Living and Learning with the Lyceum: A Reflection on Invention

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The essay narrates the author’s inventional process in imagining, writing, and developing her doctoral dissertation, which she completed at the University of Minnesota in 2001. That manuscript provided the foundation for her book, The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States (2005).

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A consequence of studying historical subjects is that one begins to historicize one’s own life and work. Where do I fit within historical trajectories? How does my work compare to that of my predecessors, my peers, or my students? I am most apt to consider such questions when I teach a graduate seminar in rhetorical criticism at Northwestern University. As we study rhetorical inquiry in communication from the 1920s to the present, we read published scholarship for implicit and explicit claims about the selection and scope of critical artifacts, the definition and utility of theory and context, the preferred approach, the bases of critical judgments, the role of the critic, the audiences for criticism, and the rationale for a rhetorical perspective. As we talk about how the students’ work can participate in ongoing conversations and also offer new insights, I notice how my own scholarship bespeaks its historical context.

Historicizing the Moment

A key aspect of that context is temporal: I completed a Ph.D. in 2001. When I consider my own work alongside the publications of other rhetorical scholars who earned graduate degrees around the turn of the millennium, some general patterns
begin to emerge. This scholarship exhibits wariness of close alignments with codified methods or schools of thought, instead embracing, individually, the pluralism that characterizes the field as a whole. It attempts to blend the insights of diverse intellectual traditions or to find new paths between or beyond polarities. It manifests the inheritance of the conclusion that rhetorical inquiry is a perspective rather than an object domain, and so it ranges widely in its selection of relevant artifacts. It continues to recover the rhetorical history of marginalized groups, it examines the discourse of collectives, and it inquires into events that are not easily endorsed or censured. It often resists definitive answers, instead offering a variety of possible interpretations. Since its authors studied broadly as graduate students, it proffers the persona of the interdisciplinary rhetorician, even as it adopts and adapts conventional categories of rhetorical practice for intelligibility. It exhibits recurring tensions between singularity and multiplicity in artifact selection, analytic perspective, evaluation, and its own audiences.

This essay does not attempt to resolve these dilemmas. Instead, it proposes a conceptual realm of presumed relevance to readers—the current practice of rhetorical scholarship—and then invites mutual reflection on that realm through the close study of a particular case. In this case, the case was assigned. Ronald C. Arnett invited me to characterize “your particular field of study and individual research, specifically your work recognized by the NCA Diamond Anniversary Book Award” (personal communication, January 22, 2009). The statement alludes to The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States (Ray, 2005). The referent of “your particular field of study,” however, is more elusive. Within the discipline of communication, my field of study is comprehended under terms like “rhetoric” or “rhetorical studies,” indicating a qualitative, humanistic approach to communicative behaviors, an area of investigation aligned with politics and ethics, a field with a heritage in the pedagogy of public speaking. For rhetorical scholars, however, my “particular field of study” needs further specification. Whereas I could have chosen many terms—rhetorical history, public address, popular culture, media history, performance history, American studies, cultural studies—I have chosen “rhetorical criticism,” in order to focus attention on habits of doing scholarship, and especially on critical invention. I emphasize invention because it is a topic that is both singular and multiple. My own ephemeral, unique inventional experience made my book what it is, and yet the evolution from the glimmerings of an idea to a written document is common in all scholarship. Whether readers respond to the particulars of my experience with recognition or with a sense of sharp contrast, I hope that my story will resonate sufficiently to occasion reflection on habits of thought and habits of work, on how we come to critical voice, and on how our scholarly projects are initiated, develop, and reach temporary resolution in publication. I have chosen to write, in the parlance of DVDs, a “making of” featurette.

The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States is simultaneously a material object, a communicative effort, a personal creation, and the result of many interactions. In the story that I will tell, the craft of invention is marked by curiosity, uncertainty, tangents, affective logics, and practical exigencies.
I take as inspiration the book *Critical Questions*, edited by William L. Nothstine, Carole Blair, and Gary A. Copeland (1994). It includes 13 essays, originally published between 1973 and 1991, paired with commentaries by their authors, who ponder invention, research, writing, review, revision, and publication. The book illustrates the interplay of authorial plan, institutional and ideological forces, reviewers’ interventions, and the vagaries of chance. I first read *Critical Questions* at the University of Minnesota in 1996, when I was a first-year doctoral student. Reading the commentaries gave me insight and encouragement, and I hope that this essay might hearten others in its turn. At the same time, readers should remember that authorial ruminations provide only one means of illuminating a text. Furthermore, this essay is not even my conclusive statement about the origins and development of my book. Discourse bears the hallmarks of its compositional moment. I would have told a different story upon the book’s publication in 2005, and undoubtedly I will reflect in new ways in years to come. For now, however, this is my story.

