

Critical Rhetoric, Relationality, and Temporality: A Case for Forgiveness

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In this article, I consider the future of critical rhetoric, the responsibilities of the critic, and postcriticism tasks. I first describe the relationality and temporality of doing critical rhetoric. I then discuss how the concept of forgiveness is a relevant concept for critical rhetoric. I conclude with two examples that illustrate my use of critical rhetoric, relationality, temporality, and forgiveness.

Keywords: critical rhetoric, relationality, temporality, forgiveness, sexuality

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Critical rhetoricians call attention to discourse that promotes injustice and inequity, challenge oppressive beliefs and practices, discern messages and meanings that should—and should not—exist, and identify “power as it is manifest across a variety of social practices” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 97). Critical rhetoricians do so to improve living conditions, promote techniques for resistance and transformation, offer visions of emancipation, and “constantly challenge the status quo to be other than it is” (McKerrow, 1991, p. 75). Thus, in essence, critical rhetoricians identify and challenge harmful messages and acts, provide strategies for curtailing (ab)uses of power, and promote ways to create and maintain just discourse.

Yet harmful messages and acts do not happen absent humans; people create discourse, practice power, and perpetuate injustice. As such, when I think about critical rhetoric, particularly the responsibilities of the critic, how and when criticism begins and ends, and what it means to embrace a critical orientation in research, I have two primary considerations: relationality and temporality.

First, relationality: Doing critical rhetoric means focusing on harmful discourse as well as the agents who create and perpetuate the discourse, the persons implicated by this discourse, and how the implicated persons relate to the agents. Discourse is embodied and enacted, and when, as critical rhetoricians, we identify harm, we also identify and implicate harm-doers.² Consequently, doing critical rhetoric means making criticism relational.

Second, temporality: If critical rhetoricians identify harmful discourse, I assume their intent is to change the (present) discourse to amend (past) and improve (future) discourse. I assume there is a need to contextualize the harmful discourse as well: What might have been an innocuous message in the past might become offensive in the future (e.g., now-controversial monuments; tarnished figures whose names appear on streets, parks, and buildings; words and acts that might have once been customary, but later understood as intolerable—an exercise in hermeneutics). Further, if criticism is relational, then I, as the critic, should consider how to hold agents accountable for their (past) harmful discourse, how the persons implicated by the discourse (presently) live with the agents, and how the material, emotional, and psychical effects of the discourse can exist across the life span—for both the agents and the persons implicated by the agents’ discourse.³

² “The ‘denial’ of an agent as productive of contingently derived social practices does not rule out the present role of persons as active participants in ‘revolt’ against the present dangers. Otherwise, there is no point in positing the possibilities of freedom” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 99). McKerrow (1989) also notes, “The task of a critical rhetoric is to undermine and expose the discourse of power in order to thwart its effects in a social relation” (p. 98). Critical-rhetorical ethnographers (Dunn, 2016; Hess, 2011) and participatory critical rhetoricians (Middleton, Hess, Endres, & Senda-Cook, 2015) also emphasize the relationality of criticism by showing how texts can be “embedded in social practices, performances, and material contexts” (p. 15) and “imbricated within bodies, places, and the stakes of immanent political struggle” (p. 19).

³ About critical rhetoric and temporality, McKerrow (1991) writes, “There is an ever-present tension between one’s life at a moment in time, with a set of power relations relatively intact, and the possibility of constant challenge which would revise that set. One takes a stand from where one is in the present, looking toward a future yet unrealized” (p. 76).

Thus, doing critical rhetoric means critiquing harmful discourse as well as demonstrating how temporality and relationality inform the task of criticism. More specifically, if I, as a critical rhetorician, identify and analyze harmful discourse, then I have a responsibility to offer insights about the harmful relational and temporal residues enacted by this discourse, which may require dealing with the agents who espoused injustice and hate. In practice, this means determining the following: What constitutes harmful discourse? How do we address the people who enact, and are implicated by, this discourse? How might we relate to an agent who has, in the past, promoted harmful discourse, but who is now perceived as just and fair? And how might we live with ourselves based on the offenses we too have committed? These questions demonstrate the need for critical rhetoricians to consider how the agents of harmful discourse, and those implicated by the discourse, can make amends for harm. One way to make amends is through the concept of forgiveness.

