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Engaging Public Rhetorics and Communities with New Faculty: Part 1

8/21/2019

By Rachel Bloom-Pojar

Fall 2019 marks the official launch of our program in Public Rhetorics and Community Engagement at UWM. My colleagues and I are also excited to welcome two new faculty members to our program: Dr. Derek Handley and Dr. Maria Novotny. To help everyone get to know them better, I asked Derek and Maria a series of questions about their experience and vision for the new program. In this post, we'll learn a bit about Derek and Maria's background with research and [part 2](#) will focus on their teaching and goals for the future of the program.



Derek G. Handley has a PhD in Rhetoric from Carnegie Mellon University and is a Navy veteran. His book project *"The Places We Knew So Well Are No More: A Rhetorical History of Urban Renewal and the Black Freedom Movement"* looks at the rhetorical strategies and tactics used by African-American communities in Milwaukee, WI, Pittsburgh, PA, and St. Paul, MN as they resisted urban renewal. Before coming to UWM, Derek was a Predoctoral Mellon Fellow at the James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference at Emory University, and he has taught at Lehigh



Maria Novotny holds a PhD in Rhetoric & Writing from Michigan State University. Before coming to UWM, she was an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh where she successfully created a professional writing minor and worked with an interdisciplinary team on creating a Health Humanities minor. At UWO, she taught classes on digital rhetorics, grant writing, and visual rhetoric. Much of her research explores the multimodal narratives and technological tools used by the infertility and reproductive loss community to navigate barriers to reproductive healthcare. She is

University, the United States Naval Academy, and the Community College of Allegheny County. Derek has also held non-academic jobs in higher education, the US Navy, and the USDA Forest Service. His research interests/areas of specialization include African American Rhetoric, Rhetorical History, and Rhetorics of Place. He has a Chamberlain Project Fellowship at Amherst College this year, and will begin teaching at UWM in Fall 2020.

also the co-founder and co-director of [The ART of Infertility](#), which is an organization that works with reproductive loss patients to portray their experiences in public art exhibits. She situates her work around cultural rhetorics, with a focus on feminist and embodied perspectives, digital rhetorics, and technical communication. Maria lives in Washington Heights with her husband, two dogs, and adopted daughter, Nina.

What is your experience with community-engaged research?

Maria: I draw on my work with the [ART of Infertility](#) to inform my community-engaged scholarship. As a resource organization, I host multimodal art workshops for reproductive loss patients to depict their experiences with grief and the reproductive healthcare industry. Once patient pieces are created, I invite patient-participants to narrate their infertility experiences through their artwork. Today, the organization has over 200 pieces of narrative art, of which, I incorporate into art exhibitions around the U.S. I understand these exhibits as evidence of how art rhetorically translates technical, scientific, and medical experiences into accessible experiences for non-experts to grasp and ignite community-engaged action. My purpose is to act as an ally to remove the embedded cultural stigma of receiving an infertility diagnosis and create resources that educate healthcare providers, and the public at-large, on the sociocultural challenges faced by the reproductive loss community.

Derek: My research focuses on African American community rhetorical histories which means I have to do research in the archives and in the local neighborhoods. I conduct interviews with community members, walk the locations where historical events took place, and attend community events. I also like to take students on walking tours of these historic neighborhoods.

What are you currently working on?

Derek: I am currently working on my book project, *"The Places We Knew So Well Are No More:" A Rhetorical History of Urban Renewal and the Black Freedom Movement*. In particular, I'm focusing on the Milwaukee section of the book where rhetorical education played a significant role in helping residents understand the complexities of urban renewal. In addition, I'm working on a conference paper (National Communications Association) about St. Paul, Minnesota, which will also be featured in my book. My paper explores how race is implicated in the contested spaces and places of urban renewal policies. But more importantly, it will examine the rhetorical actions taken by residents in St. Paul in an effort to save their community from the wrecking balls of eminent domain during the 1950s and 60s.

Maria: I'm currently co-editing special issues for *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* on "Curation: A Multimodal Practice for Socially-Engaged Action", *Computers and Composition* on "Rhetorics of Data: Collection, Consent, & Critical Digital Literacies", and *Reflections* on "Rhetorics of Reproductive Justice in Public and Civic Contexts". While on the surface those themes may appear distinct, the calls emphasize scholarly contributions that consider how curation may act as a response for social action.

Related, I'm working on a co-authored book project with Dr. John Gagnon (University of Hawaii-Manoa). We published "[Research as Care: A Shared Ownership Approach to Rhetorical Research in Trauma Communities](#)," which offers a cultural rhetorical framework for collaborating with trauma participants for rhetorical research. Our book project tentatively titled, *Care as a Practice: Reorienting Research in Rhetoric and Writing Studies*, offers a cultural rhetorics infused methodological framework to inform the design and ethical enactment of community-engaged research projects. Our manuscript expands on and explains the idea of care as a research practice, demonstrates the efficacy of a care-centered research paradigm, and delivers concrete models for how to enact care methodologically.

