Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies
1–11

DOI: 10.1177/1532708616659080
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# Rhetoric and Ethics Revisited: What Happens When Rhetorical Scholars Go Into the Field

**Sara L. McKinnon[1], Jenell Johnson[1], Robert Asen[1], Karma R. Chávez[2], and Robert Glenn Howard[1]**

**Abstract**

As rhetorical scholars adopt field methods to complement traditional text-based criticism, it is necessary to reflect on the ethical standards that guide our practice of rhetorical criticism and analysis. In this essay, we highlight five points of ethical tension provoked when doing research that moves between texts and fields: responsibility, truth, power, relationships, and representation. Each section illustrates an ethical dilemma from the authors' individual research projects that illustrates one of these tensions, and is followed by a response that explicates the questions of power and ethics. While the ethics of any research practice are often tied to a specific project, many of the issues we discuss apply widely to the practice of fieldwork and rhetorical criticism in general, and many of the questions we raise also resonate with one another. As such, the dialogic quality of the essay is meant to serve as its content as well as its form. We suggest that rhetorical discussions of power help all qualitative researchers better understand what is at stake when we move between text and field in our research practice.

**Keywords**

ethics, rhetoric, qualitative inquiry, rhetorical field methods

In recent years, rhetorical scholars increasingly have complicated the relationship between text and criticism by adopting field methods as a complement to traditional text-based criticism. This expansion of method opens up new avenues for research and generates different potential research questions, but it also requires that we carefully consider the ethical standards that guide our practice of rhetorical criticism and analysis. Qualitative researchers have a rich tradition of outlining particular ethical standards for data collection, analysis, and representation (Conquergood, 1985; González, 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Madison, 2005; Richardson, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 2006; Valdivia, 2002).[1] While rhetoricians have done much to consider how ethics should guide rhetorical practice (Chase, 2009; Foley, 2013; Lipari, 2012; McKerrow, 1987; Norton, 1995; Rowland & Womack, 1985; Stroud, 2005), they have tended to avoid extended considerations of research ethics in relation to methodology (Booth, 1988).[2] Whether we work primarily with texts or move to the field, we believe that rhetorical scholars have much to gain in considering more deeply which kinds of ethics might guide our practice as researchers.

Taking ethics seriously draws rhetoricians to reflect on and account for the process of what we do when we collect and analyze textual and field data and the politics inherent in that process. Doing this accounting work increases the openness and vulnerability of our scholarship as it allows others access to the methodological process, which provides space for further conversation and critique. Explicit engagement with ethics also serves a pedagogical function in that it allows future generations of scholars to gain critical insight into the process of collecting, analyzing, and representing data. In kind, qualitative researchers may gain from rhetorical studies' theorizing of the relationship between power and discourse—especially as we consider the various movements that qualitative researchers make between the field, texts, and processes of textualization. A rhetorical perspective, in particular, augments attention to the fields of power that play out in the critic's participation with, and construction of, context, as well as a critic's deployment of critical judgment. As we learn from John Lucaites (1989), the work of the critic is to "examine the ways in which it [the text]

[1]University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA
[2]University of Texas-Austin, USA

**Corresponding Author:**
Sara L. McKinnon, Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 821 University Avenue, Madison, WI 53706, USA.
Email: smckinnon@wisc.edu

functions in the larger context(s) in which it is made to do work," recognizing that "both the function and the context are subject to variation throughout the life of the text, such that its significance (and perhaps even its internal action) change as it functions differently in different contexts" (p. 86). While much qualitative research focuses on the particular details of a scene, a rhetorical perspective calls us to consider the function of a text "within its 'universe of discourse,'" a task that is made even more complex when a researcher is involved in the immediate context (Murphy, 1992, p. 227). This "universe" means not only this immediate scene of the rhetorical performance but also the historical, political, cultural, and economic conditions that play out and bear down on the documents and data we analyze and interpret. Of course, deciding how to participate in a context, interact with participants, and document rhetorical practices invariably raises questions of power and ethics, a point that the qualitative methodologists we cite above make very clear in their discussions of the role of researchers in the field. Deciding where the relevant context ends and how to capture it in the writing up phase is also no small task. The critic must punctuate where to begin and end in detailing the relationship between text and context and make decisions about the point of view from which to narrate context. These decisions necessarily mean making political choices about how to frame people and rhetorical practices, as well as what to make explicit and leave tacit (Branham & Pearce, 1985).

These questions about punctuation turn us to the second aspect of power that a rhetorical perspective makes visible to those working in the field: questions of judgment. The influence of a critic's judgment spans the entirety of the process—from decisions about how to relate to participants (both dead and alive), how to interpret and critique someone's rhetorical practices, as well as how to represent research in embodied and textualized form. As we demonstrate below, rhetorical theorizing of context and judgment offers qualitative researchers a different set of tools for thinking about the power dynamics and ethical concerns that surface when we move between texts and fields.

