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CHAPTER 8



LANGUAGE AND LIMITATIONS: TOWARD A NEW PRAXIS OF PUBLIC INTELLECTUALISM

Kathryn Comer and Timothy Jensen

We first became invested in debates about public intellectualism during the creation of *Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion*, a digital journal and web forum dedicated to fostering public conversations about everyday rhetoric.¹ Frustrated by the systemic isolation of scholarly publication and its exclusionary language, we found inspiration in calls for the public intellectual, one who seeks communion with a broader audience with the aim of raising the collective, critical consciousness. We were energized by Edward Said's fierce spirit and speech about public intellectualism, especially the particular brand of vitriol he reserved for academics that retreat into the insularity of "special private languages of criticism" (Viswanathan 176). *Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion* was our effort to resist the temptations and pressures of what Said labeled a "cult of professionalism" ("Response" 373). The fashionable academic stance of being misunderstood held no glory; to choose this way of life is to avoid, as Henry Giroux puts it, "the vocabulary for understanding and questioning how dominant authority worked through and on institutions, social relations, and individuals" (5). The public intellectual strives against this detachment, Said argued, by confronting injustice and the "normalized quiet of unseen power" wherever it may exist, in a vernacular that reaches beyond a circle of specialist peers ("Public").

From its inception, a primary goal of the *Harlot* project has been to challenge the conventions of academic discourse and its resulting mystique in public spheres. Specifically, *Harlot* aims to reveal the subtle and powerful ways we are influenced through communication, illuminating how truth and knowledge are inextricable from and intertwined with rhetoric. The title derives from pejorative references to rhetoric as “the harlot of the arts,” an expression from antiquity that was meant to cast rhetoric as suspect and even potentially sordid, distinct from truth and knowledge but able to “‘dress it up’ so as to communicate it more effectively” (Lucaites and Condit 6). Acknowledging such prevalent negative connotations instead of ignoring their power, *Harlot* provides a space for bridging rhetorical scholarship and public discourse.

To create the conditions for such collaborative investigations, and the potential Said and Giroux suggest they hold for social justice, however, we need to ask how the phrase “public intellectual” itself exercises an unseen power. Our aim in this essay is to examine how the language of public intellectualism frames scholarly debates about and attitudes toward social change and, consequently, academics’ participation in public-oriented scholarship. The power of the label—evidenced by its use in the mass media, numerous academic forums, and indeed, this very collection—leads us to ask: What frames of understanding are triggered by such a phrase? What narratives are invoked, assumed, and reinforced by its usage? This examination is grounded in a particular project that highlights what is at stake when the term is used to label, rally others to action, or draw boundaries between groups. Reflecting on *Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion*, a project that aspires to a new praxis of public intellectualism, we examine the assumptions of engagement that are tacitly propagated by debates centered on the term “public intellectual.” Limitations in the language, we argue, misdirect the swells of creative energy found within these debates, and so we conclude by calling for *projects* of collective critical inquiry as part of the developing movement toward a scholarship of engagement.

Our concern with ongoing negotiations of public intellectualism is rooted in a particular experience: the creation of an inclusive online space for rhetorical criticism. The project’s origin can be traced back to a particular conversation about calls within contemporary rhetorical theory to shift “from criticism as method to critique as practice” (McKerrow 108). There was lively debate about critique as transformative practice and rhetorical analysis as a special tool for demystifying how power conceals and reveals itself through discourse.

The conversation, however invigorating in its acknowledgment that power circulates through everyday social practice, was utterly devoid of material contextualization. It occurred to us that all of these bold claims about the stakes of rhetorical criticism become moot when such criticism is circulated only among academics. Where is the value, we wondered, in proclaiming the need for a citizenry sensitized to rhetorical forces and calling for change, when that call is heard only amongst those whom already agree? How can we make such bold claims about criticism's potency when it only reaches a handful of academics? From our perspective, the very integrity of the field was at stake. And so we set out to create a space for critical—but inclusive and informal—conversations about rhetoric's role in everyday lives, designed to influence participants' beliefs and behaviors. In short, we wanted to take accessible, relevant criticism to the streets. Several years later, *Harlot* is in full operation as a peer-reviewed journal and open web forum, listed in the *MLA International Bibliography* and steadily growing its community of web visitors.