A Case for Forgiveness

When I consider the essence of critical rhetoric—to identify and challenge harmful messages and acts, provide strategies for curtailing (ab)uses of power, and promote ways to create and maintain just discourse—I simultaneously consider ways to address the material, emotional, and psychological residue of offensive discourse. Thus, I approach critical rhetoric from a postcriticism perspective—the other side of critique—to consider how to address the harms of discourse and how to live with the agents who perpetuated these harms—doing so with the aim of promoting social change and just futures. One way I do so is through the concept of forgiveness—a concept that, like critical rhetoric, is inherently temporal and relational.

The concept of forgiveness is premised upon three conditions: (1) an offense occurs; (2) there are agents, typically an offender(s) and a victim(s); and (3) there is a need to, or desire for, acknowledging and making amends for the offense. The severity of an offense can be extreme, such as with killing or sexual assault, but also mundane, such as when someone refuses to acknowledge another person, makes a disrespectful comment, or wishes that an offender will experience harm themselves—metaphorically, an eye for an eye. Sometimes an offense can be intentional, such as when someone assaults another person, uses a comment to shame others, or wishes someone ill will; and sometimes an offense can be unintentional, such as when a person is oblivious to the negative consequences of an action or fails to recognize the insulting connotations of a seemingly pleasant remark.

Forgiveness happens with “a change of heart, a shift in attitude, an alteration of an inner state” (Neu, 2011, p. 134); it occurs when a victim overcomes resentment and contempt toward an entity (ourselves included) for committing an offense (Hagberg, 2011). If a change of heart or shift in attitude does not happen, or should resentment and contempt exist, then forgiveness has not occurred. When forgiveness does occur, the offense is no longer the “most salient feature of the offender, just as our own victimhood” is no longer the “most salient feature of ourselves in our relation to the wrongdoer” (Gerrard & McNaughton, 2011, p. 99). With forgiveness, a person does not forget an offense, but rather develops a new relationship to the offense (e.g., recognizing cultural constraints that contributed to the offense; acknowledging their complicity or participation in the offense; believing others acted as best they could under given circumstances).

Forgiveness is important for three reasons. First, being able to forgive others, to overcome resentment and contempt, can improve our relationships; perpetually resenting an offender leaves little hope for collaboration, improved interaction, and social change or justice. Second, forgiveness can encourage us to consider the ways we too have committed offenses and recognize that “we may all need at times to be forgiven” (Neu, 2011, p. 136); as Gerrard and McNaughton (2011) write, even the “worst” humans are not “monsters”—“if they are monsters, then so too are we, at least potentially—there’s a recurring streak of evil in the human blueprint” (p. 103). Third, forgiveness can release the burden of a harmful past, as holding onto anxiety and pain can be exhausting and toxic. Although an offense itself may indeed feel severe, the burden of not forgiving can infuse us with hate, stress, and contempt.⁴

If a primary purpose of critical rhetoric is to identify offenses and discuss potential remedies for these offenses, then forgiveness is a key concept for critical rhetoricians: We have a responsibility to describe how to live with others who have committed, or who have been complicit in, creating and perpetuating harmful discourse. Yet forgiveness can be a complicated, unpredictable, and tension-filled process, especially for critical rhetoricians. For instance, who do we forgive, especially for discourse not created by one person, but that emerges from collectives/masses? Is forgiveness a self- or other-focused process—that is, do we have to tell offenders that we forgive them, or can we forgive offenders without their knowledge? And how do we acknowledge, accept responsibility for, and forgive ourselves if or when we too have supported harmful discourse? I am not suggesting that we must forgive others or ourselves for harmful discourse; my goal is to illustrate how or why forgiveness can be an important concept for critical rhetoricians, especially when thinking about the residue of discourse and the harms of the past.⁵

I next use autoethnography to show how relationality, temporality, and forgiveness influence my use of, and orientation to, critical rhetoric.⁶ In particular, I show how texts—and criticism of these texts—inform my experience and, postcriticism, how I think about forgiveness in relation to the agents of the (harmful) texts.

