

# On Useful Rhetorical History

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*This essay addresses a recent critique of historical rhetorical scholarship and then argues for the use of history as a foundation for contemporary rhetorical scholarship. This essay offers an attitude towards history as a rhetorical perspective. Reflections on history from scholars including Friedrich Nietzsche, Maurice Halbwachs, Hayden White, and Walter Lippmann are used to indicate how historical narrative is required for relevant and timely scholarship, rhetorical or not.*

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May I not paraphrase and say that the cult of the past, far from binding the hearts of people to society, in fact detaches them: there is nothing more opposed to the interest of society?

Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*<sup>1</sup>

In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, Brett Lunceford asks whether all scholars of rhetoric must be rhetorical historians. His answer—“an emphatic ‘no.’”<sup>2</sup> I contend that his response is neither a slash-and-burn attack designed to clear space, nor is it an easily dismissed straw man argument. Rather, Lunceford is responding to a perceived lacuna in contemporary rhetorical scholarship in which the disciplinary commitments are such that scholarly theory and criticism of rhetoric need not be brought to bear on immediate social, cultural, and political contexts.

We may gain insight from both the light and the shadows cast by polemic arguments such as Lunceford’s. This essay examines both. The first section examines Lunceford’s critique of a dominant historical paradigm in rhetorical scholarship, three problems that this historical emphasis poses, and his projected alternative. The second section examines reflections on history from Friedrich Nietzsche, Maurice Halbwachs, Hayden White, and Walter Lippmann to argue that, far from abandoning history, the study of contemporary issues *requires* historical perspective.

## Lunceford on a Historical Preoccupation

In his article, “Must We All Be Rhetorical Historians? On Relevance and Timeliness in Rhetorical Scholarship,” Lunceford locates a perceived censoring function in academic

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Brett Lunceford, “Must We All Be Rhetorical Historians? On Relevance and Timeliness in Rhetorical Scholarship,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1 (2011): 1, accessed September 1, 2011, [http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/articles/lunceford1\\_1.pdf](http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/articles/lunceford1_1.pdf).

research and publishing. Scholarly journals, Lunceford writes, “strive for a long ‘shelf life,’” which “requires the selection of rhetorical artifacts that have already stood the test of time.”<sup>3</sup> Historical analyses would then be the expected norm for rhetorical scholarship. Although there is a considerable body of standing scholarship in the disciplinary journals that stands as contrary evidence, his argument is valuable nonetheless. Lunceford is inviting us to reflect on the sorts of topics that one would expect to see in disciplinary journals. The range, he argues, would span well-established genres from presidential rhetoric to densely written theoretical work in which scholars of rhetoric make appropriating uses of the best that other disciplines have to offer. In all cases, however, the author must pay mind to the “clock,” knowing fully that the topic must be justified in such a way that it is able to withstand many months (if not years) of the review process while remaining fresh long enough to be cited.

Lunceford argues that the criterion of shelf-life creates a situation in which “history and theory are all that journals have to offer.”<sup>4</sup> He maintains that the turn towards rhetorical history may disclose an academic prejudice in which history appears to be reduced to a series of inert events. Lunceford argues that this type of reduction affords convenience to the scholar insofar as static events are easy to tame. The scholar defines, explains, and predicts the past without offering a type of practical wisdom that may be applied to contemporary problems.

Compounding matters, Lunceford contends that such historical rhetorical reflection operates with a thinly veiled commitment to “Herbert Wichelns’ assertion that rhetorical criticism is concerned, above all, with the question of effect.”<sup>5</sup> Lunceford’s argument thus casts rhetorical scholarship as unaware of its own rootedness in a type of modernized Neo-Aristotelianism, albeit one that allows effect to linger without reflection.<sup>6</sup> In this modern version, scholars of rhetoric are not preoccupied with effects of speeches on immediate audiences. Instead, Lunceford argues, “effect” lingers in rhetorical scholarship as an underdeveloped concept. It is used to facilitate the scholarly review process insofar as presumed historical value (a type of effect) provides justification for the print-worthiness of an article. Here, Lunceford’s critique may be seen as indicting standing scholarship for doubly disavowing its own theoretical foundations and the exigencies of contemporary social, political, and cultural life. In its most hyperbolic form, Lunceford’s critique could then be read as denouncing standing scholarship for knowing neither where it begins nor where it is attempting to lead us.