**Influences**

*The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States* began as a dissertation project. Unlike some of my friends, I settled on a topic quite late, and none of my class papers became chapters. (This is not an approach that I suggest to others, but I do not think back on it with regret.) Instead, in classes, I studied a variety of subjects, as I explored a discipline that was new to me (I had earned a B.A. in English and chemistry, and an M.A. in drama). My papers orbited recurring themes: making meaning of a human body in performance, and the creation of the public personae of individuals and groups. For example, I wrote about a 1791 letter from Benjamin Banneker to Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson (Ray, 1998); I summarized the results of a survey about masculinity and men’s earrings; and I analyzed listserv postings circulated prior to the Speech Communication Association’s 1997 change of name to National Communication Association. In rhetorical theory classes, I wrote repeatedly about theories of bodily action, from classical oratorical delivery through European elocution to 20th-century performance in everyday life. I wrote a Foucauldian analysis of an 1831 handbook of gesture. In one class, I systematically studied Stuart Hall’s work on cultural representation, and in another, I used Hall’s insights as a lens through which to view feminist newspaper articles about a working woman accused of infanticide in 1868 (Ray, 2003). I became interested in public spectacle, in one class comparing variant newspaper reports about President Andrew Johnson’s infamous 1866 speaking tour, and in another studying the woman’s rights advocacy of the radical spiritualist, stockbroker, free-love advocate, and presidential candidate Victoria Claflin Woodhull between 1870 and 1872.

As my interest in public personae developed, the 19th-century United States began to emerge as a temporal and geographic location for my work. I found that period fascinating, since its key issues—about race, gender, labor and capital, and the role of the United States in the world—seemed to forecast so many of the concerns of the 20th century. This focus is not surprising: I was taking rhetorical history classes with
Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kirt Wilson, studying in detail a period that intrigued me well before my arrival at Minnesota. As a child, I had read powerful stories about Harriet Tubman or about my fellow Kentuckian Abraham Lincoln, and my parents regularly took me to visit historical sites. In college, I studied 19th-century novels and poetry, and in a favorite class in my master’s program, I read and performed British melodrama. During the years intervening between my M.A. and Ph.D. programs, while I worked in academic publishing, I frequently read history for pleasure. In the early 1990s, I read Richard Ellmann’s (1988) biography of Oscar Wilde, and Ellmann’s chapters on Wilde’s North American lecture tour of 1882 so intrigued me that I also read Oscar Wilde Discovers America (Lewis & Smith, 1936) and Oscar Wilde in Canada (O’Brien, 1982). The riveting cultural history of Wilde’s performances partly attracted me to the formal study of rhetoric.

As my doctoral course work progressed, I regularly found myself tending toward the analysis of critical cases rather than theorization for its own sake. Even in “theory classes,” I wrote papers that grounded theories in particulars. The particulars were endless. Time after time, I chose research topics that required hours of cranking microfilm of newspapers in the basement of Minnesota’s O. Meredith Wilson Library. This work, tedious at times, also enthralled me. Reading news stories, advertisements, and gossip from the mid-1800s allowed me to create a lively impression of the past. At the same time, I did not reject theoretical literatures. Like other graduate students in rhetoric in the late 1990s, I read a great deal of contemporary theory and metacritical commentary. At Minnesota, we read so much Foucault and Bourdieu that outside the classroom we called them Michel and Pierre. We read structuralism as ancient history and interpreted an amorphous postmodernity as the order of the day. We read bell hooks and Judith Butler and Jürgen Habermas. We understood social construction to be a truism of our field, and so we talked a lot about materiality. We pored over the debate between Michael Leff and Michael Calvin McGee from the summer 1990 issue of the Western Journal of Communication: Is the rhetorical text an icon or a fragment? Is the text something preexisting, or is it something made by the critic? We likely put these questions in unproductive ways, asking about ontology rather than function: “What is it?” rather than “For what purposes might we see it as . . .?” It seemed that we were supposed to choose sides. Some of us were reluctant.