During *Harlot*'s nascent stages, we sought practical wisdom in theoretical examinations of public engagement. Like any conditioned academics, we first turned to the scholarship. Naturally, we began by trying to define the expression as well as we could. The majority of treatments, we found, are loosely structured around three points: first, the label of "intellectual" is used to signify an identity that is, by and large, both individual and based on academic credentials. Although there are exceptions, this observation aligns with Russell Jacoby's argument in *The Last Intellectuals*, which suggests that the critical, independent, nonspecialist thinkers of the 1950s, who wielded great influence through magazines and small-scale publishers, were eventually absorbed into the university system. It is understandable, then, that the term now seems sutured to academia; it was Jacoby's book in 1987 that helped usher in a popularization of the phrase "public intellectual" (see figure 8.1).

Second, the intellectual in question addresses an audience considerably larger than his or her immediate circle of specialist peers, ideally the broadly conceived "public sphere." And, finally, the intellectual is placed in a position of authority in relation to a public in need of enlightenment. A few examples demonstrate these commonalities: The public intellectual is a "critical commentator addressing a non-specialist audience on matters of broad public concern" (Posner 5); "someone who takes as his or her subject matters of public concern, and *has the public's attention*" (Fish 118); "someone who brings academic expertise to bear on important topics of the day in a language

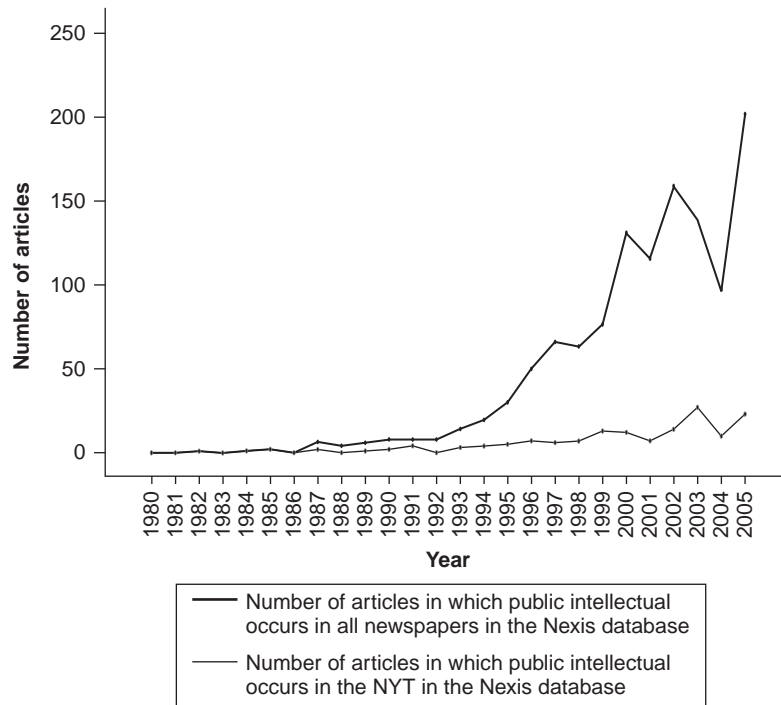


Figure 8.1 Frequency of use of “public intellectual” in print media, 1980–2005, “Major Papers,” Nexis Database. Courtesy of Springer and *The American Sociologist* journal, volume 37.3, 2006, pp. 39–66, “The Public Intellectual Trope in the United States,” Eleanor Townsley, figure 1

that can be understood by the public” (Wolfe B20). There are, of course, exceptions to be found, as in the work of Cornel West and Ellen Cushman, who include community-oriented local activists among public intellectuals. Despite such ongoing efforts to expand the terms of the conversation, however, most definitions hinge upon an individual, educated specialist passing along knowledge to general audiences.

To point out that “public intellectual” is a trope centered on the individual is hardly a noteworthy announcement. Our point, rather, is that the consequences of these assumptions have escaped critical attention. The very definite article so often applied in scholarship—the public intellectual—posits a sort of platonic ideal, an essential identity that forecloses alternatives. As a result, certain assumptions have been cultivated and normalized that shape the conversation in

subtle but profound ways. Our own experience provides some evidence; although our true concern was with the *process* and *exercise* of intellectual inquiry in public fora, we found ourselves caught up in Posner-like taxonomies, trying to discover models of “successful” public intellectuals. The association between individual identity and the intellectual implicitly hinges upon one’s qualifications for the role, namely, those earned by education and privileged position. Both Said and Chomsky base their calls for public intellectualism on the premise that with great power comes great responsibility:

For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. The responsibilities of intellectuals, then, are much deeper than what Macdonald calls the “responsibility of people,” given the unique privileges that intellectuals enjoy.

