Review essay

History of Media Studies

The Nowness of Chairing an English Department: A Review Essay of John Guillory's *Professing Criticism* and Michael J. Sproule's *Democratic Vernaculars*

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John Guillory. *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*. 456 pp. University of Chicago Press, 2022. $29 (paper).

J. Michael Sproule.*Democratic Vernaculars: Rhetorics of Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Criticism since the Enlightenment*. 382 pp. Routledge Press, 2020. $42.49 (paper).

In Kathleen Blake Yancey's "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key," delivered March 22, 2004, as the "Chair's Address" to the Conference on College Composition and Communication and later published in *College Composition and Communication*, Yancey draws attention to the ways historical practices of reading and contemporary public writing outside of school can inform what we do now as English departments. She recommends faculty in rhetoric and composition take advantage of the "nowness," or deicity, of increased public screen writing to design new curricula, update writing-across-the-curriculum efforts, and develop majors in composition and rhetoric. Yancey's address kairotically invokes the deictic quality of a moment in time to envision a new future for writing instruction.

I put my own nowness into play to frame this review of John Guillory's *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* and J. Michael Sproule's *Democratic Vernaculars: Rhetorics of Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Criticism since the Enlightenment*. As Collin Brooke writes in "Weblogs as Deictic Systems: Centripetal, Centrifugal, and Small-World Blogging," "there is an immediacy to deixis that functions rhetorically as an invitation to shared experience: we are here, in this place, and now, at this time, and we are connected, however briefly, through the shorthand of deixis."[1] And so, I invite readers to share this moment of time with me, when I am a rhetoric and writing professor reading these texts in the immediacy of my role chairing an English department at a rural research university in the American West. My tenure as a department chair has often been marked by the immediacy of the crisis rhetoric that haunts the humanities; I'm regularly pulled into concrete manifestations of this discourse because of decreased enrollment in our three majors (Literature, Writing, and English Education), concerns about student retention, and disciplinary frictions that arise among faculty when the stakes seem high and the rewards minimal. These themes are surely familiar for readers across the United States and abroad.

[1] Collin Brooke, "Weblogs as Deictic Systems: Centripetal, Centrifugal, and Small-World Blogging," *Computers and Composition Online* (Fall 2025).

Yancey's address also helps me put these seemingly disparate books—one an essay collection on the profession of literary studies by a well-regarded professor of literature and the other a monograph about the rhetorical history and pedagogy of the English vernacular since the Enlightenment by an esteemed professor emeritus in communication studies—into conversation with each other and my current moment. They invite me to think about the fields of literary studies and writing and rhetoric studies to consider how these histories reflect current faculty values and conversations and how they can inform future possibilities. Guillory and Yancey offer divergent takes on this moment from their different disciplinary commitments. Sproule's study of the rhetorics and pedagogies of reading, writing, and speaking in school, home, and business contexts is a helpful precursor to Yancey's interest in teaching public screen literacies, following Elizabeth Daley's argument that "the screen is the language of the vernacular, that if we do not include it in the school curriculum, we will become as irrelevant as faculty professing in Latin."[2] According to Yancey, Daley thinks screen literacies should be taught in media studies programs to "get in step with life practices,"[3] and Yancey, of course, wants to see writing studies take on this role, too. In doing so, she updates Sproule's historicized observation that rhetoric is central to the modern vernacular revolution for the twenty-first century (2). And both Sproule and Yancey provide counter histories and narratives to Guillory's belief that rhetoric died with the rise of

[2] Kathleen Blake Yancey, "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key," *College Composition and Communication* 56, no. 2 (2004): 305.

[3] Yancey, 305.

the vernacular and his equation of writing faculty with only first-year writing, whom, he opines, lack a "fully disciplinary status" (313). He envisions, in fact, doing away with first year composition courses altogether in favor of a suite of extracurricular means to elevate writing instruction out of writing studies altogether.

John Guillory's dense and ambitious four-hundred-page essay collection offers a historical and sociological analysis and commentary on literary studies as a profession. The collection, whose title is a twist on Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature*, takes as its primary question "What does it mean to 'profess criticism?' " (ix). By way of answer, Guillory offers his sociological history of the rise of academia as a profession, and he explores the historical arc of "professing criticism" as the guiding force of literary studies. He maps the emergence of the concept of professions and the rise of academic specializations, and considers the history of criticism as the formalization of the discipline from the nineteenth century public, journalistic critic in conflict with the academic critic who emerged in the 1920s to the rise of the scholar critic's primacy centered largely on period specialization and close reading (56) and later followed by the emergence of political topicality in the 1960s (74). He follows this with a critique of how social criticism has served as a justification and inspiration for the literature professoriate. He argues that "literature needs to be *recentered* by the literary professoriate in order to reestablish its public claim to expertise" (80), and he wants this recentering to focus on the human record as the object of study.

