
Reviewed by Diana Yıldız, Georgia State University

A guidepost at the intersection of sociology, political science, communication studies, and rhetoric and composition, Active Voices: Composing a Rhetoric of Social Movements purports to redefine the scholarship of social movements. In their introductory essay, editors Sharon McKenzie Stevens and Patricia Malesh provide a view of the intellectual zeitgeist of social movement studies in the U.S., a milieu complicated by a blurring of the demarcations between private and public spheres. To illustrate this blurring, Stevens and Malesh cite the mining of user profiles by Internet companies, the imprisonment of journalists for insisting upon the anonymity of their sources, the warrantless wiretapping instituted by the Bush administration, and the surveillance of domestic advocacy groups. Once the disenfranchised made what was private public in order to shed light on wrongs, but no longer, the editors contend. Rather, dominant institutions of American society have broken down and redefined the privacy of no-longer private citizens.

Responding to this sea change in public discourse, the editors seek to distinguish their volume by resituating rhetoric, particularly in regard to social change, as “the study of who is trying to do what to whom, with particular emphasis on how and why they are doing it” (7). Absent from this nebulous, unsettling definition is any reference to language, image, or other form of communication. This definition portrays merely the agonistic nature of rhetoric, including no acknowledgement of how rhetoric can and does effect positive social changes.

Despite this problematic theoretical underpinning, the editors provide a useful overview of trends in social movement theories, noting these stages of focus: collective behavior or structural strain, resource mobilization paradigm, framing processes, and new social movement studies (NSMs). Although social movement research traditionally has been performed by sociologists and scholars in Communication Studies, Stevens and Malesh champion rhetoricians as being especially well-suited to the “meta-inquiry” of social movement studies, particularly since it is “grounded in persuasion, discourse, and interaction” (11). Furthermore, through their pedagogical focus, Composition scholars can enact civic praxis because the classroom “embodies the dialectical relationship between theory and practice—theory informs practice, practice restructures theory, and theory crafts future” (15). Even though the studies within the book
are primarily inductive, the book itself has a deductive structure, beginning with theories and ending with specific pedagogies.

Part I of *Active Voices*, “A New Rhetoric for Social Change: Theories,” contains two essays. In “Vernacular Rhetoric and Social Movements: Performances of Resistance in the Rhetoric of the Everyday,” Gerard Hauser and Erin Daina McCellan propose that social movement studies should focus less on charismatic leaders and more on rank-and-file members. To this end, the authors use Hauser’s term vernacular rhetoric, which they explain exemplifies Kenneth Burke’s consideration of all of human symbolic action as rhetorical. Forms of vernacular rhetoric include letters to the editor, graffiti, music, and bodily displays, eliding the line between discursive and nondiscursive practices. Hauser and McCellan’s essay proves to be one of the best-researched and most engaging pieces in the volume.

The next essay, “Dreaming to Change Our Situation: Reconfiguring the Exigence for Student Writing,” by Sharon McKenzie Stevens, is comparatively slight. Stevens outlines theories about the rhetorical situation by figures such as Lloyd Bitzer, Barbara Biesecker, and Jenny Edbauer, ultimately privileging Kenneth Burke’s notion of identification to best explain how teachers and scholars can expand Bitzer’s restrictive view of audience. Stevens concludes that teachers can help students break down the dichotomy of public and private by composing texts for an audience beyond the classroom (60). The most useful part of her essay is an analysis of several college writing handbooks, some of which equate the modes of discourse with “writing situations” (49-50). Another practical aspect provides a rough course outline exemplifying the principles of expansion Stevens promotes (60-63).

Part II of *Active Voices*, “Public Rhetorics: Analyses,” contains rhetorical analyses of social movement texts. Moira K. Amado-Miller writes “Disorderly Women: Appropriating the Power Tools in Civic Discourses” to examine how feminists in the suffrage movement employed subversive uses of the classical rhetorical trope of *antistréphon*. Focusing on education as another arena of extensive social change, Brian Jackson and Thomas P. Miller trace the cause of the Progressive Education Association’s failure. In “The Progressive Education Movement: A Case Study in Coalition Politics,” Jackson and Miller explain that the PEA, which championed the theories of John Dewey, privileged the views of scientifically trained professionals in higher education at the cost of giving a voice to the emerging professional educators in public schools (95). Jackson and Miller’s argument speaks to Hauser and McCellan’s promotion of vernacular rhetoric. Thomas Rosteck performs an engaging analysis of C. Wright Mills’s use of the public letter in “Giving Voice to a Movement: Mills’s ‘Letter to the New Left’ and the Potential of History.” According to Rosteck, through tone and the use of first and second person pronouns, Mills creates two audiences: those in the nascent movement and those he wants to recruit into the movement. His clever use of the public letter, a liminal space between
public and private, also allows him to create a flexible persona for himself. In this assertion, Rosteck’s essay speaks to Stevens’s reinscribing of audience in the rhetorical situation. Patricia Malesh performs a readable analysis in “Sharing Our Recipes: Vegan Conversion Narratives as Social Praxis.” Drawing upon both narrative theory and social movement theory, Malesh identifies a rhetorical turn in ethos embodies in these tales: the narrator, once a mentee, becomes through the telling, a mentor for the audience. Her essay speaks to Amado-Miller’s explication of how narratives shift power dynamics for the rhetor.