(Chomsky 2)

According to these foundational arguments, public intellectuals are held distinct from average citizens, simultaneously elevated above and beholden to everyday people.

In this light it also becomes apparent that although intellectualism is treated as an identity, it is not an occupation. Intellectuals have day jobs, and “[n]owadays the term ‘public intellectual’ merely refers to an academic in his capacity as a moon-lighter” (Crain). Even Stephen Mailloux and John Michael, who parse distinctions between different types of intellectuals, focus their attention on academic incarnations. The very spaces of these conversations locate them as an academic concern; rarely do we see these debates rehearsed in public discourse. The “trivial repetition and dull, daily reinforcement” (Burke 26) of these discursive elisions assign the label of intellectual only to those with advanced academic degrees. Obviously, yoking intellectual identity to the academy effectively obstructs the possibility of labeling those outside the academy as intellectuals in their own right. Consequently, the emphasis on the individual intellectual locates and awards power to that figure, not the public. The unspoken logic at work in many calls for more public intellectuals is the long-debunked narrative of smashing false consciousness, as if to suggest that it is just a matter of getting knowledge out to the public and that social change will naturally follow. Given these associations, we should not be surprised to find both publics and intellectuals bristling at the label.

Most problematic of all are the verbs and directional prepositions that position the public as an object to be acted upon. For example,

Mailloux's hybrid academic/public intellectuals are assigned verbs that establish a one-way transfer of knowledge: the translators "provide," the commentators and inventors "present," and the metacritics "comment on" issues and ideas. Similarly, rhetoricians "can produce [analyses] *for* various audiences" (144, emphasis added). Even Said describes public intellectuals as individuals "endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion *to*, as well as *for*, a public" (*Role* 11, emphasis added). This kind of phrasing evokes what Nathan Crick identifies as an Enlightenment mentality in which "timeless truths" are presented for "passive absorption" by public audiences (130). Such a unidirectional approach seems fundamentally self-defeating. We are also uneasy with speaking *for* a public so confidently; politics of representation suggest that we should be creating possibilities for those public voices to represent themselves, inviting interaction without positioning the audience as student and the intellectual as authoritative teacher. Any project that seeks to raise the collective consciousness on an ongoing basis, we argue, must be done in collaboration: critical intellectuals should speak *with* other audiences, not just *to* them. But here, again, we must resist a syntactical objectification that implies a stable or unified public sphere. Critical scholars like Warner, Fraser, Kluge, and Hauser, for all their differences, have roundly refuted any idealized, impossible whole in favor of complex negotiations among multiple, shifting counter- and micropublics. It is no longer possible, especially in an age where media fragment and converge in new ways every day, to conceive of a single, locatable polis in which "the public" can be addressed as a mass, and yet reaching "the masses" seems to remain a cornerstone of public intellectualism.

By normalizing a one-way transfer of knowledge by an authoritative individual, academic discourses run the risk of normalizing the alienation that frequently occurs as a result. If we are to foster real, systemic change, public intellectualism must seek above all to engage audiences in active, mutual conversation. Though admirable in its willingness to speak tough truths, Said's brand of public intellectualism is decidedly confrontational: "Least of all should an intellectual be there to make his/her audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant" (*Role* 12). Though less obvious, the same oppositional stance is embedded in the language of "intervention" in public affairs. Even Henry Giroux, whose calls for engagement we find particularly inspiring, at times endorses a dynamic that is ultimately at odds with the projects he encourages. He writes, for instance, that "democracy also demands a pedagogical intervention

organized around the need to create the conditions for educating citizens” (4). Elsewhere, when describing Said’s opprobrium for insulated academics, Giroux suggests that we need to fight against the “the tendency to ignore questions of intervention and degenerate into scholasticism, formalism, or career opportunism” (6). Though we appreciate the urgency and conviction the term brings with it, “intervention” presupposes opposition between parties. We respectfully disagree with Said and Giroux on this point, and suggest that a transformative and sustainable public intellectualism is one that ultimately encourages its audience to engage in intellectual work on their own terms and to act on their own behalf. This is not, to be clear, a call to simply tone down the language for fear that we might scare off the timid. Our suggestion, rather, is to take the spirit and conviction motivating the antagonistic language and translate it into a discourse that prompts collaborative intellectual inquiry, fosters conversation and collective action, and empowers rather than embarrasses participants.