Critical Rhetoric in the Context of Sexuality

In my recent research (Adams, 2017b), I identify harmful discourse about (nonheterosexual) sexuality—from homophobic statements made in everyday contexts such as grocery stores and city streets, to those made by colleagues, coworkers, friends, and family members; I “attend to the ‘microphysics of

⁴ I have revised the paragraphs that define and describe the importance of forgiveness from my article, “Critical Autoethnography, Education, and a Call for Forgiveness” (Adams, 2017a, pp. 80–81).

⁵ Forgiveness is not the only concept critical rhetoricians can use to address an agent’s harmful discourse. Other concepts include apology, atonement, and reconciliation (see Hatch, 2006; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). However, forgiveness should not be conflated with these concepts. Apology and atonement are acts that can facilitate the forgiveness process, and reconciliation often requires making amends with an offender. Forgiveness does not require the presence of the other; I can forgive an offender—that is, overcome my resentment and contempt toward them—without them ever knowing.

⁶ For an insightful discussion of rhetorical criticism and autoethnography, see Dunn and Young (2017, pp. 132–154).

power” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 98) to call attention to the conditions that sustain such discourse, explain the erroneous and harmful assumptions of the discourse, and offer strategies for changing the discourse. Further, I illustrate how such discourse can motivate particular ideas about sexuality, which relationships matter, and how persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ)⁷ should be acknowledged in social life—in essence, how discourse can orient people toward some possibilities (e.g., heterosexuality, shame) and away from other possibilities (same-sex relationships, pride; see Ahmed, 2006).

Even though these tasks may satisfy my role as a critical rhetorician, I often feel as though something is absent from my critiques; new questions emerge, especially how I (and any person implicated by limiting and harmful discourse) should address the material, emotional, and psychical residue (e.g., shame, physical isolation) of the discourse, as well as relate to the agents of this discourse. Further, I fathom how I might re/act in the future should these people continue to perpetuate harm.

As one example, I offer an analysis of Shamla McLaurin’s five-page article, “Homophobia: An Autoethnographic Story,” which appeared in a 2003 issue of *The Qualitative Report*.⁸ I think about this article often—I respect its honesty, but, simultaneously, it sickens me. I also want to critique this article because to not critique it makes me feel like a bystander, complicit in advocating harmful research and erroneous assumptions about same-sex attraction.

In the article, McLaurin (2003) details her “biases and prejudices” against homosexuality—what she calls her “homophobia.” She identifies as a “recovering homophobe” and tries to navigate the racial, religious, and rural discourse she experienced as a child, especially discourse that framed homosexuality as an undesirable and unacceptable trait (p. 481). She describes learning that homosexuality was similar to “crack addiction or a demon possession” (p. 482) and feared associating with gays and lesbians “as if they possessed some sort of contagious disease” (p. 482). She describes befriending Jen, a lesbian, a relationship that encouraged her to question what she learned about the “unusual way of life” (p. 484). However, because of the relationship, others assumed McLaurin was also a lesbian, which made her feel like a “freak” (p. 484). McLaurin then describes speaking against homosexuality at “every opportunity” (p. 484). The article concludes with McLaurin claiming more acceptance of homosexuality, but still considering it “wrong” (p. 484); meeting Cindy, another lesbian, and trying to further remedy her homophobia; and how she may “never be able to understand homosexuality” and, consequently, may be a “recovering homophobe” for life. McLaurin even worries that someone might read the article and “mistake [her] for a closet homosexual” (p. 485).