Now that you've gotten to know a bit more about Derek and Maria, check out [part 2](#) to read about their teaching experience and vision for UWM's Public Rhetorics and Community Engagement program.

Engaging Public Rhetorics and Communities with New Faculty: Part 2

8/21/2019

By Rachel Bloom-Pojar

This is the second part of two posts about our new faculty members with the Public Rhetorics and Community Engagement program at UWM: Dr. Derek Handley and Dr. Maria Novotny. You can read Part 1 [here](#).

What experience do you have with community-engaged teaching?

Maria: I have taught many professional writing and technical classes, which naturally lend themselves to community-engaged projects. For example, in my "Digital Rhetoric in Health and Medicine" course at UWO, students worked with the Women's Center and Student Center on campus to create a series of multimedia, advocacy toolkits to support educating their college peers on the importance of data privacy. We reflected on the learning that occurred through these projects and shared our community-engaged projects on the [Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative's blog](#). Also, in my "Grant Writing Foundations" course, my students worked with five Oshkosh community non-profits organizations. While students gained experience researching and writing grant documents, this collaborative partnership also revealed the importance of reciprocity. As the course concluded, students remarked on the interpersonal and rhetorical negotiations they had to make in order to successfully partner with the organization.

Derek: My first year writing courses are focused on place and community. What I mean by that, is that the course focuses on issues directly affecting the local place where the students live. I have students conduct research not only in academic spaces such as the library, but also out in the community. They have to talk with people, organizations, and businesses to get a greater understanding of the various stakeholders' perspectives. For instance, when I taught in Western Pennsylvania, I developed a course around the environmental issue of [Marcellus Shale](#) fracking. Many of my students were directly connected to that industry through friends and family.

What do you envision for the future of our Public Rhetorics and Community Engagement program?

Derek: I think it is important for us to develop a program that has a viable option for careers outside of academia. The academic job market is tight and there are other careers in which students should consider. To facilitate this idea, I think we should seek relationships with outside organizations and businesses and educate them on how students in our program can contribute to the goals of that organization. Perhaps we could set up summer internships for our students. The [Mellon/ACLS Public Fellows program](#) serves as a perfect example of what some of our students should consider applying for after they complete their degree. The program places recent PhDs in government organizations and non-profit sectors for up to two

years.

Maria: I am very excited to work on the Public Rhetorics and Community Engagement program. My dissertation drew from my community-engaged work with the ART of Infertility. Engaged in that work, I recall moments of feeling overwhelmed not just by the doing of a dissertation but by the natural messiness of navigating and learning what it means to do community work. I hope to draw on these experiences, as well as the experiences of current graduate students, to think about how the program can be structurally organized and designed to offer mentorship and institutional support. I see my book project with John Gagnon as one scholarly trajectory that assists with this, but I'm also eager to think through the types of experiences and training we offer to our students via our curriculum. It's an exciting program, and I think will resonate with folks across the field!

What is a graduate course you look forward to teaching?

Maria: I'm really looking forward to teaching Cultural Rhetorics in the spring. I've taught this for undergraduate students, but I'm eager to teach approaches to a cultural rhetorics methodology to graduate students. I am hopeful that students will also take interest, as I see cultural rhetorics offering methods useful for individuals who want to do ethical and reciprocal community work. Plus, I'm hoping that I can invite a couple of scholars who do cultural rhetorics work to join our class for some Q&A sessions.

Derek: I look forward to developing and teaching a topics course entitled African American Rhetoric and the Black Freedom Movement. The course is intended as an informed introduction to African American rhetoric, which is defined as the "communicative practices, and persuasive strategies rooted in freedom struggles by people of African ancestry in America" (Jackson and Richardson). The readings and discussions will familiarize students with various contemporary theorists whose ideas broaden contemporary conceptualization of African American Rhetoric. By the end of the course, students will have a richer understanding of how rhetoric is a tool of social change encompassing a variety of written, visual and verbal communication strategies. Readings in particular will include major thinkers like Cornel West, Keith Gilyard, Molefi Asante, and Geneva Smitherman.

What's something you like to do in your free time?

Derek: Exploring Wisconsin. My family and I are still new to the Midwest so we're looking forward to taking some day-trips to go hiking, kayaking, and canoeing, especially when the leaves start to change colors. Also, we just adopted a 5 year-old Labrador Retriever named Obi, so we want to get him out of the city and get some strenuous exercise.

Maria: I'm a Wisconsin girl at heart. Raised here, in the summer I am an avid musky fisherwoman. I caught a 41 inch one this summer with my dad. In the spring, I help a family friend on their maple syrup farm. Taking walks in the woods, listening to storms roll through,

and establishing a connection to the land has helped me stay grounded when the stress of academia can seem intense.

Thanks to Derek and Maria for their time and interest in contributing to Writing & Rhetoric MKE. I'm looking forward to building community with you in our program and around Milwaukee! -RBP