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Communication’s quest for whiteness: the racial politics of disciplinary legitimacy

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ABSTRACT
This essay examines communication’s historical anxieties regarding disciplinary legitimacy as an investment in whiteness. We argue that such anxieties are predicated upon a normative ideal of citizenship. As such, rhetorics of disciplinary legitimacy enact white civil society’s originary exclusion, which is antiblackness. To illuminate the ways antiblackness finds expression in these anxieties, we engage the field’s lengthy archive of public musings regarding legitimacy to trace the rhetorical workings of antiblackness therein.

Our field’s inheritance is existential dread. Communication studies is the progeny of disaffected public speaking and elocution teachers in the US yearning for legitimacy under the crushing dismissals of snooty English professors. As a discipline with no stable object and applicability to virtually all domains of human behavior, scholars of communication and its various areas of inquiry frequently wonder aloud if a field that claims to study everything can plausibly claim to study anything at all. Beyond the specificities of disciplinary anxieties, communication also shares with other fields in the humanities and social sciences a precarious place in the neoliberal university. Thus, communication’s survival is never guaranteed, and this lack of assured continuity positions the discipline perpetually on the defensive and seeking to account for its legitimacy.

This state of anxiety and yearning for survival invest in the norms of citizenship and, therefore, enact a logic of antiblackness. In her contribution to the centennial issue of the Quarterly Journal of Speech, Karma Chávez argues that the centrality of citizenship as a grounding normative thematic in communication studies invests in civic orthodoxies that exclude non-normative bodies. Chávez and other scholars in communication and cognate fields have illustrated the ways citizenship functions as an especially violent instrumentality whose universalizing claims engage in a politics of disposability. Amy Brandzel writes that citizenship is “an internal and external system of sorting, distributing, and assigning rights, resources, and social value.” She adds, “It is not only normative and regulative of those inside and outside of its purview, but it is a violent dehumanizing mechanism that makes the devaluing of human lives seem commonsensical, logical, and even necessary.”

In this essay, we argue that communication’s longstanding desire for legitimacy is predicated on such mechanisms of citizenship and therefore invests in white civil society’s originary exclusion, i.e., antiblackness. To seek disciplinary legitimacy is to desire whiteness and,
therefore, to disavow Blackness. As we demonstrate below, the history of our field has been one of chasing legitimacy among other, better-established fields. In giving chase to the normative but counterfactual object of legitimacy, the field repetitiously jettisons Blackness.

The antiblack logics of disciplinary citizenship

Notions of citizenship cannot help but leave certain bodies for dead because they are rooted in a founding exclusion. Indeed, Alexander Weheliye argues that the very notion of the human is predicated upon antiblackness, meaning that Black bodies are always-already nonhuman or, as Armond Towns writes, mere matter. Those bodies are either Black or blackened. Frank B. Wilderson III contends that the Black subject is always-already dead within the norms of citizenship. This death is solely because, within norms of citizenship, “violence against Black people is ontological and gratuitous as opposed to merely ideological and contingent.” Hegemonic ideals of Western citizenship are unimaginable without antiblack violence. Writes Wilderson, “No slave, no world.” Therefore, the Black subject does not and cannot register as a citizen. This is not to suggest that contemporary rhetorics of citizenship speak in explicit grammars of Blackness. Rather, Wilderson claims, antiblackness is immanent to civil society and is therefore woven into the myriad practices that comprise hegemonic norms of citizenship. Anti-blackness and the whiteness it helps naturalize is a condition whose name need not be spoken.

Several communication scholars have engaged with and critiqued the discipline’s preoccupation with citizenship. But in addition to promoting citizenship as an ethical telos for scholarship, pedagogy, and service, communication enacts its own logic of citizenship. Describing the origins of the field, Kirt Wilson writes, “teachers of speech were treated as second-class citizens by their English counterparts who preferred the study of composition, classical theory, and literature.” He explains that disciplines “take extraordinary steps” to constitute a coherent citizen-subject and, in so doing, demarcate borders of belonging. Prior to establishing what would become communication studies as a discipline, speech scholars experienced the status of excluded subjects. The very identity that their English colleagues constituted rested on designating speech professors as “second-class citizens.” As speech acquired its own status as an autonomous discipline, such border rhetorics continued as they demarcated the parameters of who was (and was not) a communication scholar.