Despite the critical tone of Lunceford’s essay, the concerns listed so far, shelf life, historical preoccupation, and an underdeveloped commitment to effect, do not require a qualitative assessment of better or worse. One may acknowledge these critiques while still maintaining that historical rhetorical scholarship brings vitality, status, and a type of internal coherence to rhetorical studies. Further, it would be a great cause of concern if this argument were read to imply that all scholarship should, or indeed must, have a specific praxiological foundation or practical application. The great casualty of such myopic

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<sup>3</sup> Lunceford, “Rhetorical Historians,” 2.

<sup>4</sup> Lunceford, “Rhetorical Historians,” 2.

<sup>5</sup> Lunceford, “Rhetorical Historians,” 2, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Lunceford argues that contemporary rhetorical scholarship has inadequately responded to Edwin Black’s criticism of Neo-Aristotelianism. See Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

arguments would be the arts and humanities—that space in which Martha Nussbaum recently argued is needed for the survival of democracy itself.<sup>7</sup> Rather, Lunceford's essay sought to identify causes and consequences of a perceived lacuna in contemporary rhetorical scholarship in which scholarship is divorced from contexts of contemporary concern for a general audience.

It is in this context that we may recognize the specific field of argumentation that Lunceford is staking out. At the heart of his critique lies an anxiety over an apparent dominance of history and theory in rhetorical journals. Lunceford is not merely saying “no” to a dominant perspective or decrying its existence. In fact, Lunceford is animated by an understanding that the scholarly journals would benefit from answering “yes” and owning their perspectival and methodological foundations. Such a position would facilitate the development of disciplinary identity, demarcate types of knowledge that rhetorical inquiry may uniquely advance, and serve as an explicit criterion for judging the print-worthiness of scholarship in scholarly journals.

At the same time, Lunceford's retreat from what he perceives to be the dominant disciplinary paradigm, his “no,” invites reflection on obstacles that limit access to rhetorical scholarship. He writes:

At times, we seem to be the acolytes of an esoteric order that exists mainly to perpetuate itself. We study rhetoric because it is important and it's important so we study it. We know that rhetoric is of immense importance, yet we often have difficulty explaining how this is so to a lay audience.<sup>8</sup>

Lunceford's critique implies three interconnected claims regarding issues of translation, transference, and indifference. First, his critique maintains that scholarship is performed in a language that requires a degree of translation for consumption by a lay audience. This protects the role of the scholar, who may serve as the guardian of esoteric knowledge by, say, translating English into English. Second, Lunceford criticizes historical scholarship for being presented as non-transferable and lacking identifiable traction for application to audiences' rhetorical exigencies. This is particularly troubling insofar as rhetorical scholarship relies on claiming that rhetoric is at the center of our sense of being-in-the-world. Third, Lunceford argues that the problems of translation and transferability bespeak an attitude of indifference to an expert-lay divide. In this case, scholars have little or no concern for the problems of translatability or transferability of their scholarship to contemporary needs, which undermines the force of calls for the articulation of scholarship to democracy.<sup>9</sup>

These problems expose conceits in simple responses to a complex question—why should anyone outside of the academy care about rhetorical scholarship? In the context of esoteric scholarship, it is not sufficient to affirm the centrality of rhetoric to life. In the absence of developed arguments demonstrating transferability (from the historical event to contemporary issues), it is not sufficient to speak in clichés demanding a need for understanding history so that we do not replicate it. While demonstrating an attitude of in-

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<sup>7</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Lunceford, “Rhetorical Historians,” 6.

<sup>9</sup> Although the relevance to rhetorical scholarship is acute, similar criticism could be waged against most learned disciplines that maintain standards dedicated to the development of disciplinary-specific knowledge.

difference towards an expert-lay divide, rhetorical scholarship is less likely to empower citizens in a democracy.

