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# Being in Common: In Celebration of Ronald W. Greene's Woolbert Award

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**Being in Common: In Celebration of Ronald W. Greene's Woolbert  
Award**

**Kristin A. Swenson**

In a letter to a friend, Spinoza wrote, “between friends all things, particularly things of the spirit, should be shared.”<sup>1</sup> It follows then that friends share *in common* thoughts and knowledge, love and affects. In thinking about the Woolbert Award and Ronald W. Greene's work, it becomes apparent that those of us celebrating Greene's recognition all have in common our appreciation of Ron, as we have been affected by his intellectual thought expressed in his academic work. This *being in common* brings us together to celebrate Greene's achievement and the recognition of his contributions to our discipline and, specifically, his essay “Another Materialist Rhetoric.”<sup>2</sup> But I am not going to speak of “Another Materialist Rhetoric.” Instead, I am going to discuss “Rhetoric and Capitalism: Rhetorical Agency as Communicative Labor.”<sup>3</sup> Why this essay? Because this essay reflects the work in which I feel most “in common” with Greene. I was a graduate student when “Rhetoric and Capitalism” was published; it was during this time that I was reading and studying with Greene and our cohort at MN—we were all schlepping around our copies of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*<sup>4</sup>—and Greene's concept, “communicative labor,” greatly influenced my work.<sup>5</sup>

In “Rhetoric and Capitalism,” Greene developed that formative concept, and thus disrupted the discipline and our understanding of rhetorical agency and, in the process, solidified the biopolitical turn. For me, as for many of Greene's students with and after me, this biopolitical turn and the concept of communicative labor made it easier for us to write about affect, immaterial labor, and contemporary capitalism in our discipline. Greene created the intellectual map for us and made the arguments that we now do not have to make. We can just write, “see Greene's work” on “materialist rhetoric,” “communicative labor,” “money/speech,” and so on.

I refer to “communicative labor” as a disruptive concept to indicate that any becoming is fostered by a disruption; in this case, communicative labor is a disruption to previous theorizations and understandings of rhetorical agency and its conceptualization within our existing mode of capitalism. Greene offers us what he terms a “different materialist ontology,”<sup>6</sup> a materialist ontology that “stands in excess of the capture of economic or social relations.”<sup>7</sup>

But what does this mean? As we know, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari clearly explain that “all concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges.”<sup>8</sup> This “triangulation: concept, problem, solution,” as Cesare Casarino explains, implies an immanent understanding of the construction of concepts.<sup>9</sup> First, a problem is only a problem as its solution emerges, articulating both problem and solution together. Second, a concept is related to both problem and solution—“which is to say that a concept is the effect or by-product of the mutually determining relation between problem and solution.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the concept is crucial to understanding both the problem and its solution, demonstrating that the triangulation of concept–problem–solution “functions according to immanent causality.”<sup>11</sup> This framework—concept–problem–solution—is useful in explicating Greene's essay.

The problem that Greene outlines in “Rhetoric and Capitalism: Rhetorical Agency as Communicative Labor” is that “rhetorical agency,” as traditionally understood as a “normative theory of citizenship: a good citizen persuades and is persuaded by the gentle force of the better argument,” is unable to speak to our current moment in biopolitical capitalism in which capitalism

seeps into the core of our being in its capture of communication, affects, and knowledges.<sup>12</sup> But, as Michael Hardt notes, “Saying that capital has incorporated and exalted affective [and communicative] labor and that affective [and communicative] labor is one of the highest value-producing forms of labor from the point of view of capital does not mean that, thus contaminated, it is no longer of use to anticapitalist projects.”<sup>13</sup> Rather, the importance that communicative labor has to the production of capitalist value is precisely what makes “its potential for subversion and autonomous constitution . . . all the greater.”<sup>14</sup> To this end, Greene reconceptualizes rhetorical agency as communicative labor to suggest that in order to maintain an “anticapitalist project,” we must understand the internal workings of capitalism today.

