

Building a Better Barn: A Community-Oriented Approach to Rhetorical Scholarship

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Despite my ominously Irish last name (which I eagerly adopted from my partner given its appropriateness to my scholarly endeavours), my heritage is all German. In 1847 my great-great-great-grandparents John and Anna Kaster emigrated from Mecklenburg, Germany, arriving in Ohio before moving to Canada as part of the Pennsylvania Dutch migration, a historical footnote that is given its due attention by Kyle Gerber in this issue of *Rhetor*. The Kastars settled in Blandford-Blenheim, Ontario, as Mennonite farmers, where they raised their family. Berlin, now Kitchener, was established as a largely German-speaking Mennonite community in the 1840s, and may have been what drew John and Anna to the surrounding area.

While the name of the town has changed, the geographic proximity of the Kaster family has not. Today, I live minutes from where generations of Kastars have established their lives, and as a child, I lived in a century-old home on a hundred-acre farm that has housed three generations of Kastars (and continues to house them today). You could say my German roots run deep, but not in any stein-collecting, Oktoberfesting, pretzel-loving sense. Rather, my sense of identity is largely tied to religious tradition.

It should come as no surprise then, given that I live, work, study, and play in the Waterloo Region, that I'm Mennonite—albeit a more progressive brand of Mennonite known as Mennonite Brethren. The cultural experience of being Mennonite might be best illustrated through the Mennonite tradition of barn raising: when a farmer requires a barn, it is expected that all members of their particular Mennonite community will participate in the construction of that barn no matter their age or gender, providing labour without any compensation in the traditional economic or equitable exchange sense. It is an inherently social practice that emphasizes the collective and interdependent—in a word, community.

The collaborative spirit of barn raising recognizes what a community can accomplish that an individual cannot; but by the same token, it also acknowledges the necessity of individual talents needed to contribute to the success of the whole community. While barn raising is now only practiced in the most traditional Mennonite communities, my own experiences as a Mennonite Brethren—attending church, participating in youth group, singing in the Inter-Mennonite Children's Choir, being both a camper and leader at an overnight Mennonite camp—have affirmed the community-centric nature of Mennonite practice, where the existence of one is recognized only within the context of the many. For me, being Mennonite isn't about religious tenets (although even as an atheist I know them well and they continue to guide my moral compass); rather, it's about the cultural and social experience stemming from community, engagement, and belonging.

Barnraising Blueprint: Community in the Rhetorical Tradition

Community is not a new concern in the rhetorical tradition, as the field itself was born out of community need in the Athenian *demos* in which public discourse and deliberation were required to inform and persuade citizens on matters that affected them. The Greek sophists recognized that rhetoric must utilize shared knowledge, which invokes the idea of community or audience

as one based on shared attitudes. Aristotle's proverbs, syllogisms, maxims, enthymemes, and signs demand an audience that readily accepts stated and implied premises to be effective. Roman rhetoric similarly acknowledged the importance of community, as in Cicero's stasis theory: when a legal case is about the quality of an act, one may consider the law according to the custom of the community, implicitly recognizing that different communities have different values and morals, although why this might be was not explicitly addressed.

Modern and contemporary rhetoric has similarly brushed up against the notion of community while never fully addressing it. Most notably, Kenneth Burke's "identification" presumes that form is the basis for identifying with those whom we hope to persuade, and that when we identify with others, we become consubstantial with them. This "consubstantiality," this idea of being one with others while simultaneously being a unique individual, is the embodiment of community. In Burke's discussion of identification and the autonomous, he points out that although we can distill activity to intrinsic, autonomous principles, it does not mean it is free from identification with other extrinsic orders of motivation, as humans are not moved to action on their own (27). Identification is important because it's this rhetorical co-existence of the symbolic that exerts power in the world, suggesting that community is constructed only through successful identification with others.

The rhetorical tradition's tacit assumption of homogeneity in community has more recently been addressed by Carolyn Miller, who confronts the paradox of community in the aptly titled "Rhetoric and Community: The Problem of the One and the Many," where identity and community are dialectically linked. Miller suggests a rhetoric of pluralism in which a community is constructed not on a geographic or demographic basis, nor on consensus of beliefs and values. Community is rhetorically constituted, accommodating difference and division in the hopes of achieving emotional solidarity that drives political action. Miller's call for community appears to purposefully reject the modern dogmas so eloquently described by Wayne

Booth, and, like Booth, Miller suggests that a coming together of people demands a certain openness to mutual inquiry, where consensus in some areas allows respectful acknowledgement of difference in others.

But how does one achieve emotional solidarity or consubstantiality, without the security of consensus and agreement anchoring the community? Smaro Kamboureli's "I have altered my tactics to reflect the new era': Public Intellectuals and Community" tackles this ambiguity, proposing a community that, even more than Miller's, is infinitely rhetorical. Kamboureli writes:

How can a community of strangers, a community of those who have nothing in common, come to be? What are the epistemic shifts required to bring such a community into effect?

This set of questions invites us to think about community not through identity formation or tribal affiliations but through participatory action in the public space. A community of those who have nothing in common can materialize through an enactment of subjectivity as citizenship across multiple subject positions: citizenship as a praxis that transfigures strangeness into performative acts of speech, that allows estrangement to morph into meaningful lived experience. (186)

Kamboureli rejects the traditional notion of community as constructed through identification with others, and proposes one that is thoroughly rhetorical, that accommodates subjectivity and binds together those sharing a sense of purpose. The "enactment of subjectivity as citizenship," appears to be purposefully ambiguous, as it moves away from a community that comes together based on shared goals (as in Habermas's *Communicative Action*), and towards one based on action and experience—it's a community based on *doing* rather than *being*.