⁷ I do not include trans (T) in my discussion as I connect T to experiences of sex and/or gender. Although LGBQ and T identities can experience similar stresses regarding sex and gender, T identities are not necessarily constituted by same-sex attraction—a person can identify as T and heterosexual, T and LGBQ. I hope my insights about same-sex attraction and relationships resonate with persons who identify as T, but I do not claim that they will or should.

⁸ Although I also include an analysis of McLaurin’s (2003) article in my chapter, “Supervising, Sharing, and Evaluating Autoethnography” (Adams, 2018, pp. 206–208), the chapter focuses on evaluating autoethnographic research, not critical rhetoric or forgiveness.

It stings when I read these statements in an academic article. It stings when I finish the article and do not sense much change in McLaurin's homophobia; based on my interpretation of her discourse, she has not demonstrated personal growth or provided much catharsis. Granted, I am not sure if homophobia can be easily remedied, but I do expect McLaurin to discuss how she has changed. Instead, I worry that McLaurin legitimates homophobia, suggesting that it will always exist and is difficult, even impossible, to remedy. I also leave the essay sensing that she does not care much for anyone who identifies as LGBTQ.

Further, I wonder if what McLaurin says about homosexuality would ever be said about other identities. I am not sure it would be acceptable to say a race is not "desirable or acceptable," calling a religion an "unusual way of life" or an "alternative lifestyle," referring to a disability as a "contagious disease," or suggesting that when a person reaches a certain age, they will become a "freak." As a critical scholar, I do my best to call attention to texts that espouse misogynistic, xenophobic, or ableist perspectives. I do not want to rank or compare prejudices, only offer a sense of why I expect more resolution from McLaurin's text. I might have a more tempered reaction if McLaurin published her views on a personal website or in an opinion/editorial forum, but I expect more rigorous analysis from a peer-reviewed article.

Notice I critique both McLaurin's discourse and McLaurin as a person. I do not want to meet her; her words scare me. I know too many people like her, and I do not need to meet another person who I must convince that I, as a queer man, am a decent person. Further, based on the biographical information included in the article, I assume McLaurin is working in marriage and family therapy, possibly even as a social worker or a therapist. However, after reading this article, I would never seek her out as a therapist, nor would I recommend her to LGBTQ persons—a decision about relationality based on her discourse.

Yet I applaud McLaurin for describing her homophobia. I try to respect (what I assume to be) her intentionality: She writes to explore, and encourage others to explore, "their own biases and prejudices" (p. 481). She offers a brave, vulnerable, and insider account of homophobia, shows how "prejudice can influence thought and behavior" (p. 485), and calls attention to her "close-mindedness." McLaurin also published the article in 2003; maybe her views have since changed—an inquiry regarding temporality.

I also think about my past when I too have been homophobic, and I hope that others would forgive my mistakes. Like McLaurin, I once thought gays and lesbians were disgusting; I have called others "faggots" and "queers"; and even when I began identifying as gay, I still judged others as being "too gay." I would distance myself from, and even deny, my same-sex relationships. Maybe my strong reaction illustrates the value of McLaurin's article; I cannot easily critique her without critiquing myself.

Maybe I am being unfair to McLaurin—I appreciate McLaurin's honesty, and I feel as though she should be able to share her story no matter how controversial or offensive it might be. Further, I wonder if, by evaluating this article, I am using my authority as a critic to discount her story/experience. As a critical rhetorician, I try to identify and remedy instances of oppression, yet McLaurin may not share such a goal for her research.

As another example, I think about the discourse of Timothy Sauppé, a Catholic priest at St. Mary's Church in Westville, Illinois, a small town (4,500 residents) next to my hometown of Danville, Illinois (30,000

residents). St. Mary's is one of three Catholic churches/schools in the Danville-Westville area. From age four until 14, I attended St. Paul's, one of the other churches/schools, but I had many friends who attended St. Mary's. St. Mary's and St. Paul's often provided students for Schlarman, my high school, the only Catholic high school in the area, and a school of about 150 students. As such, St. Mary's occupied a notable presence in my adolescence and education and, as of this writing, I still have many friends who attend the church.

