

Democracy, Rhetoric, and the Distance between the U.S. and Canada

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I am an American citizen who has lived and worked in Canada for the last twenty years. I was drawn to rhetorical studies for the ways in which the field places questions about democratic life at the forefront of intellectual work, and for the ways in which it eschews questions of objectivity in favor of questions about the pragmatic value of symbols. When I left the U.S. for Canada, I felt a deep remorse that I was giving up on my responsibility to use my scholarship and teaching to engage the central problems in American democratic life (as if leaving meant I wouldn't be fighting the good fight).

That remorse has receded in the intervening years, even as I have continued to publish about American pragmatism and the rhetorical practices necessary for building a social democracy. It has also receded alongside my now deeper conviction that I cannot show the objective validity of my scholarship or teaching but that I ought to show their pragmatic cash-value. It may be a decidedly "American" intellectual position, but it seems clear to me that what work an argument does is more important than its validity. I had thought that my scholarly arguments ought to do the work of intervening in the project of rehabilitating the American democratic experiment. But that has been complicated by living and working in Canada. And as I've lived in Canada, the intervening years have brought democratic backsliding to America.

One of the sources of my early feelings of remorse when leaving the U.S. was the belief that rhetorical scholarship is best imagined and enacted as engaged critique—a practice that ideally strives for a more just world by attempting to understand the symbolic encounters, exchanges, and intersections which constitute both individual identity and public culture. I do not think I am alone in this vision of rhetorical studies. Many of my fellow graduate students at the University of Pittsburgh seemed to believe this, as do many of my current colleagues from the United States that publish excellent and exciting work on such themes. I wanted my early contributions to contemporary rhetorical studies to describe, analyze, and explain democratic life by investigating the ways in which communication practices constitute and guide public deliberation in the hopes that sociopolitical change and transformation were possible.

I have approached the relationship between rhetoric and democratic deliberation by using American pragmatism as a historical and theoretical resource because pragmatism has always been committed to the utility of ideas and not their objective validity. The main insight of my work is that pragmatism and rhetorical theory can be brought together to revitalize democratic communication. Such an insight, I thought, offered fresh and useful answers to traditional questions about the relationship between rhetoric and democracy. The development of rhetorical pragmatism aims to cultivate a more participatory and responsible citizenry through a renewed understanding of the role that rhetoric can and should play in democratic life. I learned, in other words, to worry about the connection between rhetorical scholarship and democratic life within the scene of American intellectual culture and by using America's most enduring, sophisticated and substantial contribution to the history of ideas.

But how could I aid in the revitalization of the American democratic experiment while living in Canada? This was the question that drove my initial feelings of remorse. Then, when I

arrived in Canada, I realized that I would be carrying out this scholarship within an academic scene that had no robust place for rhetoric. In other words, Canadian academics simply do not think about the deep connections between rhetoric and democratic life—those connections are not significant intellectual preoccupations in the same way that they are in the United States. So my distance from America also meant distance from an intellectual preoccupation with the questions I thought were most pressing.

Rhetorical studies is not a substantial part of Canadian communication departments, undergraduate curricula, or graduate student training. Rarely is public speaking taught, for example, and rarely is the connection between civic responsibility and communication practice explored. In many ways, my scholarship speaks to a conversation that seemed uniquely American and decidedly un-Canadian. This is perhaps brought into relief by the fact that in over a decade in Canada I have never participated in the Canadian Communication Association, yet I still attend the NCA in America each year (many Canadian communication scholars are unaware of what NCA even is). Even at my home institution, the University with perhaps the best recognized Rhetoric PhD program in Canada, I do not teach rhetoric classes and have no relationship to the official academic programs in rhetoric—those programs and classes are housed in the English Department (a Department that seems to me confused about the status of Communication as an academic discipline and unwilling to collaborate with those of us in Communication programs committed to work in rhetoric).

Canadian universities tend to understand rhetoric as an art of composition and therefore not as deeply connected to questions of civic life as many of their American counterparts. How, then, does an American intellectual committed to work on the intersection of rhetoric and democratic life carry out a program of scholarship and teaching within such circumstances? My distance from America, in other words, created circumstances in which both my desire for my scholarship and teaching to be a resource for sociopolitical change

and the assumption that questions about rhetoric were inextricably linked to questions about democratic life fit poorly. This is brought home most clearly during grant application season, when the Communication Studies Committee at the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada routinely, and unfairly, discounts rhetorical work.