One day, amid the busyness, I learned about the lyceum. For a session of Campbell’s course on early U.S. woman’s rights, we read Anna Dickinson’s 1870–1 lyceum lecture “Jeanne d’Arc” along with Campbell’s (1989) analysis of it. The markers of Dickinson’s liveliness in performance leapt from the page: “The end of all seemed near. Suddenly—through this darkness a light shone” (Dickinson, 1989, p. 282). I recognized the melodramatic imagination. I imagined this dark-haired young woman from Philadelphia holding audiences spellbound. I remembered Wilde’s lecture tour. What was this thing, the lyceum, this venue in which Dickinson performed so successfully? I asked Campbell, who brought out her files on Dickinson to show me. I asked Robert L. Scott, who plucked his copy of Carl Bode’s (1956) American Lyceum off his shelf and presented it to me to keep. I discovered that the
celebrity lecture circuit of Dickinson’s day had evolved from antebellum debating and lecture clubs. And then I went on to other things, to Johnson and Woodhull, to Hall and woman’s rights journals. I would be back.

**Evolution**

In the summer of 1998, after my second year of course work (I took doctoral courses for three years instead of two, in order to compensate for the absence of communication courses in my predoctoral education), I began to discuss with friends some vague ideas about a dissertation on spectacularity and social reform in the 19th century, on the creation of celebrity personae and controversy presented as entertainment. My friends talked back to me about contemporary media and politics, about public schools and radio talk shows. So I learned that the themes could promote discussion. In the fall, I began to compile a bibliography on “the lyceum movement” (Bode’s term), and I sought faculty for my examining and dissertation committees. To one professor, I described my proposed project this way:

> I want to examine oratorical performance in the mid- to late-nineteenth-century United States, especially as it relates to social reformers (perhaps women, and possibly others). I am mostly interested in the moment of rhetorical performance itself—particularly in the ways that meanings coalesce around the constructed persona of the orator. I may decide to look at the lyceum movement, to examine the constraints and opportunities of the conjuncture of education and entertainment. [A. G. Ray, personal communication to R. L. Brown, Jr., October 19, 1998]

Readers of the 2005 book will recognize familiar topics in this 1998 e-mail, but the journey between the two points was hardly linear.

As I began to talk seriously with Minnesota faculty about studying the lyceum, Campbell, my advisor, cautioned me about potential problems of reception of such a study in the academy. So few scholars had treated the lyceum that the subject matter might seem trivial or antiquarian, and even some rhetorical historians might not care about a popular culture study. Would the topic help me to get a job? This warning was not cheering news, but it proved salutary, as it pressed me to keep a disciplinary audience well in mind. If I undertook a project on a topic that might not easily appear relevant to contemporary concerns, then I would have to make a strong appeal for readers’ interest. (This responsibility is not unique to obscure topics; see Zarefsky, 1998.) It was clear that I would need to learn to speak about my project in the language of media networks, of celebrity, of social reform, of culture-creation, of the bourgeois public sphere, of social and political history. I also needed to spin a lively tale. As I began to learn more about the lyceum, I took inspiration: like a successful popular lecture, my writing needed to inform and entertain, to offer a history with the potential to beguile.

The dissertation prospectus that I submitted the following fall, after completing courses and qualifying examinations, referred to the lyceum lecture system, but as an example of “the cultural phenomenon of the popular public lecture in the
mid-nineteenth-century United States” (dissertation prospectus, September 14, 1999). Only as I began to write what would eventually become the first chapter of the book did I understand that “the popular public lecture” was an impossibly broad subject, comprising itinerant lectures and formal events sponsored by religious or voluntary organizations, educational institutions, political groups, and reform societies. Choosing the lyceum was an attempt to narrow the focus.

Still, the term lyceum was (and is) hard to pin down, and as I learned more, I found defining to be more, not less, challenging. Responding to theoretical literatures that I had read in my courses, I began to imagine the lyceum as a venue where 19th-century Americans made sense of themselves as members of local and national communities. Thinking this way, I was approaching the project differently from the way that I had typically begun research papers: instead of starting with an intriguing, relatively bounded artifact and then shifting my focus outward, toward other artifacts and theoretical models, this time I was beginning with a speculation about a nebulous phenomenon. What specific manifestations of this phenomenon would I study? What would “the text” be?