Using our own individual textual and field-based research as exemplars, in this essay, we offer a dialogical reflection on the ethical issues and concerns about power that surface as rhetoricians and qualitative researchers alike navigate the politics that arise in the movement between the field and text. We focus on five points of tension around questions of power and ethics that emerge as researchers move between fields, texts, and practices of textualization: responsibility, truth, power, relationships, and representation. Each section is guided by an ethical dilemma from one of our research projects that draws out one of these tensions, followed by a response that explicates the questions of power and ethics raised in the exemplar. As our exemplars illustrate, the ethics of any research practice are intensely contextual and personal. However, many of the issues we discuss apply widely to the practice of fieldwork and rhetorical criticism in general, and many of the questions we raise also resonate with one another. Questions about relationships, for example, give rise to questions of power. Questions of truth provoke questions of representation, and vice versa. In that spirit, although this essay is composed of five voices, what follows is meant to be read as a whole that examines the various power dynamics that researchers navigating between texts and fields might confront. We use the dialogic form so that the concerns we raise serve less as a prescriptive list of how to be ethical and more as a set of questions, contemplations, and tensions inherent in the research practices that help rhetoricians and qualitative researchers alike consider the politics that emerge when we move between text and field.

## Responsibility (Jenell Johnson)

When I first started writing my book *American Lobotomy* (Johnson, 2014), I spent time in the archives of Walter Freeman, the most prolific lobotomist in the world. Guided by the field of disability studies, and committed to foregrounding the experiences of disabled people, my original intention was to restore personhood to men and women we know only through caricature. However, as I made preparations to visit the archive, I hit a roadblock. Even though most of Freeman's patients were dead (some for nearly 70 years), all of the case files were off-limits. This frustrated me, in part because it required some significant rethinking of the book's objective, and in part because I felt that by not using their experiences to ground my study, I was somehow letting these women and men down.

But who, exactly, was I letting down? Do we have duties to the dead?

Institutional and federal guidelines on human subjects research provide some perspective but also raise further questions. One does not need Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct research on human cadavers or discarded tissue (as long as the specimens, cells, or data are not acquired, for research purposes, from a living individual). Importantly, these guidelines apply only to bodies and tissue. They differ from guidelines on information, which is protected under Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations that extend 50 years after death (*Code of Federal Regulations*).[3] At a time when people may still face discrimination related to illness and disability, these regulations offer critical social and legal protections. In these two cases, our duties are not to the dead but to the living, which is the rationale I imagine guides the restrictions on Freeman's case files. The stigma of mental illness persists, and many family members of lobotomy patients are still alive. The files may also be closed to protect Freeman's few surviving patients, such as Howard Dully, whose trip to the archives served as the basis of the documentary and book *My*

*Lobotomy* (2007). One of the shocking things Dully discovered while reading his case file was that Freeman had misrepresented information to authorize his operation. Dully's experience reveals another protection not often imagined by policymakers and archivists: By closing files to researchers indefinitely, we also protect doctors from future scrutiny and critical judgment about their participation in the violence experienced and still very much felt by impacted individuals and communities.

This critical judgment can serve a number of functions, each motivated by our imagined object of duty. One such function, motivated by our duty to knowledge, is the desire to recover the past as it *really happened.* In this case, the historian acts as archaeologist and unearths what is hidden to bring it into the light of the present. A second function, motivated by a sense of duty to the dead, is justice and advocacy. In this case, the historian exacts a kind of representational vengeance to right what has been wronged. And yet even our desire for knowledge and justice is not a duty to the dead as much as it is a duty to the living, and this is the case at any point when our project is to represent the past, whether in the form of rhetorical history, rhetorical criticism, or qualitative research report (de Certeau, 1992; Hartman, 2008).

However, in the pursuit of justice, the definition of "the living" is expanded beyond genetic kinship. To illustrate, I want to conclude with what may seem an odd example: the Gross Anatomy lab. After the course, many medical students attend a ceremony that honors the lives of the bodies on the dissection table. Candles are lit, poems are read, photographs are displayed, and family members speak. As this ceremony implies, the cadaver is no ordinary object. It is something in the borderland, a quasi-subject, quasi-object (Serres, 2007). We can think of this quasi-status as the cadaver's capacity for action—the student's "best teacher," as the body is sometimes called—but also as the strange ethical temporality in which human remains are situated (once-subject, now-object). In this liminal space, the duty students have to the cadaver is not necessarily to the object itself, but what it represents: their "first patient" (e.g., Fountain, 2014). In honoring the cadaver as "first patient," the body ceremony creates a network of kinship that is not limited by time or space. It draws an ethical relationship between the cadaver, the family, the students, the doctors the students will become, their future patients, and the society they serve, making three-dimensional the horizon of context in which work with the "first patient" is conducted.

