

## Public Rhetoric in the Shadow of Ferguson: Co-Creating Rhetorical Theory in the Community and the Classroom



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**Abstract:** This multimedia article focuses on my experience as a professor working on a campus adjacent to Ferguson, Missouri. I discuss the ways that Ferguson and Black Lives Matter pushed me to intentionally and meaningfully connect my teaching, research, and the local community. Through narrative, video and audio excerpts and analysis of conversations with Ferguson community members, and pedagogical reflection, I argue for an understanding of public rhetoric and writing that is more inclusive of listening, archives, collectivity, and social justice. I also highlight the importance of building rhetorical theory alongside public rhetors in local communities, helping students understand that the rhetorical tradition is far from a historical relic. Instead, it is a work-in-progress, living and breathing all around them.

### **Public Rhetoric in Action: Silence at the New Faculty Orientation**

*It is the week after Michael Brown was killed. Ferguson, a municipality within St. Louis, is still reeling in the throes of grief and anger. Protests, and what some view as riots, are taking place all day, every day, on West Florissant Road, near where Brown was killed and left to lie on the street for several hours. All of this is happening about a mile from the university where I work, and I know that, in just a few days, I will stand at the front of classrooms staring at students, some who have general questions and concerns, some who might have known Michael Brown, and others who relate to his life, his story, his death.*

*At the same time, other students will be wondering if coming to this university was the right choice. While most students commute to our campus from around the St. Louis region, the university is located in the north county area; many of them, though living only thirty minutes away, have never visited north county and might have heard negative things about it. The shooting of Michael Brown, emerging hypotheses of his criminal behavior and images of fires and tear gas on West Florissant further shape the perceptions and potential fears of incoming students.*

*I am starting my second year as an assistant professor at this university, and I am looking forward to entering this semester more confident, more prepared. Anything would be better than the trials of my first year on the tenure track, right? I am asked to speak at a new faculty orientation about how to “adjust” to the university, something I am still figuring out myself but will now try to guide even newer faculty members through. It is a panel discussion, and we are asked questions about how to get to know St. Louis, resources at the university, and what new faculty might expect from students.*

*When we begin to discuss the students at the university—who are they? What is it like to teach them?—I give my usual explanation of how unique these students are. Hard working, often paying their own way, racially and ethnically diverse, and many are first-generation college students. They are some of the smartest students I have worked with, but they also sometimes need more support and understanding, especially as they adapt to the new demands of higher education.*

*As I conclude my comments, I note that this will be a time in which we must be especially supportive of our students; many of them live in the Ferguson area, some might have known Michael Brown, and, at the least, many might see themselves in him, feel understandably shaken by this local tragedy that we are watching play out on the national news. Other students are already, even days after his death, heavily involved in protests and activism in Ferguson.*

*I say all this rather quickly, assuming that a discussion of working on this campus after a nearby trauma has been included at other points in the orientation. This is the final day, after all, how could it have been avoided? But I am told after the panel that this is the first time anyone has mentioned Ferguson, how Michael Brown's death might affect our students, and how students' emotions—whether they are sad, confused, or angry—might shape experiences on campus and in the classroom. The university's leadership has also failed to formally communicate with faculty, staff, and students. We have no direction, no resources, no sense of where to go or what to do as we begin the semester.*

*I cannot make sense of this institutional silence, this avoidance of what has to feel like an elephant in the room for all of us. I am reminded (haunted?) by a chorus that runs throughout much of Cheryl Glenn's book *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*: "Just like speech, silence can deploy power, it can defer power. It all depends" (15). There is power deployed by the university in its silence, and this deployment is dangerous. This silence wages a subtle war against the neighboring community, against marginalized people, against the very students the university serves. A question begins to run through my mind, and it has stuck there, like a track on repeat, an earworm I cannot (but also should not) shake: "What can we do—how do we write, research, and teach—in the shadow of Ferguson?" [\[1\]](#)*

## **Working toward the Co-Creation of Reciprocal Public Rhetoric**

This special issue of *Composition Forum* draws on Susan Wells' still relevant question from her 1996 article: "What do we want from public writing?" In 2017, it is difficult to address this question without considering the larger context of current social movements, especially Black Lives Matter (BLM). BLM necessitates new questions: how do we teach public rhetoric and writing in a way that acknowledges and respects powerful, growing, and complex social movements? How can the academy reciprocally engage with local communities while learning from or alongside them? Ben Kuebrich, in a case study of a community publishing project in Syracuse, New York, raises related questions: "If the field views rhetoric and literacy as a means to social change, how do our choices—how we sponsor students and community members, participate in relevant rhetorics, and provide resources—position our discipline to address the most fundamental abuses of power?" (568-69). Laurie Grobman, in a discussion of courses she teaches that incorporate oral history research as one way to build "public rhetoric partnerships," explains that projects created by her students, in tandem with both community members and local museums, are "one substantive response to the ongoing, growing demand that English studies teacher-scholars and students participate in purposeful, impactful public work" (237). Kuebrich and Grobman, centering social change and meaningful community connections, reveal ways that the field can revisit its commitment to public engagement in the research we undertake and the courses we teach, particularly in light of BLM.

After much grappling and grieving in the months after Michael Brown's death, I realized that Ferguson and BLM demand I intentionally and meaningfully connect my teaching, research, and the local community. In this article, I weave together three threads to create a case study and living archive of how I make such connections, as imperfect and in progress as they may be. Thread one: I intersperse short narratives, like the one that begins this article, of troubling local rhetorical trends observed in relation to Ferguson, specifically silence, distancing, and violence. Thread two: I consider what interventions in public rhetoric can look like, with a focus on voices from the community who offer meaningful insight into rhetorical theory and action. Thread three: I offer an ongoing discussion of how I have thus far involved Ferguson in my own teaching of public rhetoric and writing through an introductory rhetoric class entitled *Rhetoric and Social Justice*. In short, through narrative, excerpts and analysis of conversations with community members, and pedagogical reflection, I argue for an understanding of public rhetoric and writing that is more inclusive of listening, archives, collectivity, and social justice. I also highlight the importance of co-creating a more ethical and reciprocal public rhetoric alongside public rhetors in local communities, teaching students that the rhetorical tradition is far from a historical relic. Instead it is a work-in-progress, living and breathing all around them.

## **Methodology: Collecting Narratives through Conversational Interviews**

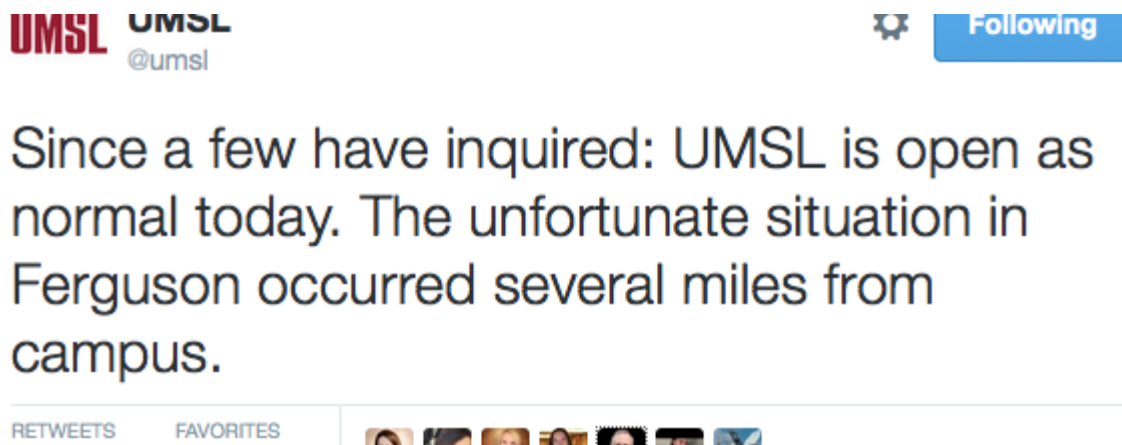
At the heart of this project are the voices of the community members who graciously shared their time with me and the students in my classes.[\[2\]](#) I suggest that it is these local, public voices and insights that the field must make more of an effort to center, listen to, and learn from, revising contemporary rhetorical theory and pedagogy accordingly. Living and working near Ferguson in this moment, it feels imperative to document an in-the-moment historical record, as incomplete as it may be. As a rhetorician and teacher of writing, one small concrete action I can undertake is talking to people in and around Ferguson, to learn from them, to gain, and share with others, a sense of how the social movement surrounding Ferguson intersects with writing, rhetoric, and literacy practices. At the same time, as a white professor on a campus next door to some of the most powerful and important protests of the 21st century, ones led by the African-American community, it was clear to me that my desire to "do something" or "take action" could not

be an outdated mode of the university “lending a hand” to the community, and my commitment needed to avoid oversimplified notions of “speaking for” or “teaching about” Ferguson. I keep close Ellen Cushman’s caution to avoid “reproduc[ing] a colonizing ideology” and “enact[ing] violence” in the well-intentioned but sometimes too distant process of knowledge creation (11). I also am guided by Grobman’s long-term partnerships with various marginalized communities surrounding her university; she acknowledges, drawing on philosopher Linda Alcoff, that there are “complex dynamics” to working with people whose histories have often been neglected or misrepresented, and she advocates working toward a space of speaking *with* community members, opening a dialogue, rather than speaking for them (245). As both a citizen and a scholar, then, I work to approach my own activism, public engagement, and pedagogy in ways that involve listening, building relationships, and learning from and with the community.

