Public Argument, Academic-Style

I first heard of the journal *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* last Friday when someone placed a copy in my hand while I wasn’t looking. I’m never sure whether to accept freebies doled out at conferences; most serve primarily to weigh down my briefcase long enough until they can be duly glanced at and then promptly thrown away. But in this case I was slightly curious and even interested, and as copies were circulated I stretched out my palm accordingly. Perhaps I was dimly aware that I had a journal assignment coming up and that this sober tome might in some way be of use. In the faded light of the auditorium I couldn’t make out anything on the cover save the journal’s R&PA logo, a designer’s attempt at snazziness, no doubt, amid an otherwise banal grey.

However, as I am so fond of saying, you can never tell an interdisciplinary journal devoted to the history, theory and criticism of public discourse by its cover. The “special issue” that, with the help of stronger light, I now clutched with newfound attention, was focused as it turned out on the Emmett Till case, something I’ve spent a good deal of time studying. It seemed from my first cursory thumb-through that the journal was a bridge between the rhetoric theme of this course and my academic interest in modern American history, and I therefore decided it was an appropriate subject to investigate further for this assignment.

Mary Stuckey, a communications professor at Georgia State University and the journal’s book review editor, took my call between appointments. She started with what is obvious from the title: “the journal is about the intersection of rhetoric and political science, history and sociology.” It has a humanities focus, she added, and favors qualitative over quantitative analyses. It’s about “the available means of persuasion,” she said, including spoken, visual and written rhetoric. To give examples of visual rhetoric, she cited memorials and museum exhibitions -- displays of what she calls “public argument.” Often articles are based on a single speech or a letter, she said. Stuckey herself has written articles for *R&PA* on the speeches of Woodrow Wilson.

A presidential focus fits in neatly with the interests of the journal’s editor, Martin Medhurst, a professor of communication studies at Baylor University, but he emphasized that he looks for articles from a wide range of areas. “I was surprised right from the outset that we attracted certain kinds of articles,” he told me, “particularly feminist criticism. We also got a lot on environmental matters.” He added, “I was not surprised that we got a lot of stuff on the Cold War and the American presidency, since those are
my areas of interest and authors tend to assume that an editor will publish what he or she is interested in. That is not true in my case, but people still think that.”

The “special issue” on the Till case, dated summer 2005, is the latest of a series, published annually. According to Medhurst, in past years the journal has published such issues on civil rights, what he called “deliberative democracy,” Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail, and the intelligent design debate. “I usually come up with the ideas for special issues,” Medhurst said, “but there have been a few occasions when others have come to me with an idea and I have said ‘go with it.’” The Till issue was edited by Davis Houck, a communications professor at Florida State University. The next special issue will be on the 2004 presidential election, Medhurst said.

Let me conclude with some additional specific information about Rhetoric and Public Affairs:

• The journal is published four times a year. It is published by the Michigan State University Press for the Department of Communication Studies at Baylor University.

• The journal has an editorial board, currently consisting of 39 academics from across the country. The board sets the editorial policy and helps publicize the journal.

• The editorial policy is stated on the inside back cover of each issue. It reads: “Rhetoric & Public Affairs is an interdisciplinary journal devoted to the history, theory and criticism of public discourse. Traditional areas of rhetorical investigation include executive leadership, diplomacy, political campaigns, judicial and legislative deliberations, and public policy debate. Critical, analytical, or interpretive essays that examine particular instances of symbolic inducement in any historical period are welcome. Of special interest are manuscripts that explore the nexus of rhetoric, politics, and ethics – the worlds of persuasion, power and social values as they meet in the crucible of public debate and deliberation.”

• The submission guidelines are also outlined on the journal’s inside back cover. They state, for example, that four copies of manuscripts should be sent to Dr. Medhurst, at Baylor. They go on to specify style, documentation, spacing, and footnoting requirements. But Medhurst, in his candor, tended to dismiss all the boilerplate. “Basically, we just need four copies,” he said.

• The journal does not have a website, but articles from back issues can be accessed via Project Muse, an online scholarly journal database, at http://muse.jhu.edu/.