I do not think scholars have duties to the dead, even if we might feel compelled to honor them. In every case I can imagine, any duties we have are to those they leave behind, and at points when those duties conflict, the living ought to take priority in our decisions about how to contextualize and evaluate work we do with texts and in the field. But the body ceremony suggests that we may want to enlarge what we mean by "those they leave behind." To tell the story of the dead is not so much a forensic action as it is an epideictic and deliberative one, and the critical judgments we make are less pronouncements on *what happened* and more a guide for deliberation on *what should happen next*. When it comes to protecting information about the dead, then, we may want to move beyond *yes* or *no* and into the rhetorical realm of *maybe*, guided first by our ethical obligations to the next of kin, and then by our desire to honor their loved ones, but also by our duty to create a better world than the one in which they died.

## *Responsibility—A Response by Karma R. Chávez*

Johnson proposes a question that has been given little consideration within rhetorical and qualitative studies: What are our duties to the dead? She suggests that even the two primary duties that a researcher might feel toward the dead—to knowledge and to justice—are actually duties to the living. Thus, when we tell the stories of the dead, our critical judgments might be guided by the question of "what should happen next." In other words, at least from a Western point of view, our treatment of the dead bears no significance to the dead, only to the living communities to which they belonged. While matters might be different from an indigenous viewpoint of life and death, this belief about the dead and the fact that dead subjects have no say in how we represent them have made historical rhetorical scholarship more or less devoid of ethical considerations with regard to the dead people we research.

Recasting Johnson's question away from duties to the dead and toward responsibilities to representation, we invite ethical considerations for historical rhetorical scholars that are similar to those of ethnographic researchers. Thinking about responsibilities over duties and representation over individual subjects reorients our attention to what Maria Cristina González (now Sarah Amira De la Garza) calls an ethic of accountability. In her discussion of postcolonial ethics for ethnography, De la Garza argues that conventional Western (colonial) thinking is only concerned with accountability because of possible repercussions. She encourages looking differently at the word: "Account-ability. The ability to account. To tell a story. . . . When we are *account*able, we are able to tell a story" (González, 2003, p. 83).

For De la Garza, the telling is not just about the research tale, but how we came to know what we know in a sense that may put our whole life story on the table. Telling our life story in a research monograph is not realistic, but "it is an *ability*. An ethical ethnographic tale holds implicit that the teller is able at any point to tell the story of the story" (González, 2003, p. 84). The same is true for an ethical rhetorical tale. The ability to account is not a duty to the dead, but we have the same responsibility to questions of judgment and representation regardless of whether our research

subjects are breathing. Perhaps, this is foremost a responsibility to the self as researcher and critic—to understand our decision-making, our awareness, our cultural limitations, our blockages, our openness, and more. Transferring this vulnerability from the field to a traditional text may seem strange at first, but it intervenes in our textual centrism and Western worldview that takes texts as unliving and objective reality. Guided by accountability, even when working primarily with texts, we would consider the full range of humanity and life involved in our work and our role as critics in judging and representing those lives.

## Truth (Robert Glenn Howard)

With the consent forms signed, the audio recorder running, and seated in a coffee shop near the optometrist office where he practiced, an interviewee I call "Tim" stated as a matter of fact that "the Jews are Satan's people." He went on to describe how Jewish people have "higher IQs" because they were once "God's chosen people." Tim felt the Jewish people had rejected God when he came to earth as Jesus and were, as a result, fundamentally evil.

So when Israel is mentioned in a prophetic book of the Bible, Tim went on to argue, the reference is actually to all "saved" Christians. He explained, "I am the Bride of Christ. Not some Jewish nation that totally rejects Christ!" He went on to articulate a complicated scenario to account for the fundamental evil he saw in Judaism, concluding that, "If you study the Talmudic writings you find out how demonic they are and how unbelievably . . . obscene it is. Have you ever looked at that stuff?" As Tim smiled kindly across the table at me, I realized he actually wanted an answer.

Caught off guard, I did the first thing that came to mind. I shook my head to gesture "no"—but I was lying. As a researcher of religion, I had, in fact, "looked at" Talmudic and lots of other Jewish "stuff." It may have been partially because I was surprised, and I just did not know how to respond. But it was certainly also because I did not want him to stop talking.

Thinking about that interview years after, I realized the experience compelled me to more fully engage the significant body of research on structural intolerance in Christianity historically. I felt compelled to explore and document how the powerful rhetorical functions of extreme intolerance play among everyday Christians online. That analysis suggests intolerance still is a common feature in some contemporary Christian communities.

Maybe I should not have pretended to be unaware of Jewish religious practices in that interview, but, in a sense, my very engagement with conservative Christians was always already disingenuous. Entering each interview, I already knew I would (again) not be convinced by their claims, and (much worse) I would not stop the interviewee from expressing beliefs I already knew I could never consider reasonable. Seeking to understand what I had already deemed unreasonable and sometimes even racist, I was always pretending to be more open to them than I could ever have been.

Encounters with Tim and others like him forced me to reconsider the most basic ethical question a fieldworker confronts. Were my research methods and resulting public statements worth the impact they could have on the community in which I was working? Was my disingenuousness worth it? The members of the community may not all have thought so, but I do because it allowed me access to document and critically judge what rhetorical performances of structural racism look like. Even though Tim allowed (even encouraged) me to use his real name, I do not. Today, I am not even sure what it was. My point was not to reveal Tim's racism. It was to reveal the structural racism that emerged so effortlessly in the everyday rhetorical performances I found online and off. Publishing his name would not make my research better. But letting him voice his anti-Semitism to me openly while he clearly understood I was doing research made my research not only better but also honest.