Thus, at the center of this article, and my methodology, is an emphasis on co-creation and reciprocity, ideals I am constantly working to better understand and integrate. I follow the lead of Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher, who have outlined and embodied in much of their work the approach of “conversational interviews.” As they explain it, “We draw, in particular, on feminist understandings of interviewing as a process of not extracting information but sharing knowledge.” Such interviews build relationships beyond one scholarly project and construct a participatory model of research (Selfe and Hawisher 36-37). And I might add to this that, for publicly engaged scholars and students, such interviews can offer a mode of rhetorical intervention into social justice issues.

Over the past eighteen months, students in my Rhetoric and Social Justice course and I have slowly collected and archived conversational interviews with people in and around Ferguson, with a goal of eventually making the archive publicly accessible. We currently have sixteen interviews recorded, most running between thirty and sixty minutes. These interviews focus on the ways that rhetoric comes into play as the interviewees lead the community, work in activist circles, publish their own writing, or simply talk about Ferguson and race relations with others. Interviewees run the gamut, including a former St. Louis City police chief, local educators, and parents and siblings of students. The interviews are semi-structured; the students and I develop a list of topics or starting points to engage interviewees, but the goal is conversation as a mode of reciprocally “sharing knowledge,” as Selfe and Hawisher encourage, rather than a formal or highly structured question and answer session (see interview questions, [Appendix](#)). These interviews have been eye opening for me, fundamentally shifting how I think about and teach public rhetoric and writing, particularly in terms of acknowledging the role of conversations, listening, and archives; the collaborative nature of rhetoric; and the necessity of social justice-oriented pedagogies, even when they are imperfect and do not seem like enough.

### **Public Rhetoric in Action: Institutional Distance**



**Figure 1.** The university’s first tweet about Ferguson

*While the faculty orientation narrative with which I begin this article highlights the most dominant local rhetorical trend I observe in relation to Ferguson—silence—I also observe moments around campus and the city that are loud and declarative, usually depicting Ferguson as a problem to avoid or separate yourself from. A tweet from the university the day after Michael Brown was killed serves as one example, and I remain chilled and frustrated as I read it, even years later: “Since a few have inquired: UMSL is open as normal today. The unfortunate situation in Ferguson occurred several miles from campus” ([Figure 1](#)).*

*A similar moment of headshaking frustration for me comes later that fall semester (December 2014), when the Chancellor writes a letter to all university employees explaining that Ferguson is now linked to a hiring freeze on our campus. This letter explains that the need for a hiring freeze can, in part, be traced back to “a widespread anxiety about the region in general and North County in particular” causing “lower than expected enrollment” (Moffitt).*

*As I read both the tweet and the letter, the institutional position on “events” in Ferguson, despite historical partnerships and engagement with the community, is portrayed as distant at best and agonistic at worst. These examples of institutional public writing highlight a rhetorical and material separation from Ferguson, the place, the people, and “the unfortunate situation.”*

*If this is the institutional positioning in relation to Ferguson, I wonder, what is the “right” university space to talk about what happened, to listen to different perspectives, to grapple with it, to plan in thoughtful and critical ways for support and response?*

## **Integrating the Resistant Archive into Rhetoric and Writing Classrooms**

Influenced by BLM, other scholars in the field have argued for the increased necessity of bringing conversations about race and social movements into writing and rhetoric classrooms. James Chase Sanchez and Kristen R. Moore suggest that “rhetoricians...address and engage with the Black Lives Matter movement in new ways,” which is particularly important since “the #blacklivesmatter movement continues to re-invite and recreate public rhetoric” (6). While Sanchez and Moore take up BLM as it relates to public memory, Nathaniel Rivers argues that one important place to engage BLM is the public writing and rhetoric classroom: “Talking about race is easy; talking about it well is hard. Teaching it seems downright impossible both inside and outside of courses focused exclusively on it... Nevertheless, there are moments when we are compelled as teachers (of rhetoric) to take up race and racism as matters of concern.”

I suggest that one way to engage with BLM and “take up race and racism,” especially in the context of public rhetoric and writing classrooms, is through rhetorical listening and the accompanying creation of archives. In integrating the use of conversational interviews as a way to learn about and enact public rhetoric, I am making a call for listening and archiving as related and meaningful moves, and I build on the work of many others in making this call (Alexander and Rhodes; Carter and Conrad; Kirsch and Rohan; Ramsey et al.; Ramsey-Tobienne; Rice). As Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes suggest in their work on LGBT archives, in the ways they allow for narrativization of painful pasts, archives can offer “powerful opportunities to think critically about systems of oppression.” Grobman’s focus on oral history in her courses also connects to archives, as she explains that her students “uncover, recover, and preserve underrepresented stories of racial, ethnic, and cultural history in Reading and Berks County, Pennsylvania” (237). Grobman develops the term “rhetorical citizen historians” to explicate the philosophy behind her pedagogy. In conducting oral history research and recovering local cultural history, students act as “rhetorical citizen historians” because they “collaboratively work with community members to produce new historical knowledge; contribute to rhetoric and composition studies’ ongoing investigations into discourse, power, and difference; and develop and enact the citizenship capacities necessary for participatory democracy and responsible community membership” (239). Students in Rhetoric and Social Justice do not undertake oral history research nor recover history, but there are pedagogical overlaps with Grobman’s notion of the “rhetorical citizen historian.” Namely, we document and archive the precarious present, which allows students to consider, often critically, what it means to be an engaged citizen while also revising their understanding of the rhetorical tradition and rhetorical theory, especially in terms of whose voices have been historically valued and whose have been left out.

In *Distant Publics: Development Rhetoric and the Subject of Crisis*, Jenny Rice makes an argument that citizens must move toward a public subjectivity rooted in inquiry rather than argument, which necessitates collecting and archiving as a way to re-orient and constantly ask questions rather than only draw conclusions. Understanding archives as alive, growing, and focused on advocating for social justice in the present day allows my students—and myself alongside them—to embody Rice’s notion of the public subject as critical inquirer (rather than constant critic) into my rhetoric course. As the students conduct conversational interviews and contribute these conversations to a growing archive of what we think of as “Ferguson Rhetoric Stories,” they are no longer solely analysts of this rhetorical world. Rather they are asking questions, listening, reflecting, and revising their own knowledge of rhetoric. Ideally, through conducting interviews and building an archive of these voices, students come to view the rhetorical tradition itself as ongoing and shaped as much by present-day community members as it is by historical orators, theorists, or scholars.

## **The Course: Rhetoric and Social Justice**

As the narratives of public rhetoric in action I have shared so far demonstrate, I did not immediately observe much formalized space created for thinking about Ferguson on my campus. This motivated me to design a course that introduced rhetorical theories, methods, and public writing and rhetoric assignments as a way to better understand events, protests, and media representation surrounding Ferguson. The course is called Rhetoric and Social Justice,

offered for the first time in the winter semester of 2015. This course functions as an introductory one; the students I work with have largely been exposed only to literary approaches to English Studies. Rhetoric, as a field and as a methodology for research and writing, is new to them and often intimidating.