Thus, even as we were energized by these arguments for the potential influence of public intellectuals, we realized that these approaches would not teach us how to perform the type of public intellectualism for which we saw a real need. Although our project sought to enact the noble goals espoused by Said and others, we could not locate *Harlot* in these conversations. We were not an individual, nor did we want to speak to other audiences from an assumed position of authority, nor did we aspire to reach some vast, abstract public. We were a collective, seeking to build an open, accessible space for critique and intellectual play among invested participants from diverse communities. It was this goal that brought to light for us the counterproductive subtexts of dominant models. The discomfort our explorations engendered has proven incredibly useful as *Harlot* progressed from concept toward reality. Our identification of the major points of tension within scholarly treatments of public intellectualism—problematic assumptions about the intellectual, the public, and the relationship between them—served as both warning and inspiration. If *Harlot* were to enact a new praxis of public intellectualism, we would have to be just as critical about our technologies as our theories; we aimed to subject our tools to the same scrutiny as our language.

The name of the journal, of course, was a major consideration as well as an early negotiation that presaged many of those to come. Around the same time that we began talking about the project, we happened across the phrase “harlot of the arts” as a pejorative reference to rhetoric’s ability to play fast and loose with meaning and

laughingly noted its rich potential. Our initial misgivings about raised eyebrows and rolled eyes were mitigated, however, when we dug into the word's etymology. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term has varied greatly in its usage over the centuries, referring to both men and women and carrying both positive and negative associations. The key definition, for our purposes, is that of "an itinerant jester, buffoon, or juggler; one who tells or does something to raise a laugh." This neglected denotation evokes the harlot's ability to speak irreverent truths in the face of complacency, to voice critique with a smile and (usually) without reprisal. The *American Heritage Dictionary* highlights the word's association with a lack of fixed occupation, what we like to think of as a fluid professional identity in line with Said's figure of the "traveler" who abandons fixed positions in favor of "a multiplicity of disguises, masks, and rhetorics" (qtd. in Howe). Even in its contemporary associations with prostitution, the harlot figure is one who circumvents, reverses, or flattens the various boundaries and controls enforced by social and political norms. And so to us, the harlot is a gender-neutral trickster figure who encourages the carnivalesque overturning of traditional hierarchies, even if just for a moment. *Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion* refers to the goal of promiscuous—inclusive, informal, and accessible—intellectual play.

This figure of the shape-shifting harlot has proven helpful for working against dominant fixed positions or individualistic ideologies. From that first debate and throughout the planning stages and our first years of publication, *Harlot* has been a collaborative effort that resists a version of public intellectualism as an individual enterprise. Indeed, the whole premise of the project is that academic isolation is counterproductive. As teachers and thinkers, we understand that the process of sharing and creating knowledge is enhanced by a diversity of voices and perspectives interacting in a variety of places and modes, each combination of which constitutes a space for mutual learning. And there was plenty of learning to be done, learning that would require team building within and beyond academic settings. To that end, we recruited colleagues and institutional sponsors who could foster multidimensional growth. The reassuring ease with which we gained the material and moral support of our peers reaffirmed our sense that many academics are looking for new ways to play in public. These experiences, especially the invaluable technological expertise and training offered by the Ohio State University community, confirmed the importance of developing strong ties among intellectuals and the institutional administrators who have

the knowledge and (often) the funds to bring their ambitious ideas to fruition. Of course, as Deborah Brandt wisely reminds us, sponsorship always comes with strings; this push and pull is an unavoidable factor of institutional support, one that requires careful negotiation of ideologies and economics. Nevertheless, as scholars look for new ways to work together, such resources should be recognized and mobilized en route to productive collective action.

