

- Labov, W., & Fanshel, D. (1977). *Therapeutic discourse: Psychotherapy as conversation*. New York: Academic Press.
- Philipsen, G. (1987). The prospect for cultural communication. In L. Kinkaid (Ed.), *Communication theory: Eastern and Western perspectives* (pp. 245–254). New York: Academic Press.
- Schegloff, E. A., & Sacks, H. (1984). Opening up closings. In J. Baugh & J. Scherzer (Eds.), *Language in use* (pp. 69–99). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Slater, P. (1970). *The pursuit of loneliness*. Boston: Beacon Press.

KEY TERMS

leavetaking
ethnography

social relationships
Colombia

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does this “*salsipuede*” leavetaking ritual in Colombia reflect an important Colombian cultural value?
2. What leavetaking rituals do you and your friends engage in? Do these rituals vary from context to context (social vs. task)?
3. To what extent does Fitch’s characterization of the typical North American leavetaking ritual hold true for all cultural groups in the United States?
4. Why is “*salsipuede*” leavetaking in Colombia described as a “communication ritual”?
5. How might a critical researcher approach this study of communication rituals?



20

WHEN OUTSIDERS ENCOUNTER INSIDERS IN SPEAKING: OPPRESSED COLLECTIVES ON THE DEFENSIVE

DETINE L. BOWERS

Many whites treat a militant speech—not action, mind you, but a speech, a presentation of rhetoric in public—like a revolutionary conspiracy. When even a small group of blacks gather for some purpose other than a card party, whites get upset.

—Bell, 1992, p. 67

Oppressed populations such as African Americans are forced into defensive postures, constantly identifying ourselves and justifying our

Author’s Note: This essay is an adaptation of a speech delivered at the “Women and the First Amendment” forum at Radford University, Radford, Virginia, October 1993. I am grateful to Barry Brummett and Wayne Hensley for their reading of a draft of this essay.

place in society. Our task is an ongoing attempt to argue for our right to equality and our right to speak before getting on with our particular policy claim—that is, when we can make the policy claim. Such claims are usually left untackled because matters of collective definition take precedence. The predetermined condition for speech, one that accepts voices of the oppressed only on the definitional terms of the power structure, reminds the public that oppressed collectives, “groups that have goals that transcend the ending of discrimination against their members,” are actually struggling to be like our oppressors (Sanders, 1991, p. 369). Such a condition results from a hierarchy of voices that claim the high

ground on rationality and reason to justify actions in a civilized society—a society that expects univocal responses from oppressed collectives to inherently repressive claims and rhetorical agendas. This dominance is manifest in a Eurocentric rhetorical condition. Asante's (1987) definition of the rhetorical condition is "the structure and power pattern, assumed or imposed, during a rhetorical situation by society" (p. 22). Characteristics of a condition of hierarchical discourse include "control over the rhetorical territory through definition . . . and the stifling of opposing discourse" (p. 22). Such control ultimately includes the domination of rhetorical agendas as evidenced in television programs and in the interpretation of law. The rhetorical condition is structurally embedded in media and legal institutions.

My goal in this essay is not merely to join the perceived gloom and doom of marginalized voices demanding access to institutional media for public discourse (e.g., feminists, African Americans, Latinos) but to explore some of the reasons for rhetorical deadlock for oppressed populations even when there is access to public discourse channels. My aim is to demonstrate the inherent cost of individuals and groups representing oppressed collectives freely speaking and speaking freely. I contend that oppressed collectives must stop letting institutional structures set the rhetorical agenda, and should use institutional structures more effectively. This work is about how the rhetorical agenda of the media, as a free speech channel, harms oppressed spokespersons and how those spokespersons can exercise proactive strategies to empower themselves. The media, the law, and other institutions subvert the rhetoric of oppressed collectives by creating ambiguity in the discourse. As participants in institutional strategies, collectives spend excessive time satisfying the remedial needs of journalists and lawmakers who focus on *who* we are rather than offer an opportunity to explain our program. To understand how ambiguity is created, we must next confront the current controversy over the First Amendment.