Since this course is an introduction, I first felt pressure to design it as a traditional history of rhetoric survey, moving through canonical texts chronologically, what I think of as the “From Aristotle to Kenneth Burke” approach (an approach I had experienced—and enjoyed—as a student). But as I began to plan the objectives, I realized that the most important aspects of rhetorical history and theory—the aspects and applications of the field I was always most drawn to—can be framed through the overlapping lenses of public engagement and social justice. In other words, this is a course that puts public rhetoric and writing at its heart, undertaking the critical study of rhetorical history and theory alongside the application of rhetoric through diverse acts of composing for varied audiences. Specifically, to explicitly connect public rhetoric, writing, and community engagement, I designed the course to include an ongoing case study element, requiring us to turn our rhetorical lenses to Ferguson through assignments both large and small.

### ***Learning to Listen through the Collection of Narratives and Building of Archives***

One such assignment I have included in Rhetoric in Social Justice asks students to interview St. Louisans about the ways Ferguson intersects with rhetoric, writing, and literacy. I emphasize that students can interview anyone, even people who outwardly have little connection to Ferguson. My hope is that once the conversations get started, the various connections that all locals have to events in Ferguson will emerge. So while students can interview someone as close to them and as easy to access as their mother or a sibling, other students want to pursue conversations with people who have more direct experiences—activists, teachers from the local school district, and civic and community leaders, for example. In this way, the assignment is designed for students to approach it in their own ways. Some use it as a chance to become more involved—or at least learn more from a first-hand perspective—in activism and community engagement surrounding Ferguson and Black Lives Matters. Other students did not have that same sort of access or comfort, and they were more prepared to have conversations with people they already knew. At the same time, though the interviewee might be familiar to them, they would be having a conversation that was likely entirely new and, perhaps, uncomfortable.

Since one objective for this course is exposing students to research methods, this assignment provides one way to accomplish that. We read scholarship that utilizes interview research, glean directions and perspectives from websites or projects that include oral history interviews as a method, and explore other interview and oral narrative projects that show the necessity of listening to and collecting individual stories, such as the [Digital Archive for Literacy Narratives](#). I also model what these conversational interviews might look like by inviting guest speakers into the class who share important perspectives on the ways that language shapes their interaction with Ferguson. As a class, we then ask questions, and the result is a collaborative interview. The final step in preparing students to undertake this assignment is working together to create a list of questions we could draw from. This step is important because these interviews, while they aim to be conversational and welcoming of unexpected divergences, are not seeking to only talk about Ferguson in a generalized way. Instead, students are hoping to uncover important perspectives about intersections between Ferguson and rhetoric. And while students in the class are quickly able to understand what that might mean, the people they were interviewing, while often possessing great rhetorical expertise, will not use the same vocabulary. So our questions tend to range from broad to very specific, and we allow for various ways of connecting rhetoric, literacy, or language to events in Ferguson.

While interviewing is a common qualitative research method, this assignment, on the surface, might not appear very rigorous or even academic. I do not ask students to analyze the interview data nor do they have to integrate it into a larger project (though certainly they can if they so choose). My interest in making the interviews a required component of the course is to involve students in acts of rhetorical listening, communicating across various differences. I define and teach rhetorical listening primarily through the work of Krista Ratcliffe. In *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, and Whiteness*, Ratcliffe emphasizes that cross-cultural identifications can be troubled and difficult to achieve. Ratcliffe’s main goal is to consider what makes listening so difficult, especially when listening must occur across difference. This is where identification comes into play; for Burke, identification must precede persuasion, but Ratcliffe reminds readers that identification—and thus any sort of persuasion—can be difficult to achieve when the speaker and listener are of different genders and/or races. Rhetorical listening, though, requires a stance of openness and an ability to establish a dialogue about differences like race, gender, and intersectionality. Ratcliffe makes an argument that rhetorical theory must find ways to challenge the narrative that makes whiteness invisible within dominant culture. While identification is part of rhetorical listening, the more important goal is to establish ethical, productive modes of cross-cultural communication (2). For example, Ratcliffe encourages a form of rhetorical listening she calls “listening pedagogically” in which teachers and students are willing to hear and embrace individual stories—even when these stories might be difficult or uncomfortable. Listening pedagogically can then counter discourses of colorblindness that tend to erase difference and establish race as a

“problem” to be “eradicated” in the classroom. Instead, through listening pedagogically, differences can be more successfully defined, negotiated, and respected (134).

Beyond the importance of rhetorical listening in my local context, I suggest that listening must be addressed as integral when defining and teaching public rhetoric and writing. Through listening, public rhetoric can be understood as more than a single, finished product; instead, public rhetoric is a process, a dialogue, and an ongoing, interconnected activity. Brian Gogan advocates an “affirmative and expanded definition of public rhetoric and pedagogy” (538). Using the common letter-to-the-editor assignment as a case study, Gogan emphasizes a need to “generate awareness” and “construct publics” in public rhetoric units, which requires “sustained rhetorical activity” and, drawing on Susan Wells, “a complex array of discursive practices” (542-43). Nathaniel Rivers and Ryan Weber build on this idea, explaining that public rhetoric must be understood as more than “isolated incidents of discourse” and should instead be approached from an “ecological standpoint,” meaning that public rhetoric is fluid and based in exchanges. They state, “We want to move students beyond the idea that most public change happens through a single author writing a single text for a single audience” (189). I view conversations and dialogue with community members, practicing rhetorical listening, as a key mode to expand public rhetoric practices and pedagogy. Conversational interviews can embody fluid, ongoing, sometimes messy exchanges, broadening definitions of public rhetoric and, in my experience, offering generative possibilities for the classroom, as well.

I hope in hearing these stories, the ones students collect themselves or the ones their classmates collect, and even the act of having these conversations, will facilitate a more complex form of identification. While planning for and then reflecting on the conversations, we discuss striving for a form of identification in which we could practice listening across differences; listening as a form of understanding, not persuading; and understanding in a way that acknowledges and explores differences rather than ignoring or smoothing them over. This complex identification is, in Gogan’s words, “sustained rhetorical activity” and, per Rivers and Weber, much more than an “isolated instance of discourse.” In other words, rhetorical listening is public rhetoric in action.

Engaging in conversational interviews and creating a corpus of stories has allowed my students and I to come to understand Ferguson, Black Lives Matter, and rhetoric itself in new ways. In time, I hope to make the archive public, and I am confident that eventually sharing the stories with a wider audience will prove similarly thought provoking. Indeed, sharing some excerpts from our archive in this article, as I do the next section, is a first step toward offering an intervention in public rhetoric in relation to Ferguson, supplementing and challenging some of the other scenes I have documented around my campus, community, and in widespread popular media.

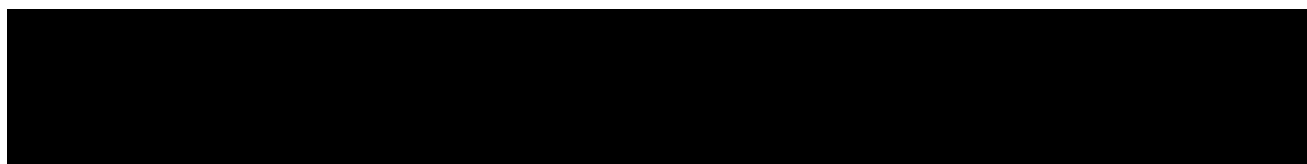
## **Voices from Ferguson: Narratives as Public Rhetorical and Pedagogical Intervention**

I will spend the remainder of the article focusing on a few of the narratives that have been collected thus far. I selected narratives that I find particularly powerful in terms of their contributions to rhetorical theory. Each interview in full is lengthy, lasting around an hour. To narrow down what pieces to share in this article, I open coded the full interview transcripts for dominant themes, and I then selected short excerpts that highlight those themes.

The first narrative I share, from Dwayne T. James, I collected on my own. I now use James’ interview as a text for my Rhetoric and Social Justice course, both because of its theoretical insight and because it can serve as a methodological model for students’ own conversational interviews. The next two, from Jason Vasser and Brittany Ferrell, were co-collected with one section of my Rhetoric and Social Justice class. Both Vasser and Ferrell visited the class to share their stories, and we all were able to ask questions and listen.