Approaching the question anew, why should laypersons care about rhetorical scholarship? If the goal of rhetorical scholarship, as Barry Brummett argues, is “to teach people how to experience their rhetorical environments more richly,” then, as Lunceford argues, “we must do so [educate people] where and when they are.”<sup>10</sup> Lunceford maintains that, for a general audience to care about rhetorical scholarship, scholars must make available writings that are judged both on the basis of scholarly achievement and on criteria of timeliness and relevance to both academic specialists and a broader audience. Such reflection requires space, which is now available with the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*. The journal is modeled after the early disciplinary journal *Today’s Speech* with a rigorous yet expedited review process that affords the possibility for scholarship to respond to contemporary issues with the timeliness of journalism and the depth and precision required by a scholarly peer review process. Whether the journal meets the task it set forth will largely depend on the enthusiasm that scholars bring to the journal as a unique scholarly space.

### Useful Rhetorical History

Mindful of Lunceford’s critique of an apparent dominance of historical scholarship—not its presence, disciplinary value, or intellectual contribution—I contend that a particular historical perspective is necessary for relevant and timely rhetorical scholarship. While all historical scholarship is motivated by particular historical perspectives, my call is for a rhetorical historical perspective in which histories of ideas and events are appropriated to develop a deeper understanding of those contexts and events that resonate as timely and relevant to the contemporary reader.

A turn towards historical perspective may invigorate our ability to understand, evaluate, and act in the present. Although there are many ways to esteem and do history qua history, a particular type of historical perspective is useful for relevant and timely rhetorical scholarship. Our discipline allows for a particular sort of history, a history useful for understanding the present and making judgments about how to act and be in the world. In his meditation on the value of history for contemporary life, Friedrich Nietzsche explains:

Certainly we need history. But our need for history is quite different than that of the spoiled idler in the garden of knowledge, even if he in his refinement looks down on our rude and graceless requirements and needs. That is, we require history for life and action, not for the smug avoiding of life and action, or even to whitewash a selfish life and cowardly, bad acts. Only so far as history serves life will we serve it: but there is a degree of doing history and an estimation of it which brings with it withering and degenerating of life . . .<sup>11</sup>

In the larger argument in which this quote occurs, Nietzsche argues that there are three species of telling history (antiquarian, monumental, and critical), each having the potential to be useful or disadvantageous to human creativity and ingenuity. For our purposes,

<sup>10</sup> Barry Brummett, “Rhetorical Theory as Heuristic and Moral: A Pedagogical Justification,” *Communication Education* 33, no. 2 (1984): 103; Lunceford, “Rhetorical Historians,” 3.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980), 7.

he calls for a useful history that serves as a repository of knowledge, insight, and inspiration for contemporary action. In this account, the task of history is rhetorical. History serves persuasive purposes as it is told in ways that influence how we act, think, and judge. The tasks of both tellers of and witnesses to history should then include paying careful attention to how histories are told, what histories are told, and how histories may help understand and respond to the “fierce urgency of Now.”<sup>12</sup> These are, as it seems, issues quite relevant to rhetorical scholarship.

To approach history in this perspective, the critic must recognize how history influences the present, a point which is taken on explicitly in scholarship on the rhetoric of public memory. One of the foundations for this line of thought is in Maurice Halbwachs’ pioneering sociological work on collective memory. In Halbwachs’ account, the past is understood only as it is formed through the collective frameworks of memory, which are “the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of society.”<sup>13</sup> The frameworks describe the limitations of human agency in particular historical contexts—we act, think, and judge in highly predictable ways, unaware of our own predictability. Halbwachs demonstrates how an understanding of the historical conditions of the frameworks of memory (religion, class, and family) may explain how people within a particular cultural and historical frame are likely to think, act, and judge. A critic could then argue that such an understanding of the historical conditions through which the frameworks of memory have developed could at least open up the possibility for a type of individual and/or collective agency to emerge within cultural and historical limits. On this point, sociologist Lewis Coser argues, Halbwachs reminds us that “present generations may rewrite history, but not on a blank page.”<sup>14</sup> In sum, this perspective makes the case for a useful rhetorical history, one that provides a contextual framework for understanding how collective frameworks (which are historical products) could be analyzed to see how they both constrain and enable rhetorical agency in the present.<sup>15</sup>