Catherine MacKinnon, a radical feminist, and Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams, critical race theorists, pinpoint the dominance of the rhetorical agenda in legal decision making that goes on

daily, especially in the case of the First Amendment (Bell, 1992; MacKinnon, 1987; Williams, 1991). An inherent structural problem for oppressed collectives is that judicial decision making is a political process that might enforce the persuasion principle in one instance and not do so in another. The persuasion principle, a fundamental principle of the First Amendment, tells us that "government may not suppress speech on the ground that the speech is likely to persuade people to do something the government considers harmful" (Strauss, 1991, p. 335). But, according to MacKinnon and others, the First Amendment is harm-based law, not a content-based law, because it can silence an oppressed collective such as women (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 207). Judgment regarding First Amendment interpretation is then based on the court's view of what is rational and reasonable at the time, and it protects the interest that the establishment deems important even though members of the establishment *say* that is not the case. The history of First Amendment decision making shows this to be true in cases where prior interpretations were ignored over prevailing opinion (Kairys, 1982).

Given this rhetorical agenda of the dominant structure, efforts to change that agenda by creating more diversity about First Amendment interpretations and decisions is not a place for oppressed populations to concentrate protest rhetoric. A short-term victory when it comes to legislating against freedom of expression, even those biased views of what it should be, does not get anyone far. To silence some expressions because they are harmful or irrational about particular collectives does little to alter massive repressive attitudes about that collective. Focusing voices on denying access to pornographic images may not necessarily alter attitudes that associate women's images with sex and constitute a long-term risk. Long before media images were in vogue—for example, in the age of Thomas Jefferson and, later, Angelina Grimke—women's behavior was linked to sexual promiscuity and immorality, as when women who publicly protested against slavery were associated with sexual promiscuity. Why would banning sexual suggestion through pornography change attitudes now? Further, reprimanding prior acts (motives)

that lead to hate speech on college campuses—acts aimed to punish students who yell, write obscenities, or promulgate, in any way, insensitivities toward a particular victim—risks backlash, a reversal of the problem. The core of rhetorical problems for oppressed collectives lies not so much in institutional permissions of freedom of expression at the expense of the civil liberties of someone else. Nor is the root in lack of access to the media or other channels for public discourse, for the actual mechanisms and opportunities to cash in on them exist.

Rhetorical Condition: Structure and Resistance

The individual right to hear or see what one person or participant in a collective deems offensive behavior is at the same time an opportunity to voice objections to that behavior. Whereas members of oppressed collectives may be conditioned to accept many offensive behaviors, those who are not so conditioned must use communication channels open to them to object to oppressive behaviors and rhetorical agendas such as those of the media.

Asante explains that the rhetorical condition is rule oriented and is governed by the dictates of the dominant discourse in a society. In *The Afrocentric Idea*, Asante (1987) writes,

There are three characteristics for a condition of hierarchical discourse: control over the rhetorical territory through definition, establishment of a self-perpetuating initiation or rite de passage, and the stifling of opposing discourse. These characteristics may be seen in the rhetoric of domination. One way to create ambiguity is to redefine established terms in such a manner that the original meaning is lost. Wherever ambiguity exists, the established order is able to occupy the ground of clarity by contending that ambiguity did not exist prior to the rise of the opposition, although the established order may have participated in creating the ambiguous situation. In this manner, the established order can undercut the opposition and manipulate the pattern of communication for its own effect. By

defining not only the terms of discussion but also the grounds upon which the discussion will be waged, the established order concentrates power in its own hands. (p. 22)

The dominant power structure sets not only the language rules but the ground rules for which the language functions. It uses a creative range of strategies to stifle voices of the oppressed. Being cognizant of such subversive rhetorical agendas can reverse those conditions. The media attempts to subvert the rhetoric of oppressed collectives through setting agendas that create ambiguity in discourse of collectives through television, newspapers, magazines, and a range of other media. Media efforts often damage the credibility of individual members of collectives before we speak. In establishing strategies for countering these rhetorical agendas, oppressed collectives can alter the structural conditions for our discourse by challenging the condition in which we participate. This can be done by pointing out stifling agendas to the general public.

Although oppressed collectives may argue that breaking the chain of oppression requires shaking up the establishment's exclusive laws through counterrhetorical strategies directed at the lawmakers, we have been misguided about the full range of target audiences and strategies to capture them. In other words, there has been confusion about emphasis—who collectives should persuade that what is advocated is right. It is true that legal institutions that serve the public need to be shaken—and, over the past 30 years, civil rights movement spokespersons have done that. That was the purpose of the counterprotest rhetoric that shook the fundamental constructs of rational discourse by invoking another kind of logic, one common to oppressed collectives (Gresson, 1977). The opportunity exists under the First Amendment whatever the interpretation and whether one views laws as harm-based or not. To take such a stand is not necessarily to accept the "marketplace of ideas" concept that has no standards for what constitutes a perfect set of conditions that allow fair competition in a public marketplace of free-flowing ideas (Strauss, 1991, pp. 348–349). Further, there are not enough sensitized oppressed people in any one collective who

can answer all the repressive dominant rhetorical agendas that confront us daily, and, in many cases, there are political reasons why we cannot. But the marketplace is a place where oppressed populations can provide more evidence of *collective strategies*—a place where we can create counterstructural conditions for the rhetorical condition in which we are forced. The remainder of this essay explores contexts for altering the conditions.

