Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

FORUM ON ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

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The Contest of Faculties: On Discerning the Politics of Social Engagement in the Academy

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> One of [Harvey Milk's] key principles was that in order to fight one must come out. And I think he meant a couple of things by that. The first thing that he meant, of course, is that you can't fight against discrimination and exploitation if you're in the closet. But he also meant ... that you have to be out about your politics.
> —Charles Morris III

Addressing a modest November press conference as part of a boycott against the site of the annual 2008 National Communication Association (NCA) Convention in San Diego, Professor Charles Morris III celebrated colleagues willing to take a public stand for social justice in condemnation of bigotry, while admonishing those who maintained their silence despite shared political commitments. The issue at hand concerned opposition to Douglas Manchester, owner of the convention hotel, who had allegedly mistreated his employees and provided a sizable contribution to the campaign in support of California's controversial Proposition 8, proscribing same-sex marriage within the state. The boycott of the Manchester Marriott is among the most recent, conspicuous instances in which NCA members have confronted the tension between political commitment and scholarly obligation. Such a tension is common to many academic disciplines, but in the summer and fall of 2008, it was literally in our (collective) face.

Of course, Professor Morris's appeal speaks to a concern much larger than any particular controversy. The immediate exigency for this forum is thus not just the 2008 boycott of the Manchester Hotel at the San Diego convention, nor even the subsequent debate before the 2009 NCA Legislative Council over a failed resolution

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concerning whether the association should oppose the use of torture as anathema to its professional code of communication ethics. Rather, it is the discussions animated by the *increasing regularity* of such controversies concerning the propriety of engaged scholarship in the first place.

We begin by noting that the relationship between scholarship and social engagement is by no means obvious or unproblematic. We know, for example, that there are less conspicuous forms of scholarly engaged activities than what we might affiliate with so-called political boycotts, such as working on community projects with non-academic leaders and public figures, developing public health or youth voting campaigns, actively cultivating the role of the public scholar, and so on, all of which deserve careful attention. These "civil" and "public" forms of engagement often displace the "political" in name, and yet they seek some sort of interface with various publics and state institutions. Questions abound. Is it possible to conceive of engaged scholarship—and in particular, scholarship in the humanities and social sciences—as apolitical, as some scholars seem to suggest? Or is socially engaged scholarship, broadly construed, inevitably a political endeavor? To answer these questions and consider their implications, one must decide what the "political" might mean, as well as come to terms with how the concept of "engagement" has been discussed in academic institutions. We address each of these concerns in turn.

In the context of the protest against the site of the 2008 NCA convention, the concept of the "political" specifically refers to matters of civil rights, including the right to work, as well as what is often characterized as the politics of identity. More implicitly, the "political" invokes what Michel Foucault might characterize as an economy of power that can serve both productive and destructive ends.[1] There is also, however, a more traditional and popular understanding of the political as having to do with the ordinary processes of civic governance, including a focus on legislative, executive, and judicial forms and functions; the management and regulation of scarce resources; party affiliations and loyalties; and the like. It is this more workaday understanding that comes to mind for most people most of the time, especially academics (e.g., those who study "political communication").

For us, however, it is important to stress that both notions of the political (politics as production *vis-à-vis* party politics, biopolitics *vis-à-vis* civic governance, and so forth) share an understanding of "power," broadly construed as both force and influence. In particular, they share a relationship between various publics and official government institutions.[2] From either standpoint, then, we might say that politics concerns the use of force and influence, usually in respect to a public or state. From a rhetorical vantage, of course, we would underscore the sense in which politics concerns *public arguments about the appropriate use of power*.

Social engagement has been part of the mission of the public university since the nineteenth century. The ways in which it has been understood, however, differ dramatically. Indeed, the literature on "engagement" by academics is conceptually unwieldy and centuries old. To manage it in this relatively short space, we identify three distinct but interrelated registers of social engagement to provide some preliminary (and tentative) coordinates for continued discussion: the civil, the

(explicitly) political, and the public. Historically, we believe, social engagement rhetoric in the US academy has successively moved through each emphasis.

