Comparative Rhetoric as Pedagogical and Cultural Topic

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I’d like to make two brief interventions into the rich, unfolding conversation about comparative rhetoric. The first, which I can’t develop beyond baseline assertion, is to advocate for a more thoroughgoing embrace of the idea that rhetoric is a cultural practice. This means that it takes shape not just through texts and discursive performances but also through institutions, technologies, social structures, and bodies within ongoing forms of life. Rhetoricians know that, and comparative rhetoricians know it better than most. But as an occupational group, we are drawn to the intricacies of language and texts. This occupational psychosis has taken us far, but also limited what I’d call our anthropological imaginations. We can learn from cultural anthropology and its largely subterranean tradition of rhetorical study (Simonson; Mokrzan). If rhetoric is indeed a cultural practice, then it blends symbolicities, materialities, and institutionalized habits in ways that call out for ethnographic sensibilities and methods. Close reading can only take us so far.

Research alone can also only take us so far, which leads to my main intervention. As a cultural practice itself, comparative rhetoric has yet to develop fully articulated pedagogies that the broader “interdiscipline” (Mailloux) desperately needs. I say this respectfully and sympathetically, speaking not as a card-carrying comparative rhetorician but a supportive fellow traveler launched on that path by excellent undergraduate courses in comparative religion. I continue to benefit from habits of mind developed there, which find their ways into my research and teaching in small and larger ways.

Comparative rhetoric needs to find greater place within rhetorical curricula. I’ll bend the traditional concepts and say we need to do more to make it both a common and a special topic in undergraduate and graduate studies. As a special topic, it’s the subject of in-depth courses fully devoted to comparative studies across cultures, traditions, geographies, and time. These are taught by comparativists, represent the state of the art in the field, and immerse students in the questions, methodologies, and problematics that develop enduring habits of mind of a comparativist sort. As a common topic, comparative
rhetoric would be dispersed across the curriculum in courses taught by fellow travelers who design pedagogical contact zones between specialized expertise and general rhetorical learning. This means including units on rhetoric from outside the U.S. and beyond Greco-Roman traditions. But it also means fostering habits of culturally attentive comparative thinking across all assigned texts. There’s an analogy with the teaching of gender and race. Hard-fought battles initially brought those subjects into curricula. The next step has been moving them from being represented only in special courses or singular units to being fundamental categories informing rhetorical and communication study more generally. In the current globalized moment, nearly a century after the introduction of cultural pluralism as concept and ideal, comparative and non-Western rhetorical studies need to take more prominent seats at the educational table.

Much of that effort relies on specialists in comparative and non-canonical rhetorics. To date and for good reason, the vast majority of their publication labor has been devoted to efforts “to discover and/or recover under-represented and under-recognized cultures and their discursive practices,” in the words of the Lawrence Comparative Rhetoric Manifesto. In contrast, very little has been written on the teaching of comparative rhetoric, a fact underscored by its absence from Hum and Lyon’s fine handbook chapter on the state of the field. Lipson and Binkley’s edited volume includes a helpful appendix with suggestions for teaching the rhetorics represented across its chapters, but most are background readings and bibliographies of scholarly treatments of the subject. Vernon Jensen’s “Teaching East Asian Rhetoric” is nearly 30 years old now. A decade ago, Xing Lu argued that the insights of comparative rhetoric would be relatively inconsequential until they were “incorporated into the curriculum of rhetorical education” (in Wang, “Survey” 177). That effort has been hampered by a dearth of pedagogically focused writing on the subject.

There is, to be sure, an implicit pedagogy to be found in key statements on comparative rhetoric. We can see outlines among the goals identified in the Manifesto, which include promoting and practicing “a way of doing, knowing, and being…that transcends borders, binaries, and biases” and embracing “different grids of intelligibility or different terms of engagement for opening new rhetorical times, places, and spaces.” There are hints in Mao’s framing essay in the special issue on comparative rhetoric in Rhetoric Society Quarterly. He notes the value of “studying non-euroamerican rhetorics in their own terms, rethinking the field of Rhetoric and Communication in relation to these other rhetorics, recognizing the influence of one’s own cultural and ideological make-up on the study of the other, and valuing the importance of the historical and cultural contexts to rhetorical performances at all levels” (“Beyond” 215). A pedagogy is also implied in his idea of the art of recontextualization as a “discursive third” whereby the contexts of scholars and those they study are brought out “in a chain of speech acts foreground[ing] dialogism or discursive open-endedness” (218)—an art we might chain out with our students as well.

But the pedagogy of comparative rhetoric remains underdeveloped as an articulated public component of the project. Both overarching educational teloi and the techniques, assignments, and learning environments for achieving them are left unsaid.
Pursuing the *topos* of comparison, we might view this situation alongside the tradition of contrastive rhetoric and its spinoff, intercultural rhetoric, which have taken cross-cultural writing pedagogy as a primary research focus even in recent moves “beyond texts” (Connor). There seems to be little dialogue between comparative and contrastive rhetoric. This owes partly to differences in paradigms and purposes and a historical parting of ways as comparativists came to critique the shortcomings of a project anchored in the teaching of *English* composition (Mao, “Reflective”). But that divide can also be read as part of the larger and longer-standing division in the twentieth-century interdiscipline of rhetorical studies: criticism and interpretation lie on one side, composition and production on the other. As Mailloux urges, it is time to find our way beyond these divides.

It will obviously take time to articulate pedagogies for comparative rhetoric as special and common topic, filling out the broader cultural practice in a way that cultivates habits of living in a pluralistic and globalizing world. In the meantime, as a fellow traveler, I’ve taken to working Latin American rhetorics into my courses. They offer historical case studies in the contact zones between Europe and the first nations of the Americas, illuminations of contrasting systems of communication and media, and antidotes to the self-legitimating professional ideology of rhetorical studies as the continuation of an essentially democratic tradition. These provide new degrees of reflexivity about cultural specificities, theoretical partialities, and blind spots of other readings we do. I’ve also incorporated contemporary media anthropologies conducted in different world regions, retrofitting their accounts of cultural practices with rhetorical concepts introduced in other sections of the course. I see these as consonant with Bo Wang’s attention to cross-national networks and geopolitical forces as part of the comparative rhetoric project (“Comparative”).

Seeds for fuller pedagogies lie within recent writings I’ve referenced. If comparative rhetoric fosters “a way of doing, knowing, and being,” then it might be apt to fill out Mao’s figure of the discursive third through a concept of culturally mediated rhetorical *experience*. The idea is to create space for embodiment, affect, and symbolically charged sensorial things as elements of the rhetorics we study, the ways we try to understand them from afar, and the modes of rhetorical production we hope to help cultivate in our students. This could lead to pedagogies of embodied mindfulness cultivated through anthropological imaginations attentive to institutions, practices, regimes of power, and differential social access to spaces of rhetorical expression, intelligibility, and efficacious public action. Or to other paths forward.

**Works Cited**