Central to producing the norms of disciplinary citizenship and sovereignty are the logics of whiteness and antiblackness. Responding to Wilson’s conceptualization of communication as comprising a normative mode of citizenship, Eric King Watts argues that such constituting practices are unavoidably racialized. Drawing on the work of Afro-Pessimists such as Wilderson, Watts writes that “the manner in which claims of belonging to and eviction from national dwelling places can be historically coordinated with this nation’s emergent racial imaginaries.” Because disciplinary histories are unavoidably entrenched in national histories, they cannot help but enact the nation’s racial logics. For this reason, Watts argues that the communication discipline “has been and is subject to being ‘blackened’” by other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Blackness is the originary exclusion constitutive of US civil society and citizenship, and therefore of disciplines such as communication.
toward the horrible condition approximating (but not identical to) the black’s structural position.” Whereas Wilson argues that communication enacts its own nationalism in constituting itself as a sovereign field, it does not do so in ways analogous to Black or other radical diasporic nationalisms. Rather, yearning for legitimacy and seeking to constitute a disciplinary identity that possesses its own internal coherence and can dialogue on equal terms with other fields is to engage in a *whitening* of the field. As it seeks to center itself and move from the margins, communication performs antiblackness.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe contemporary Western higher education as immanently interwoven with the broader state apparatus. For them, the modern university advances a managerial logic whose telos is professionalization. Even the critical academic is complicit in such a project. Harney and Moten write that “certainly, critical academic professionals tend to be regarded today as harmless intellectuals, malleable, perhaps capable of some modest intervention in the so-called public sphere.” It is the critical intellectual’s fidelity to the Enlightenment concept of the public sphere that seals their entrenchment within the university. Thus, Harney and Moten call on subversive intellectuals to “be in but not of” the university. To be anything else is to subordinate criticality to contemporary higher education’s Enlightenment project.

The history of communication studies is one of seeking identification with the university writ large—a desire to be taken seriously within the humanities and social sciences. Such anxieties betray an investment in and strategic pursuit of whiteness. For this reason, even attempts within communication to amplify historically marginalized voices on the pages of journals and monographs, as well as within classroom or leadership positions, reify “regimes of knowing that risk totalizing a field through a zero-point epistemology rooted in a logic of universality.” The proliferation of racialized and otherwise marked bodies appearing in our journals and other salient outlets is not in itself a measure that confronts the whiteness of communication. As long as legitimacy underwrites what the field characterizes as “progress,” even the most seemingly cosmopolitan reforms will prefigure “a logic of universality” predicated upon whiteness. And such logic renders whiteness invisible, even as it finds expression through what appear to be perfectly benign rhetorics of disciplinary legitimacy.

**Communicating legitimacy**

Up until this point, we have joined others in contending that citizenship functions as a particularly violent instrumentality that engages in a politics of disposability invested in antiblackness. We have also suggested that disciplinary discourses that yearn for the legitimacy of communication studies within the broader registers of Western academic publics enact *whitening*. In this section, we offer several examples of how communication studies articulates itself into norms of disciplinary citizenship to elucidate how whitening happens. Specifically, we center disciplinary discourses of status and coherence.

**Status**

Attribution and negotiation of *status* are primary means through which disciplinary legitimacy is constituted. Robert Hariman explores the various ways that genres of discourses often articulate an attribution of status. He writes:
Status is the determination by one’s associates of one’s worth relative to their worth, and includes one’s rank, reputation, respect, esteem, prestige, or place. The attribution of status to genre is a device for establishing the privileges—and powers—of those discourses in the verbal sciences.24

The communicative attribution of status is a series of rhetorical moves that negotiates the relative worth or rank of communication studies. Scholarly conversations often weigh the status of communication studies in relation to other disciplines or articulate the unique value of communication studies in the broader public sphere. One need not venture into the annals of journals to observe such practices at work. Instead, just open an issue of Spectra or peruse the social media accounts of the National Communication Association to stumble upon narratives that emphasize our legitimacy and value. One might also notice the ubiquitous poster circulated by communication studies departments that famously notes, “What can you do with a degree in communication studies?” Or one might hear a colleague espouse the oft repeated fact that “communication is the number one skill employers seek in employees!” While banal—and certainly part of broader constraints within the neoliberal university that require departments to participate in marketing schemes as a means of survival—such everyday performances of legitimation speak to a broader anxiety about our precarity as a presumably marginalized or subordinated discipline that is misunderstood, undervalued, and unknown.

In her call for submissions at the beginning of her editorship at Communication Monographs, Tamara Affifi extrapolates the need to be taken up by other disciplines and also our unique value.25 Such conversations also seem to focus on arguing that our research has yet to matter, or has not made as significant of an impact as it should in the wider public sphere.26 In his debate-inspiring essay in Communication Monographs that examines the state of communication theories, Charles R. Berger argues that “the field of communication has been suffering and continues to suffer from an intellectual trade deficit with respect to related disciplines; the field imports much more than it exports.”27 He goes on:

I believe that the future growth and well-being of the field depend upon the ability of communication researchers to advance ideas and theories that are taken seriously by colleagues in related disciplines. Such developments not only ensure the crucial support of colleagues from other disciplines that is vital for continued development of the field, they also have favorable effects on the self-esteem levels of the inhabitants of our field, which at times tend to be unjustifiably low.28

These conversations reflect the anxieties that circulate about the field’s relationship to disciplines such as English, political science, sociology, or psychology—disciplines that lay claim to legitimacy and ignore communication. Feeling blackened, our field pursues whiteness’s legitimizing embrace.