Greene begins his argument by employing Jodi Dean's definition of politics. As Greene explains, Dean defines politics as “a domain of financially mediated and professionalized practices centered on advertising, public relations, and the means of mass communication.”<sup>15</sup> If we start with this definition of politics, then it follows, as Greene explains via Dean, that the current practice of rhetorical agency is to “raise money, buy the television time, register the domain names, build the website, and craft the accessible, user-friendly, spectacular message.”<sup>16</sup> These practices—within a system that Dean defines as “communicative capitalism”—Greene describes as “money/speech.”<sup>17</sup>

Concepts emerge simultaneous to the problem or the question, and as Deleuze and Guattari note, “It has to be possible to ask the question ‘between friends,’ as a secret or confidence [ . . . ] and at the same time to reach that twilight hour when one distrusts even the friend.”<sup>18</sup> With friends, we share in common the struggle for freedom from oppression. And it is this engagement with the work of friends, or in Greene's words, “comrades,”<sup>19</sup> in which he presents us with a landscape of the problem: “an anxiety over rhetorical agency,”<sup>20</sup> and does so by what I like to imagine as a late-night discussion<sup>21</sup> with James Aune and Dana Cloud to determine if “communicative labor” is the answer to understanding rhetorical agency today.

Rhetorical agency, as Greene explains, is traditionally understood as “a communicative process of inquiry and advocacy on issues of public importance.” As a mode of action, this understanding of rhetorical agency suggests a normative practice of citizenship, in which “a good citizen persuades and is persuaded by the better argument.”<sup>22</sup> As Greene contends, this classical model is incongruent with current practices of public participation, including the various forms and technologies of communication in our globalized and interconnected world.

This traditional understanding of rhetorical agency as political praxis of the “orator-statesman”<sup>23</sup> reveals the myth that the most logical argument is also the most persuasive. And whereas we continue to be committed to this ideal in our pedagogy—good citizens who know how to make good arguments will lead us to good political decisions—we recognize that in our actual existing practices of political engagement, and life decisions for that matter, we are usually anything but rational. Or to paraphrase Spinoza, Why do we act against our own self-interest as if it were in our best interest?<sup>24</sup>

One of the skills that I most admire about Greene is his skill as a cartographer of our discipline's intellectual history. The contours of his landscapes reveal his skills as a debater and, perhaps more importantly, his training as a philosopher. This particular landscape is contoured by two modes of

thought. As Greene explains, “The first, represented by James Aune, advocates a hermeneutical approach to rhetorical agency, and the second, represented by Dana Cloud, argues for imagining rhetorical agency as a class-based social movement.”<sup>25</sup>

This late-night discussion is mapped something like this: Greene first engages the work of Aune and refers to his approach to rhetorical agency as “hermeneutical.” He explains that Aune employs “rhetorical agency as a citizen-orator.” The premise of this approach is that “speakers primarily exist as representatives of a class-based politics engaged in strategic communication to challenge their exploitation.”<sup>26</sup> Greene notes that Aune’s approach makes a distinction between “economics as the site of exploitation” and “politics as the space for the rhetorical struggle over class interests.”<sup>27</sup> Greene argues that this distinction puts rhetorical agency in the middle as a mediator between economics and politics. This position of mediation fails to recognize that in biopolitical capitalism, economics and politics are no longer discernible as discrete categories.

Greene articulates three flaws of Aune’s hermeneutical approach: first, “the nationalist conflation of cultural value and economic value displaces the international division of labor” by which other forms of exploitation and imperialism are left out of the equation.<sup>28</sup> Second, a hermeneutic-inspired approach to rhetorical agency makes invisible the institutional and class interests of rhetorical studies to imagine its role in the creation of citizen-subjects.”<sup>29</sup> Greene reminds us of the sad reality that most of our university students “often aspire to be on the wrong side of the class struggle.”<sup>30</sup> And as Brynnar Swenson explains, “Each and every form of labor is organized as wage-labor within real subsumption,”<sup>31</sup> including those forms of labor that these same students will perform. Finally, Aune’s “hermeneutically inspired class-based politics fails to appreciate how capitalist exploitation works in and through cultural logics of domination and representation.”<sup>32</sup> Greene argues that this model does not offer a distinct solution to the problem of rhetorical agency today, as it fails to recognize the existing mode of our lived labor within capitalism, and therefore lacks a common force against it.