While Halbwachs’ approach allows us to see how historical forces (the frameworks of memory) influence contemporary life, historian Hayden White allows us to see how history itself is constructed as a rhetorical discourse. White explains that “A historical narrative is thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative.”<sup>16</sup> If we are attentive to White, history loses a claim to a simple and staid presentation of facts about events that have passed. Instead, we are given to view historical

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. called for attention to the “fierce urgency of Now” in his “I Have a Dream” speech on August 28, 1963. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream,” in *American Rhetorical Discourse*, 2nd. ed., ed. Ronald F. Reid (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1995), 781.

<sup>13</sup> The specific frameworks of memory discussed by Halbwachs are class, family, and religion. Maurice Halbwachs, *Memory*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis A. Coser, “Introduction: Maurice Halbwachs 1877-1945,” in *On Collective Memory* by Maurice Halbwachs, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 34.

<sup>15</sup> This point suggests that individual and collective agency is possible at moments of informed communicative action. Alternatively, the term “agency” is not an adequate description of the type of thought, action, or judgments that occur when individuals or collectives act while remaining ignorant of who they are, what they are doing, or how they came to be what they are.

<sup>16</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 51.

texts as incomplete and fraught with the weight of opinion and perspective. History is less a mechanical or factual depiction of the past and more a layered discourse, part reality part conjecture, part science part art, part observation and part commentary. Approaching a historical narrative as a complete “explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative” would then be a failure of modern beings to understand the rhetoric of history.<sup>17</sup>

The scholar of contemporary rhetoric gains a great deal by approaching historical narratives as rhetorical discourses, instances of purposeful communication, written in narrative form and loaded with interpretation. Lest we forget, there is always an interval between the contemporary context being responded to and the publication of critical scholarship weighing its rhetorical dimensions. During this interval, the scholar takes in multiple accounts, weighs evidence, and puts the event into a contextual conversation that helps one understand and learn from it. Taking this to mind, a historical perspective might lead the scholar to ask a set of questions that approach the contemporary as if it were historical. What happened? How did it happen? How did discourse shape it? What consequences emerge from the particular trajectory of events? What or who are the secondary beneficiaries of a particular rendering of the event? What other modes of response are available? What are the potential consequences of alternative approaches? While answering such questions, the scholar of contemporary rhetoric brings other knowledges to bear on the present such that we can look at it, subjectively to be sure, with eyes that help see a little more clearly through the fog of immediacy.

Published rhetorical scholarship that we may label as timely and relevant relies on historical knowledge and perspective. Take for instance the recent articles by Thomas W. Benson and Brett Lunceford, “The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy” and “On the Rhetoric of Second Amendment Remedies.”<sup>18</sup> Both essays deal with an issue of decidedly contemporary concern, namely U.S. political discourse in the context of the assassination attempt on Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords on January 8, 2011 that left six people dead of the nineteen who were shot. Both scholars show how the depictions and discourses about the event disclose important features of civic life. To do so, both scholars weave a tapestry of discourses that includes newspaper accounts, public speeches, and scholarly studies of related phenomena as diverse as Cicero’s *de Inventione* and J. Michael Hogan’s *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy in the Telepolitical Age*.<sup>19</sup> Benson and Lunceford’s analyses are not historical, though the authors earn their salt by bringing powerful discourses from the history of ideas and the history of U.S. political discourse to bear on an issue of contemporary concern. That is, they draw on historical narratives, of ideas and events, to do the work of explaining and responding to a contemporary event that has yet to run its entire course.

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<sup>17</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 51.

<sup>18</sup> See: Thomas W. Benson, “The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1 (2011): 22-30, accessed September 1, 2011, [http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/articles/benson1\\_3.pdf](http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/articles/benson1_3.pdf); Brett Lunceford, “On the Rhetoric of Second Amendment Remedies,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1 (2011): 31-39, accessed September 1, 2011, [http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/articles/benson1\\_3.pdf](http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/articles/benson1_3.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> See: Cicero, *de Inventione*, LII. 98; trans. H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library 386 (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1993); J. Michael Hogan, *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy in the Telepolitical Age* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994).