The attribution of status to the field in relation to other disciplines is also clearly observable in debates regarding “Big Rhetoric.” Big Rhetoric, as Schiappa notes, is “the theoretical position that everything, or virtually everything, can be described as ‘rhetorical.’”29 As rhetorical scholarship expanded from solely examining public address to critiquing multitudes of discourses, many scholars in rhetoric began trumpeting the field’s universality. Debates about Big Rhetoric have centered on the purpose, size, disunity, and future of rhetorical inquiry.30 These scholarly conversations are ultimately citizenship rhetorics characterized by appeals to disciplinary legitimacy and belonging.
Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar wrote that the obsession with the supplementary status of rhetoric to other disciplines is characterized by a kind of double movement that “regulates, shapes, and determines the self-image of rhetoric.” He writes:

The double movement simultaneously propels rhetoric on a vertical axis downward into its past to find itself a suitable history and on a horizontal axis sideways to situate itself within the discursive practices of special “substantive” sciences, especially the human sciences. Rhetoric moves diachronically to discover itself an alternative historical tradition that will free it from its supplementary status, and it moves synchronically to find itself in the discursive body (textuality) of other disciplines that will confirm its “presence.”

In other words, rhetorical inquiry is obsessed with no longer being subordinate or supplementary, but also simultaneously seeks confirmation of legitimacy from the very disciplines to which we feel subordinate within the Western academic public sphere. The field wishes to disavow its Blackness but can only lay claim to whiteness if already-whitened fields sanction its membership. James Arnt Aune argues that “the politics of rhetorical studies in its modern and postmodern forms takes place in a mood of mourning” for, essentially, its classical status as the discipline “in the Athenian polis.” Never-ending performances of self-measurement have become, therefore, commonplace in rhetorical studies and are rooted in a phallocentric ideology that relies on discriminatory marking of “insiders and outsiders.” By marking what is rhetoric, we also mark what it is not.

In seeking to reclaim rhetoric’s rightful place atop the Western intellectual hierarchy, scholars in the field must determine who we leave behind. The ongoing drama of our perceived inclusion or exclusion is an example of pleas for citizenship that are enacted through attributions of status that, at their core, enact a politics of disposability. These are emblematic performatives of communication studies’ desire for whiteness.

**Coherence**

The relatively large breadth of communication research has been heralded both as its primary strength and as a kind of identity crisis that needs resolution if we are to survive the impending guillotine. The Big Rhetoric debates were certainly characterized by many as a kind of identity crisis, but such questioning of our identity is not limited to rhetorical studies. Kory Floyd argues that interpersonal communication is suffering from a similar identity crisis. The problem, Floyd articulates, is not one of defining what interpersonal is, but what it is not.

In their extensive history of the discipline and the National Communication Association, Pat J. Gerhke and William M. Keith contend that “unity” and “diversity” are two dialectical poles through which the communication discipline has historically negotiated itself. Gerhke and Keith note:

Unity represents the pull toward commonality of ideas, practices, politics, and institutions, whereas diversity represents the pull toward inclusion of difference of ideas, practices, politics, and institutions. Excessive unity can breed exclusion and control; diversity can beget fragmentation and incoherence. The critical point of tension for the association and the discipline has been between narrow, solid, well-defined, coherent research and efficiency versus a broad membership, intellectual cross-pollination, inclusiveness, and democratization.

The narrative of unity versus diversity in the discipline and subdisciplines conflates unity with cohesion, or diversity with incoherence. The ongoing preoccupation with the
constitution of a disciplinary identity that possesses an internal coherence or unity, we argue, is key to broader claims for legitimate citizenry. Gestures for unification, codification, and coherence are a discursive practice which is characteristic of whitening practices of legitimation. Speech acts that seek to contain, control, or redirect the perceived disunity of the discipline or that attempt to “recuperate” speech communication by performing constantative histories of the discipline reveal how communication studies scholars are reckoning with our perceived subordinate citizenship status within the Western academic public.39

William Eadie similarly contends that the communication discipline has suffered because of a lack of a unified story.40 He explains that

we have made enormous progress as a discipline since the 1980s, and by appreciating the stories that formed us, I expect that we will, eventually, have a clear and coherent identity, both within the academy and in the public sphere.41