In Part III, “Changing Spaces for Learning: Actions,” the focus of Active Voices turns to classroom practice and praxis. David Coogan’s “Moving Students into Social Movements: Prison Reentry and the Research Paper” narrates the intellectual and emotional changes evident in his students resulting from their interaction with released prisoners trying to create a life outside bars. Throughout this essay is a subtle yet powerful argument for reexamining the perceptions and rhetoric surrounding prisoner rehabilitation. “Engaging Globalization through Local Community Activism: A Model for Activist Pedagogical Practice” by Anne Marie Todd demonstrates how teaching community activism engages students: “Through participant observation of an activist group, students gain insight into the notion of civic responsibility from being themselves politically engaged” (175). While this statement may not seem profound, Todd nonetheless calls needed attention to an overlooked aspect of pedagogy: service learning. The final essay of this section, “Creating Space for Community: Radical Identities and Collective Praxis,” shows the ways in which performative rhetoric can reify the material rhetoric that is often invisible to students. Mary Ann Cain describes a performance by the Three Rivers Jenbé Ensemble as embodying a “third space” in which discursive (symbolic) and extradiscursive (material) aspects of language and rhetoric can exist in harmony. She contrasts this “habitable space” with the “transient space” that represents the typical college classroom, but she does not offer a practical way to incorporate this performative/material rhetoric into pedagogy, a crucial weakness in an otherwise sound and well-researched piece.

In a response essay concluding the volume, William DeGenaro echoes the importance of rejecting the “cultural-material binary,” a prevalent theme in this anthology (203-04). He makes several salient and insightful points in “Politics, Class and Social Movement People: Continuing the Conversation.” Fellow scholars, he urges, must forget neither the human face of social movements nor the necessary methods of ethnography and archival research that constitute ways to unearth the contributions of often-forgotten people. DeGenaro emphasizes that the shift in notions of public and private represents an integral part of social movements, which are increasingly characterized by their followers’ identities. More significantly, DeGenaro observes that social movements are not just about identity, but have been also typically stratified by class, a marker that needs careful study due to “our current moment of
transition” (204). In this transition, he explains, fiscally conservative elites have joined forces with socially conservative working-class people to form new movements on the political Right. The radical rhetoric of fundamentalist Christians and neoconservatives as well as the “curmudgeonly” rhetoric of liberals trying to protect entitlement programs have been neglected by largely progressive scholars of rhetoric, and DeGenaro justifiably points out this gaping hole in our field (201-03). DeGenaro posits the best ways to meet these new developments are rooted in creativity and coalition building, and we should rejoice that social movement scholarship is thriving.

DeGenaro’s reflection on Active Voices honors the power of social movements and those who study them in effecting social change. Scholars and teachers of Composition and Rhetoric should read this book, certainly, but so too should Communication Studies scholars and teachers, as well as those in Anthropology, Sociology, and Political Science. The intersection of social movements and rhetoric encompasses not only the humanities and the social sciences, but also nearly every facet of academic and personal life.

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What does writing in the 21st century look like? We know that it is often project-based. It includes blogs, digital books, podcasts, and hybrid compositions. It is collaboratively conceived and generated. Questions remain, however, about how classroom teachers implement and assess these multimodal texts. Teaching the New Writing: Technology, Change, and Assessment in the 21st Century Classroom attempts answers. With twelve chapters that provide three or four examples from each level, Teaching the New Writing captures the intersection of school-sponsored literacy practices and state-sponsored literacy assessments, providing an overview of many ways in which writing, technologies, and assessment practices come together in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary classrooms across the country. In the early 1990s, Charles Moran, one of the editors of Teaching the New Writing, argued that