### ***The Councilman: Dwayne T. James***

The first interview I share was conducted in the spring of 2015 with Ferguson Councilman Dwayne T. James.<sup>(3)</sup> Notably, James was the only African-American Ferguson city council member until 2015. As a councilman, I knew James was having difficult conversations with his constituency, and I also wondered how he viewed or reacted to media coverage about Ferguson. I feature here a powerful piece of our conversation touching on learning as a rhetorical goal and the necessity of discomfort and failure in rhetorical exchanges.



### Dwayne James Interview Transcript

L: I just feel like um I've noticed part of why, or one small part of why I've thought about Ferguson a lot is about how it really raises my awareness of how hard it is for people to talk with each other about anything they disagree with? Disagree about. I can talk to people and have good conversations about anything that that happened in Ferguson if we're basically already on the same page.

D: Right.

L: But if I actually have to talk to someone who totally disagrees with where I'm coming from, then, the conversation, it's just pretty much stymied. The discourse we have is totally stymied. We can't really have a great exchange about it.

D: You have to force yourself into that situation.

L: So you [referring to Dwayne] just kind of are forced into that situation by your position [as councilman], right?

D: right, right.

L: okay.

D: But if you're not in that position, or if you're not thrown into that situation, then why would you have that conversation? Why would anyone have that conversation unless they want to grow? But how many of us actually deals with all the stuff that we're dealing with on a day-to-day routine, and then says alright, I'm going to go ahead and put myself in a very, very uncomfortable situation, just so I can try to learn. Some people do it; some people are doing it more than they were before; but everyone doesn't do it.

L: Right.

D: The difference that you see with, um, some of the race issues and some of the gender issues and some of, um, age issues is that minority group is thrown into those conversations. It's not that they choose to be in those conversations, but we're in a room where we're the only. So stuff is being said that we have to accept, and we have to learn, and we have to deal with, and then we have to be flexible about. But if you're that majority, then you can choose to go into an uncomfortable situation. Oh I'm not gonna go there; I'm not gonna do that; I'm not going to say that because I'll be the only. Well, how many times have we been the only? Been the only black, the only gay, the only white—I mean, the only female, the only young person, the only this, the only that. And you're forced into that so you can deal with those conversations. At some point it's like, NO. I'm gonna make you have this conversation.

L: Yeah, yeah.

D: You need to learn.

L: Yeah.

D: You need to be uncomfortable at some point. I'm not saying that it has to be yelling and vulgar and abusive.

L: Right.

D: Um, what I say with that is, when you hold something in for so long, unfortunately the only way it comes out is negative.

Speaking with James brought to the fore reconsideration of the goals of rhetoric. There are many oft-cited goals that the field leans on as we explain rhetoric to our students or to the wider public. The most frequent and obvious is that the goal of rhetoric is persuasion. Aristotle remains the most familiar guiding figure of the rhetorical tradition: "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion."

But James frames the goal of rhetorical exchanges differently, or at least in a way that challenged some of my own assumptions about what makes "good" or "successful" rhetoric. There is no emphasis on persuasion, changing someone's mind, nor even coming to a place of understanding or consensus. Often, rhetors (or those who analyze and teach rhetoric and writing) conclude that rhetoric fails when it does not persuade or change hearts and minds. For James, though, communication is not based in persuasion, and he instead emphasizes a need to "grow" and "learn." The goal of rhetoric subtly shifts; people engage because they need to learn, and this learning will not be without struggle, nor will it be a process with a distinct end, marking an important connection to public rhetoric and writing theory. As Rivers and Weber suggest in their work on public rhetoric as ecological, "Rhetorical exchange is a bloody mess, a living thing, or, more accurately, a confluence of many living things: an ecology...The concept of rhetorical ecology emphasizes the symbiotic nature of texts, including the way texts, events, and feelings influence or 'contaminate' one another" (193). If the goal of rhetoric is growth and learning, interlocutors in a dialogue must "influence or contaminate" one another, likely through varied modes. As anyone who has had a conversation about a controversial issue can attest, there will not be a single, clean moment of persuading one person to new perspective. Instead the process is a continuing and messy struggle.

Even more, this messy struggle of rhetorical exchange will be uncomfortable, potentially deeply so. As James explains it, "But how many of us actually deals with all the stuff that we're dealing with on a day-to-day routine, and then says alright, I'm going to go ahead and put myself in a very, very uncomfortable situation, just so I can try to learn." There is an important lesson here for public rhetoric and writing scholars, in terms of how rhetoric is understood and then taught to students. While "good" rhetoric is sometimes framed as a civil exchange, conversations where there is a balance of speaking and listening, working toward a respectful understanding (Foss and Griffin; Ede et al.; Bone et al.), James suggests that there must be room for discomfort in rhetoric, especially when the topic is difficult, divisive, or somehow controversial, like Ferguson or race relations more broadly. Simply put, discomfort is a necessity, especially for rhetors who usually find themselves in the majority; in James' example, this specifically means white community members. Nina M. Lozano-Reich and Dana L. Cloud offer a critique of invitational rhetoric (2009) which James' words call to mind. Lozano-Reich and Cloud resist calls for civility and instead promote an "uncivil tongue" to challenge oppressive discourses. They state: "the suitability of the invitational paradigm is not universal; it presupposes conditions of economic, political, and social equality between and among interlocutors. However, such conditions of actual equality are rare in political controversy and interpersonal relations. By what standard, then, are we to decide when and under what conditions invitational rhetoric would be productive?" (221) Importantly, and in this way, James pushes back on feminist-aligned theories of invitational or civil rhetoric, and he acknowledges that sometimes uncomfortable exchanges might be "negative," as in they might involve "yelling" or anger. He notes that discomfort does not inherently lend itself to being "vulgar or abusive" but, at the same time, "when you hold something in for so long, unfortunately the only way it comes out is negative." James opens up varied "means of persuasion," and, especially for long-oppressed communities, anger is often a valid and necessary form of rhetorical participation. Anger does not indicate failed rhetoric, even though it will, undoubtedly, make listeners squirm. Instead, anger is one piece of the necessary discomfort that comes with rhetorical exchanges about topics like race; it is part of the process of learning and growth. In my own courses, largely thanks to James, this acknowledgement of discomfort and anger as part and parcel of public rhetoric and writing, has been an important addition to our study in terms of better understanding the rhetoric of BLM and in shaping the projects students undertake, pushing them to take risks in their own public participation.



Related to this discomfort, James makes the important point that minority rhetors do not usually have a choice about participating in hard conversations about issues of identity. They are “thrown into the conversation,” whether you are a woman forced to comment on gender inequity, a black man forced to talk about racism, or gay person forced to offer insight about homophobia. James frames this as an issue arising from being “the only”: “It’s not that they choose to be in those conversations, but we’re in a room where we’re the only. So stuff is being said that we have to accept, and we have to learn, and we have to deal with, and then we have to be flexible about. But if you’re that majority, then you can choose to go into an uncomfortable situation.” In other words, those who are “the only” are forced into conversations, whether or not they want to have them, and in that process they are asked to “be flexible” or perhaps to “learn” and “deal with it.” Majority rhetors have the privilege of selecting whether or not they want to be uncomfortable, or whether or not they want to show the same flexibility. In this scenario, an unethical imbalance forms, or more realistically remains, as the responsibility for learning and growth is largely on the shoulders of the marginalized group.

James’ insight resonates when considering how to build alliances or show support to marginalized communities, both rhetorically and materially. Public writing scholarship has long acknowledged that working with community partners is complex, requiring thoughtful reflection and balance. Grobman summarizes this complexity concisely: “Students, faculty, and community partners must find ways to negotiate discursive power and authority in the making of shared, public meaning” (241). This leads me to questions raised by well-intentioned white people (myself included) in relation to BLM: What can white people do? How can they help? How can they listen without co-opting or centering themselves? While there does, undoubtedly, need to be an increased emphasis on privileged groups listening more carefully to the concerns of those directly affected by racism, James also explains that listening is only part of the process. For James, white people need to get involved in the conversations as a movement toward learning and growth, the ultimate rhetorical goals. To return to James’ words: “At some point it’s like, NO. I’m gonna make you have this conversation.”