Greene then moves to the social movement approach of rhetorical agency by way of Dana Cloud’s work in this area. He describes the social movement model as a model that “distributes the field of political struggle into opposing camps: the dominant and the subordinate.”<sup>33</sup> For Greene, this model places rhetorical agency in the role of mediator as well. He writes, “[A] communication model of rhetorical agency mediates the relationship between the two groups (the social movement representing social change and modern capitalist production representing the social structures of power).”<sup>34</sup> Additionally, Greene argues against a “class-based social movement approach to rhetorical agency because in this model agency can never be a part of communication’s production of social being; therefore, it can never be located squarely within the logics of capitalism.”<sup>35</sup> The concern is that if rhetorical agency is conceived as a mediating force, then it has already been organized and coopted by capital.

The philosophical problem of understanding rhetorical agency in our current biopolitical-capitalist moment does not find its answer in either the hermeneutic approach of rhetorical agency as citizen-orator or in an understanding of rhetorical agency via class struggle as a social movement. Greene explains that “whether the model imagines rhetorical agency in terms of reinventing cultural traditions (hermeneutics) or in terms of collective action (social moments), the emphasis on

rhetorical agency as a model of political communication, prefigures the significance of rhetorical agency as always already in support of, or opposition to, the institutional structures of power.”<sup>36</sup> A model of rhetorical agency as mediator, as Greene argues, places us in the position of being what he calls “moral entrepreneurs scolding, correcting, and encouraging the body politic to improve the quality and quantity of political participation.”<sup>37</sup> And who likes to be scolded?

Greene's question—how are we to understand rhetorical agency within our current moment of capitalism?—is answered through the concept of “communicative labor.” As Casarino explains, “if the first function of a concept is to pose a problem adequately, the second function is to articulate a solution, distinctly, namely to posit a clear distinction between solution and problem as they emerge simultaneously and immanently.”<sup>38</sup> In order to posit “communicative labor” as a solution to the problem that rhetorical agency is unable to perform as mediator between politics and economics, as now their distinction is nearly indistinguishable, Greene turns to Marx's labor theory of value and argues against conceiving of labor as always negative; rather, labor can be life-affirming. We must always be mindful that capital makes nothing on its own; rather, it graphs onto social relations to organize labor power to create value, highlighting what Greene refers to as “the parasitic nature of capitalism.”<sup>39</sup> Greene argues that “understanding labor as self-valorizing or life-affirming, allows the potentiality of labor to escape the capture and exploitation of capitalism” and to “embody creativity and cooperation.”<sup>40</sup> What Greene means by this is that we must conceive of immaterial production as the raw materials—thoughts, affects, knowledges—that capital has not yet captured, as something that is produced by us, in common, that can generate affirming forms of value.

Greene contends that “the persuasive, aesthetic, and deliberative characteristics of communication (elements associated with the information and cultural content of the commodity as well as the social networks of care) reside in the matrix of bio-political production.”<sup>41</sup> Communicative labor produces surplus and this surplus has the potential to escape the capture and circulation of capitalism, even if it remains within capitalism. That which escapes—thought, discourse, affect—are the raw materials of communicative labor; and, as we all are aware, communicative labor—or what Marx would refer to as the “general intellect”—and its processes of production are by definition common.<sup>42</sup> We have no solitary thoughts, private discourses, or individual affects; to express ourselves through thought, discourse, and affect is to activate what we have in common.<sup>43</sup> In other words, as Matt May explains, “The same surplus that capital strives to subsume is also constitutive of the potential for the affirmation of the living and active forces of mutual aid and cooperation to create a world beyond capitalism.”<sup>44</sup> And this is the key to the whole enterprise: The potentiality of labor is also the potential for what is *in common* to escape capture, circulation, and consumption by capital. I suggest that we, as rhetorical and communication scholars, in order to be ethical to the potential of communicative labor, can begin by mapping the places in which we see a disjuncture between surplus and capital—places in which capital has yet to totally subsume—and in this disjuncture we may find an opportunity for communicative labor to generate power from below. Yes, by the time we see it and name it, it will certainly have been already subsumed by capitalism, but even in this capture, there is excess, and in this excess—in the (re)assemblage of this excess from below—life-affirming value is generated. Greene contends,