Struggling with these questions, I offered an elaborate theoretical framework and a brief, tentative chapter outline in my prospectus. A historical narrative would be followed by four case studies. One case would compare lecturing activity in several geographic locations. Then three chapters would analyze the public lectures and lecture tours of individuals, all reformers but with diverse perspectives: Wendell Phillips, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Anna Dickinson. Neither I nor my committee found this framework satisfying, but the committee endorsed the goals of the project and encouraged me to research and write the historical narrative and to continue to think about how to configure the critical analyses.

Five months later, with a long draft of a chapter on lyceum history nearly complete, I applied for a dissertation fellowship. The application described a new plan: a historical narrative and three thematic, analytic chapters. I had selected five lectures that I boldly claimed as “representative of the midcentury lyceum platform”: Park Benjamin’s “The Age of Gold,” George William Curtis’s “Political Infidelity,” Anna Dickinson’s “Whited Sepulchres,” T. Starr King’s “Substance and Show,” and Wendell Phillips’s “Toussaint L’Ouverture” (A. G. Ray, fellowship application, February 28, 2000). I would study the texts of these lectures, as well as archival evidence of their reception throughout the country. Instead of examining one lecture per chapter, I would blend the analyses of all five lectures into three chapters based on key questions:

- What is our past? How do we understand U.S. history?
- Who counts as one of us? Who is included in the category “American,” and who is excluded? With whom do we identify, and from whom are we divided?
- What do we do now? What are the duties of an active U.S. citizen? How do we improve ourselves?
Although this structure allowed me to deflect disciplinary anxieties about the “great speaker” model and to foreground theoretical questions about national identity formation, it soon felt cumbersome. Was I going to have to write separate essays on each of the lectures (to figure out how I would interpret them) and then recombine the essays into thematic chapters? Would that be better, or just different? As I put it in a long letter to Campbell in mid-2000 (by this time I was living in east-central Wisconsin), I was beginning to doubt “the advantage of the thematic approach.” Instead, the writing that I had already done suggested a new framework: “What I’ve set up in the historical narrative seems to be the beginnings of an argument about the temporal evolution of a dialectic between education and entertainment. It now seems to me most reasonable to take core samples from the lyceum over time, selecting ‘texts’ in which this interplay is likely to emerge.” It seemed plausible that studying different kinds of critical artifacts in each chapter would allow me to make claims “about other issues (e.g., knowledge creation, identity formation, inclusion/exclusion),” and that such claims “might then result in a conclusion that would allow me to pull back to a point at which some broader generalizations about the meanings of the lyceum movement might be possible” (A. G. Ray, personal communication to K. K. Campbell, June 16, 2000).

Although I never used the “core samples” metaphor in any other statement about the project, it implied a way of thinking that persisted: the lyceum was a vast terrain of practice—discursive, material, performative—and I could best make meaning of it by closely reading selected instances, then allowing my interpretations to trace the imagined outlines of a larger depiction. For this to be convincing, much would depend on the sample selection. As I asked in my letter to Campbell: “So, what do I analyze?” It was a rhetorical question. I continued with concerns about scope: “I wonder about the value of doing a series of chapters at a fairly consistent scale, as opposed to the value of chapters at different scales (e.g., a chapter dealing with a single speech, another dealing with a series of speeches on the same topic, etc.).” I was concerned about texts and contexts, and I used the language of class readings: “I’ve got McGee-type questions (about ‘culture’) and a propensity for Leff-type methods.” I observed that “it seems ideal to let my own questions about the lyceum drive the choices of objects and methods, but that’s easier said than done.”

Amid this uncertainty, I asserted a decision. I announced that I was going to write a chapter about a periodical of the early 1830s, the *Family Lyceum*, which I had recently unearthed in a microfilm version of the American Periodicals Series (now, but not then, available electronically). I proposed that this periodical could “be understood as a manifestation of the vision for the lyceum by its most important early promoter,” Josiah Holbrook. I mentioned that I wanted to write a chapter on Anna Dickinson, to represent woman’s rights on the post–Civil War lyceum circuit, but I wondered whether I should treat Dickinson along with another successful lecturer, Mary Livermore, and whether, if I treated Dickinson alone, I should compare a series of her lectures, examine one in detail, or study lectures along with editorial commentary about them. I suggested a potential chapter comparing two lectures by Wendell
Phillips, “The Lost Arts” and “Toussaint L’Ouverture.” I invited advice but also noted that the act of writing the letter had helped me to clarify my thoughts.