Guillory also establishes his overarching claim that the literary professoriate is marked by its historical and ongoing formation and deformation. In other words, Guillory understands the shaping of a profession as a way of seeing the world that always also entails the limits or biases on this specialized way of seeing. A key argument that he revisits over the course of the book is that elevating literary critique to social critique is an "overestimation of aim," one that "deforms the discipline" (81). Guillory wants literary studies to focus on records or documents as objects of study rather than using texts for social critique. This is a provocative claim, particularly for literature colleagues like mine who see social critique as a foundational justification and method of doing literary criticism—of moving discussions students encounter in novels, short stories, drama, and poetry into broader social interpretation and critique. His critique is also interesting considering the recommendation that our department's program reviewers made last year that we are "behind" in having sufficient DEI-inflected curricula to address low enrollment by capturing more students' interest. This recommendation reflects a common understanding within the discipline and the university that broader social

concerns are a legitimate part of literary criticism, and yet outside of the university DEI commitments are currently under significant attack by US Republicans at the state and federal levels.

Guillory's focus leads him to take up different facets and histories of this dynamic relationship between disciplinary formation and deformation, which allows him to concretize his own understanding of literary studies. Guillory identifies and expands on Erwin Panofsky's terms "monument" and "document" to argue that the humanities should study "records left by man," located in the dialectics of documents/documentality and monuments/monumentality (118). He claims for the humanities, including literary studies and presumably writing studies and communications, what he sees as a more "coherent" description of what the humanities study rather than arguing about why we should study them, which is how he frames social critique (110). He directs readers towards the idea that the humanities center on "the study of a particular kind of object" that "calls to us across the long time of human existence, exceeding by far the duration of any one human life" (123). In other words, Guillory is particularly oriented towards archival and historical research methods. I'm not persuaded that the "what" and "why" are so easily separated, and I'm also aware of the limits of this claim for humanities scholarship that isn't centered on written, historical texts, like communication scholar Natasha Seegert's work at the intersections between humans and more-than-humans, where the object of study might be coyote tracks located in human habitats. Or the ways scholars in the humanities conduct quantitative and qualitative research. The remaining chapters in this section take up "dead" or failed predecessors to literary studies, including rhetoric, *belles lettres*, and philology; historical locations of literature relative to the sciences and the rise of the vernacular curriculum as formative to the discipline; and a reflection on the decolonization of global literature.

Guillory also focuses on four disciplinary problems that he sees weighing down literary studies: graduate education, evaluation of scholarship, first-year composition, and reading practices. Guillory is less interested in solving problems than he is in raising questions and observations that might inform future planning in English departments. Guillory returns to the argument that the literature profession ought to focus on human records—novels, drama, and poetry—as the objects of study with their attendant reading practices, which for him entails looking at the relationship between lay reading and professional reading practices. He raises interesting questions about the reading practices taught in literature classrooms, including whether the literature classroom is a place for reading for pleasure or if professional reading is meant to be work.

With its five rationales for literary study, the conclusion of *Professing Criticism* is meant to inspire hope for readers. What I find most interesting is how Guillory's discussion affirms his belief that literary study is "a combination of positive knowledge and cognitive training" (348). That is, literary studies is "at once a kind of learning and the cultivation of an *art*," specifically the arts of reading and writing. He argues that these arts were "arguably the first versions of media studies in Western education" and "the deepest foundation for the future development of literary study" (355). This closing essay loops back effectively to the opening discussion of the rise of professions, kinds of knowledge valued in this shift, and their relationship to craft knowledge, or techne. I find this discussion particularly interesting given Guillory's argument that the "death" of rhetoric as techne occurs in favor of the rise of scientific disciplinary information as evidence. As a scholar of feminist rhetorics, I find his claim of the death of rhetoric premature, and narrowly conceived, even as I'm fascinated by his discussion of the opposition between techne and information, since I understand rhetorical studies as centering on knowledge acquisition and production. I can't help but get the feeling he wants only the literature professoriate to take on teaching the arts of writing and reading.

