

Present Tense

A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

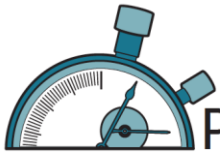
Special Issue on Race, Rhetoric, and the State: Introduction

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Present Tense, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2015.

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Special Issue on Race, Rhetoric, and the State: Introduction

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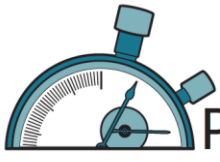
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Back in the summer of 2009 I was invited to join a group of fellow graduate students at Purdue University who were working on a yet to be named online journal. After the prolonged, exacting deliberation that happens when you get a number of rhetoricians in one room, we titled it *Present Tense*. In September 2010, after some of the most formative and powerful experiences of my professional life, we published our first issue. In January of 2015, Managing Editor Megan Schoen suggested that we do a special issue on “Race, Rhetoric, and the State” as a way to address the seemingly constant stream of violence against people of color that has gotten so much attention lately. I thought it was a matter we were in desperate need of addressing so I volunteered to co-edit the special issue. The moment we decided to do the issue, I knew that I wanted Donnie Johnson Sackey to be my co-editor because he would be able to help me realize my vision for a daring, maybe even slightly irreverent, look at the problem, featuring pieces that relied on different media to make their points.

When Alexandra Hidalgo contacted me, I felt that we had to work on this project given its timeliness and our academic commitment to social justice. The confluence of race, rhetoric, and state turns our attention toward communities of distress, resulting from generations of socially-engineered structural

inequality. This is a moment that calls for rhetoric and action. Rhetoric is often associated with analysis and critique. Alex and I, however, think about this rhetorical moment as one that calls for story and invention. As Phaedra Pezzullo writes, “[i]nvention offers a means of theorizing the transformative democratic possibilities of civic rhetoric” (7). If we are truly committed to anti-racism, antisexism, anti-homophobia, and anti-ableism, we are going to have to put forth an effort toward dismantling the systems that erected them.

We are writing and recording this on November 15. Two days after the ISIS-organized Paris attacks left the world in shocked silence. Like the issues discussed here, the situation in Paris is a complex and rhizomatic rhetorical conundrum regarding race and the state’s responses to it that we as a discipline need to address and try to untangle. Members of our discipline, like the streets of Paris, are literally under attack, as our colleague Ersula Ore shows in our opening article when writing about being the victim of police brutality as an African American woman. Her piece—we dare you not to cry as you read it—is one of the most powerful examples of pathos and memoir our field has ever produced. Santos Ramos and Angélica de Jesus use illustrations created by de Jesus to look at a different, yet just as dangerous, kind of state violence: the sustained erasure of Chicana/o culture and history on American soil. By discussing her illustrations, Ramos and de Jesus



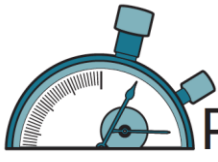
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create an abstract and emotive space for us to understand the rhetorical and human cost of devaluing a whole portion of a country's population. Moving images play a big role in Armond Towns's critique of the American media's boundless appetite for images of black bodies in pain or distress. He wants us to be aware of the human cost of consuming such images no matter whose side we're on. Perhaps the needed response to those kinds of images is for African Americans to portray their own stories, as they do in Alexandra Gerbard's account of community organizing during the Baltimore Uprising this April. She collaborated with local video artist Reuben "Dubscience" Greene, whose videos embedded throughout the piece tell a more accurate story of the uprising than the one portrayed in the media. Also exploring the ways that video can be used to create counternarratives is Sarah Arroyo and Bahareh Alaei's video essay on the way that YouTubers around the world have parodied ISIS's dissemination of filmed executions. As Arroyo and Alaei argue, the mocking presented in the parodies may be the most effective antidote to the violent rhetoric presented in ISIS's videos.

Ana Milena Ribero turns our attention toward the discourse surrounding immigration and how even political figures framed as allies offer rhetoric that fails to deliver change. Drawing on the concept of "pinkwashing," she focuses on President Obama's use of "brownwashing" as a rhetorical strategy that placates liberal allies, while simultaneously maintaining discriminatory practices against undocumented immigrants. Equally concerned with resistance to hidden, yet present racism, James Chase Sanchez and Kristen Moore explore how monuments function to collect public memories and to erase and homogenize individual

memories. Their analysis of Black Lives Matter activists' rhetorical remaking of the Confederate Defenders Monument exemplifies how rhetoricians can engage with public memory to forge connections with grassroots activists. Whereas Sanchez and Moore address acts of inscription, andré carrington analyzes the significance of "Black Lives Matter" as an utterance. When activists say and write "Black Lives Matter," it comes in stark contrast to the State's position on the matter. carrington works from firsthand accounts of the phrase's origins in order to argue for applications of speech act theory that allow us to assess the efficacy of rhetoric that engages state-sanctioned violence. Normalizing the truth that Black Lives Matter means that we have to make sense of rhetoric that systematically devalues Black bodies, such as the rhetoric surrounding the death of Michael Brown. There has been much discussion in the press regarding Officer Darren Wilson's grand jury testimony, which resulted in prosecuting attorney Robert McCulloch's decision not to file charges for Brown's death. Scott Gage articulates how the verbal-visual aspects of Wilson's testimony sanctions Brown's death as a just punishment and normalizes State violence against Black male bodies.

As Donnie and I were working on the issue this summer the country was shaken by yet another example of unspeakable violence when Dylann Roof shot nine African Americans at a Bible Study meeting in June. Travis D. Boyce and Winsome Chunnu-Brayda discuss the historical rhetoric of racism in South Carolina that Roof took inspiration from as he developed his own rhetoric of hatred. In a similar attempt to conceptualize America's problematic attitudes toward people of color, Theresa Donovan traces our nation's categorization of race through legal documents such as the 1790 Naturalization Act



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and current Naturalization applications. We end the issue as we started it, by returning to a personal story of an academic in our field navigating racial violence in Tamika Carey's review of Elaine Richardson's *PHD to Ph.D.: How Education Saved my Life*. As the review shows, Richardson's extraordinary journey is one that we can all learn from as we make sense of our own role in creating a world where race, rhetoric, and the state have a more harmonious relationship with each other.

We challenge you to engage with these authors, to teach their work, and to address their concerns. They, along with the collective experiences of activists on the ground, demand deep structural analysis and critical engagement with the systemic violence that affect communities of color. There are responsibilities that come with rhetoric. We, as scholars, must think about the privileges we have and the amount of power that comes with it. We cannot be content to witness violence happening around us and remain silent. We must think about ways in which we can speak to this violence, because it affects us, the bodies that come into our classrooms, and the bodies that surround us wherever we are.

We want to thank our reviewers Steven Alvarez, Laura Gonzales, Shenika Hankerson, Lisa King, Aja Martinez, Kyle Mays, Jennifer Sano-Franchini, and Don Unger. Without their tireless generosity, brilliance, and enthusiasm this issue would not have existed.

Credits

Written by Alexandra Hidalgo and Donnie Johnson Sackey

Edited by Alexandra Hidalgo
Cinematography by Alexandra Hidalgo, Donnie Johnson Sackey, and Nathaniel Bowler

Remixed Videos Research by Alexandra Hidalgo and Donnie Johnson Sackey

Thank you to members and attendees of the following conferences, whose filmed images we feature here:

Conference on College Composition and Communication
HASTAC

Works Cited

Alphabetic Writing

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Soundtrack

"Reflective-88" by Podington Bear
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