“As living labor, communication acts; there is no anxiety here about the status of rhetorical agency, because its action generates the value of living labor.”<sup>45</sup>

Communicative labor “produces surplus value not only through communication, but also through the communication of thought, discourse, and affect.”<sup>46</sup> “Rhetorical agency is everywhere,”<sup>47</sup> Greene declares. And we have it in common. *Being in common*, and being in friendship, is where I began, and this is where I will conclude also, with a borrowed phrase from a friend in common: In friendship, as in communicative labor, “everything is common: its potentialities, its actualities, as well as the process that continuously turns the former into the latter.”<sup>48</sup>

## Notes

[1] Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics with The Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 263.

[2] Ronald Walter Greene, “Another Materialist Rhetoric,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 14, no. 1 (1998): 21–42.

[3] Ronald Walter Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism: Rhetorical Agency as Communicative Labor,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 37, no. 3 (2004): 188–206.

[4] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

[5] See, for example, Kristin A. Swenson, *Lifestyle Drugs and the Neoliberal Family* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

[6] Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism,” 189.

[7] Mathew Bost and Ronald Walter Greene, “Affirming Rhetorical Materialism: Enfolding the Virtual and the Actual,” *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 4 (2011): 441.

[8] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 16.

[9] Cesare Casarino, “Universalism of the Common,” *diacritics* 39, no. 4 (2009): 164.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism,” 188.

[13] Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” *boundary 2*, no. 26 (1999): 90.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Cited in Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism,” 188.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ronald Walter Greene, “Orator Communist,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 39, no. 1 (2006): 94.

[18] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 2.

[19] Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism,” 189.

[20] Ibid.

- [21] This is a rich, productive, and ongoing discussion. For the fuller discussion between Greene, Cloud, Aune, and Macek, see, for instance, Dana L. Cloud, Steve Macek, and James Arnt Aune, “The Limbo of Ethical Simulacra: A Reply to Ron Greene,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 39, no. 1 (2006): 72–84. Also see Greene, “Orator Communist.”
- [22] Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism,” 188.
- [23] *Ibid.*, 188.
- [24] Spinoza writes, “[T]hey will fight for their servitude as if for salvation.” Benedictus de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 3.
- [25] Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism,” 189.
- [26] *Ibid.*, 190.
- [27] *Ibid.*, 193.
- [28] *Ibid.*, 193–94.
- [29] *Ibid.*, 194.
- [30] *Ibid.*, 191.
- [31] Brynnar Swenson, “From the Prostitute to the King: The Corporate Form, Subsumption, and Periodization,” *Cultural Critique* 89, 61–82.
- [32] Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism,” 194.
- [33] *Ibid.*
- [34] *Ibid.*, 195.
- [35] *Ibid.*, 197.
- [36] *Ibid.*, 198.
- [37] *Ibid.*, 189.
- [38] Casarino, “Universalism of the Common,” 167.
- [39] Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism,” 199.
- [40] *Ibid.*, 201.
- [41] *Ibid.*, 201.
- [42] See Casarino, “Universalism of the Common,” 165.
- [43] Casarino, “Universalism of the Common,” 166.
- [44] Matthew S. May, “Spinoza and Class Struggle,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2009): 205.
- [45] Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism,” 203.
- [46] Casarino, “Universalism of the Common,” 165.
- [47] Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism,” 203.
- [48] Casarino, “Universalism of the Common,” 166.