In my view, positioning myself as openly as I could to these individuals even as I became less and less tolerant from a critic's standpoint of their beliefs was definitely fake. I was playing the part of a more sympathetic researcher than I was. It was worth it because the everyday rhetorical performances I documented allowed my analysis to reveal the deeply embedded intolerance in rhetorics of religious certainty. For me, those published findings rendered my choice to engage individuals that I knew I would never agree with well worth it (Howard, 2011). However, it remains a choice I do not take lightly—nor can any fieldworker seeking to engage any individuals to whom they will remain alien.

### *Truth—A Response by Sara McKinnon*

I am reminded of Gary Fine's (1993) "The Ten Lies of Ethnography" in reading this excerpt about the often fraught maneuvering of self-presentation and power in doing interviews. "Most, if not all, ethnographers make a play for their subjects, suggesting that they are intensely sympathetic chroniclers," he quips (p. 270). Indeed, there seems to be a bit of acting that goes into most interviews. Sometimes, this acting involves flattering the interviewee; other times, it involves playing the adversary, and in Howard's instance, it meant he played the fool, acting ignorant so that Tim's rhetorical performance could unfold uninterrupted in the interview. Was this ethical? Was it truthful? To answer these questions, two additional questions must be answered. First, what are the research goals? And second, what is the locus of critical judgment?

Much has been made of interview methods that purportedly flatten power dynamics by calling them "dialogues,"

"conversations," or even "friendships," yet Steiner Kvale (2006) is right to note that power asymmetries are always evident whether we want to admit it or not. For me, a primary question we must ask in considering how to comport ourselves in the field and attend to power dynamics is, what is the goal of research? In Howard's instance, the purpose was not to write a biography of "Tim," nor was it even an instance of investigative reporting. Howard was trying to document the rhetorical performances of conservative Christians, and "Tim" was just one important representative. With a research goal of documenting rhetorical performances, the choice to strategically omit knowledge in order that the interviewee might elaborate makes sense. Equally demonstrative of the value of centering on this question is Howard's decision to use the pseudonym of "Tim." Documenting the *who* mattered less than documenting the *what* of the rhetorical performance, which then meant that Howard could punctuate his critical judgment on what was said, not the stakes of who said it. Perhaps this point is in contradiction with the ethics of responsibility and accountability proffered above in Johnson and Chávez's ruminations of the duties that we hold to the dead, but an orientation that starts with specific goals of the research will necessarily lead us to different ethical actions and standpoints.

With attention to the goals of research, the next important question to ask is about the proper focus of the researcher's critical judgment. Howard's example directs us to important questions that might arise when we consider the focal point of our judgment. Is it toward the rhetor? The details of the words themselves, or the context? While these may be interesting choices, Howard shows us that a critique of power is key to the work we do as rhetorical critics. In deciding what to do with Tim's racism, he starts by asking what structures of power impact most directly on the moment? And, what structures might be brought to the surface through critical rhetorical judgment? In emergent fashion that is emblematic of good inductive research, Howard realizes that his critical judgment of this particular scene must be applied to illuminate structures of racism in the everyday. Such a locus fits well with his goal of documenting the rhetorical performances of conservative Christians, for it allows him to move from documenting and describing, into the analytic work of critical judgment, which involves explanation, interpretation, and advocacy that is central to theoretically engaging and evocative field- and text-based scholarship.

## Power (Robert Asen)

When we consider the ethics of incorporating fieldwork into rhetorical scholarship, we should carefully consider relationships, especially relationships between the rhetorical scholars conducting the fieldwork and the people studied. These relationships do not lend themselves to any universal rules, but require consideration of context and power, especially the comparative power of the scholar venturing into the field and the people who reside there. To recognize that ethical actions depend, in part, on power relationships is to forswear a stance of objectivity practiced by some social scientists and to adopt instead a stance of critical engagement. Elucidating this alternative, Della Pollock and J. Robert Cox (1991) observe that a critically oriented and an "objective" approach "differ not in the sense that the former is ideological and the latter value-free. They differ, rather, in the recognition and reflexive engagement of their respective ideological commitments" (p. 172). This insight underscores that the question of critical engagement is not a matter of *if*, but *when* and *how* scholars—including rhetoricians and qualitative researchers more generally—should answer it.

I have confronted this difficult question in my own experience interviewing state legislators, which has lead me to the view that the obligations I owe these subjects, and the ethics that arise from such obligations, stem from their positions as powerful public officials. Legislators wield the power of the state to make laws and policies that may advance justice and injustice, fairness and unfairness, freedom and coercion. They may grant material benefits to some people while denying these benefits to others. Poor people, vulnerable people, people subject to discrimination and state violence in its many forms can certainly fight for justice, equality, and freedom. By no means are such people always angels. But their experience of power does not grant them the authority and privilege of official representatives of the state. So, when I think about sustaining ethical relationships with the people I interview, I think about these differential opportunities and constraints.