Social engagement has been a fundamental concern of the theoretical humanities from the modern era to the present. So, for example, in the late eighteenth century— and importantly in response to the ways in which universities were becoming socially engaged institutions during the Enlightenment—Immanual Kant published an unusual collection of essays that he titled *The Contest of Faculties* (1798). Writing as a distinguished professor of the "lower faculty" of philosophy, Kant outlined the role of "public reason" for society and the state, forecasting the now familiar and tired narrative of "the ivory tower versus the real world," a tale that seems to be inimical to the recent ascent of the "for-profit university" and their prolific advertising campaigns.[3]

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical scholars in the humanities are probably more familiar with the expressly political scholarship of the Frankfurt School, much of which echoed the Enlightenment push for a direct engagement with society and its problems outside of university settings. From Theodor Adorno's famous critique of the "committed" work of Jean Paul Sartre and Bertolt Brecht, to Herbert Marcuse's engagement with the New Left, critical scholars have sought to think actively about the ways in which "art," for example, can lead to social transformation or (often unwittingly) contribute to human suffering.[4]

Closer to home, social engagement was first embraced as a concept by speech teachers in the context of "civic engagement," the unquestioned good of the humanities in general, and the founding promise of communication studies in particular.[5] This conception was the fruit of the nineteenth-century adult education movement in the United States. Congressional debate over legislation that would create state-based research universities began in 1857, culminating in the passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Act in 1862. The Morrill Act gave public lands to each state for the purpose of building universities that would serve the educational needs of the families of farmers and military personnel, ex-military personnel returning to the workforce, and other members of the so-called industrial classes.[6] While the motives leading to its passage were related primarily to economic recovery, the law helped to define the mission of the public university as providing access to an affordable education, as well as delivering experts and leaders for consulting and advice to the surrounding community. The point of the public university was to engage the working classes and thus operated in terms of an implicit *class politics.*

As Herman Cohen has detailed, the field of communication studies was created as a consequence of the kind of student that attended a land-grant university. "These students could, in no way, be called university students," argues Cohen. "They did not resemble European students; nor were they like the students of established American universities."[7] Rather, they were semi-literate and required remedial instruction in the norms of English speaking and writing. The fields of composition and speech emerged as a consequence of teaching the "industrial classes," but also because the new kinds of textbooks that were composed to engage these new students contributed to an emergent disciplinary identity. Indeed, in the early part of the

twentieth century, many communication scholars, animated by a Deweyan progressivism, understood their pedagogical mission as foundationally civic in character, helping to produce an engaged citizen of the state by teaching public speaking, debate, and discussion.[8]

Pedagogical concerns aside, the politics of this form of social engagement were not directly confronted and discussed as a matter of scholarship until the cultural tumult of the 1960s. In rhetorical studies in particular, political scholarship began to compete with, and finally eclipse, the democratic idealism of civic engagement. It is difficult to recapture the mood of the time, but portentous songs like "Gimme Shelter" by the Rolling Stones give lyrical and affective expression to a generalized sense of cultural crisis: "Oh, a storm is threatening/My very life today/If I don't get some shelter/Oh yeah, I'm gonna fade away/War, children/it's just a shot away/it's just a shot away."[9] It was in this apocalyptic mood that a debate unfolded in the pages of this journal between Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Forbes Hill that became something of a watershed, making explicit the political dimensions of engagement in rhetorical scholarship.[10]

