On the horizon, the world of the here and now blends into and with the (im)possibilities of our monadic past/present/future: places we have (not) been, people we have (not) met, experiences we have (not) had, worlds that have (not) existed. For some, the horizon is an ever-receding vanishing point: a limitless frontier to be conquered. For others, the horizon is the monadic site of our existence: we have been to the mountaintop; we have seen the promised land; we have lived in the end of times; we have experienced our annihilation. The horizon, for us, is not an ephemeral, ever-expanding frontier to be conquered; the horizon, for us, is the site of our (im)possible existence.

It is little wonder, then, that the phrase “the abolitionist horizon” has become so pervasive in contemporary abolitionist rhetoric. Abolitionist groups like All of Us or None (AOUON), Black and Pink National, Black Youth Project 100 (BYP 100), Critical Resistance, the Formerly Incarcerated & Convicted People and Families Movement (FICPFM), The Revolutionary Abolitionist Movement (RAM), the Sisterhood Alliance for Freedom & Equality (SAFE) Housing Network, and the Undercommoning Collective, Project NIA, are led by, with, and in memory of those who have live(d) in the end of times as they work toward otherwise possibilities. Contemporary abolitionists have drawn on this language of the abolitionist horizon reflecting their commitments to confront and break free from structural and interpersonal violences, heal old and open wounds, and demand that we build a better world for all.

For abolition, as Mariame Kaba reminds, is not about destruction or tearing everything down but is rather about building a new society that cultivates new ways of be/coming and relating, opens space for transformative justice, and moves toward healing and liberation. Or, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore asserts, “abolition requires that we change one thing, which is everything. Abolition is not about absence, it is presence. What the world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, experiments and possibilities [...] Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can.” This speaks to the queer temporality of abolition, where the then, now, and what-shall-be come together in a revolutionary configuration of sense-making and sense-breaking, world-making and world-breaking—an (im)possible horizon where societal transformation and liberatory futures are already a given. The abolitionist horizon is already here, now, as an unfolding possibility, as that which has already happened and is always happening in moments of rupture and instability, and as a backdrop to speculate about what might come next.

For this special issue, we invite you to submit 7500-word essays (inclusive of notes and references)—in any style, genre, and form—that seek to re/locate rhetorical studies along this radical and open horizon. Submissions should adopt abolitionist frameworks, look to ongoing abolitionist histories, and speculate about abolitionist futures in ways that might transform the discipline (or do away with the borders of discipline altogether) and contribute to building a better world for all. Contemporary abolitionists such as Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, adrienne maree brown, Dylan Rodríguez, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Allegra McLeod, Robin Maynard, Kelly Hayes, Damien Sojoynner, Lorgia García Peña, Rachel Herzing, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, Yasmin Nair, Woods Ervin, Andrea Ritchie, and many others are rooted in revolutionary histories of anti-slavery activism, informed by W. E. B. DuBois’s calls for abolitionist democracy, and inspired by Black feminist thought and queer intersectional politics. And while the prison industrial complex and institution of policing are the primary and most publicly known targets in abolitionist movements such as #defundthepolice, others have called for an abolitionist university studies, for the abolition of borders, the abolition of whiteness, the abolition of (so-called) Man, of gender, of capitalism, the wage, big oil, and much more—for these things are all deeply networked and connected. Similar conversations have also appeared in rhetorical studies
scholarship, from PCARE’s groundbreaking work, David Cisneros call for a rhetorical studies with a “telos of abolition,” Lore/tta LeMaster’s forthcoming Women’s Studies in Communication forum “Against Carceral Feminism, Toward Abolitionist Futures,” Dreama Moon and Lisa Flores’s critical and intersectional engagement with Race Traitor’s call for the abolition of whiteness, Jessica Hatrick’s work on abolition and the university, and the many conversations taking place at conferences, in the university undercommons, and which are beginning to take shape in doctoral dissertations and graduate seminars and essays.

We invite submissions that build on these conversations, imaginaries, and histories. We recognize that this journal was born of a moment of crisis and rupture in the discipline of rhetorical studies and built on a chorus of voices demanding transformation. Thus, we are not looking for pieces that center diagnostic criticism and “criticism-as-usual” unless such diagnoses are rooted in and foreground abolitionist hope, praxis, love, and possibility, etc. We encourage essays and other works that take risks and reflect on bold leaps of imagination, refuse the order of discipline by offering different ways of doing what we call “rhetorical studies,” and ground their perspectives in abolitionist sense-making and theory-building. In addition to these orientations and commitments, we welcome essays that:

- consider what an abolitionist democracy might look like and how a transformative rhetorical studies might contribute to realizing such openings and ruptures
- recognize, intentionally build on, and center Black people, brown people, indigenous people, poor people, and those with disabilities, who are incarcerated, queer, transgender, neurodivergent, or at the intersections and otherwise on the margins who have long animated abolitionist thought, movement, and praxis
- draw out new concepts and vocabulary from the spaces of dispossession, displacement, and radical hope that harbor the seeds for building something new
- center movements, coalitions, and collectives that reveal abolitionist praxis and possibility and which offer insights into forms of world-breaking/making that are already here and all around us
- imagine speculative futures and possibilities rooted in material struggles and ongoing histories
- engage aesthetic and artistic practices that offer resources for survival, undercommoning praxis, being otherwise, and world-breaking/making
- think through abolitionist pedagogies and how abolitionist frameworks might challenge the university industrial complex, refigure university labor, and create space-times for survival, mutuality, affirmation, and joy
- embrace otherwise forms of being/becoming and relationality that offer models and/or signs of different possible worlds and liberatory futures beyond race, gender, cisheteronormativity
- articulate how “forgotten” and suppressed histories, from Black Wall Street to the Haitian Revolution, continue to shape the abolitionist present and future in piecemeal ways

While this is certainly not an exhaustive list, each of the above prompts represent themes that are pervasive among abolitionist movements, histories, theory, and ongoing struggles, and which we believe could aid in the project of transforming rhetorical studies into something subversive, liberatory, and full of radical hope and potential for what might or already is manifesting along the abolitionist horizon.

- Submission Deadline: September 1, 2023
- Decisions & Feedback: October 15, 2023
- Revision Deadline: December 15, 2023
- Final Draft Deadline: TBD

Special issue coeditors: Logan Rae Gomez, Matthew Houdek, and Robert Mejia

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Submissions accepted via the RPC submission portal. Select “Special Issue Submission” as the section type during submission to designate that your submission is for the special issue.