White rhetors, too, must participate and have difficult conversations, whether that be with their own families or friends or within the wider community. They cannot back away because they are uncomfortable or worried about being “the only” speaking out. Indeed this is long the position people of color have found themselves in, and as James’ comments indicate, this can become exhausting or feel like too much for one person to take on. So in terms of “what can we do?”, those aligned with majority groups must also participate in rhetorical exchanges, as listeners, yes, but also speakers at times. This is especially true for the exchanges that feel uncomfortable or like failure. These are moments of growth and learning, if not always successful persuasion. Scholars and teachers committed to forming ethical public rhetoric and writing community partnerships must participate and speak up when needed, and this is part of learning to “negotiate discursive power and authority” (Grobman 241).

To summarize, there are a few related and powerful takeaways about public rhetoric and writing gleaned from Councilman Dwayne James. First, the field can understand, and then teach, the goals of rhetoric in broader ways, moving away from approaches that frame rhetoric as chiefly about persuasion, changing minds, or “winning.” While rhetorical theory has long acknowledged that there are models of rhetoric that are less agonistic but just as productive, especially apparent in feminist rhetorical theory, James pushes those theories further by bringing discomfort, anger, and failure to the center, and in the process showing how public rhetoric works in action, making a place for messiness and struggle. Related to this, when discomfort becomes a necessity in rhetoric, rhetorical labor is more distributed. No longer can majority groups, particularly white people, avoid rhetorical engagement because it feels uncomfortable or because they do not want to feel like “the only,” expressing an unpopular opinion. Instead, this discomfort is part of making change, however slow it may be, and embracing this discomfort is also part of negotiating ethical partnerships between universities and their surrounding communities. “Successful” rhetoric does not only mean a classical skillful balance of ethos, pathos, and logos, resulting in what might be understood as a “civil” exchange. We have to talk about things that we do not want to talk about, including and beyond Ferguson. As Grobman reminds readers as she concludes her article, “for marginalized and previously marginalized communities and individuals, for our students, and for our discipline, the time to act is now, even when it’s not perfect” (255). Conversations are one way public rhetoric and writing scholars, teachers, and students can act, as much as they might sometimes feel like rhetorical failures; the onus is not just on those who are “the only,” as James explains it, to engage in uncomfortable rhetoric.

### ***The Poet: Jason Vasser***

The next voice I feature is Jason Vasser, who is a recent graduate of the MFA in creative writing at my university. [\(4\)](#) He is an activist-oriented poet who often writes about social issues, and some of his poetry about Ferguson was published in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. Vasser also grew up and lived most of his adult life in Ferguson, identifying closely with the city. As a poet, Vasser was already thinking about the power of words, and I wondered how Michael Brown’s death—and the reactions after it—shaped his work and thinking. This perspective motivated me to invite

Vasser to come talk to my Rhetoric and Social Justice class, so students were able to participate in listening to his narrative; in addition to supplementing the rhetorical theory we were reading, having Vasser in the class with us also served to instruct future interviews students might conduct or conversations they might have. I highlight here a particularly rich two-minute segment, furthering some of what Councilman James touched on, explicating the role of a black man as “the only” and how others might work toward building a coalition of support for African Americans, rhetorical and otherwise. Vasser also draws direct attention to the fact that *rhetoric matters* when it comes to Ferguson, raising questions about yard signs that were popping up around St. Louis during this time, with statements like “Black Lives Matter,” “All Lives Matter,” and “We Heart Ferguson.”



### Jason Vasser Interview Transcript

J: I have a friend in Maryland, and he and I talk quite often. He would ask me, “Now how far is Ferguson from St. Louis?” And I say, “It’s part of St. Louis. It’s one of our municipalities.” And yadda yadda yadda.

But what I found interesting is the whole “I Heart Ferguson” thing or “Black Lives Matter” vs. “All Lives Matter” thing. That rhetoric is very interesting. It’s very interesting if you really pay attention cause. Okay. When police shoot people or when police do things, they’re doing it in the name of the state. The state does these things. The state, you know, crack down on drugs, or whatever, right? So when the state kills a child, you know, even though he may be a big child, or maybe an angry child, he’s still a child. So when the state kills this person, now all of a sudden “We Love Ferguson.” When before we didn’t have to say “We Love Ferguson.” I have to question what that really means. Are you loving the Ferguson that kills people? Or are you loving the Ferguson before all this happened? It’s a grey area.

And then you know when you have this situation where Black Lives Matter. Of course black lives matter. But we have this whole group of people who want to say “All Lives Matter.” And we know all lives matter. But it only becomes, you know, an issue when black bodies are being discarded, as if they don’t matter. So now you have two people having the same conversation of ignorance. It’s like, of course, all lives matter. But when it comes to us [black people], we don’t matter. And so what do you do with that? Right?

And so, that’s again the line I walk in my work. Is how to convey that in a way that isn’t threatening. That’s the challenge of a writer. Is how to convey that message without being the angry black man in a room. Ya know? I’ve always been the angry black man in the room. In workshop, in a poetry reading. I’ve always been, I’ve always had to speak for...a whole group of people, when I’m just one person.

Vasser, perhaps because he is also a writing teacher and has a keen sense of rhetoric in that capacity, overtly frames Ferguson rhetorically more than any other community member I have spoken with. He points to particular examples to highlight that words matter when it comes to discussing Ferguson, race relations, and police violence. In just this brief clip, for instance, Vasser articulates, quite accessibly, ways that talking about Ferguson aligns with rhetorical tropes. As he moves into a reflection on various slogans and signs he has seen, he explains, “When police shoot people or when police do things, they’re doing it in the name of the state. The state does these things.” The state, in this example, operates as a metonymic device, standing in for the police and more broadly for violence against marginalized populations. All can be presumably allowed (or forgiven) when done in the name of the state. This example of metonymy also illustrates how a rhetorical trope can, sometimes manipulatively, cloud meaning. When the “state” perpetrates violence, rather than a specific group or individual, the actor in the rhetorical situation is veiled, and the audience confused.

Further, Vasser brings the important issue of appropriation of language to the forefront, alongside asking questions about consensus—when are people “having the same conversation” but refusing to acknowledge one another? The example he uses is one that is now common nationwide and, in my experience, one that rhetoricians must be confident and clear in talking through with the public: the difference between Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter. He states, “It’s like, of course, all lives matter. But when it comes to us [black people], we don’t matter. And so what do you do with that? Right?” Vasser crucially points out what many people misunderstand about the Black Lives Matter movement, noting that a statement of the value of black lives does *not* discount or negate the value of all lives. He highlights that it is the ongoing marginalization of blackness, what he describes as “black bodies being discarded,” that necessitates the movement, and the language, of Black Lives Matter. While it should not have to be overtly stated—as he emphasizes, “we know all lives matter”—it does “become an issue” when black people are killed disproportionately by “the state.” The language of Black Lives Matter then becomes a crucial rhetorical move to draw attention to this inequity, this marginalization (historically and presently), and the cold “discarding.” To challenge this movement with the words “All Lives Matter,” even when the motive is to emphasize the value of life and work toward unity, minimizes the very real concern and reality experienced by members of the black community. The issue of appropriation of Black Lives Matter had already come up in the class, in both readings and discussion. But Vasser’s explanation, and clear passion about the subject, helped students better understand the connection between words and the often painful lived experiences of black people in the St. Louis area. In other words, Vasser pushed students to consider that it is never “mere rhetoric.” The students’ reaction to this conversation with Vasser illuminates the value of working toward reciprocal collaborations with community members in public rhetoric and writing courses. Students were able to learn from Vasser in ways that they could not from our course readings nor my carefully planned lectures, discussions, or activities. At the same time, we worked to reciprocate, documenting his narrative, adding it to the archive, and sharing his insights with others. Grobman advocates “productive, substantial, collaborative participation, in the public sphere to advance social justice” (239-40). While only a small example, this conversation with Vasser illustrates the value of such collaboration to advance social justice, yes, but also to incorporate important contemporary voices to the rhetorical canon.