The debate focused primarily on an analysis of President Nixon's 1969 speech to the nation arguing for a policy of "Vietnamization." In this debate, Hill argued that critical scholarship needed to focus exclusively on the success of the speech, regardless of its deceptions, in the service of dispassionate analysis. Campbell challenged this position by noting that such an approach "hardly qualifies as objectiv[e]. It is, in fact, to choose the most favorable and partisan account a critic can render. For example, it is to accept the perspective of the advertiser and applaud the skill with which, say, Anacin [a brand of caffeinated aspirin] commercials create the false belief that their product is a more effective pain reliever than ordinary aspirin. As a consequence, the methodology produces analyses that are at least covert advocacy of the point of view taken in the rhetorical act—under the guise of objectivity."[11] Notwithstanding Hill's response that "[r]hetoric is the study of our use of the means, not our commitments to ends,"[12] Campbell's argument that one cannot *avoid* the political in the critical act is widely assumed in contemporary rhetorical studies (and beyond) today.[13] In retrospect, a concern for political engagement arguably eclipsed a commitment to civil engagement in the 1970s because of calamitous congeries: the devastation of the war in Vietnam—both at home and abroad—racial strife, sexual repression, and misogyny.[14]

By the late 1990s, the cultural mood shifted once again, and newer instantiations of scholarly engagement emerged that we might characterize as forms of "public engagement." In one sense, at least, such efforts by communication scholars mark a return to—or a refashioning of—the tradition of a Deweyan civic engagement that animated early efforts in teaching public speaking. So, for example, Richard Cherwitz's "Intellectual Entrepreneurship" program at the University of Texas labors to "educate 'citizen-scholars,'" who will "utilize their intellectual capital as a lever for social good."[15] And in a forthcoming edited volume titled *The Public Work of Rhetoric: Citizen-Scholars and Civic Education*, a wide range of scholars focus on the

ways in which scholarship and pedagogy can be articulated to address the "Republic's need for capacitated citizens."[16]

Outside of communication studies, "engagement" has become a buzzword in scholarship concerned with both pedagogy and educational policy, and has been featured in essays in trade publications like the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*.[17] Indeed, as we were writing this introduction, we discovered a new journal dedicated to the topic, the *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*.[18] In the broadest strokes, educators have called most recently for engagement in terms of "public scholarship," community-campus partnerships, service learning, public intellectualism, and public relations work.[19] Whereas expressly political forms of engagement concern the state, the newest forms of scholarly engagement call for active interaction with a range of publics and communities that might be understood to be the contemporary expression (or replacement) of the initial, institutional focus on the working class.

Of course, the efforts of academics to engage socially have also been heavily criticized and critiqued—and from across the political spectrum. Conservative figures such as David Horowitz have taken aim, specifically, at the most conspicuous forms of engagement as part of a larger, insidious liberal conspiracy to brainwash students.[20] And in an infamous opinion piece from 2003, the liberal-leaning Stanley Fish admonished educators to "aim low" and abandon civic engagement as an inherently inconsistent with the project of scholarship.[21] From a more radical critical perspective, Darrin Hicks and Ronald Walter Greene have shown how forms of civic and political engagement participate in fashioning neo-liberal citizens in a way that seriously questions the assumed good of engagement as an educational end.[22] Notably, all of the participants in this forum (including the two of us) assume that social engagement, in whatever its form, *is an inherently good thing*. This party line could be problematic, and we invite readers to question it.

Finally, it must be said that pursuing social engagement in civil, political, or public ways entails risk. Lip service to the contrary, the present academic industrial complex typically refuses to reward social engagement in any significant way. In the summer of 2008, a coalition of nineteen chancellors, deans, provosts, and senior scholars, chaired by Syracuse Chancellor and President Nancy Cantor and California Institute of the Arts President Steven Lavine, began working to develop guidelines and strategies for revising tenure and promotion policies to recognize and reward "publicly engaged academic work."[23] As they deliberated, Cantor and Lavine published a provocative essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that detailed their exigency:

> Scholars and artists at colleges and universities are increasingly engaging in public scholarship. Leaving their campuses to collaborate with their communities, they explore such multidisciplinary issues as citizenship and patriotism, ethnicity and language, space and place, and the cultural dimensions of health and religion. They are creating innovative methods and vocabularies for scholarship using cutting-edge technology, pursuing novel kinds of creative work, and integrating research with adventurous new teaching strategies. But will those faculty members be promoted and rewarded at tenure time for their efforts?[24]

