues of diversity, identity, ideology, and scholarship--has begun. I am, therefore, pulling the editorial from the journal. Instead, I am pleased to announce that in place of the editorial *R & PA* will devote a special issue to the topic of "The Politics of 'Merit' in Academic Disciplines," to be guest edited by Dr. Kirt H. Wilson of Penn State University. Please direct all inquiries to Dr. Wilson at [redacted].

Editorial

Over the past 22 years, I have seldom used the pages of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* to make editorial statements. I have not done so because I wanted to avoid the politicization that inevitably accompanies strong positions on important issues. The pages of our journal have been open to all perspectives--left, right, and center--and scholars of all identities--gay and straight, men and women, black and white and brown, believer and atheist, Christians, Jews, and other faith traditions, graduate students and full professors, and even a couple of undergraduates.

We recently received a submission from a scholar who identifies as trans. That scholar will receive the same consideration as any other-her scholarship will be judged on its merits, not on the identity category of its author. And that's the way it should be.

Unfortunately, a recent policy change by the Executive Committee (EC) of the National Communication Association (NCA) is based on precisely the opposite premise-that identity ought to control in areas where it has historically not been prioritized. The change is being pursued under the banner of "diversity," which is, of course a god-term of our age, and rightly so. I believe in diversity, and you probably do, too.

But there is a difference in trying to promote diversity within a scholarly consensus about intellectual merit and prioritizing diversity in place of intellectual merit. There is a difference in running an issue of a journal that features two female scholars, a black scholar, and a graduate student, all of whose work has been accepted through the process of blind review versus saying to oneself, "I need to publish some female scholars and black scholars and graduate students so everyone will know that I believe in diversity." Along that pathway lies disaster, for once we substitute identity for scholarly merit as the first consideration, we have lost our reason for being academics.

This is precisely what the EC of NCA is currently in the process of doing. It began with an attack on the association's own Distinguished Scholars. Since the establishment of the Distinguished Scholars Award in 1991, every year nominations have been solicited and new Distinguished Scholars selected from among those nominated. There are now 70 living NCA Distinguished Scholars. Since 2015, the nomination process has been open to the entire NCA membership.

Prior to 2015, the NCA Distinguished Scholars made the nominations. The nominations were then voted on by the Distinguished Scholars, and anywhere from one to five new Distinguished Scholars were selected annually. For more than a decade, there has been a shared concern that the nomination process was not yielding many people of color. Expanding the nominators to include all members of NCA was one of several efforts made to expand the pool of nominees. Yet only a handful of people of color were nominated and only one was elected as a Distinguished Scholar of NCA. These are the facts.

Unfortunately, the EC has chosen to react to these facts not by enthusiastically encouraging more nominations but by scapegoating the entire group of NCA Distinguished Scholars, blaming them for the lack of diverse nominations, and implicitly accusing them of racism for not selecting more people of color. The problems with these accusations are multiple.

First, for the last four years the Distinguished Scholars have not been the primary nominators-the entire NCA membership has been. Yet even that expanded nomination base has not produced the desired results-very few people of color have been nominated-so why lay all the blame on the Distinguished Scholars?

Second, the EC has chosen to strip the Distinguished Scholars of the responsibility for selecting the new scholars, thus taking away their one and only remaining responsibility and removing from the selection process the field's most qualified judges of scholarly merit. Since 1991, only the existing pool of Distinguished Scholars has selected the next group of scholars to join their ranks.

Now, the EC has decided to remove the Distinguished Scholars as electors and replace them with a group selected by NCA leadership. No scholarly credentials are apparently required for this new group of electors-at least none has been announced.

The new selection committee will be guided by "diversity," not intellectual merit. Third, the EC, in attacking their own Distinguished Scholars, has apparently overlooked the fact that most of the current group come from Research 1 and Research 2 institutions, where most of the minority, female, and other diverse populations obtained their doctoral degrees. It is the very group that the EC is attacking and implicitly accusing of racism that mentored, and taught, and advised, and published with the scholars they are now being accused of abandoning. What nonsense! But this is only the beginning.

The EC chose to attack the Distinguished Scholars first because that group is the epitome of intellectual merit. The attack currently being waged is not just on the Distinguished Scholars. The attack is on using intellectual merit as the chief criterion, not only for the selection of Distinguished Scholars, but also for the selection of journal editors, and presumably, the selection of what those newly diversified journal editors will choose to publish-it is an attack on the very foundations of Communication as a research discipline.

Most of the Distinguished Scholars, under the leadership of David Zarefsky, have protested these attacks and the removal of the Distinguished Scholars' chief responsibility of selecting their own membership. Some 66 of the 70 living Distinguished Scholars have signed a letter of protest, including seven members of the R & PA editorial board, all of whom I consulted during the preparation of this editorial. I, too, was one of the signatories.

As important as the Distinguished Scholar issue is, the far more important issue is what sort of organization the NCA will be. One where selections are made on intellectual merit or one where identity is prioritized over intellectual and scholarly merit? One where new journal editors are chosen on their background, publication record, vision, and experience, or one where the color of one's skin or one's gender trumps everything else?