On August 11, 2015, "in order to evangelize and to protect St. Mary's Catholic Church from future attack," Sauppé sent the following letter to Westville residents:

I am Fr. Sauppé, pastor of St Mary's Catholic Ch & the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! The US Supreme Court has issued a new "civil right" recognizing same-sexed "marriages." However, Justice Kennedy, writing for the 5-4 majority, also states that citizens & institutions holding religious and/or philosophical beliefs do not have to condone this new "civil right"; it seems this is also a Constitutional civil right not to condone! The Catholic Church does not condone for both religious & philosophical reasons. The Biblical condemnations are too many to list, but Romans 1 is based on the Natural Law i.e. two men or two women cannot produce, naturally, any children. We also hold that children have a natural right to a mother & a father at the same time (if at all possible) and are not to be used as pawns in the homosexual culture war. While we are all affected by Original Sin, the Grace of Jesus Christ can help anyone and everyone to live a holy life—regardless of orientation! I invite all to repent & to live a holy life & to worship God on Sunday—either at St. Mary's or a church of your choice! (Matney, 2015, p. 1)

In addition to the mailing, Sauppé posted the letter prominently on the Church's website; as of this writing (July 2018), it is still there.⁹ Sauppé also includes a link to "Courage" (www.couragerc.org), a website with information for anyone who needs help "dealing with same sex attraction," as well as a link to EnCourage ministry, an organization "dedicated to the spiritual needs of parents, siblings, children, and other relatives and friends of persons who have same-sex attractions."

As a critical rhetorician, I can analyze the letter—and Sauppé—in various ways. I can critique its harmful assumptions: the praising of biological reproduction; the "natural right" of (undivorced) mothers and fathers; the role of the church in society; the need for (heterosexual) families to defend themselves against the "homosexual culture war"; and the disparaging of same-sex attraction and relationships. I could also call attention to the significant (ab)use of power: In a small, rural community like Westville, a priest can wield great authority—for example, providing supposedly correct interpretations of Christian scripture—being viewed as a trusted community friend who participates in many life events including baptisms at birth, conducting (heterosexual) marriages, helping people live with/confess their sins, and performing last rites in preparation for death. Although I do not believe parishioners are dupes who agree with Sauppé's views, I only emphasize that a priest can occupy an elevated role within such a community; he is a medium who grants people access to, and understanding of, "God's word."

⁹ I encountered the letter on Facebook, and multiple news outlets covered the controversial text (e.g., Matney, 2015).

What complicates the letter is its framing as a “civil service” and call for families to defend themselves against discourse protecting same-sex attraction. “I was doing the public a service by letting people of goodwill know that they have the right not to condone same-sex marriage,” Sauppé says in an interview (Matney, 2015, para. 3). Sauppé and I may have different views of oppression and social justice, and our views may be irreconcilable: I will never praise (or disparage) solely biological reproduction or the need for undivorced mothers and fathers, and I refuse to ridicule same-sex attraction or embrace the “love the sinner, hate the sin” chant, a phrase hinted at in the letter (“While we are all affected by Original Sin, the Grace of Jesus Christ can help anyone and everyone to live a holy life—regardless of orientation!”). As a communication scholar familiar with how speech acts, I understand discourse as constitutive: one is what one writes and speaks, one is what one does, one is one’s sins. I refuse to forgive Sauppé for the hate he promotes; yet he might feel similarly toward me and my writing.

I also feel anger toward community members who walk through the church doors every Sunday and, in practice, condone Sauppé’s hateful assumptions; the parishioners comprise and perpetuate the church—without them, there would be no need for Sauppé and his discourse.¹⁰ I recognize that homosexuality and same-sex marriage are not the only issues that should concern parishioners, but I do hold them accountable for their actions, especially those fully silent or complicit in perpetuating Sauppé’s harmful text. I even wonder how others, especially my (former?) friends, view my sexuality and same-sex relationship; maybe I don’t want to know. If I did hear erroneous and hateful assumptions, I might have to engage in further acts of forgiveness; yet maintaining my ignorance about their beliefs could be a sham, too.