With the “intellectual” reconstituted as a community, we turned our attention to the idea of “public” as a factor of two considerations: the public space and the public body. From the outset, *Harlot* was conceived not as an *act of* communication but rather as a *space for* communication, an arena in which participants would engage the issues and ideas that mattered in their daily lives. But before we could determine where or how *Harlot*’s space would materialize, the question became: who was our public? If it was not some abstract mass, how could we locate, or rather create, an alternative discursive community? In those early conversations, we used the phrase “popular audiences” as shorthand to signify those curious and engaged citizens interested in thinking critically together; each of the editors had his or her own image of friends, family, and colleagues who fit the bill. This language, of course, was soon dismissed on account of its own implicit distinction between “elite” and “common” participants in “high” and “low” culture. In fact, we have yet to settle on an appropriate terminology for *Harlot*’s target audiences, an indeterminacy with which we have become comfortable. This ambiguity remains bound up with our rejection of the outdated assumption that any such public can be approached as a whole.

Such a version of “the public” as a coherent, identifiable mass is not just a theoretical fallacy; in practice, it can have a paralyzing or disheartening effect. We cannot all be Stanley Fish, reaching millions through the *New York Times*, nor achieve Henry Louis Gates’s level of recognition and influence. But that kind of exposure does not have to be the goal of an alternative version of public intellectualism. As the late great Howard Zinn reminds us, “We don’t have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world.” Our modest goal was simply to create a space in which individuals came together to engage in a form of intellectual exchange that can participate in—influence and be influenced by—public discourse. But that does not necessarily equate to addressing or engaging some elusive “public as a whole.” Instead, we formulated our public as *a* public “both larger in meaning but more local in scope” than *the* public

(Farmer 204), simply those who wanted to play with rhetoric, with dual emphasis on fluidity and activity. We would invite these public participants in much the way we engaged academic participants at the local level of connection, whether that meant physical proximity, personal relationship, or online access.

What these revisions of the public and the intellectual brought to the fore was the relationship between them, the dynamic of public intellectualism. Theoretically, *Harlot's* ideal was to foster reciprocal conversations among diverse, interested public players. Practically, then, our task became "to join others in creating a space within which such matters can be articulated publicly and debated critically" (Jacoby 3). We quickly understood that the form of this space would irrevocably determine the dynamics within it, and any early considerations of print media were swiftly rejected. The obvious objections (prohibitive cost and declining circulation) paled in comparison to those arising from our philosophic commitments. Conventional print publication would rehearse the linear, one-to-many dynamic we wanted to challenge; it simply cannot offer the community and responsiveness we imagined for *Harlot*. To create that kind of interactivity, we needed the affordances of the Internet, with its shared discursive spaces and the exchanges they enable. This is not to suggest that the Internet has unified definitions of the public sphere, nor simplified debates about its liberatory capabilities. Issues of access and equity remain paramount, and as scholars like Irene Ward caution, it would be naive to assume that the Internet constitutes a democratic public sphere. Nevertheless, the qualified optimism of Susan Kates and Siva Vaidhyanathan, each of whom approvingly notes new options for online intellectualism, is infectious. The Internet makes possible multiple shape-shifting public spaces that can foster critical thought and conscious action on a micro scale or local level. This kind of activity, in turn, has the potential to create pockets of conversation that can web outward and offline, influencing the everyday lives and practices of users.

Again, the hope for active collaboration dictated our practical decisions, leading us to embrace the inclusive, dynamic spirit of Web 2.0. Just as the World Wide Web has irrevocably complicated old notions of the public sphere as based on physical spaces and direct influence, Web 2.0 fostered new patterns of interaction that have fundamentally challenged the top-down model of disseminating knowledge in favor of lateral connections among "users" actively seeking and creating new knowledge. Richard MacManus's explanation speaks to fresh opportunities for a new public intellectualism: "the philosophy of Web 2.0

is to let go of control, share ideas and code, build on what others have built, free your data.” In this light *Harlot* seeks to free academic rhetorical criticism and its multiplicity of analytical tools, allowing rhetorical resources to be generated, debated, and edited by a wide range of users. With the addition of blogs, wikis, and commenting functions, along with complementary activity on social networking sites, *Harlot* is designed to resemble a virtual playground for genuine, open-ended encounters. Of course, we also want to encourage a level of critical and thoughtful participation, an intellectual rigor that leaves *Harlot*’s users feeling invigorated in the face of the rhetorical forces all around us. To that end, we have tweaked the traditional academic peer review system, heeding Crick’s reminder that professional intellectuals’ contributions to public discourse are “no more or less significant than those of the ‘average citizen’ ” (136). In *Harlot*’s public, peers are equal participants, experts of everyday rhetoric working alongside experts in the field of rhetoric, all engaged in the same task of fostering productive dialogue.