In retrospect, I see this letter and Campbell’s e-mailed response as a turning point in the project’s evolution. Her prompt and lengthy answer characterized the multiple emphases of my letter: Would I organize according to a temporal framework, by speakers, or by reform efforts? I seemed to be saying all of these. The so-called “McGee-Leff conundrum,” she wrote, “is a real concern.” Both “analysis of texts” and “analysis of reception and commentary in the popular press” would need to be blended, “so that what emerges combines what is said with what is understood and how it is interpreted” (personal communication, June 22, 2000). Then she made a key observation and delivered crucial advice:

I think you are going to be forced to have several kinds of organization. In each case, you are going to have to select some exemplar(s), e.g., Dickinson, one reform movement, evolution in one area, etc., in order to make sense of this.

I know this [response] won’t solve your problems or answer all your questions. I think you need to launch into several chapters. Do the Family Lyceum chapter. Try a chapter on Dickinson or a chapter combining Dickinson and Livermore. Then assess where you are. Don’t try to solve all the structural problems before you begin doing analysis—it won’t work.

Freed from what I had felt as the necessity of fully mapping my route in advance (had that not been the goal of the prospectus?), I progressed more swiftly. Do what you are able to do now: that was the lesson. The following month, I mailed an analysis of the Family Lyceum to my two readers (in addition to Campbell, Scott had volunteered to respond to drafts of chapters). The chapter kept in play the dialectic of education and entertainment but focused on the periodical as a model for an ideal lyceum practice.

The next chapter required laborious archival research, but within three months of completing the Family Lyceum chapter, I had sent the subsequent chapter to Campbell and Scott. Having learned in Bode’s American Lyceum about the correspondence of lecture organizers Jerome Ripley Brigham of Milwaukee and Samuel Dexter Ward of Chicago, I paid a visit to Madison, to see Brigham’s papers at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (since renamed the Wisconsin Historical Society). There I found a treasure trove in Brigham’s papers from the mid-1850s, when he was president of a lecture lyceum called the Young Men’s Association (YMA) of the City of Milwaukee. At the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, I found the manuscript minutes of this association between 1848 and 1868. Returning to Madison, I read Brigham’s mail, gathering an impression of his YMA activities, his law practice, and his ongoing courtship. From the manuscript minutes, I identified men active in the YMA, and I sought details about them in city directories of the period. I learned that M&I, the largest banking corporation in present-day Wisconsin, had been started in the 1840s by two of these young men, Samuel Marshall and Charles Ilsley. In 1857, Brigham married Ilsley’s sister Mary. I read histories of Milwaukee; I learned about contemporary lyceums in other Midwestern cities; I traced YMA lecture performances through all five of the English-language daily newspapers published in Milwaukee for three lecture seasons in the mid-1850s.
I identified the site of Jerome and Mary Brigham’s graves in Milwaukee. The following summer, after my dissertation was complete, I would take flowers there.

Discovering these materials was directly linked to inventional choices. Given the scope of the archival sources, I quickly decided to concentrate not on the texts of lyceum lectures delivered in Milwaukee but instead on the commentaries about the lecturing events. I would interpret what is conventionally understood as "context" as the rhetorical "text" (in this choice I was influenced by Ceccarelli, 1998). My decision to focus the chapter on judgment—How did Milwaukee residents define a good popular lecture?—came later, after I had compiled several notebooks full of photocopies and notes. The choice suited the archival materials, and it permitted comparison and contrast between the YMA’s 1850s lyceum practice and Holbrook’s earlier ideal. The Milwaukee YMA could exemplify practices of cultural leadership recognizable when read through Foucault: not a self-conscious, top-down effort but rather power exerted by up-and-coming professionals as they went about their ordinary lives.