To return to questions of objectivity and pragmatic utility, I have come to believe that distance is critically important to scholarship and teaching. Or, put another way, that distance can be a useful resource for pedagogical practices and scholarly interventions in conversations. This may be an argument made of necessity for me, or a kind of self-defense mechanism to protect me from the remorse I felt from being so far away from both the political action about which I was writing and the intellectual conversation in which I was trying to participate. But I'm not concerned with whether distance is objectively beneficial to scholarship and teaching. My interest is in whether distance might be put to interesting uses to produce important effects. This is where I have come to understand my position within Canada as a useful resource. I am nicely insulated from the intramural politics and jockeying of professional development within both the scene of American communication departments and Canadian rhetoric or communication programs. Distance has meant that I am not beholden to the intricate and subtle forms of professionalization in either place. In this way, the effect of distance is a kind of freedom and security that comes from being largely irrelevant to the main disciplinary structures in either country.

Furthermore, my identity as an American combined with my lived reality in Canada allow me to do things in class that I might not be able to do otherwise. I can press my Canadian students to better understand themselves as political, rhetorical, and cultural agents through juxtaposition with my own authentic forms of national identity. Such juxtapositions have become regular resources for my pedagogy. My students routinely remark on my "Americanness"

and how it inflects their experience of a course or their own learning. I also think I write with different kinds of clarity and urgency about the intersection of rhetoric and American democracy because of my positionality. I co-authored two books on civility and rhetorical citizenship that would not have been possible without my years in Canada (years which have taught me to see and value forms of civil communication practice).

Rhetoric has taught me the following about identity (national or otherwise): one's self-perception does some work in one's own scholarship, but more important, it operates as a potentially useful resource. In addition, claims to identity are useful instruments for producing effects on audiences. Such claims do work, symbolic and material work, and we ought to be tracing the consequences of that work to analyze and evaluate the identity claims. In other words, rhetorical scholars can both track the consequences of identity claims and help others see the ways in which individual self-perception is consequential for scholarship and teaching. In some ways, the perspectives afforded by certain degrees of distance do not provide a methodology for objectivity (as distance might in some disciplines) but instead provide resources for invention, innovation, and intervention.

This, I think, is the enduring lesson of my move to Canada. Distance becomes the grounds by which to certify or authenticate methods of interpretation or scholarly activity without needing recourse to scientific standards of objectivity or the cultural norms of the moment that belong to whatever disciplinary/political conversation is driving work in professional associations. When I first arrived in Canada I went to get my hair cut. The person cutting my hair asked me, "What are you?" I told him I was American, but this was not enough. He pressed further, demanding to know my "original" ethnic identity. I told him a clever story of immigration, which satisfied him. Was that story objectively true? Probably not. Was the story he told me about his Italian heritage objectively true? I can't say. But our identity claims did some work

in that conversation, and those claims ought to be measured by the work that got done. We ought to stop asking what someone really is, and start asking questions about the consequences of identity claims. This I take to be one of the central lessons of American pragmatism and rhetorical studies.

I was recently denied Canadian citizenship because of ambiguous travel records to and from the United States. As I sank under the symbolic weight of that decision and argued with an immigration judge for a reprieve, I said, "But I am, already, Canadian in every way one can be Canadian." I filed my paperwork again and got my Canadian passport the second time around. I did so knowing that the distance afforded to me by living in such fortunate and privileged circumstances has allowed me to see the forms and forces of rhetoric in American democracy differently than I would have otherwise. That distance is not a form of objectivity like some scientists (physical or social) may endorse. It is, instead, a perspective from which to see the failures of the American democratic experiment and that can be used to make different arguments, thoughts, or ideas to both Americans and Canadians. One of the most pressing goals for the field of rhetorical studies in the coming fifty years (regardless of one's national identity) is to perform an autopsy on American democracy, to show where and how things went wrong in the hopes of leaving insights that might help the success of some future democratic age.

I started out in this field believing that my job, through my scholarship and teaching, was to help improve the structures and practices of American democratic life, but my distance and time away from the day-to-day realities of America have taught me that it might not be possible to revive or revitalize a corpse. Maybe all rhetorical scholars are always, already performing some form of autopsy, an after-the-fact assessment of some moment where symbols or communication practices did some work in the world. Those autopsies might not give us final answers or objective truth claims; we perform them in hopes of staving off our own demise,

teaching our students how best to survive, and showing others how rhetoric just might save us from some untimely death. It may be too late for America, but other nation-states might have the ears to hear these lessons. I, for one, intend on taking the best of what I have learned from my autopsy of the American corpse in the hopes that my Canadian students might have the ears to hear how to preserve, expand, and enhance their democratic ways of life. That is the advantage of inhabiting the intellectual space between Canada and the U.S.