Finally, listening to Vasser’s comments alongside Councilman James’ words, I am struck in particular by the last portion in which Vasser ruminates on the complex positionality of the black man as public rhetor. Like James, Vasser pushes on the idea of speaking for an entire group of people and gets at the difficulty of being, in Vasser’s words, “the angry black man,” what James framed as “the only.” In these statements, Vasser and James indicate a need to work toward a coalition of support for African Americans: one which does not tokenize or put the entire responsibility for change on an oppressed group. At the same time, while such coalition is necessary in rhetorical and material ways, the need to listen arises again and becomes more specific, as expressed by Vasser when he explains the violence against black bodies that is inherent in “All Lives Matter,” despite claims that that it is a harmless phrase or motivated by a vision of a peace. To continually assert that “All Lives Matter” when a marginalized person explains why this phrase is hurtful is a key example of poor listening, and through poor listening, failing to work toward a more equitable future. In short, rhetorical subjectivity, as Vasser and James theorize it, is nuanced and multifaceted. It must be collective and distributed so the labor does not fall solely on those oppressed, but it also must remain ethical in terms of listening to and learning from the concerns and critiques of those most affected. This provides another example of why rhetorical listening must become more central in public rhetoric and writing pedagogy. It is increasingly integral to social justice yet often too abstract and difficult to enact. Thus students must learn and live the nuances of rhetorical listening in public rhetoric and writing courses as a crucial step toward creating change. As Rivers and Weber note, students do not have to publish public rhetoric projects for them to make a difference. They state, “we imagine the classroom as a proto-public training ground for public engagement” (207). I have a similar vision for my classroom, and though the results are often messy and incomplete, never producing a publishable product, I argue that that rhetorical listening must be part of this training for public engagement if we hope students might create social change beyond the walls of our classroom.

## Public Rhetoric in Action: The Violence in/of Rhetoric

In case this is not yet clear: I view rhetoric as, in many ways, at the heart of Ferguson. Beyond the distance and silence on my campus, there is also disturbing rhetorical violence taking place throughout St. Louis and nationwide. I come to collectively think of these public moments—be it the silence, the distance, or examples that are more overtly violent—as (perhaps too innocently) “rhetorical problems” surrounding Ferguson. In other words, I find myself collecting and trying to make sense of actions that rhetorically frame Ferguson itself as a problem of some sort.



**Figure 2.** Cops Lives Matter graffiti in my neighborhood (August 10, 2015)

Here is a common and widespread example, one that is likely familiar to readers in any location: the appropriation of “Black Lives Matter” into “Cops Lives Matter.” [Figure 2](#) shows a photo of graffiti, bold letters scrawled in black and red permanent marker. At one point, before I took this photo, someone wrote “Black Lives Matter” on the road block at the end of my street. But then others joined this conversation, physically erasing, as best they could, “Black Lives Matter.” Then adding instead “Cops Lives Matter, too” in black, bold letters. Added below that is the statement, underlined, “All races.” In marker, “Cops Lives Matter” has also been scribbled again on the other side of the road block and the top of it, visible from all angles. This graffiti appeared and changed over the course of four days, indicating that it was a dialogue between various rhetors, though I will never know how many or who they were. This rhetorical problem hits me particularly hard as I observe its emergence on my daily walk to the bus stop, nearly a year to the day after Michael Brown was killed.

### **The Activist: Brittany Ferrell**

Finally, I want to share two short clips from a conversation with Brittany Ferrell. Ferrell is the co-founder of a group called Millennial Activists United (or MAU). [\[5\]](#) MAU was on the front lines, in various ways, in protests and conversations about Ferguson. Ferrell offers an astute understanding of the connections between activism and rhetoric, illustrating how BLM might expand or shift rhetorical theory, particularly understandings of public rhetoric, in fundamental ways.



**Brittany Ferrell Transcript One**

L: If you could talk more about the idea of the movement as not just based in one person.

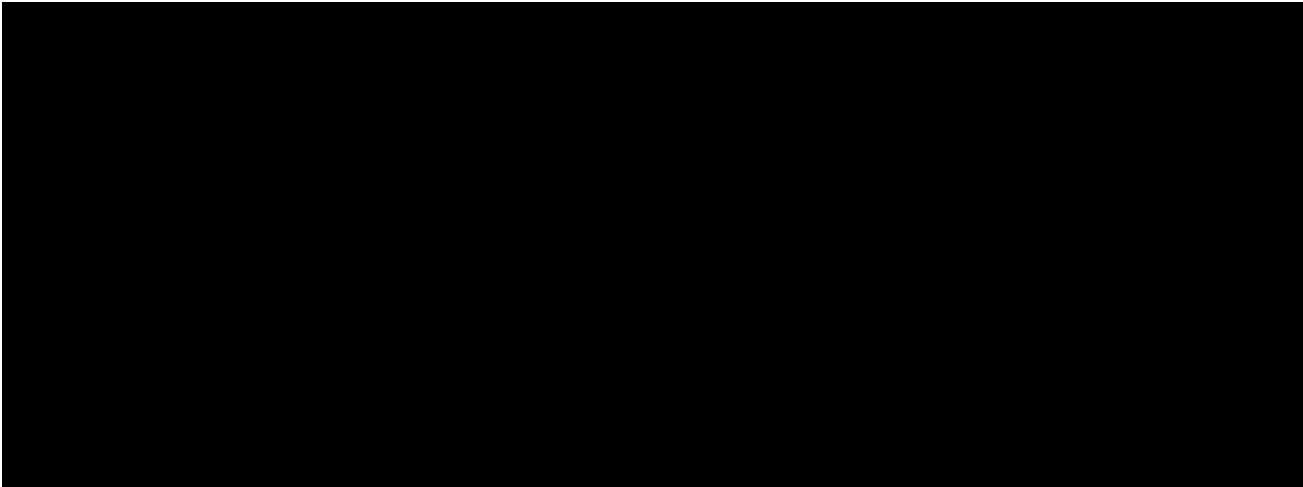
B: Yeah, um, it's called "group-centered leadership." It's a ...

L [interjecting for clarification]: Wait, what kind of leadership?

B: Group-centered.

L [repeating B]: Group-centered leadership.

B: So a lot of times we go into spaces and either the police or the person in charge will be like, "Who's the leader?" And everybody raises their hand. And it's really frustrating for them. [Background laughter] But the reality of it is there is no one central leader. You're not gonna find your MLK in this movement. You know, you're just not. It does not exist. Um ... and what's important about that is we have this message that has to be communicated, and we're not just talking to the white politicians, you know. Um ... we're not just talking to white people, in general. We are talking to everyone. You know. And there is, um ... with group-centered leadership, it's a collective voice. People all saying the same message in different ways.



## **Brittany Ferrell Transcript Two**

B: Well, I think that just because of the society that we live in, um, so, when I say leaderless movement, the people doing this work, everybody has called a shot at one point. Everybody has the power to say “this is what we're doing and this is why we're doing it.” And everybody will be like, “okay, we're doing it.” You know, so, um, intracommunal leadership is everyone. Okay?

Me and Alexis were talking about how when the media gets involved, or when outsiders looking in gets involved...oddly, they pick who they think might be the most articulate. You know, who they think might be good in front of a camera. There's something that I call “pretty privilege” now, that I notice. You know, one that is appealing to the eye is now put in front of the camera versus the ones that don't fit into that category. I notice that in the movement a lot of black women do not conform to European beauty standards. At all. So then you just knock it down a level. Well, who's pretty at least? You know, who has nice teeth? Who has, you know, speaks and enunciates their words? You know, so they see who they want to put in the media to make the movement either look good or look really bad.

So, it's um...within the movement we know that there are no centralized leaders, no centralized leadership. Outside of the movement, and looking in, people are gonna try to make a leader. You know, I think what's important is knowing that everybody doing the work they have a unified message. So you can pick all you want, but the message is gonna be the same. You know, and a lot of times people put people in front of cameras thinking that they're gonna get one thing, and it's another. Because the message remains the same.

In these excerpted segments of my class' conversation with Ferrell, a recurring theme is collectivity in a movement. Ferrell explains activism around Ferguson, and BLM more widely, as using “intra-communal leadership,” and she also calls BLM a “leaderless movement.” She even notes, “You're not gonna find your MLK in this movement,” a particularly powerful moment for students in a rhetoric class, a space where great orators are often at the center of study. From this interviewee's insight, the class was able to more clearly understand the power in rhetorical collectivity; the movement cannot be slowed by arresting or attempting to discredit one person. Even more, this collective rhetoric causes productive confusion, for both authority figures and the media. As Ferrell explains it, “A lot of times people put people in front of cameras thinking that they're gonna get one thing, and it's another. Because the message remains the same.” Ferrell pushes listeners to view rhetoric as more than an act based in an individual rhetor. Instead, rhetoric can sometimes work best when it is a collection of voices, all aligned with the same message. Such collective rhetoric is, in short, resistant, divergent, and more difficult to suppress. This insight explained so beautifully by Ferrell hits on an important point for public rhetoric and writing: enacting change through rhetoric does not happen alone. Paula Mathieu and Diana George take this idea of “going it alone” as the jumping off point for their discussion of working with independent media in public writing courses. Citing Kathleen Welch, they propose that many students believe “engaging in public discourse remains an individual act,” and this is a myth that must be dispelled (131). Mathieu and George conclude their article with some lessons for public writing courses, and one of these lessons is emphasizing that “public writing relies on networks of collaboration and community action” (145). The discussion with Ferrell brought this lesson to students in my class in a powerful way, illustrating the defiant and noncompliant efficacy in collectivity.