Ultimately, Guillory expresses his "hope that this framework of analysis will help to explain the perennial churn in literary study" (ix), and the collection does this well, including underscoring how disciplinary perspective and preferences play out in this "churn." As I read, I was regularly aware that Guillory is a privileged white male and successful scholar of literary history; it's much easier to dismiss rhetoric as dead, composition studies as a misguided literacy project, and social literary critique as overreach from his position of relative institutional power. I grant that the social aims of my literature faculty have not elevated our department's cultural capital in or beyond the university, but our department is an important place on campus where students can engage different beliefs, experiences, and perspectives from across the Anglophone world. Nonetheless, I encourage faculty, graduate students, and professionals to read Guillory's collection alongside academic books like *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*[4], the numerous public articles and essays proclaiming or challenging the demise of English majors and/or the humanities, and the 2024 World Humanities Report,[5] but also to read other disciplinary perspectives on reading, writing, speaking, and listening as well.

J. Michael Sproule's *Democratic Vernaculars: Rhetorics of Reading, Writing, Speaking and Criticism since the Enlightenment*, a 350-page, impressive historical study of the evolution of Anglophone vernaculars

[4] Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[5] https://worldhumanitiesreport.org/.

from the seventeenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century, represents the kind of humanities scholarship Guillory values. Sproule's meticulous historical scholarship centers closely on human records, even as his argument and evidence effectively counter Guillory's claim in "The Postrhetorical Condition" that the "end of rhetoric is concurrent with the extension of literacy to the populace as a whole" (129). Guillory goes on to write, "Vernacularization is a condition and a cause of the demise of rhetoric, a force undermining the 'dead languages' of antiquity that could not be resisted forever" (131). Sproule's extensive study proves otherwise. Sproule argues that "the modern theory, pedagogy, practice, and criticism of rhetoric proves central to the vernacular revolution—and in no way represents an epiphenomenon vis-à-vis grammar and literature" (2). I recommend reading Sproule's study in dialogue with Romeo Garcia and Damian Baca's *Rhetorics Elsewhere and Otherwise: Contested Modernities, Decolonial Visions*, Jeffrey Ringer's *Vernacular Christian Rhetoric and Civil Discourse: The Religious Creativity of Evangelical Student Writers*, and Carmen Kynard's *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies* to expand on the scope of theorizing and inclusivity of vernacular studies.[6] Nonetheless, Sproule's examination of 750 texts related to speaking, writing, and reading in school, home, and business is a robust and compelling study.

Sproule's introduction is critical in offering his framework and argument; four principles he shares in the introduction form his operating definition of rhetoric, namely that rhetoric is a process of negotiating idea-communication and expression (aesthetics and correctness) for different audiences for different purposes. His plotting of the dimensions of his study along an x and y axis graph is a useful frame. He describes the x-axis as "denoting the span of conceptual themes serving functional requisites—from simple spelling and penmanship books to systematic and multifaceted treatises," while the y-axis "adds refinement by recognizing rhetoric's multilayered applications in primary grades, upper grammar school, academy or high school, college, home study, group or club, business-professional office, and high-level scholarship" (4). This graph effectively illustrates the depth and breadth of Sproule's study and supports his argument that Anglophones "built vernacular competence over the course of their studies by assimilating genres" rhetorically (4). The third key principle that establishes rhetoric's centrality to the vernacular is found in the dialectical relationship he traces between idea-communication and expression across a number of texts, a concept he attributes to Locke and traces across other influential figures (2). Sproule writes, "From grammar rhetoric derives its expression

[6] Romeo Garcia and Damian Baca, eds., *Rhetorics Elsewhere and Otherwise: Contested Modernities, Decolonial Visions* (NCTE, 2019); Jeffrey M. Ringer, *Vernacular Christian Rhetoric and Civil Discourse: The Religious Creativity of Evangelical Student Writers* (Routledge Press, 2018); Carmen Kynard, *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies* (State University of New York Press, 2013).

criterion of *correctness*, and from literature rhetoric absorbs values respecting *beauty* of expression" (3). Finally, Sproule reminds readers that "Theorists and teachers of the post-Lockean vernacular redeployed classical-era concepts, chiefly from Cicero and Quintilian, to such an extent that modern rhetoric represents a continuation rather than a full revolution" (13). In other words, the clean break from classical rhetoric Guillory envisions is neither clean nor complete.