My interviews with state legislators, even those with whom I deeply disagree on matters of policy, carry ethical obligations. And there is plenty of room for disagreement. As readers may know, since the election of a conservative governor and state legislature in 2010, the state of Wisconsin has taken a sharp right turn on policies relating to education, labor, the environment, and more. In a recent legislative session, policymakers severely weakened tenure and shared governance for faculty across the University of Wisconsin system. Nevertheless, even when interviewing proponents of these changes, I owe them accuracy, fairness, understanding, and respect. Accuracy means characterizing the positions of legislators, in anonymous quotations from interviews and when paraphrasing the interviews, as the legislators see these positions. Accuracy entails conveying the statements and positions of legislators without purposeful misrepresentation or distortion. Fairness encompasses representing legislators' positions within the context of their overall views. As teachers of communication know, the same statement placed in different contexts can assume different meanings—fairness obligates me to place the

interviews in a context consistent with the legislators' views, even though the contextualization of my criticism may exceed that immediate context. Understanding constitutes an obligation to try to understand why people hold their views, even when we might strongly disagree with such views. At the core of rhetorical scholarship, in my view, is an effort to explain the dynamics of discourse—any discourse—studied. If we can understand the dynamics of unjust discourse that perpetuates pernicious stereotypes, for example, we may better respond to such discourse. By respect, I mean recognizing the purpose of my interviews as eliciting legislators' opinions. As I have listened to legislators' answers to my questions, I have sometimes judged their positions as misguided in some way. But I have refrained from openly debating their positions during the interviews because of my respect for our mutual understandings of these encounters, which position me in a mode of inquiry rather than advocacy.

I hope to hold legislators accountable by recovering democratic connotations of accountability, such as legislators answering to constituents, upholding public goods and services, and taking responsibility for their decisions. In contemporary politics in the United States and elsewhere, a narrower "technical-managerial" meaning of balancing accounts, which is evident in contemporary calls to privatize public goods and submit to the discipline of the market, has obscured the democratic potential of accountability (Biesta, 2004). I pursue the democratic potential of accountability by analyzing emergent themes and tensions from the interviews, while adhering to confidentiality agreements, and considering these tensions and themes in light of contemporary political discourses. In this analysis, for example, interviews may betray cynical views of the public good, fealty to donors, and craven commitments to self-interest.

### *Power—A Response by Jenell Johnson*

Ethically attuned ethnographic research acknowledges that researchers tend to enjoy greater power and privilege than their subjects. However, in the situation Asen describes, an example of what Nader (1972) calls "studying up," we see a different kind of power, one that does not inhere in a subject but in a subject's positions, which are contingent, always in relation, and rhetorically constituted. A number of these subject positions emerge in Asen's narrative: researcher/subject; constituent/representative; professor/politician, all of which hold fascinating rhetorical dynamics. Asen explains that although he sometimes feels that legislators are misguided, he does not express this disagreement during the interview out of respect for his participants. But why does debating a subject constitute disrespect? As communication scholars committed to the value of disagreement in a pluralistic society, most of us would balk at equating debate with disrespect, which only highlights the uniqueness of the rhetorical situation between interviewer and interviewee in this context of a polarized political climate.

It is not that Asen wishes to remain "objective" and somehow above the fray. As a critical theorist who is committed to justice, Asen practices socially reflexive scholarship. And yet there *is* a kind of objectivity here, what I would identify as a strategic performance of objectivity ("accurate," "fair"), which is a constitutive element of the ethos of the researcher who is a participant in the context studied. By calling objectivity a "performance," I do not mean to imply that Asen is doing something deceptive—rather, I think he is doing something essential.

By avoiding disagreement in the immediate context of the interview, Asen enables deliberation with others so that he can later analyze the discourse that emerged from the context and participant. To openly disagree with a participant in this immediate context shifts Asen from *researcher* to *constituent* or perhaps, particularly troublesome in our current political climate, *partisan professor.* A moment of open disagreement challenges the researcher's ethos, and diminishes a participant's trust, particularly if the interview situation has been framed as an academic exchange. Without trust, a subject may not be as forthright, or worse, they may retreat into partisan platitudes and talking points. In the context of an interview, as in deliberation, trust emerges in relation, as Asen (2015) argues in his most recent book. Trust is produced by discourse; trust also produces the conditions for discourse to emerge. I am not willing to call an interview a form of deliberation, in the classic sense of the term, but it might be seen as the origin of an asynchronous, multi-modal conversation between researcher, participant, discipline, and, one hopes, the larger community.

