

The Marie Hochmuth Nichols Award and the Living Tradition of Public Address

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This statement is based on comments delivered at the 2007 National Communication Association convention in Chicago, on the panel entitled “The Marie Hochmuth Nichols Award Spotlight on Scholarship.” The panel honored the work of Trevor Parry-Giles, the 2007 Nichols Award winner. Ray participated on the panel as the 2006 recipient of the award.

The Marie Hochmuth Nichols Award brings with it an argument of definition. Although my publisher describes my book as “Rhetoric / Communication / U.S. History,” the Nichols Award rhetorically marks it as public address scholarship.¹ If the Nichols Award performatively defines all work that it honors in this way, then what can we extrapolate about twenty-first-century public address scholarship based on the recent winning entries?² That is the question that I want to take up today.

Current definitions of public address, of course, are affected by prior rhetorical action. The term “public address” first appeared in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* in the 1920s, denoting oratory or, sometimes, an apparatus like the one that I remember from elementary school, the public address system. Public address as an area of scholarly inquiry stabilized in the 1940s and 1950s, when the organization that later became known as the National Communication Association supported the publication of the three volumes of *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*.³ The first two volumes were edited by William Norwood Brigance, and the third volume was edited by Marie Hochmuth, later Marie Hochmuth Nichols. In these books, “public address” denoted an object domain, public orations, and those orations deemed important were typically delivered by members of the white male elite, often on overtly political themes. The

approach, called historical-critical, tended to be biographical description, with some identification of textual elements based on Aristotle's typologies. Stephen Lucas has described the fate of public address in subsequent years: the growing challenge to the Aristotelian method, the decisive blow rendered by Edwin Black's book *Rhetorical Criticism* in 1965, and the decline in scholarship on oratorical artifacts as an effect of the rejection of the method with which such study had been associated.⁴

Yet by 1988 Lucas was able to identify a "renaissance" in public address studies, and in 1993, the same year that James Jasinski won the first Nichols Award, Martin J. Medhurst described the field as "a tradition in transition."⁵ The sexist and racist heritage was beginning to be undermined, and today studies of gender and race abound. Scholars of public address are publishing more and more books, and the biannual Public Address Conference offers a venue for discussion of new scholarship and for community building. I am not unmindful of the difficulties faced by those among us who feel burdened by the history of public address in trying to explain the significance of our work to colleagues, or to the challenges confronted by teachers of public address during curricular decision-making, but it does appear, from the outpouring of books and articles that one can label public address scholarship, that public address research is lively. Indeed, the field is vital enough for the term to appear in the title of a 2007 book, *Queering Public Address*, a volume edited by Charles E. Morris III that challenges public address scholars not merely to broaden our object domain but also to interrogate our scholarly practice, to explore our silences, and to recognize that "public address is itself a rhetorical enterprise." Morris writes, "Instead of abandoning public address for queer-hospitable academic locations within the discipline and beyond, . . . [my coauthors and I] have decided to stay our home

ground and render it pink.”⁶ In reading scholarship in the field as a rhetorical act, I interpret this type of work as evidence of vibrancy in public address (the home ground is worth contesting, after all) and as evidence of hope for a future that innovates with creativity without dismissing the utility of traditions.

The Nichols Award is one of the mechanisms by which public address traditions are rhetorically generated; it helps to define what will count as tradition.⁷ Since 2000, the winning entries in the Nichols Award competition have been single-authored scholarly monographs: in 2000, the winner was Gerard A. Hauser’s *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres*; in 2001, Michael J. Hyde’s *The Call to Conscience: Heidegger and Levinas, Rhetoric and the Euthanasia Debate*; in 2002, Davis W. Houck’s *Rhetoric as Currency: Hoover, Roosevelt, and the Great Depression*; in 2003, Kirt H. Wilson’s *The Reconstruction Desegregation Debate: The Politics of Equality and the Rhetoric of Place, 1870–1875*; in 2004, Susan Zaeske’s *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women’s Political Identity*; in 2005, Lester C. Olson’s *Benjamin Franklin’s Vision of American Community: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology*; in 2006, Angela G. Ray’s *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States*; and in 2007, Trevor Parry-Giles’s *The Character of Justice: Rhetoric, Law, and Politics in the Supreme Court Confirmation Process*.⁸ Half of these eight books began as dissertations: Houck’s at Penn State, Wilson’s at Northwestern, Zaeske’s at Wisconsin, and Ray’s at Minnesota.

If these books represent a significant subset of public address scholarship, as the labeling of the Nichols Award implicitly argues, then one might fairly ask whether public address is a mode of inquiry that dare not speak its name. Only Wilson’s book indexes

the term, and then only as a cross-reference.⁹ Instead, the books foreground the terms “rhetoric,” “rhetorical criticism,” or “rhetorical perspective,” and those that refer to “public address” use the term in different ways: Hauser’s book invokes a theory of democratic practice, Houck’s describes a critical method, and Wilson’s offers a near synonym for “rhetorical criticism” and “rhetorical history.”¹⁰ Despite the relative absence of the term “public address,” the recent Nichols books tend to cite some scholarship in common, drawn from the work of individuals like Stephen Howard Browne, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Maurice Charland, Celeste Condit, James Darsey, G. Thomas Goodnight, Robert Hariman, Michael Leff, John Louis Lucaites, Stephen Lucas, Michael Calvin McGee, Robert Scott, and David Zarefsky.