Importantly, then, a move to understand rhetoric as fundamentally collective, per Ferrell, highlights two related concepts, deserving of further attention by scholars and teachers of public rhetoric and writing: 1) resistance and 2) a shifted focus to the message rather than the singular rhetor. First, collective rhetoric can be used in the service of resistance, key for understanding the role of rhetoric in present-day activism. This is best illustrated in Ferrell's discussion of members of the media, who may try to cherry pick the “right” or “appropriate” person to talk about Ferguson and BLM. Someone, as Ferrell explains it, who preferably represents Eurocentric standards of beauty, or, if no such rhetor is present, someone who has “pretty privilege”—someone “articulate” with “nice teeth.” But collective rhetoric is able to resist this “pretty privilege” (and other assumptions made by the public) via a strong, united

message; the focus for Ferrell's group is on this strong message rather than one representative leader who speaks for all.

The media may desire an ideal rhetor, and they can then represent that person however they choose, but this is a move which might be divisive within the movement and between the movement and a wider public. Collective rhetoric resists such media pressure because “the message remains the same,” no matter who speaks. Collective rhetoric means that the message of BLM is not beholden to one voice or one leader, which defies what outsiders expect to see in a movement. While Ferrell's comment that “there is no MLK” might initially seem like a problem with the movement—why wouldn't we want another iconic leader or voice?—Ferrell emphasizes that it is this very collectivity and the distribution of the message across voices that sets BLM apart and lends it unique power.

This conversation with Ferrell, and the role members of the Rhetoric and Social Justice class played as listeners rather than speakers, resonated throughout the semester. We frequently revisited what we had learned from the Ferrell, coming to cite her alongside the academics we were reading each week. It is perhaps Ferrell's interview, then, that best demonstrates how these conversations with people who were engaged in public rhetoric around Ferguson contributed important insights to the rhetorical canon, and thus there is a need for these voices to be archived. Collecting narratives, in this instance, is a way to expand audiences and help others learn and practice acts of rhetorical listening. To collect and archive conversations like those we had with Brittany Ferrell is necessary because they can help the field, including students, come to understand the ways that the rhetorical tradition is happening *right now*. When civically engaged listening is at the center of public rhetoric and writing, not only do we come to better understand local communities, rhetoric itself is revitalized, always in flux, never stagnant.

## Conclusion

### ***Public Rhetoric in Action: Moving Toward Public Rhetorical Interventions***

*While I observe these (depressing) rhetorical problems—the silence, the distance, and the overt violence—I also observe what I call (more hopefully) “rhetorical interventions” in relation to Ferguson; namely, I notice many events around my campus and St. Louis that propose addressing Ferguson through rhetoric. In these instances, rhetoric (though that is not the term used) is one way to engage with and about Ferguson, working toward actionable change at various levels.*

PLEASE COME AND BE PART OF AN IMPORTANT CONVERSATION ABOUT *race and cultural identity*. PANEL MEMBERS INCLUDE REPRESENTATIVES FROM FACULTY, STAFF, AND STUDENTS.



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 10  
MSC CENTURY ROOM A  
6 p.m.

DIALOGUE FOR  
**DIFFERENCE**  
*panel discussion event*

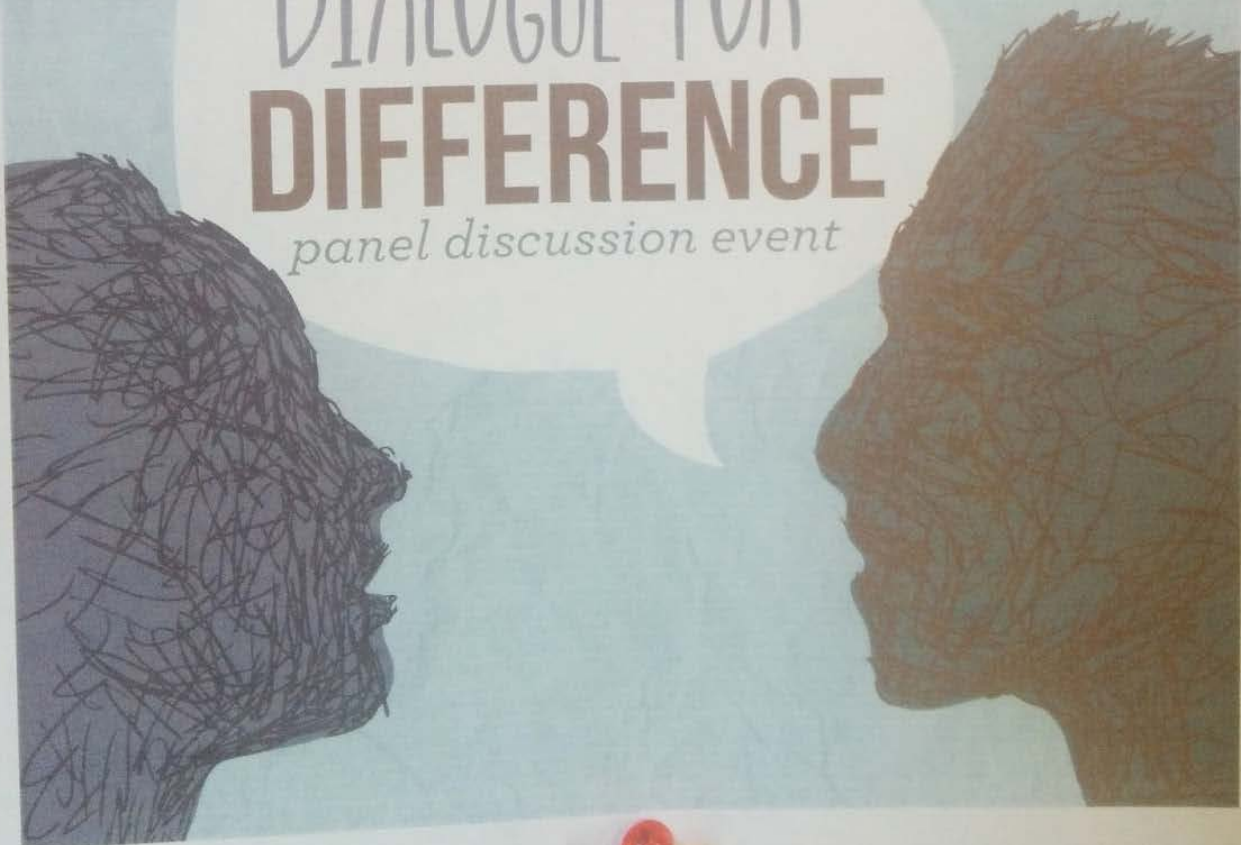
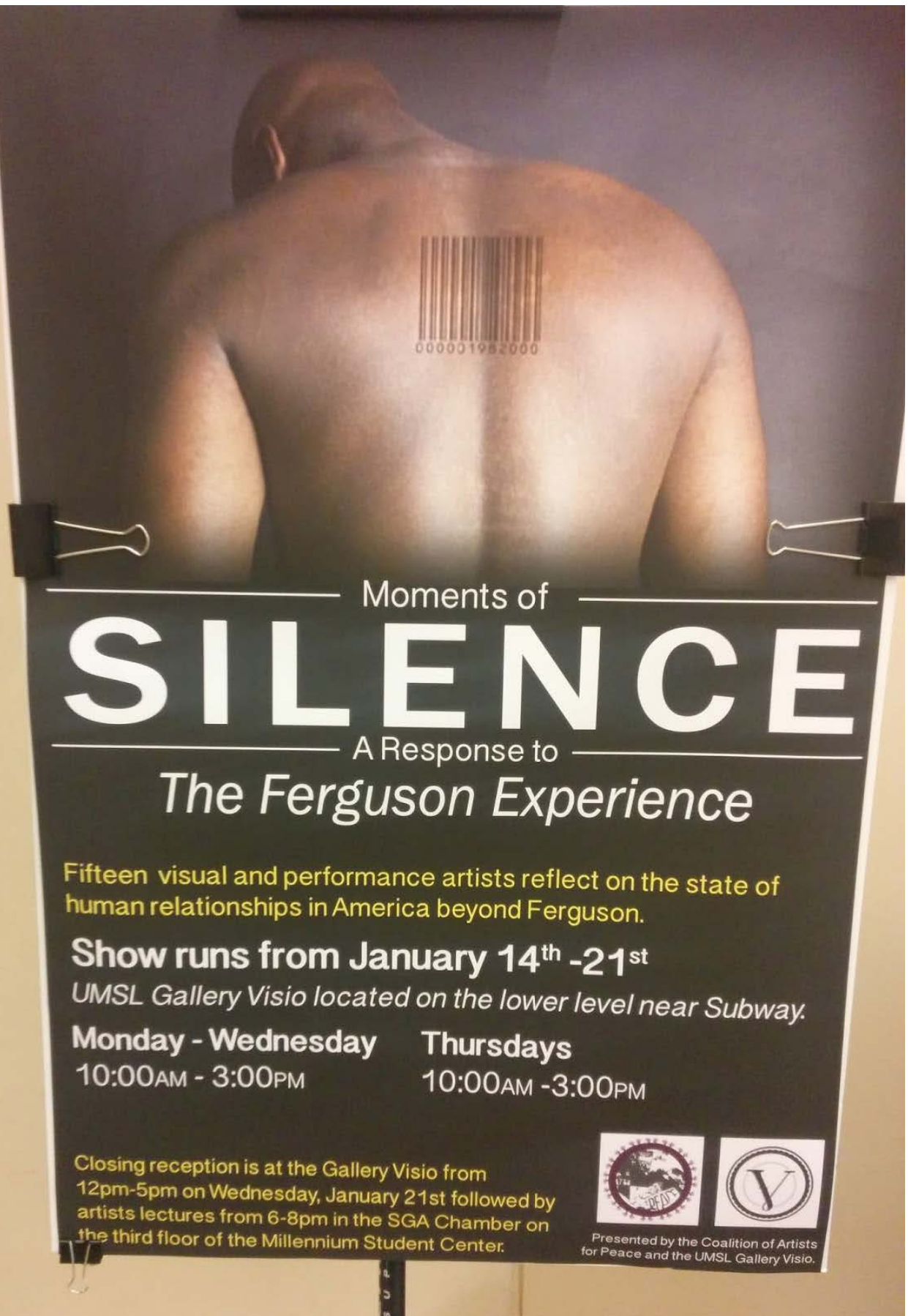