The descriptive, but not the prescriptive, work in Walter Lippmann's pioneering work of political science, *Public Opinion*, provides one more call to a useful rhetorical history. On the one hand, Lippmann's book *prescribes* a response to his contemporary rhetorical situation by calling for "the establishment of bureaus of experts who could help leaders to sort through the confusion."<sup>20</sup> This elite class of opinion leaders would take on the task of disseminating interpretive accounts of events in the world that publics would use to form their collective opinion. The elite would thus control what information was to be remembered by monopolizing the dissemination of information about the world.

On the other hand, Lippmann *describes* how, and to what effect, people come to experience events in the world that they did not witness firsthand. Lippmann writes, "the only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event."<sup>21</sup> This mental image shows how the fictions that we live in are produced—a "fiction" being "a representation of the environment which is in lesser or greater degree made by man himself."<sup>22</sup> Lippmann argues that "it is clear enough that under certain conditions men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities, and that in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they respond."<sup>23</sup> Lippmann's work thus describes how decisions are made by people in society—events happen, are encoded into fictions that define the events, these fictions are arranged to produce particular effects on their audiences, the fictions are transmitted, people take in the fictions, people "see" or experience the world as a mental image, the mental image finds its place in a web of fictions, and the web of fictions guides behavior.

One need not be a hopeless determinist to see how this frightening tale might take shape in contemporary society. In an era marked by for-profit news and punditry, "political talking points seem to be driven more by ideological loyalties than by deliberation over the merits of particular policies."<sup>24</sup> Lippmann himself argues that "the conclusions they [members of the public] draw are the conclusions of their partisanship" and that, say, "to many a member of the Union League Club there is no remarkable difference between a Democrat, a Socialist, an anarchist, and a burglar."<sup>25</sup> The world that Lippmann describes is hauntingly familiar—and to understand Lippmann on this point is to better understand its familiar effect in contemporary rhetoric.

Taken together, these reflections from Nietzsche, Halbwachs, White, and Lippmann suggest that historical perspective is of central concern to scholars whose work addresses timely and relevant issues. The work of these scholars identifies history as a resource for better understanding who we are, where we came from, and where we ought to go. The historical perspective called forth from these thinkers is decidedly rhetorical—history is recognized as a narrative that serves varying, at times conflicting, purposeful ends. In this paradigm, the value of history hinges on its usefulness to think through contemporary problems in more expansive ways.

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<sup>20</sup> Lunceford, "Rhetorical Historians," 8.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> The emphasis is in the original. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald A. Placone and Michael Tumolo, "Interrupting the Machine: Cynic Comedy in the 'Rally for Sanity and/or Fear,'" *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1 (2011): 17, accessed September 1, 2011, [http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/articles/placone\\_tumolo1\\_2.pdf](http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/articles/placone_tumolo1_2.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 12, 44.

## **Conclusion**

In the first section of this essay, I examined Lunceford's argument against historical scholarship. His argument was shaped through two goals, the articulation of a perceived dominance of a particular scholarly paradigm in rhetorical scholarship and the development of a scholarly space in which an alternative type of scholarship might lay down roots. Here, I argue that Lunceford's critique might best be approached generously as an opportunity to reflect on what we are and might be doing. In the second section, I argued that historical perspective is necessary for producing relevant and timely rhetorical scholarship. Reflections on the value of history from Nietzsche, Halbwachs, White, and Lippmann were offered to explain how the historical perspective that I am calling for is essential for responding to current events in ways befitting a scholarly journal.

While it would be foolhardy to think that a moment or even a lifetime's worth of rhetorical criticism could serve as an antidote to unethical persuasion or myopic public opinion, it is indeed worthwhile to address issues of contemporary concern in a way that speaks to people beyond an insulated audience. However, as we recognize the rhetorical character of historical narrative, it becomes increasingly important to reflect on history to meet the challenges of contemporary life. A decidedly presentist rhetorical scholarship calls for a practice of evaluating and reevaluating events before, during, and after they happen. This requires the conscientious use of historical perspective to better understand and evaluate contemporary rhetoric.