My relationships are tangled by the discourse perpetuated by the leader of an organization. Time matters, too: A hard copy of the letter was only sent once, but still exists on the Church’s website; I could forgive Sauppé for his initial act, but his discourse exists again every time I visit the website. Once, on Facebook, I did observe a parishioner challenge Sauppé’s views, but I also notice that the person “checks in” to St. Mary’s Church most Sundays. Consequently, I might praise the parishioner for challenging Sauppé, but then have to forgive the person every time they walk through those church doors, every time their mere presence indicates support for Sauppé’s hate. The harm accumulates; I exhaust myself paying them time, energy. I sense not to trust the parishioner—they might harm me, judge me, wish me ill will. I also might question myself, think of myself as too sensitive and move to forgive again, but then, the following Sunday, allow them to inflict harm again by checking in to church.



As a critical rhetorician, my task is to identify and critique harmful discourse. Yet it is also my responsibility to offer strategies to remedy the potential harms inflicted by the discourse as well as offer

¹⁰ In 2010, St. Mary’s school closed. For that, I am thankful—one less organization espousing homophobic discourse; fewer chances for (queer) children to encounter oppressive religious dogma. Yet I simultaneously feel off for wishing ill will, knowing the many students, parents, faculty, and staff who can no longer attend a religious school (but one that, at least in my experience, perpetuates hateful ideologies).

insights about how to relate to the agents who created and perpetuated the discourse. One way to fulfill this responsibility is through the concept of forgiveness. Although forgiveness cannot be prescribed or predicted, I now describe how I imagine the forgiveness process could begin, from my perspective, in relation to McLaurin and Sauppé, the agents (wrongdoers) of harmful discourse.

If they are alive and well, I would find and inform McLaurin and Sauppé about the ways their discourse has harmed me and to inquire about their intentions for creating and perpetuating hateful ideas. I might even share this article with them. I would like to assume that they did not know they were being offensive with their discourse; yet I also sense McLaurin or Sauppé knew their discourse could offend and would not agree that it is harmful, else why would they make it public? Further, should they disagree about the offensiveness of their discourse, more harmful discourse might ensue.

If McLaurin or Sauppé cared about the ways their words have harmed me, and if they ever sought my forgiveness, here are the actions I would expect: Given that McLaurin's is an open-access article in an academic journal, I would ask McLaurin to submit an erratum apologizing for the views in the article or to write a follow-up article that revisits, and apologizes for, the prior hateful remarks. McLaurin could even request the article to be removed from the online site, but such a request might introduce concerns about censorship. I also might expect the editors of *The Qualitative Report* to acknowledge their complicity in publishing the essay and support an erratum, a follow-up article, or a forum of articles that discuss why the article should (not) have been published.

For Sauppé, I would expect the hateful discourse to be removed from St. Mary's website; a public apology for his actions, either at mass, in a newsletter, or in a local news outlet; and a commitment to challenging Catholicism's demonization of same-sex attractions and relationships. I also expect parishioners to refuse to attend St. Mary's Church, especially if Sauppé does not remove and apologize for his hateful letter, as well as commit to challenging Catholicism's demonization of same-sex attractions and relationships. Although I recognize that these demands may be unrealistic, I feel as though I cannot yet forgive Sauppé or the parishioners; I will continue to harbor resentment and contempt toward these entities, though I recognize they might not care.

If the agents are not alive or if I cannot locate them, I might recognize cultural constraints that contributed to their discourse, attempt to understand the conditions of the texts' production, realize that the offensive views were practiced and celebrated by McLaurin's and Sauppé's professions, and, consequently, that they may have acted as best they could under particular circumstances. However, understanding may not be enough to forgive the agents; they espoused harmful messages and need to be held accountable for their discourse.

