

## Review:

**Michael Middleton, Aaron Hess, Danielle Enders, and Samantha Senda-Cook.**  
*Participatory Critical Rhetoric*

**Sarah Stanley,**  
*University of Alaska,  
Fairbanks*

---

**A**t the first Community and Writing conference in Boulder last October, as she considered community and writing as a scholarly field, Paula Mathieu framed three audiences of concern: community members, students, and scholars. Mathieu sequenced them in the order she did to provoke the consideration that scholarship should never be a primary motive—if, that is, we are truly committed to the critical project of social justice or transformation. For these reasons, I found Michael Middleton, Aaron Hess, Danielle Endres, and Samantha Senda-Cook's *Participatory Critical Rhetoric: Theoretical and Methodological Foundations for Studying Rhetoric in Situ* provocative by focusing on the scholarly motive. This co-authored book illustrates, but does not prescribe, what rhetorical scholarship looks like from the perspective of a rhetorical critic who is also a participant.

The argument in *Participatory Critical Rhetoric* draws primarily from a rhetorical discourse that privileges the role of critic-scholars, versus

teachers-scholars doing activist work in a community. This difference means the authors take up a familiar critique in order to stake a claim about the legitimacy of their brand of rhetorical scholarship. They draw from discussions concerning bias and critical judgment of efficacious rhetoric and do not engage with familiar discussions about reciprocity between literacy researchers and community partners. Familiar to some readers of this journal, the authors frame how the combination of social activism with rhetorical critique presents a challenge to conventional understandings in rhetoric (i.e., an expert objective critic evaluates a distant rhetorical text, understood to be a product of an autonomous agentive rhetor transmitting an argument to a passive audience in some backdrop of place and time).

The book's style of argument is inclusive and humble: the authors do not make claims their approach should supplant the practice of rhetorical criticism as "after the fact" (161). The book's organization is straightforward, delineating and breaking down claims, as based on foundational and critical principles in rhetoric theorizing the role of activist-scholarship, the embodied critic, other participants, and the field itself. Each chapter draws from a range of each author's participatory research across geographic location, time scale, and focus. A single-authored, italicized vignette will transport you to a climate change rally in Arizona to a bike and food charity event in Omaha to the New York 911 memorial and many more. These examples are meant to highlight a feature of participatory critical rhetoric, as told by the participant and helps capture what's possible. I recommend this text for anyone who wants to read these vignettes and make connections with rhetoric as social material practice, critical praxis, or reflexivity.

Pushing forward, the authors prompt the question: What experiences are left out of rhetorical knowledge construction when we engage as both field observer and field participant? Intended as a catalyst and resource for like-minded rhetorical critics, a key theoretical motive here is to expand the extra-textual concerns of rhetoric, and the authors' scholarship weaves together discussions about materiality, place-space, embodiment, and vernacular discourses (xxiv). I attended a Black Lives Matter rally while reading *Participatory Critical Rhetoric*, and I applied the authors' methodology to my experience

at the rally. I paid attention to the micro choice-making I engaged in while at the event (where I chose to stand, how I held my hands), the multiple interactions leading up to and following the rally (the back and forth between blue lives, black lives, and all lives matter), and the impacts from feeling the hot sun on my body (a remark after the rally “I used my sign for shade”). Other rhetorical concerns faded into the background: the demographics of the audience, transcripts and messaging, agenda schedules, timing of speeches. I was not systematic in my thinking about a question of rhetoric prior to the event, a pre-step of field research that does not receive much, if any, attention in the book. I found the critic’s lens refreshing, as it meant that studying rhetoric from the perspective of a participant in rhetorical fields highlights multiperspectival judgment (178).

The authors claim that dual engagement as critic-scholar and participant promotes an intersectionality, which is theorized as embodied and emplaced, prompting noticing about the immanent politics of a scene’s vernacular everyday discourse, intertwining the political and the critical (44). In this methodology, the authors define *critical* as micro choice making, in terms of action or inaction at the time of participation—rather than after the interaction, as one puts “pen to paper.” I found a helpful distinction, for example, between the low stakes of scholarship, which “offer[s] *advice to a community*,” versus “*participating in a community*,” where consequences of rhetorical actions are shared (44). Such micro attention is illustrated in one author’s recap of being taken by surprise when the performance of the Star Spangled Banner at a nuclear science conference suddenly meant deciding how to participate. “*I looked around the room unsure if I should stand and hold my hand to my heart. The reactions of the people around me assured me that I was not alone in my uncertainty. Although most of the audience stood, few held their hands to their hearts*” (21).

A particular strength of this book is the authors’ sourcing and synthesis of a wide range of research experiences, to demonstrate critical participatory rhetoric’s deserved place at the rhetorical table. Impacts from the inspiring participatory scenes used in the book as examples of the approach, however, are not discussed in any detail. Following up with the individual author’s projects might provide additional insight since the theoretical ideas and framework may be familiar to *Reflections’*

readers. Chapter endnotes reveal extensive scholarship, and readers will also want to follow some of these arguments as they point to more analytical discussion of the book's claims. A highlight for me was a vignette that drew on an author's undergraduate research experience at a Promise Keepers rally to contrast an in situ approach with a more traditional approach to the same kind of interest in the rhetoric's impact. This example, while not argued as such, demonstrated the value of participatory critical rhetoric as a pedagogical as well as a research lens.

The practical advice occurs at the end of the book, and here I found a keen observation—a few paragraphs cautioning about entering and exiting from the field. Transitions in community work, and specifically exiting away from a scene of participation is challenging, as it involves human relationships and potential feelings of abandonment and distance (172-173). The career or scholarly move from one project to another warrants more attention in our field, as relationships and trust fall apart as people leave, thus contributing to harmful legacies of academics in everyday contexts. We should continue to strategize and complicate exits in our institutional and community work. As a writing teacher and community organizer, the messiness and spontaneity of when and where surprises happen for any project is what I enjoy about what I do every day. In simple terms, this means I get to learn all the time. For this reason and because it focused on rhetorical invention and narrated the embodied and emplaced experiences where rhetorical relationships are messy and judgment unfolds, I left the book reinvigorated and ready to participate.

**Sarah Stanley** is Assistant Professor of English at University of Alaska Fairbanks and directs University Writing. She has published in several book collections, *The Journal of Basic Writing*, and *Radical Pedagogy*.