They concluded, of course, with the obvious answer: no. After two years of deliberation and consultation, and under the moniker "The Imagining America Tenure Team Initiative," the coalition released a forty-five-page report that provides an exhaustive account of the structural discouragement that "unorthodox" and "publicly engaged" scholarship receives, as well as a series of recommendations for changing the tenure and promotion process to evaluate and recognize the quality of good, albeit unorthodox, public scholarship.[25]

The problem with the report, again, speaks to the issue we are pointing up: just what constitutes "engaged public scholarship" for the "tenure team" is unclear. Civic? Political? Public? The concept is operationalized through examples, such as community outreach programs and performance art projects, but the actual definition is vague:

> Publicly engaged academic work is scholarly or creative activity integral to a faculty member's academic area. It encompasses different forms of making knowledge about, for, and with diverse publics and communities. Through a coherent, purposeful sequence of activities, it contributes to the public good and yields artifacts of public and intellectual value.[26]

The failures of this definition became obvious last year when Syracuse University weathered a controversy over the tenure case of Boyce D. Watkins, a professor and public intellectual who took Cantor at her word.

The key problem is that the definition Cantor's "tenure team" advances fails to account for the ways in which the political is yoked to the civic and the public. Since starting his career at Syracuse, Professor Watkins had devoted considerable time to a form of public scholarship that "contributes to the public good": he became a high-profile media commentator on racial issues. According to the university, his publication record was not up to Syracuse's standards. Watkins's response was that the university cannot have it both ways: the university president had been calling for more public intellectual work and "scholarship in action," and even helped to write a high-profile report for revising tenure and promotion standards to accommodate publicly engaged scholarship.[27] Yet when he became a public scholar, the university was unwilling to support his many appearances and popular audience publications as "scholarship."[28]

Watkins's case is demonstrative of what is ultimately at stake in any discussion of engaged scholarship: however we slice it, social engagement is unavoidably political. To "engage" concerns power and, insofar as resources are concerned, the appropriate use of force and influence. In general, the call for the academic to engage socially reduces to the mandate that scholars and teachers make their work relevant, informative, or empowering to communities or publics *outside* of the (often erroneously assumed) confines of the college or university. "Engagement" connotes a traversal, a crossing, a movement *beyond* a perceived boundary. And yet, there is no reward system for moving beyond the university campus. Sometimes engaged educators are accused of overstepping their roles or punished for not staying in their place. Social engagement is about power and the state, but it also harbors an institutional politics of its own.

Indeed, a number of the authors participating in this forum have risked their careers to various forms of civic, political, and public engagement. Some have left behind traditional scholarly publication—and resources—to forge connections between customary academic pursuits and the social good. Others have taken to the street to protest social injustices and suffered death threats for their outspokenness. One of the authors has actively pursued mass media platforms to popularize his thinking and critiques, testing a tenure machine that yet another author insists needs to change. Another author warns that the call to social engagement risks an opposition to thinking, which is *the* fundamental form of social engagement in the academy. And other authors ask us to use the power of witnessing to engage the hurting other, putting aside the need to turn all labor into an article, pushing back that familiar academic pressure to turn social engagement into academic exploitation.

In addition to the three kinds of scholarly engagement that we see operating in the academy, the argument we have offered here—that the political underwrites contemporary calls for "engaged scholarship," and consequently, that it puts scholars into a double bind generated by the competing and contradictory demands of the contemporary academic industrial complex—was presented to each of the authors participating in this forum. We did not, however, ask authors to respond directly. Rather, we asked them to address our contemporary "contest of the faculties" by advancing their own unique perspectives and arguments on scholarly engagement. As a prompt, we posed three questions that, we stressed, they needed to address only at their discretion: what form should engagement take? whom do we engage? and should we even try? All authors answered the last question in unison. And as the pages that follow make clear, there is no consensus on the first two, suggesting that further debate and discussion is clearly warranted. We hope that this forum can serve in some small way to generate such consideration.