## Relationships (Karma R. Chávez)

For my dissertation research, I studied activist coalition building with two non-profit organizations with missions I admired: Wingspan, Southern Arizona's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Community Center, and Coalición de Derechos Humanos (DH), a grassroots immigrant rights and anti-border militarization group, both in Tucson. Wingspan and DH had largely separate agendas and groups they worked with and represented, but leadership in both groups had long recognized the connections between anti-migrant and anti-LGBT oppression, not to mention the often difficult plight of LGBT migrants.

To this day, I attribute my own foundation as an activist and critical thinker to activists I worked with in these organizations. Some remain good friends of mine, and I retain strong admiration for many others with whom I have lost contact. When I worked with them, I was developing my analysis of borders, immigration, and queer politics, and the passion with which several of the activists did their work was very attractive to me.

This research was "activist scholarship" in the tradition of Shannon Speed (2006) and Charles Hale (2006), which meant I conducted field research, including interviews and participant observation and advocated alongside these groups for the causes we jointly found important. For about a year, I functioned as a liaison between the two groups, bringing messages between them as they prepared for the 2006 state election, which included several anti-migrant and one anti-LGBT ballot initiatives that they wanted to collectively confront.

In preparing and studying activist methodology, I believed my foremost concern in the field would be to balance between advocacy and cultural critique. I quickly learned that while that tension was important, in working with people with whom I agreed so much, I would also have other ethical considerations. These considerations included having to learn how to manage relationships with people I valued, represent difficult situations in what I wrote about my field experiences, and ultimately on some occasions pick sides both in real time and in retrospect. These considerations are also important for rhetorical field methods and for qualitative methods more broadly as we consider how to contextualize the instances of discourse we write about and analyze, and also how to apply our judgment as critics.

One of the ways Wingspan and DH decided to jointly challenge the troubling ballot initiatives was to co-produce materials with both organizations' names that would offer reasons for LGBT citizens and non-LGBT migrants and their allies to oppose all the ballot initiatives, not just the most relevant one(s) to their lives. Working primarily with activists in DH, I helped to produce pamphlets in English, and DH helped to translate the materials into Spanish, despite having limited staff capacity for doing so. DH activists regularly took these pamphlets and flyers with them to events to put them on cars and hand them out. After the election, Wingspan and DH wanted to produce a postelection joint statement making sense of the results, which were positive for LGBT rights and negative for migrant rights. DH organizers asked me if I could have someone in Wingspan translate the statement as DH volunteers had done the others. I figured it would be no problem, but this was not the case.

In my dissertation and subsequent book, I wrote about this frustrating incident as a struggle over theories of translation internally with Wingspan that meant that the document that needed to be translated never was. In the note of my book, I explained,

> "Theories of translation" is a vague way to represent this particular conflict, which raised issues of power, culture, and education. However, because most participants in my study asked to use their real names, and this particular instance would unnecessarily implicate parties on both sides, I made the ethical choice to represent the problem in this way. (Chávez, 2013, p. 182n100)

I would add to that now that I wrote about what happened using those incredibly vague terms because I did not know how to represent what, in my view, actually happened in the immediate context. I did not want to write about what actually happened because I worried how it would reflect on Wingspan's leadership and the work the organization was doing in conjunction with DH. I also did not want to write about it because of how I thought it might make one of my participants feel to read it. In essence, those of a different class and education status within Wingspan held conflicting viewpoints on what could be considered appropriate written Spanish in public documents. I learned this was an ongoing struggle in Wingspan, which is why I used the term, *theories of translation*. The result of this seemingly small conflict was that Wingspan took no burden of translation and, in essence, did very little in contributing to this piece of the groups' coalitional efforts—a piece intended to be significant.

It has been many years now since this happened. Neither of the involved parties is affiliated with Wingspan any longer although I occasionally interact with them on social media or when in Tucson. One of them never knew about this incident, and I doubt the other has thought about it since. I have thought about it many times over the years, and even in this piece, I edited out several details I intended to include this time because these tensions between participants, their disparate power, and our relationships do not subside.

## *Relationships—A Response by Robert Glenn Howard*

When spending time with long-familiar people, sometimes a particular observation strikes us: an event, a relationship, or an interaction. In the recollection of the moment, a set of details emerges as extraordinary in their ordinariness. Synecdoches of our already-familiar experience, these details can crystalize what we already know into something we can clearly communicate to those who do not.

But what if that synecdoche captures something that is not what we want to communicate to others? What if it captures something true and important, or even essential, about the community and context but that also undermines our advocacy and invites critique? What responsibility does realizing an unwanted truth place on researchers?

Chávez's recounting above is a revelation of a set of details that have not let her be because they were a powerful synecdoche, an opportunity to communicate something important—but one she did not take. Afraid of the tension it would bring out into the open because of her relationships with the participants, she concealed it in the modest trope: "theories of translation." But now it has reemerged on the pages above as a terse statement of the fact: "Those of a different class and education status within Wingspan held conflicting viewpoints on what could be considered appropriate written Spanish."

