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Dissertation Abstract

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Writing with Risk: Dangerous Discourses and Event-Based Pedagogies

My dissertation responds to the pedagogical work of scholars such as Susan Wells, Nancy Welch, and Linda Flower by arguing that the risks associated with public writing pedagogies stem from the transformative nature of the rhetorical event that implicates and rearticulates actors through co-production, subverting their assumed autonomy. I argue that each of the three primary vantages of publics scholarship is particularly vulnerable to a certain type of risk aligned to a specific element of the rhetorical situation: idealist scholarship to unintended consequences in which the meaning of the text transforms, activist scholarship to harassment in which the comportment of the audience transforms, and materialist scholarship to demagoguery in which the rhetor herself transforms.

I explore each of the three risks through the case studies that compose Chapters Two, Three, and Four of this dissertation. First, I explain how the meaning of Black Power changed as it was interpreted and co-created by the Los Angeles street gang the Crips, which was then itself multiply interpreted and co-created by a variety of actors. Second, I present Gamergate as an example of how audiences can turn from innocuous to violent before explaining how the alt-right utilizes harassment to build their sphere public. Finally, I analyze the techno-utopian accelerationists to show how publics infatuated with their own terministic screens can move from narcissistic to demagogic.

I end by advocating for event-based pedagogies that address these risks by attuning students to the co-productive and transformative nature of rhetoric. Event-based pedagogies
follow five tenets, asking students to: 1) enable other actors to participate in the transformation of the world, 2) conduct nuanced research that illuminates the complexity of public discourse, 3) be open to the diverse array of opinions and perspectives expressed within and among various publics, 4) adapt positions and arguments in response to new information, and 5) attend to the ways in which new arguments are constructed from elements of prior arguments.