Harlot’s modified review system—in which each submission is vetted by at least one academic and one reviewer who does not self-identify as a professional scholar—has validated itself repeatedly. What initially felt like a necessary capitulation to gate-keeping academic publishing standards has become essential to *Harlot*’s integrity. From one angle, our decision to implement a version of peer review constitutes an act of inclusion for some of *Harlot*’s public; when professional academics are able to situate alternative work within their institutional reward structures, they are far more likely to play along. Meanwhile, the review process has held academic contributors to high standards of relevance and accessibility that consistently challenge conventional scholarly performances. More importantly, the resulting collaboration between editors, reviewers, and authors constitutes its own participatory space within our open-source online journal management system. Users actively participate at every stage of the editorial process, creating encounters that have become one of the most satisfying aspects of the project for all involved, leading to heightened levels of participation in and enthusiasm for other areas. The result, we hope, is increased rhetorical consciousness and critical practice for all of *Harlot*’s publics; we can certainly attest to these results in our own experiences.

Playing across these borders, as *Harlot* has shown its editors and contributors, offers opportunities to hone our rhetorical awareness and resources of strategic communication. These exercises train us to become the kinds of travelers called for by Said. So whether the role

we perform is that of the professional academic supporting systematic reform, the local community activist, or the digital trickster, we can do so with greater flexibility and facility. Given the challenges faced by academics and academia more generally, we will need all the acumen we can develop. As we have hinted, a major hurdle to academics' active participation in projects like *Harlot* is the dominant reward system built around "too narrow a definition of scholarship and too limited a range of instruction" (Lynton and Elman 7). No one reading this volume needs reminding of the "publish or perish" mentality that demands increasing amounts of scholarship in the face of diminishing audiences and budgets, nor of the negative consequences of such limited notions of academic work or success. This does not mean, of course, that we dismiss the value of sharing knowledge with other specialists; we do not wish to downplay or discredit the significant accomplishments achieved through such models. We do, however, suggest that our definitions of *professional* intellectualism may well merit the same kind of reconsiderations as *public* intellectualism if we are to see our current position as one of opportunity rather than adversity.

Indeed, there is increasing evidence that some long-awaited changes are in process. In the 20 years since the highly influential Carnegie study *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* was released, the four-part model of scholarship Earnest Boyer suggested, in which alternative forms of intellectual labor merit recognition and reward, has facilitated broad conversations and local institutional change. These negotiations highlight the practical value of tweaking our terminology, as well as the stakes of those choices. For example, Boyer originally designated community-oriented work as "scholarship of application"; quickly detecting the implications of a one-way dissemination of academic wisdom, he soon rephrased such work as "scholarship of engagement." As R. Eugene Rice observes, this language change rejects "the 'expert' model" in favor of one that "emphasizes genuine *collaboration*: that the learning and the teaching be multidirectional and the expertise shared" (28). These ideas coincide with "the public turn" in rhetoric and composition studies, in which teachers, students, and researchers reconsider the standard assumptions of writing in/as academic discourse, increasingly looking outside of academic settings to address issues with real-world exigencies. Such ongoing redefinitions, and the traction they are gaining, hold the promise for increased participation of academics in alternative projects and spheres as we continually revise assumptions regarding the priorities of intellectual work.

As this narrative attests, this process of revision, literally seeing anew, necessitates turning a critical eye on our language choices as well as the behaviors they inscribe. If scholars truly hope to pursue public intellectualism in action as well as in theory, we must excavate this underlying logic in order to move in more productive directions. But this is not simply a matter of finding a better term, the “right” phrase. Rather, we call for an ongoing process of discovering language that works for *your* particular project, that impels *your* particular public to action and inquiry, and expands—rather than consolidates—conversations about intellectualism. *Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion* is just one example of reimagining academic discourse in the twenty-first century, one step toward a new praxis of public intellectualism. Negotiation between the change we wish to see and the current structures calls forth our trickster capacities to challenge the status quo with a disarming smile instead of a clenched fist. A harlot of the arts, like the trickster, “is many things, and is no thing as well. Ambivalent, androgynous, anti-definitional, the trickster is slippery and constantly mutable” (Powell 9). In an age marked by both the consolidation of power and the proliferation of communicative resources, such dynamic potential becomes intellectuals’ greatest asset.

NOTE

1. *Harlot* can be accessed at www.HarlotoftheArts.org.

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