Chávez's choice of the gentleness of the trope over the tension of the synecdoche left her scholarship less complete. But the strength of research in the field is not only in its labor of documenting details of the immediate context, it is also in the judgment it affords the critic who must choose which details to bring out and when to bring them. As an activist scholar, making that judgment is further complicated by the fact that her research seeks not only to document and analyze but also to forward the goals of the community she studies, and remain faithful to the relationships she has with research participants. Here, the activism and the relationships come into tension with the scholarship.

Not all opportunities need to be taken, and Chávez's judgment was that the tension that gave rise to this complex synecdoche with all of its potential to reveal would, in this particular case, reveal too much. It might have hurt her friends by revealing their own need for critique to each other—and to us.

I wonder, though, if representing those who we most hope succeed as fallible or even sometimes struggling to uphold their own principles does not make them appear that much more persuasive. After all, we all struggle for what is good, and we are all sometimes mistaken.

## Representation (Sara McKinnon)

Much of my research concerns the experiences of those whom we might consider to be extremely marginalized or subaltern in the communities in which they live. They are refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, and those trafficked across nation-state borders for sexual and manual labor. These are individuals whose daily life experiences are constituted by high levels of precariousness and vulnerability, and individuals for whom textualization in the form of documents, records, and representation often does not bode well. Many of the asylum cases that I write about involve details, details that, as I read the court record, stick in the pit of my stomach. These are details of bodies, vulnerability, and violence that are as gruesome and horrific as they are common and mundane. Representing these details in writing is one thing. I rely on the court record, the transcript tightly wrapped up by the court reporter to do the work. There are silences, gaps, and mistranslations that come with this approach, but at least I get a sense of how the court is hearing and interpreting the details.

The harder part, for me, is representing these lives, experiences—these details—when I am asked to give live presentations of my work. It feels different to take the details from writing to sound in my voice, in my body. The stakes of the live performance in a particular field, of rhetorically materializing these details, feel different. The question that plagues me as I work alongside of, document, analyze, and then later write or talk about these people is, what does it mean to be me doing this research and writing work, and how do I represent their experiences in ways that do not add to the precariousness they already experience through my own documentation. I want to suggest that our use of primary data—whether it is from interviews, observations, archived texts, or digital spaces—must also consider the audiences who may engage and imagine the lives of the people we represent, so as to minimize the possibility of material and discursive violence that is always present in our representational practices.

One particular case and presentation stands out in my mind. I had not fully thought through the stakes of speaking the details of this particular case out loud from my body and voice. I had not considered what it meant for a lecture hall full of young 20-something, mostly white, U.S. students to hear these details represented in my voice and body. As I started, though, my mouth got dry and sticky with anxiety. Something was not right. My body told me so. I looked for places in the lecture to cut or summarize so I could move more quickly to the analysis. Not familiar enough with what I had prepared for that day's lecture, I had to keep going with what was before me.

> This is the case of Lorraine Fiadjoe, who arrived in the United States from Ghana in 2000 with the travel documents of another person . . . Fiadjoe was a member of the Ewe ethnic group in Ghana. Her father was a priest of the Trokosi religion within the Ewe ethnic group. As noted in the case based on the Department of State Ghanaian country condition report, "Trokosi, a traditional practice found among the Ewe ethnic group and in part of the Volta Region, is an especially severe human rights abuse and an extremely serious violation of children's and women's rights." . . . Fiadjoe herself testified that she was enslaved and sexually abused by her father . . . Fiadjoe was severely traumatized by the circumstances of her life. She had difficulty talking about her experiences of rape and incest without disassociating or breaking down.
>
> The judge hearing her case was insistent on hearing the details in her voice, questioning her directly:
>
> Q: For how long of period of time did that go on?
> A: For, till I was seven, I know my father was raping me.
> Q: Ma'am, you're not making any—
> A: —For it went—
> Q: —Ma'am, you, you can cry, that's fine, but your [*sic*] not making any sense, and the tears do not do away with the fact that your [*sic*] not making any sense to me. Now, rather than crying, just answer the question. You said, your father raped you at age seven and he would beat you, correct?
> A: Yes, but I didn't tell anybody.
> Q: I don't care if you did or not. At age seven, how long did this go on that he was raping you and beating you? (*Fiadjoe v. Attorney General*, 2005)

I got to the end of the passage and felt the whiteness of the eyes staring at me, searing my skin. Why this case and these details in this venue? What were the students thinking

about Fiadjoe? What must they be thinking about her community, country, even her continent?

What is the relationship of positionalities between the researcher and those represented in research? What are the politics of representation that we must account for in sharing people's stories and experiences? What happens to the politics of contextualizing as we move across venues of representation? A study of rhetoric helps scholars attend to the differentials in power dynamics that play out as they contextualize the details of a particular set of discursive practices across different live and textualized contexts and for different audiences.