Will we be a field in which journal submissions are judged by competent reviewers who are blind to the identity of the author, or a field where editorial boards are filled with the "right" number of people from the "right" categories. The EC has already issued a document that calls for populating editorial boards with more "diverse" people, whether they are scholars or not.

Let me be clear: I strongly support diversity and recognize that social, cultural, and racial perspectives make a difference in what is studied and how it is studied. The work of the field has been enriched as it has become more diverse. That is a belief, I am sure, shared by the Distinguished Scholars as a group. We support diversity, but not at the price of displacing scholarly merit as the chief criterion for selecting Distinguished Scholars, choosing journal editors, and evaluating research.

Only the concerted effort of the entire NCA membership can stop identity from displacing scholarly merit as the governing norm of the discipline. To register your concerns write to NCA president Star Muir ([redacted]) and the members of the Executive Committee, whose names and addresses can be found at (<https://www.natcom.org/about-nca/what-nca/leadership-and-governance>). We can have diversity within scholarship, but only if scholarship is our first priority.

Martin J. Medhurst
Editor

Hauser's Statement

The following statement was published on RSA's website on June 14, 2019—just days after Medhurst's editorial was made public. It was written by RSA's Executive Director, Gerard Hauser, who was also one of the Distinguished Scholars who co-signed Zarefsky's letters to NCA's Executive Committee in protest of the changes to the award's selection process.

RSA Executive Director's Statement on NCA Diversity Controversy

The last few days have witnessed controversy over a letter written by the Distinguished Scholars of the National Communication Association, of which I am one, in response to a change in the process for selecting its Distinguished Scholars, of which I was a signatory. Some of you may not be familiar with NCA's DS designation, so permit me to provide a brief background.

NCA established its DS designation in 1991 to acknowledge career achievement in the study of human communication. To be considered, a scholar must be in the discipline at least 20 years. The designation recognizes career achievements as a researcher, mentor, and influence on the study of human communication. Candidates are nominated with a cover letter and a separate unsigned one-page statement that provides a context for the candidate's accomplishments. Self-nominations are disallowed. Candidate CVs and the one-page anonymous contextualizing are distributed to the DS group. Unlike RSA, whose Fellows are selected by the Society's Awards committee, heretofore DS selection was made by the extant DS group, which ranked up to half or

fewer the candidates under consideration. To become a DS, one must be ranked by 50% of the voters, with the highest ranked, up to a maximum of 4, selected in any given year.

At the time I was named a DS, 2005, the 52 honorees included only 8 white women and no scholars of color. Several measures were adopted to address this imbalance, including opening the nomination process to the entire membership. The results have been positive but not stellar in the case of women scholars, with 14 of the 50 selected since then being white women, but only one male scholar of color. To address this glaring absence, NCA's Executive Committee determined that in the future the DS would not be selected by the DS group, as in the past. It established a selection committee to be named by NCA's Leadership Development Committee (i.e., a committee on committees). The DS group took this action of being informed without consultation as a vote of no confidence in its ability to address the problem all agree exists. It responded with a letter to refute the action. There were two key responses to the DS letter—a letter by Star Muir, NCA President to the DS and one by Marty Medhurst, a DS and editor of *Public Affairs*, in the form of an editorial intended to run in his journal. Medhurst's intended editorial, unfortunately, instantiates how a position of privilege can make us blind to the consequences of actions that reproduce that privilege. That letter has led me to reflect on my own commitments and, because I signed the DS letter and also have an official capacity in RSA, recognize this is an important moment to publicly address RSA's commitments and my own.

I will start with my commitments. I am a white male in his 70s. That position has consequences. Being a white male in the US, I recognize that every day I must work at reassessing my privilege that comes with being a white male of a certain age. I recognize that I do not always succeed. I did not succeed in this particular case because I lost sight of the problem that transpires when a homogeneous group of predominately male and almost exclusively white scholars assess the impact and contribution of scholars whose work may address issues outside a white person's experience. As one who has been named a Distinguished Scholar of NCA I am less concerned with how that designation is made than I am that NCA be welcoming, supportive, open, and fair to all its members. That value can only be lived if I learn from scholars whose research reflects the full range of lived experience. My signature on the original DS letter did not reflect that value.

As Executive Director of RSA, it is important that my commitments to inclusivity, to a welcoming Society, and to learning from perspectives beyond my experience are reflected in my own actions and in the exercise of my influence as a person in a position to strengthen RSA in these regards. RSA now has the most diverse board in its history. I work for them and for you to make the board's composition an opportunity for RSA to embrace more completely and openly the way rhetoric shapes our lives and society. As its Executive Director, I strive to aid the board and officers to make its processes, its committee composition, its events, and its publications reflect these values, and where there are perceived problems, to address them. RSA is not perfect; it is a work in progress. For example, two weeks ago the board charged its president to examine its awards structures to address concerns of bias. The same imperative holds that I strive to learn from its officers, board, editors, and administrative offices about the myriad ways RSA is experienced and how we might continue to improve.

Regardless of my intent at the time, I regret that signing the DS letter was not conducive to expressing the principles that I value or the aims that I seek as Executive Director of RSA.

Gerard A. Hauser
Executive Director
The Rhetoric Society of America