Wilson’s explicit link between public address and history is mirrored in the Nichols books’ emphasis on rhetorical practice as historically situated, regardless of the specific spatial or temporal foci. Based on the evidence of these books, public address is still primarily an Americanist study, notwithstanding contrary examples such as Olson’s discussions of Benjamin Franklin’s relationships with European powers or Hauser’s treatment of vernacular rhetorics produced in post-Communist Poland and Yugoslavia.¹¹ Within the American context, however, the recent Nichols books range widely over time, with Olson studying visual discourse of the colonial era and early republic; Zaeske, Wilson, and Ray investigating rhetorical phenomena of the nineteenth century; and Hauser, Hyde, Houck, and Parry-Giles emphasizing twentieth-century controversies.

These books illustrate the expansion of the object domain for public address scholarship beyond orations, as Zaeske focuses on women’s antislavery petitions; Olson reads pictorial motifs; Ray examines popular magazines and the minutes of meetings;

Houck studies memoranda, correspondence, and press releases; and Parry-Giles draws upon myriad discourse, both official and popular, concerning the Supreme Court confirmation process. The public speech is still present, however, as Wilson studies national congressional debates over the Reconstruction-era civil rights acts, Ray devotes two chapters to readings of lyceum lectures, and other authors regularly draw evidence from speeches. Rather than rejecting the speech as an object of study, recent scholarship views speeches as one form of rhetorical practice. The Nichols authors tend to spend less time seeking eloquence and more time seeking illustrations of cultural formations, especially in moments of controversy and change. For example, Wilson elucidates various positions on desegregation in the 1870s, Hyde studies the euthanasia debates of the late twentieth century, and Parry-Giles highlights the most controversial Supreme Court confirmation processes over the past ninety years.

Further, unlike the 1940s and 1950s, our own historical moment is far from being a heyday of biography: only Olson's book uses a personal name, Benjamin Franklin, in its main title, and Olson's project is not to generate a comprehensive portrait of Franklin but rather to trace the development of Franklin's visual rhetoric depicting British America as an index of his "process of rejecting Britain's constitutional monarchy" and supporting a republican government in the United States.¹² Likewise, although Hyde's subtitle highlights Heidegger and Levinas, just as Houck's mentions Hoover and Roosevelt, Hyde investigates the concept of conscience in European philosophical thought, and Houck emphasizes the relationship between economics and the U.S. presidency from 1929 to 1933. Personal names appear in chapter titles in the books by Hyde, Wilson, Ray, and Parry-Giles, but the named individuals are primarily used to

illustrate theoretical or ideological forms. The symbolic value of the individual emerges as an explicit theme of Parry-Giles's book, which argues that controversial Supreme Court nominees like Louis Brandeis, Thurgood Marshall, and Robert Bork became public texts to represent various "conceptions of justice."¹³

If we borrow Benjamin Franklin's motif "We Are One," a claim that multiple entities are simultaneously singular, and juxtapose it to the Nichols Award books as examples of public address scholarship, then we can ask, What one are we?¹⁴ The recent Nichols books perform public address scholarship as a perspective or approach rather than an object domain. Hence, the work easily crosses disciplinary lines, encompassing history, the law, ethics, visual studies, and economics. These books are concerned with symbol use in its situated moment, and thus the case study is a preferred analytic mode.¹⁵ They emphasize the relationship between rhetorical practice and culture, the ways that human beings use symbols to create, maintain, and challenge beliefs about individual and group identity.¹⁶ These books are concerned with "publics," but they may be diverse national publics constituted through media technologies or small groups in antislavery meetings. These books are concerned with that which is "addressed," but this address may have overtly persuasive purposes in a legislative forum or it may be experienced by participants as popular entertainment. These books exhibit similarities, but if they were not connected by the rhetorical claim of the Nichols Award, their differences, for most audiences, would overshadow their resemblances. Indeed, the Library of Congress places the eight twenty-first-century Nichols books in seven different organizing classifications.¹⁷ Not only are these books not side by side on library shelves, but in larger libraries they are located on different floors.

Still, these books share a heritage, one that is well illustrated by an example from Parry-Giles's work, which mentions an allegation connecting Thurgood Marshall with communism. Parry-Giles writes that the allegation "was insignificant to the outcome of the nomination debate but ideologically important for what it expressed about the tensions over civil rights in the late 1960s."¹⁸ This passage typifies key attributes of current public address scholarship: effects are not the only story, and scholars see significance crystallized in features that others might ignore. In that spirit, I will close by recalling a 1943 *Quarterly Journal of Speech* essay by Bower Aly of the University of Missouri. Aly did not foresee the expansion of the objects of public address scholarship beyond orations, but he did recommend broadening research questions, to consider institutions, regions, periods, social movements, customs and manners, war and peace, immigration, races, sex, iconography, rhetorical theory, and so on.¹⁹ Although Aly's essay seems not to have had discernible effects on the field of his time, it is now possible to suggest that his vision of expanded inquiry was a dream deferred. Sixty-four years later, we—all of us, not only the Nichols Award recipients—are defining public address, as we, as one and as many, "stay our home ground," as we argue, wonder, and learn from each other.