Although I longed to make the Milwaukee chapter as complete as possible and to get every date right (not an easy task, since the dates of lectures often changed many times before the performance), I had learned what all scholars who go to archives soon discover: that every narrative will be partial, that primary sources are contradictory, and that even a rich reserve of material calls attention to the depth of its silences. But the recognition that writing history is creation rather than reportage is not a reason to abandon a dream of truth, and striving toward such a goal shows respect for human experience. People of the past are neither just like us nor entirely alien.

With the Milwaukee chapter complete, I had written two case studies and had not yet substantively analyzed a lecture text. I was ready to do that. For months, I had been examining a microfilmed version of Anna Dickinson’s papers from the Library of Congress (reels could be ordered via Interlibrary Loan). I decided to concentrate on Dickinson’s major lecture from 1869–70, “Whited Sepulchres,” which was simultaneously a travel narrative about an 1869 trip to Salt Lake City and a denunciation of universal patriarchy. In Dickinson’s papers were variant speech texts, relevant personal letters, scrapbooks of newspaper articles, and diaries of speaking engagements. An analysis of this material would offer a counterpoint to the Family Lyceum and Milwaukee chapters, showing how reform discourse was generated in a popular commercial venue. Texts of the lecture interested me for their quasi-sermonic character, for the explicitly female persona that incorporated elements of the figure of the masculine explorer, and for the analogies that linked what Dickinson’s audiences would perceive as exotic (the Mormon enclave in Utah Territory) and familiar (the subordination of women). The close-reading tradition in rhetorical criticism strongly influenced the approach of the chapter, which emphasized the dynamics of the oratorical text, supplemented with evidence of invention and reception.

When I submitted the Dickinson chapter to Campbell and Scott in mid-December 2000, I was able to show an emerging logic in the project’s structure (see Table 1).
Campbell had been correct to anticipate “several kinds of organization.” I had not yet chosen a topic for a fourth case, but I knew that something was missing between Milwaukee and Dickinson. Temporally, I needed to bridge the Civil War, and thematically, I needed to write overtly about race and nationhood. Controversies over race relations and racial identities suffused the discourses of the lyceum, and this had been apparent even in the first version of my history chapter.

By early January 2001, I was writing to friends about Frederick Douglass, whose eloquent 1852 Fourth of July speech and 1876 Freedmen’s Monument address I had studied in graduate courses. I soon located a microfilm copy of Douglass’s Library of Congress papers, as well as the standard multivolume edition of his works, at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Other libraries and convenient booksellers provided secondary literature. I did not tarry long over the decision. Douglass’s lyceum lectures increasingly seemed an ideal choice: his easily accessible papers contained multiple examples of commercial lectures, and unlike the subjects of other chapters, he had inspired substantial scholarship and would be easily recognized by readers. Besides, he had worked alongside Dickinson in encouraging black men to enlist in the Union Army in 1863, and he had spoken before the Milwaukee YMA in 1866. The choice was clear.

In the other chapters, the critical artifacts had varied markedly, creating an emergent argument that a defining characteristic of the lyceum was the multiplicity of its manifestations. Selecting multiple foci—in types of texts and in the necessarily pluralistic analytic approaches to them—demonstrated a critical response to the lyceum that echoed its own complex characteristics. Over time, I had become more committed to writing in a way that amplified what I perceived to be the key features of my subject matter. Consequently, it seemed methodologically consistent for the Douglass chapter to vary yet again. Instead of paralleling the Dickinson chapter by studying the invention, performance, and reception of one of Douglass’s most famous

Table 1. Organisation of Case Studies, as Described in December 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>Family Lyceum</th>
<th>Milwaukee lectures</th>
<th>Not Yet Written</th>
<th>Dickinson’s “Whited Sepulchres”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEXT</td>
<td>Popular</td>
<td>Commentary</td>
<td>Speech texts</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>magazine</td>
<td>about popular public lectures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOPIC</td>
<td>Modeling</td>
<td>Judgment,</td>
<td>Social reform,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ideal lyceum</td>
<td>community-building,</td>
<td>women’s discourse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>practice</td>
<td>defining “popular lecture”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISCOURSE PRODUCER</td>
<td>Lyceum’s major</td>
<td>Professional elites</td>
<td>Anna Dickinson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>promoter</td>
<td>of Milwaukee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Holbrook)</td>
<td>(Brigham et al.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLACE</td>
<td>Boston (hearth of lyceum activity)</td>
<td>Milwaukee (Old Northwest)</td>
<td>Joining East and West</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIME</td>
<td>1832–33</td>
<td>1854–57</td>
<td>1869–70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

lyceum lectures, such as “Self-Made Men,” I gathered multiple texts of various lectures that Douglass delivered at lyceums over several decades. Examining these as a set, I looked for argumentative patterns in Douglass’s assertions about the humanity of African Americans and the centrality of African American experience in American national life. Could lectures designed for commercial success with usually white, middlebrow audiences promote social change?