Despite the varying perspectives, all conceptions of community suggest that a shared sense of *something* (whether it be purpose, goals, values, attitudes, understanding), acts as the glue that binds individuals together. Community

is dependent on these inextricable and impalpable bonds that package groups of people up in ways that are easy for members and non-members to identify, and often, define.

Framing the Barn: Community as Rhetorical Constituent

The idea of community plays a leading role in my research that explores the intersection of popular culture, science communication, and politics in online communities, and community is also the lens through which I approach scholarship as a Mennonite-Canadian.

Although the notion of community has always operated within the peripheries of the rhetorical canon, I would argue that it deserves a central place in rhetorical studies, because how one identifies oneself and engages with others is always within the context of communities. Communities allow us to categorize ourselves and others, and they act as a rhetorical constraint, limiting what arguments can be used and what may be found persuasive. But they are also liberating in their social power in that they foster belonging and security, and can, through the multiplicity of voices and coordinated action, enact change.

To illustrate, my work as a Marketing & Community Relations professional in the print media industry has drawn on the concept of community to emphasize the collective, where the newspaper's philanthropic initiatives create a community that is in constant dialogue with itself. The *Waterloo Region Record* not only reports on the community it serves, but encourages service to the community it reports on (Moriarty, "Connecting Our Community"). More concretely, the desire for people to belong is so powerful that one of the newspaper's most successful marketing campaigns uses the tagline "Connecting Our Community," and posits that "by subscribing to one of our publications, you're becoming a part of one of the largest families in Waterloo Region—a Member of The Record Family" (Moriarty et al.). The campaign received national recognition,

praising its ability to “[give] readers a more intimate feel about [the] brand” (Newspapers Canada), while simultaneously providing evidence that community is at its very core a rhetorical construction.

From a more scholarly perspective, my research focuses on popular subreddits and viral artifacts on Reddit, an online social-voting community (Moriarty, “Vaccines Going Viral”; Moriarty and Mehlenbacher). Boasting over a billion unique visitors each month, Reddit allows users to share, vote on, and discuss user-submitted content. The political power of Reddit is apparent in its ability to engage citizens, politicians, and celebrities, from then-sitting President Barack Obama to Bill Gates, along with its propensity for the organization and execution of successful fundraising campaigns and online protests. One such protest organized through Reddit was instrumental in preventing the passing of the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) in the U.S. House of Representatives. Although the Reddit community exists only within the incorporeal pages of the Internet, and within the minds of its members, its ability to create tangible political change is evidence of the community’s ability to raise barns, so to speak.

My approach to rhetorical scholarship admits the inseparable nature of community, how people are bound together by immaterial social ties, and the operation of rhetoric.

A Barn Under Construction: Untangling Identity and Community

But how does a scholar raised conservatively come to study the liberal and digital? This is one of the perplexities offered by dual identities, and my obsession with popular culture is largely a result of my true-North-strong-and-free identity. As a country that recently celebrated its 150th year, Canada is youthful, and our national identity has in large part been shaped by popular culture, perhaps attributable to the fact that colonial Canada may never have had an oral culture. The tropes of the apologetic, eh-saying, maple-syrup-devouring, Hudson’s Bay-shopping, Tim Horton’s-drinking,

hockey-playing, snowshoeing, nature-conquering, plaid-wearing, Canadian-Tire-money-collecting, Bieber-hating Canadian stems from a collective, national identity that has always been documented and circulated through the relative permanence of the printed word, and later radio, television, and the internet.

Cultural communication critic Neil Postman traces ideological technological changes in our modes of communication, positing that new modes of communication change a culture's "cognitive habits, its social relations, its notions of community, history, and religion" (157). But in the case of colonial Canada, print was never introduced—it was always there, making it a constitutive element in the formation of our country and allowing one of the most dispersed populations to collectively construct, disseminate, and maintain a sense of Canadian identity. In some ways, popular culture has now become representative of Canadian culture; as new media has allowed audiences to become niched and migratory, with individuals willing to seek out the kind of media experiences they want (Jenkins 2), popular culture is one of the only things that unifies our membership to multiple micro communities, creating a loosely connected national community.

I study popular culture and viral artifacts because the popularity of content assumes an engaged community, one where the majority of members have access to and engage with particular material. As Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca recognize, language has a social aspect rooted in a community's tradition, and as such, artifacts that can be categorized as popular culture, whether within a national community like Canada, or an online community like Reddit (or one of its many subreddits), may act as a litmus test of attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and values held by community members—and isn't the interrogation of how these views are created, reinforced, and challenged at the heart of rhetoric?

Although I previously referred to myself as having a dual identity, I hardly think that describes me. I've laid out characteristics of myself in a way that is easier for others to categorize and therefore understand my identity,

because my membership in these communities is already in conversation with your, the reader's, own frame of reference (and one of the benefits of drawing on popular culture, is that I can assume of my reader what those frames are). My Mennonite-ness and Canadian-ness, despite the seeming inherent paradoxes, are not in conflict with one other—they are completely reconciled—one might even say consubstantial. And while I don't know where one identity ends and the other begins, I do know how to define the communities that I inhabit and situate myself in them—I know where I belong.

Building a Better Barn: A Call for Rhetorical Scholars

Central to this issue of *Rhetor* focused on identity is the concept of community: saying you identify as someone means you belong to something. As scholars of rhetoric we must recognize the way in which community acts as a defining feature of rhetoric. While belonging and interdependency are natural qualities of community, rhetoricians should examine and chart the ways in which rhetoric may be used to promote inclusivity in socially constructed communities, where heterogeneity can erode the rhetorical restraints that segregate members within and outside community boundaries. When we build better communities, creating unity that accommodates difference and dissent, we build better barns, better cities, and maybe even better citizens.

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