Eadie makes a call for a unified conception of our fragmented history in order to establish and maintain the relevance of communication studies and to highlight our legitimacy and importance to other disciplines. James Arnt Aune argues that the only way to survive our impending eradication of the discipline is for rhetoricians to stop “bickering” by developing a coherence.42 He writes:

Our lost object, the presence of rhetoric at the summit of the humanities, may well be buried forever, in Proust’s image, in some lost object on a forgotten library shelf. But if we could develop a core set of messages to promote in unison, to avoid the kind of bickering that destroys fields and departments, and remain committed to the humble work of teaching speaking and writing, we will continue to do something of value. Remember: Stay on Message, In Your Face, Protect Your Base.43

The persistent chorus that implies that we must do this to save ourselves is part of broader universalizing impulses that whiten. The production of linear intellectual histories with “unified” messages often works to marginalize scholarship that does not reflect that image.44 Euro- and US-centric academic disciplines, including communication, were built around a presumed white, Western, cis, heterosexual, male subject.45 Gust Yep writes that “whiteness was, and continues to be, the standard, the ideal, and the norm in communication theory, research, and pedagogy.”46 Often, whiteness functions as a strategic rhetoric here that both conceals itself and perpetually works to center itself. Moves to create coherence and unity often affirm the knowledge and practices of the white majority while devaluing subjugated knowledges. Yep continues:

The hegemony of whiteness contains and devalues communication patterns and practices of the racially marked … producing “subjugated knowledges,” which according to Foucault, refers “to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity.”47

The turn towards coherence that led to critical, interpretive, and critical/cultural work is somehow less valuable if it does not engage in practices of generalizability, empiricism, or biology.48 Such conversations often return to desires to create communication-based theories in more systematic ways as other disciplines do.49 The ongoing and never-ending debate between social scientific, behavioralist, and rhetorical or interpretive scholarship has been a primary feature of the various origin stories of communication studies.50
In a 1980 essay in Communication Education, Robert P. McClure suggests that the discipline of speech communication is too divided between those who do “scientific” analysis of observed human communication behaviors and those who perform rhetorical criticism of the “art” of rhetoric. Roderick P. Hart takes more of a scientific approach to the generalizability of rhetorical criticism, arguing that it should offer broad insights about human persuasive practices. Hart claims the role of the critic is to “gather facts,” and he views individual texts as less important than the generalizable practices we can identify across many texts. Celeste Michelle Condit argues in her 2004 Carroll Arnold Lecture at the National Communication Association Conference that humanistic scholars need to shift to studying biology in order to keep bio-humanistic study from writing us out of existence. Academic norms of scholarship—built on the presumption of “neutral” white academic subjectivity—often encourage generalizability and the performance of the ideal of objectivity as mechanisms of securing whiteness. Decolonial and postcolonial scholars in the field of communication studies have articulated that normative Western academic practice, methodologies, and epistemologies are inextricably bound to the project of colonization. Indeed, the rhetorical project of legitimation is one of assimilation—akin to a paradigm of citizenship of intellectual worlds where the communication discipline seeks relevance and belonging within the systems of white meritocracy and academic citizenry.

### Holding ourselves accountable

In the foregoing, we have argued that communication studies, when its practices are contextualized through the paradigm of disciplinary citizenship, suffers from an insidious impulse to whiten itself in order to gain recognition from and parity with other more established disciplines and, in so doing, legitimize the field. Put differently, our disciplinary practices engage in normative modes of civic belonging that demarcate who/what belongs and does not belong in ways that work to center whiteness. In this way, our discipline has been from its founding complicit in a logic of antiblackness.

Our identity as a discipline lies in the very truth we wish to jettison: our field’s theoretical and methodological plurality, promiscuity, and fragmentation. Rather than reject this disciplinary truth in an effort to show ourselves worthy, we must instead hold ourselves accountable to that history—and accountable in ways that speak not only to our unique contributions in the academy and public sphere, but also in ways that recognize and honor the variety of perspectives that have been traditionally ignored. Only in our rejection of the impulses to whiten do we reach a legitimacy worth striving for.

### Notes

2. Karma R. Chávez, “Beyond Inclusion: Rethinking Rhetoric’s Historical Narrative,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 101, no. 1 (2015): 162–72. While Chávez directs her essay toward a rhetorical studies audience, we include her in a broader scholarly conversation housed primarily in communication studies. For more on the centrality of citizenship to rhetorical studies in/and communication studies, see Pat J. Gehrke, The Ethics and Politics of Speech: Communication


18. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013).

19. Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 32.


42. Aune, “The Politics of Rhetorical Studies.” 74.
45. See Maria Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2003), 70; Chela Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2000), 69–70.
54. Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*.

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