The Douglass chapter, which I finished in mid-March, completed the evolving structure: it examined assimilation-integration and adaptation to promote social change (Subjects) as manifested in lyceum lectures (Texts) written and delivered by reformer Frederick Douglass (Discourse Producer). In its themes, it exemplified conflicts between North and South (Place), and it highlighted the 1850s through the 1870s (Time). Now the four case studies were balanced between discourses of power and discourses of challenge (although I later argued that the records of lyceum activity demonstrate the permeability of these categories; see Ray, 2004a). In the conclusion, I linked the four cases, emphasizing changes over time and space in the audiences for the lyceum, the types of knowledge expected and espoused, the cultural functions, and the performed conceptions of what rhetoric is and does. On May 30, I successfully defended my dissertation (Ray, 2001). The project now existed in written form, ready for reconsideration and reshaping.

**Continuations**

Although the manuscript continued to change between mid-2001 and its publication in the Rhetoric and Public Affairs Series at Michigan State University Press in 2005, this story explains key features of how the substance of the book came to be. It resulted from personal inclinations, curiosity, class readings, conscious decisions and intuited impulses, tentative inferences and rejected possibilities, conversations, and serendipity. In researching and writing, I learned about balancing flexibility with the practical necessity to make choices, I thought a great deal about disciplinary and interdisciplinary audiences, and I benefited from advisors who listened closely and guided without imposing. Although the solid mass of the published book implies a kind of inevitability in its structure and form, its contents were far from inevitable. Instead, I grappled with the selection of artifacts, organizational frameworks, and analytic approaches while finding my way within a changing academic discipline at a singular historical moment. My book is unique, but so many of its conceptual concerns also appear in the scholarship of my peers that it is not difficult to perceive some of the historical, cultural, ideological, and disciplinary forces that shape our work and our performances of the scholarly role.

Furthermore, since my book does not begin to exhaust the possibilities for studying 19th-century mass education and popular media networks, I have found that following the threads of questions I did not or could not answer earlier has continued to prove interesting and fruitful. Although in my subsequent scholarship I sometimes have explored unrelated topics, I have also persisted in examining facets of lyceum activity, such as the antebellum debating clubs (Ray, 2004a); the power of
travel narratives in popularizing a national imperialist ethos (Ray, 2004b); the connections between the lyceum and woman’s rights advocacy (Ray, 2006); and the lyceum as a context for Lincoln’s early public discourse (Ray, in press). I have taught the Douglass and Dickinson chapters in undergraduate classes, and once I taught the book in a graduate seminar on the analysis of cultural practices. I have spoken about attributes of the lyceum at academic colloquia, in workshops for schoolteachers and for college professors, and to public audiences in a 19th-century wooden building in Concord, Massachusetts, in a storefront in Chicago, and on the radio in Champaign, Illinois. In May 2009, I lectured about Douglass’s lyceum lecturing at Lyceum Hall in Salem, Massachusetts, where Douglass himself delivered six lectures between 1864 and 1870. I was accompanied on the program by a gifted actor performing as Douglass.

Robert Scott recently remarked, “The lyceum seems to be serving you well” (personal communication, March 5, 2009). So it is. Each time I teach or lecture or study or write, I learn more, from interlocutors or from manuscripts or from my own words. As I reflect on how my book evolved, and on how it speaks to and of its own time within a disciplinary community, I recognize it as something public and also deeply personal, as similar to and different from the work of others, as something indelibly marked by the places and people with whom I have lived and worked, by other books I have read, by the historical circumstances of its production, and by my own choices. I recognize it as robust in some ways, flawed in others. I would write it differently now, but writing it the way that I did helped to make me the rhetorical scholar that I am.

References