The fourth of Sproule's ten operating principles identifies gaps in rhetoric's "familiar archive of texts," including "the working class, white women, and diverse ethnicities" (6). While Sproule briefly addresses feminist rhetorical studies across his book, much more study needs to be done in the areas Sproule mentions, but also in those he doesn't, including sites like agriculture, domestic work, and by second language users, to name a few. While I sometimes lost sight of Sproule's larger arguments and principles within the nitty gritty of chapters—it's hard to see the forest for all the trees—and in the ways some of the relations between sections are glossed (likely due to the scope of the study), it's clear that vernaculars—as dynamic and adaptable forms of language—have played a critical role in shaping modern rhetoric in practical and intellectual forms. The remaining principles Sproule offers address themes of incompletion and underappreciation to underscore areas needing additional scholarly attention, all derived as ways of more fully understanding rhetoric's historical relevance, whether that means identifying the influences of Cicero and Quintilian or that of postmodern rhetorical studies.

Sproule locates his ten principles in different Anglophone texts and contexts across the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries. He establishes John Locke's "central[ity] to the communicative-rhetorical tangent of English-language vernaculars" (24), as well as the influences of other figures on the modern vernacular. This he follows with a textual study of how "Lockean idea-communication intersected with classically inflected *belles lettres* to create a framework for new vernaculars in contexts scholarly, pedagogical, professional, and social" (85). Sproule then shifts the domain of study beyond "formal school" to public contexts like debating societies, the home, and business, where one can "hone skills of conversation, letter-writing, grammar, and speaking" (163). For example, he surveys the uses of advice books, professional handbooks for secretaries, debate manuals, and manuals for extemporaneous speaking to trace language use via idea-communication and expression. Sproule then surveys the relationship of communication and expression across the genres of composition-rhetoric textbooks, composition handbooks for writing (e.g., the popular *The Elements of Style*) and oratory (e.g., *The Art of Oratorical Composition*), handbooks for newspaper reporting to com-

plement on-the-job learning, and criticism, providing an additional discussion of the professional versus academic critic. From here, Sproule more narrowly centers on elocution. One interesting tension Sproule points to at the turn of the century is between the disciplines of speech and English, "the expressive culture of elocution" and "an ever more powerful English-studies establishment for whom the vernacular apex amounted to critical appreciation of great works silently read" (271). Sproule's discussion of literary criticism alongside public speaking explores an interesting disciplinary relationship to English departments, as Guillory doesn't significantly consider the discipline of communication studies. Sproule looks across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries at the place of eloquence in communication, largely emphasizing it as a site of "vernacular quality and language efficacy" in oratory (314) displaced by rhetorical, literary, and cultural criticism. These chapters are densely detailed and descriptive, although the book ends with a more sweeping gesture towards the importance of postmodern perspectives on vernaculars.

While Guillory proclaims the death of rhetoric, and the attendant failures he perceives in first-year composition (he hesitates to call it first-year writing), Sproule reminds us that we can also look to communication studies as a profession for studying the humanities and how the arts of writing, reading, and speaking circulate in contemporary vernaculars. These texts are both valuable for what they do accomplish as well as what they don't accomplish, pushing readers to reflect on disciplinary formations and deformations to inspire our reflection on our own departments, our own professions, and our own moments, our nowness. From Guillory I better understand my literature faculty and their desires to elevate social critique and distinguish between the reading they want from students versus lay reading practices. I also see reflected in his book the ways they devalue first-year writing and the writing major, imagining these programs as largely instrumental or workplace-oriented rather than related to the arts they profess. Sproule's monograph is in many ways a comfort because it points to the duration, functionality, and aesthetic dimension of rhetorical pedagogy and practice in diverse academic and public sites. Rereading Yancey's essay now, I'm struck by how exciting it was for me back then, as a new assistant professor of rhetoric and writing, listening as Kathy Yancey identified a moment for promoting exciting professional changes in college writing instruction, including the establishment of writing majors. While I'm more jaded now, over twenty years later as a department chair and a faculty member in a writing major, I'd still like us to see how we might jointly contribute to teaching the arts of reading, writing, and speaking—creating coalitions within and across the humanities—rather than trying to shore up our siloed departments or professions.

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