### *Representation—A Response by Robert Asen*

The disturbing story of Lorraine Fiadjoe, which McKinnon shares, and the callous response of the judge who demanded "rational," emotion-free answers elicits an immediate response for me as I read it: sadness and sympathy for Fiadjoe, and anger at the judge. I use the word "read" purposefully, because I am reluctant to speak Fiadjoe's story, and I cannot fully appreciate the great challenges that must accompany the act of lecturing about Fiadjoe's experiences. My own discomfort underscores McKinnon's point about embodiment. I had not considered the ethical significance of writing and speaking as different ways of engaging text and field, but McKinnon's reflections highlight how these differences can be crucial to our understandings, as researchers, of text and field, as well as our audiences' understandings. I wonder if the judge who interrogated Fiadjoe sensed this point—that speaking horrific experiences leads the speaker to a kind of embodiment—and perhaps he tried to avoid feelings of unease by insisting that Fiadjoe adopt an exaggerated, disembodied voice. In any case, McKinnon teaches us that scholars can learn and convey their findings through a variety of sensory means and communicative modes.

McKinnon's observations also reaffirm the inescapability of context when we consider our obligations, as scholars, to the people we engage when conducting fieldwork. As Fiadjoe's case exemplifies, and as McKinnon states, her fieldwork brings her into contact with people who are deeply marginalized in their communities. This standing raises the clear ethical obligation of "represent[ing] their experiences in ways that do not add to the precariousness they already experience through my own documentation." To date, my own fieldwork has led me to interact with public officials at the local and state levels. They hold prominent positions in their communities. They make consequential decisions that affect many other people, including people who live on the margins in extreme poverty and are subjected to cruel racism. Unlike McKinnon with her subjects, I do not worry about the precariousness of the public officials I study. To the contrary, I see ethical value in diminishing some of the sense of security with which they hold onto their positions. I am realistic enough about my own position as a researcher to know that I alone will not weaken their positions, but if I can participate in actions that bring greater scrutiny and critique on public officials, then I see myself as fulfilling an ethical good.

## Conclusion

Our dialogue on the ethics of fieldwork for rhetorical scholars affirms the contextual qualities of many of the judgments we have made while also connecting our disparate cases. Starting at different points, we have converged on themes of responsibility, truth, power, relationships, and representation. If there is one key consideration that arises from our dialogue, it is a call to reflect carefully on the relationship between ourselves as researchers, the people we study, and broader communities implicated or impacted by those we study.

Our dialogues suggest that privilege and precariousness may serve as qualities for considering the relationship between researchers and people with whom researchers may study. In an extreme case, we can imagine encounters with people of absolute privilege, who carelessly or ruthlessly direct the lives of innumerable others. In another extreme, we can imagine people living completely precariously, utterly dependent on the actions of others and always at risk of extreme misfortune. But real people do not live as extreme cases. Women legislators, for example, often must negotiate patriarchal practices even as they hold positions of power. Marginalized people may enact agency or reproduce inequality even as they live in desperate circumstances. As scholars, then, we may consider how privilege and precariousness inform any situation we encounter in the field, both in terms of our own position as well as the people with whom we study. A rhetorical contribution to fieldwork, then, may be to highlight for qualitative scholars the importance of the researcher's judgment and the centrality of context in deciding how to move forward in the research practice.

At a basic level, these reflections raise questions of power. When engaging in fieldwork, we would do well to remember Foucault's (1995) observation that power is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon; rather, power exists in dialectical relation with resistance. This relationship is identifiable between people, to be sure, but also in relation to the institutions that enable and constrain our actions. Researchers and subjects may each deploy strategies and tactics of power and resistance (de Certeau, 1984), which may take a number of forms, depending on a host of factors we have identified in this essay. Perhaps accountability, then, offers one way of negotiating these power relationships. If accountability offers an account by telling a story, if accountability can be reconfigured to revive its democratic connotations, then it may serve as one possible ethical guide in the complex negotiations between rhetoric and qualitative inquiry.

### Acknowledgments

We thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback on this essay as well as the graduate students in Rhetoric,

Politics, & Culture in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin–Madison for thinking alongside of us about the ethics and politics of work that translates between the field and text.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. For a thorough discussion of ethics in qualitative and ethnographic research, see chap. 4 to 6 in *Critical Ethnography* (Madison, 2005).
2. Others including Gerard Hauser, Erik Doxtader, and Michael J. Hyde have also considered ethics in the practice of criticism. It seems fair to say, however, that the ethics of criticism and all that it entails—collecting/creating texts, analyzing and evaluating them, and writing about them—has not been a central preoccupation among rhetorical critics, at least in their published writing.
3. One might extend these restrictions to questions for rhetorical history and criticism—do our duties lessen the further we extend into the past? Do we have more ethical responsibility to the early 20th century dead than we do to the dead from ancient Rome?

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## Author Biographies

**Sara L. McKinnon** is an assistant professor of Rhetoric, Politics & Culture in the Communication Arts Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**Jenell Johnson** is an assistant professor of Rhetoric, Politics & Culture in the Communication Arts Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**Robert Asen** is a professor of Rhetoric, Politics, and Culture in the Communication Arts Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**Karma R. Chávez** is an associate professor in Mexican American & Latina/o Studies at the University of Texas-Austin

**Robert Glenn Howard** is a professor of Rhetoric, Politics, and Culture in the Communication Arts Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.