Notes

[1] For example, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; New York: Vintage, 1995).

[2] Influence is ultimately a kind of force; however, we separate these out to acknowledge the more common distinction between coercion and persuasion. For a detailed description of influence as force, see Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to* Capitalism and Schizophrenia: *Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 10–46.

[3] Immanual Kant, "The Contest of Faculties," in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet, 2nd ed., Cambridge Tests in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 176–90. For a lucid explication, see Carlos Leone, "The Kantian Insight on the Future of the Humanities," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 5 (2006): 264–74.

[4] Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), 177–95; and Herbert Marcuse, *The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 2005). For a nuanced understanding, see Christopher Swift, "Herbert Marcuse on the New Left: Dialectic and Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40 (2010): 146–71.

[5]   See William M. Keith, *Democracy as Discussion: Civic Education and the American Forum Movement* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

[6]   Library of Congress, "Morrill Act: Primary Documents of American History," Virtual Programs and Services, Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/ Morrill.html.

[7]   Herman Cohen, *The History of Speech Communication: The Emergence of a Discipline, 1914– 1945* (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1994), 13.

[8]   See Pat J. Gehrke, *The Ethics and Politics of Speech: Communication and Rhetoric in the Twentieth Century* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), esp. 43–59; and Keith, *Democracy as Discussion.*

[9]   Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, "Gimme Shelter," on *Let It Bleed*, The Rolling Stones, compact disc, Decca Records/ABKCO, 1969. We stress that listening to the song rather than simply reading the lyrics is a better way to feel the context we think the music captures. Numerous fan videos on YouTube.com that use the song are available.

[10]   See Forbes Hill, "Conventional Wisdom—Traditional Form—The President's Message of November 3, 1969," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 373–86; Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "'Conventional Wisdom—Traditional Form': A Rejoinder," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 451–54; and Forbes Hill, "Reply to Professor Campbell," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 454–60.

[11]   Campbell, "'Conventional Wisdom," 453.

[12]   Hill, "Reply to Professor Campbell," 456.

[13]   This debate was extended in the early 1980s following the publication of Philip Wander's "The Ideological Turn in Modern Criticism," *Central States Speech Journal* 34 (1983): 1–18. See in particular Lawrence W. Rosenfield, "Ideological Miasma," *Central States Speech Journal* 34 (1983): 119–21; Forbes Hill, "A Turn against Ideology: Reply to Professor Wander," *Central States Speech Journal* 34 (1983): 121–26; Allan Megill, "Heidegger, Wander, and Ideology," *Central States Speech Journal* 34 (1983): 114–19; Michael Calvin McGee, "Another Philippic: Notes on the Ideological Turn in Criticism," *Central States Speech Journal* 35 (1984): 43–50; Robert Francesconi, "Heidegger and Ideology: Reflections of an Innocent Bystander," *Central States Speech Journal* 35 (1984): 51–53; Farrel Corcoran, "The Widening Gyre: Another Look at Ideology in Wander and His Critics," *Central States Speech Journal* 35 (1984): 54–56; and Philip Wander, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal* 35 (1984): 197–216. The issue was revisited in a special section of volume 4, issue 1 (2000) of the *American Communication Journal* titled "Criticism, Politics, and Objectivity," including essays by Edwin Black, "On Objectivity and Politics in Criticism"; and Jim A. Kuypers, "Must We All Be Political Activists?" at http://acjournal.org/ holdings/vol4/iss1/. The topic was pursued further two issues later in volume 4, issue 3 (2001) of the *American Communication Journal* under the title "Rhetoric, Politics, and Critique." See in particular Dana Cloud, "The Affirmative Masquerade"; Robert Ivie, "Productive Criticism Then and Now"; and Michael McGee, "On Objectivity and Politics in Rhetoric" at http://acjournal.org/holdings/vol4/iss3/.

[14]   Space limits any discussion, but we must mention that television and embedded reporting is also a causal factor here, so much so one might argue television and Nixon politicized rhetorical criticism.