I think about other articles and historical documents that espouse homophobia. I have more understanding/acceptance/forgiveness toward a homophobic text from 1955 (e.g., Rees & Usill, 1955), less for a peer-reviewed academic article published in 2003 (McLaurin, 2003), and much less for a 2015 letter written by a priest and still posted on a church's website. Yet even with the text from 1955, I wonder how I should live with or think about the agents who created and perpetuated the homophobic discourse, even

though it may have been acceptable at the particular time. I try to monitor “semantic contagion” (Bochner, 2014; Hacking, 1995)—of applying current terminology, meanings, values to past practices—but I struggle.

My view of particular people, based on their discourse, informs how I relate to them, a relationality also tangled by temporality, and both concepts inform my process of forgiveness. I want McLaurin and Sauppé to engage in corrective actions for the harmful discourse. Should they not, I will merely tolerate them. I refuse to respect them, make time for them, or have a civil dialogue about the worthiness of my same-sex attraction or relationship (marriage), and I will continue to call out their hate. I recognize that such a lack of civility might offend McLaurin and Sauppé, yet my reaction is what can happen when offensive discourse goes public.¹¹

I do want to forgive McLaurin and Sauppé but, as I write, I feel my anxiety rise, my heartbeat race, and the tension increase in my upper back; the embodiment of criticism, of exposure to harmful discourse, of engaging tarnished pasts to cultivate hopeful futures. Yet I live now, in the present, where the homophobia, the criticism, and thoughts about forgiveness continue—every time I read McLaurin’s or Sauppé’s words, or learn about tragic events such as the Pulse Massacre (2016), or encounter people who advocate for ex-gay, “reparative therapy” (Conley, 2016), or hear phrases such as “that’s so gay,” or observe a (former) friend walk into St. Mary’s Church.

Critical Rhetoric, Forgiveness, and the Future

When I think about the future of critical rhetoric, the responsibilities of the critic, how and when criticism begins and ends, and what it might mean for a person to apply a critical orientation to their work, I think about relationality, temporality, and the idea of forgiveness. With identifying harm comes a need to discuss, postcriticism, how to address the harm that has been identified; asking the critic to recognize the myriad ways in which harmful discourse is tangled by time and ties to the critic, the agent of the discourse, and others; and offering strategies for repairing past harms and promoting just futures. I also must consider possible impasses of critical rhetoric and forgiveness: What if a critic makes unrealistic demands of an offender for forgiveness to occur? Who determines which demands are unrealistic? What if a critic identifies an agent’s discourse as intolerant, yet the agent refuses to care about the accusation or designates the critic as the intolerant one?

I recognize that we all make mistakes and, should I try to make amends for the harms of the past that I too have inflicted, that I could be forgiven. Yet I do not want to forget the harmful discourse that has happened or who perpetuated this discourse—myself included. As a critic, reminding people about the past—maybe in an attempt for forgiveness, maybe not—is a never-ending process that might mark me as a “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed, 2010) in that I cannot be content with “progress.” But, as McKerrow (1989) notes, the task of critical rhetoric never ends—new power relations emerge, and what might be just for some might

¹¹ As McKerrow (2001) observes, “privileging civil discourse as a solution to human problems carries with it the promise of what might be called the tyranny of civility. Civil behavior may be more than politeness, but in its execution it may also serve to mask very real differences in power relations. In a word, civility may perpetuate servitude” (p. 279); “merely getting along is woefully inadequate as a response to social issues” (p. 280).

be unjust for others. Harm is contextual, and doing critical rhetoric means, simultaneously, embracing “never-ending skepticism” and “permanent criticism” (p. 96).¹² Thus, the task of repairing the past, of forgiveness, of trying to live with others who have and will continue to espouse harmful discourse in unforeseeable ways, is perpetual, uncertain, and infinite.

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¹² McKerrow (1989) writes, “Results are never satisfying as the new social relations which emerge from a reaction to a critique are themselves simply new forms of power and hence subject to renewed skepticism” (p. 96). New relations of powers produce new inequities and thus new critiques (see Ono & Sloop, 1992).

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