Figure 3. "Dialogue for Difference" panel discussion event flyer (November 10, 2014)

One example of a rhetorical intervention is illustrated in [Figure 3](#); it a flyer for a campus panel discussion called "Dialogue for Difference," taking place in the fall of 2014. The flyer promises a discussion about "race and cultural



identity,” featuring representatives from the university’s faculty, staff, and students. The visual rhetoric further emphasizes dialogue, showing two shaded profiles facing one another, mouths open and word bubbles holding text representing a conversation. Two rhetorical lessons emerge: first, the campus needs to hear from “representatives” who can speak with expertise about race and identity. Second, while listening first needs to happen, a discussion must follow. The flyer conveys a message that listening and conversation, uncomfortable as they might be, must be part of working through what happened in Ferguson or working toward systemic change for race relations.



**Figure 4.** Poster for “Moments of Silence: A Response to the Ferguson Experience” on-campus art exhibit (January 2015)

Another example of a rhetorical intervention is featured in [Figure 4](#). This is a poster for an on-campus art exhibit

about Ferguson. The exhibit is entitled “Moments of Silence: A Response to the Ferguson Experience,” and the poster features a dramatic photograph of a black man’s back, marked with a barcode. The poster notes that the artists featured, both visual and performing, will “reflect on the state of human relationships in America beyond Ferguson.” While art is often rhetorical, this particular exhibit takes rhetoric as its framing device through the title of “Silence.” Implied immediately, especially because of the photograph featured on the poster, is the silencing of black bodies and black perspectives. Also implied is a need for audiences to be silent. And in this silence, they can instead look, learn, and listen to marginalized rhetors.[\[6\]](#)

I conclude with these examples of public rhetorical interventions because they align and resonate alongside the words of the James, Vasser, and Ferrell: listening, learning, speaking when needed, finding power in the collective, distributing rhetorical labor, and embracing uncomfortable exchanges. These are just some of theoretical insights built when rhetorical theory is co-created alongside community members.

The work of this article, and the ongoing project I undertake in my Rhetoric and Social Justice class, is inspired by these rhetorical interventions, from James, Vasser, and Ferrell, and from the thoughtful and resistant moves I continue to stumble across on my campus and in my city. I hope, in some small way, what I share here serves as a generative baseline for other rhetorical interventions and engagements that can be extended and applied by both scholars and students, in our communities and in our classrooms, for Ferguson and for the field.

## Appendix: Conversational Interview Questions/Topics (for Interviews Focused on Intersections of Rhetoric & Ferguson)

In what ways does your own identity—such as your race, class, age, job, or gender—shape how you use language, whether it is how you write, talk, read, or interact with others?

How do you use language or literacy to engage with the community? (Do you find literacy or language intersects with any activist or advocacy work you do? Or public service?)

In the wake of Ferguson, did you read or discuss any texts—articles, videos, photos, etc.—that came from the media? What did you read/see? How did it affect you or your thinking about Ferguson as an event?

What is your reaction to popular media that has arisen in support of Ferguson—such as “black lives matter” or “I heart Ferguson” signs? Do these words/signs matter or affect people? Why?

Have you had conversations with friends or family about Ferguson? How did you work to navigate this conversational topic through your choice of words or particular stories you might share?

Have you seen striking media representations in the wake of Ferguson? How has such media affected your perceptions or actions?

Did you create a protest sign? Tell us about it—what did you hope to convey?

Did you tweet or post on Facebook about events in Ferguson? What did you say? What was the effect of your words or images?

## Notes

1. I keep stumbling over if this is the right metaphor, as a shadow at first invokes darkness and fear, ideas that strike me as misplaced stereotypes people might have about Ferguson. In local parlance, Ferguson is more typically described as a quaint, safe, and supportive, far from shadowy or ominous.

I am grateful to my colleague, friend, and generous reader, Victoria Bauer, for pointing out that a shadow implies much more than a threat. Instead, a shadow can be embracing and capacious, which is how I use this metaphor. I find myself, as a scholar, teacher, and person, in the shadow of Ferguson because I want to align with it and aim to learn from it. In this way, Ferguson casts a productive reminding shadow over all I do: always attached, never possible to shake, influential. What happens there is *part of* my life, part of who I am, and I aim to learn *in and with* Ferguson. ([Return to text.](#))

2. The interviews featured in this article have been approved as exempt by my University’s Institutional Review

Board. ([Return to text.](#))

3. Learn more about [Dwayne T. James](#). ([Return to text.](#))

4. Poems by Jason Vasser:

- [Picking up, in Ferguson](#)
- [At Cork](#)

Articles about Jason Vasser's work:

- [Poetry can be an early form of artistic response to trauma](#)
- [Voices of Ferguson](#)

([Return to text.](#))

5. Articles about Brittany Ferrell:

- [Bitch Media. Where My Girls At: Meet Two of Ferguson's Black Queer Activists](#)
- [#FergusonFridays: Not all of the Black freedom fighters are men: An Interview with Black Women on the Front line in Ferguson](#)

([Return to text.](#))

6. While this particular exhibit struck me, and my students, as social justice-oriented, we were all disappointed that the time that was available for viewing on campus was mostly during winter break when fewer people are around, and we wondered if this timing was purposeful, perhaps a subtle form of silencing in and of itself. A bold exhibit could be held on campus, yes, but not during a time that many people would actually be able to view it. ([Return to text.](#))

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Return to [Composition Forum 36 table of contents](#).