[15]   Richard Cherwitz, "Intellectual Entrepreneurship: A Cross-Disciplinary Consortium," University of Texas at Austin, http://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/index.html. Also see Rick Cherwitz, "The Challenge of Creating Engaged Public Research Universities," *lanning for Higher Education* 38 (2010): 61–64; James W. Hikins and Richard A. Cherwitz, "The Engaged University: Where Rhetorical Theory Matters," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 38 (2010): 115–26; Gary D. Beckman and Richard A. Cherwitz, "Intellectual Entrepreneurship: An Authentic Foundation for Higher Education Reform,"

Planning for Higher Education 37 (2009): 27–36; and Richard A. Cherwitz and E. Johanna Hartelius, "Making a 'Great "Engaged" University' Requires Rhetoric," in *Fixing the Fragmented University: Decentralization with Direction*, ed. Joseph C. Burke (Boston, MA: Anker Publishing, 2007), 265–88.

[16]   See John M. Ackerman and David J. Coogan, ed., *The Public Work of Rhetoric: Citizen-Scholars and Civic Engagement*, introd. Gerard A. Hauser (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, forthcoming 2010).

[17]   For example, see Lisa Blee, Caley Horan, Jeffrey T. Manuel, Brian Tochterman, Andrew Urban, and Julie M. Weiskopf, "Engaging with Public Engagement: Public History and Graduate Pedagogy," *Radical History Review*, no. 102 (2008): 73–89; Tessa Hicks Peterson, "Engaged Scholarship: Reflections and Research on the Pedagogy of Social Change," *Teaching in Higher Education* 14 (2009): 541–52; and Lori J. Vogelgesang, Nida Denson, and Uma M. Jayakumar, "What Determines Faculty-Engaged Scholarship?" *Review of Higher Education* 33 (2010): 437–72. Also see Audrey Williams June, "Colleges Should Change Policies to Encourage Scholarship Devoted to the Public Good, Report Says," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* June 26, 2008, http://chronicle.com/article/Colleges-Should-Change/937/; and Scott McLemee, "The Public Option," *Inside Higher Ed,* October 21, 2009, http://www.insidehighered.com/views/mclemee/mclemee263/.

[18]   *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* 1 (2008). This journal is published by the University of Alabama Press.

[19]   Julie Ellison and Timothy K. Eatman, "Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University," Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life Tenure Team Initiative on Public Scholarship, 2008, http://imaginingamerica.org/TTI/TTI_FINAL.pdf; also see Peterson, "Engaged Scholarship"; John Saltmarsh, Dwight E. Giles Jr., Elaine Ward, and Suzanne M. Buglione, "Rewarding Community-Engaged Scholarship," *New Directions for Higher Education*, no. 147 (2009): 25–35.

[20]   See, for example, David Horowitz and Jacob Laksin, *One-Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America's Top Colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009).

[21]   Stanley Fish, "Aim Low," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 16, 2003, http://chronicle.com/article/Aim-Low/45210. See also Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[22]   See Darrin Hicks, "The New Citizen," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93 (2007): 358–60; and Ronald Walter Greene and Darrin Hicks, "Lost Convictions," *Cultural Studies* 19 (2005): 100–26.

[23]   Ellison and Eatman, "Scholarship in Public," iv.

[24]   Nancy Cantor and Steven D. Lavine, "Taking Public Scholarship Seriously," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 9, 2006, http://chronicle.com/article/Taking-Public-Scholarship-S/22684/.

[25]   Ellison and Eatman, "Scholarship in Public," iv.

[26]   Ellison and Eatman, "Scholarship in Public," iv.

[27]   Cantor and Lavine, "Taking Public Scholarship Seriously."

[28]   Peter Schmidt, "Public Scholar Engages Syracuse U. in Public Tenure Dispute," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 18, 2009, http://chronicle.com/article/Public-Scholar-Engages-Syra/47260/.