Notes

¹ The Public Address Division's Web site indicates that the Nichols Award honors "outstanding published scholarship in public address"; National Communication Association, Public Address Division, "Call for Nominations: Marie Hochmuth Nichols Award," <http://www.ncapublicaddress.org/Call%20for%20Nom--Nichols%20Award%2007-1.pdf>, accessed October 29, 2007.

² For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to follow the popular assumption that the twenty-first century began on January 1, 2000, rather than to accept the numerical logic that identifies the first day of the new century as January 1, 2001. Since the title of the 2000 Nichols Award winner is *Vernacular Voices*, this seems an appropriate choice.

³ *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, 3 vols., vols. 1–2 edited by William Norwood Brigrance, vol. 3 edited by Marie Hochmuth (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1943–55). The organization was called the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking from 1914 to 1923, the National Association of Teachers of Speech from 1923 to 1945, the Speech Association of America from 1945 to 1970, and the Speech Communication Association from 1970 to 1997. It has been the National Communication Association since 1997. On the name change in 1945, see "Minutes of the Thirtieth Annual Conference, National Association of Teachers of Speech, Columbus, Ohio, December 26–29, 1945," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 32, no. 2 (1946): 245–52, esp. 249.

⁴ Stephen E. Lucas, "The Renaissance of American Public Address: Text and Context in Rhetorical Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74, no. 2 (1988): 241–60.

⁵ Lucas, "Renaissance"; Martin J. Medhurst, ed., *Landmark Essays on American Public Address* (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1993), intro.

⁶ Charles E. Morris III, ed., *Queering Public Address: Sexualities in American Historical Discourse* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 4, 5.

⁷ Other defining mechanisms include the National Communication Association's Winans-Wichelns Award and Michigan State University Press's Kohrs-Campbell Prize in Rhetorical Criticism; book series at such university presses as Alabama, Baylor, Michigan State, South Carolina, the State University of New York, and Texas A&M; and journals such as the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* and *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*. Less formal definitional mechanisms also prove to be salient. Individuals are sometimes defined as public address scholars based on the identity of their graduate advisors, perceptions about their graduate education, or their friendship groups within the communication discipline.

⁸ Gerard A. Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1999); Michael J. Hyde, *The Call to Conscience: Heidegger and Levinas, Rhetoric and the Euthanasia Debate* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); Davis W. Houck, *Rhetoric as Currency: Hoover, Roosevelt, and the Great Depression* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001); Kirt H. Wilson, *The Reconstruction Desegregation Debate: The Politics of Equality and the Rhetoric of Place, 1870–1875* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002); Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Lester C. Olson, *Benjamin Franklin's Vision of American Community: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004); Angela G. Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005); Trevor Parry-Giles, *The Character of Justice: Rhetoric, Law, and Politics in the Supreme Court Confirmation Process* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2006).

⁹ Wilson's index includes this entry: "Public address criticism. See rhetorical criticism." Wilson, *Reconstruction Desegregation Debate*, 273.

¹⁰ Hauser, *Vernacular Voices*, 35–36; Houck, *Rhetoric as Currency*, 10–11; Wilson, *Reconstruction Desegregation Debate*, xv.

¹¹ Efforts to promote public address scholarship on international and transnational topics are under way, as evidenced by discussion at the Public Address Division business meeting in San Antonio on November 18, 2006, and by conference panels such as "Transnational Exigencies: Public Address across Borders" at the 2007 National Communication Association convention, which featured papers by Jennifer Biedendorf, Paul Hendrickson, Rana T. Hussein, and Jiyeon Kang.

¹² Olson, *Benjamin Franklin's Vision*, 17.

¹³ Parry-Giles, *Character of Justice*, 3.

¹⁴ The “We Are One” motif is explicated in Olson, *Benjamin Franklin’s Vision*, chap. 5.

¹⁵ Notably, however, Hyde’s *Call of Conscience* combines a philosophical framework with rhetorical analysis of discursive moments, connected through personal narrative.

¹⁶ This characterization is borrowed from James Boyd White, via Ray, *Lyceum and Public Culture*, 2.

¹⁷ The Library of Congress classifies Hauser’s book under *P*, “Language and Literature”; Hyde’s under *B*, “Philosophy, Psychology, Religion”; Houck’s under *J*, “Political Science”; Wilson’s and Olson’s under *E*, “History of the Americas”; Zaeske’s under *H*, “Social Sciences”; Ray’s under *L*, “Education”; and Parry-Giles’s under *K*, “Law.”

¹⁸ Parry-Giles, *Character of Justice*, 80.

¹⁹ Bower Aly, “The History of American Public Address as a Research Field,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 29, no. 3 (1943): 308–14. Aly was a member of the committee of the National Association of Teachers of Speech and then the Speech Association of America that oversaw the production of *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*.