Although shaking multiple establishments through protest rhetoric must continue to be a part of protest life, it is becoming increasingly apparent that strategies for winning long-term gains must be targeted at the public mind through more discourse aimed to disclose manipulative rhetorical agendas. The public mind is being shaped by that percentage of those who represent oppressed populations, those who gain access to public discourse channels such as organization heads and spokespersons, professors, and media staff.

The most important question for the oppressed now is, What constitutes a rhetorical agenda of dominance? What prohibits listening to arguments? One strategy that underlies the creation of ambiguous discourse of oppressed collectives is to feed on the public's faulty reasoning. Bell (1992), in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, reveals four crucial "rules of racial standing" regarding society's premises about Blacks as institutions set rhetorical agendas:

1. No matter their experience or expertise, blacks' statements involving race are deemed "special pleading" and thus not entitled to serious consideration. (p. 111)
2. [There is] a widespread assumption that blacks, unlike whites, cannot be objective on racial issues and will favor their own no matter what. (p. 113)
3. Statements of one black who publicly disparages or criticizes other blacks who speak or act in ways that upset whites are granted "enhanced standing" even when the speaker has no special expertise or experience in the subject he or she is criticizing. (p. 114)
4. When a black person or group makes a statement or takes an action that the white com-

munity or vocal components thereof deem "outrageous," the latter will actively recruit blacks willing to refute the statement or condemn the action. (p. 118)

The first two are faulty premises that institutions and individuals buy into. The second two are actual strategies of institutions and individuals to manipulate the condition for the discourse.

From talk shows to headlines, these "rules of racial standing" create the rhetorical condition for oppressed collectives. The institution perpetuates false images of speakers and incites false premises about the oppressed for the consuming public. These rules are important because they inhibit listening to those speakers who attempt to eradicate negative images and they inhibit the voluntary process of absorbing public discourse content.

Divide and Conquer Strategies: Fostering Ambiguity

Now consider media manipulation that perpetuates faulty premises when it comes to a particular oppressed collective. Widely watched television programs create ambiguity within the discourse of oppressed collectives. For instance, the June 2, 1991, ABC program *This Week With David Brinkley* focused on impending civil rights legislation, and Brinkley's guests included three African American spokespersons: Shelby Steele, professor of English at San Jose State University; Benjamin Hooks, the executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People at that time; and Don Edwards of the Civil Rights Commission. The usual program format is a news update from Brinkley, a brief background report on the issue to be discussed on the program, followed by the appearance of each guest presented separately. Three panelists—George Will, Sam Donaldson, and Brinkley—interview each guest. On that particular Sunday, as has been the case when other African Americans have appeared on the program, two of the guests were allowed to speak during a single segment. Hooks and Steele were at separate remote locations and ended up engaging in feuding that turned

into babble on commercial television while Will, Donaldson, and Brinkley just watched the brawl. At that time, this particular program structure was seldom used for other guests. Brinkley, Donaldson, and Will just smiled through the incendiary format ABC had orchestrated. But also at fault were the guests, who played into media hands by saluting to unethical establishment arguments using ad hominem to "win" their (dis)respectful arguments. They fell into the trap of participating in the "enhanced standing" trap that Bell (1992) outlines, statements from a Black "who publicly disparages or criticizes other blacks who are speaking or acting in ways that upset whites," and divide-and-conquer techniques (p. 114). The deck was stacked by the very nature of the structure. Hooks, Steele, and Edwards could have averted such a rhetorical agenda by agreeing in advance on an acceptable one. Then they could have held the interviewers responsible for that agenda by refusing, on the air, to participate in this rhetorical agenda by revealing the common premise that oppressed collectives ought to be univocal.

On a November 13, 1992, CNN *Crier and Company* program, three African American women—Julia Hare, renowned educational psychologist; Ezola Foster, president of Black Americans for Family Values; and Pearl Cleage, playwright and writer-in-residence at Spellman—were special guests for a segment about Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*. Foster argued that Malcolm X was "nothing more than a petty thief, a little hoodlum that went to prison and became a Muslim, and all of a sudden he became a hero. Unfortunately, this is the kind of heroes we're giving to our young people. Our young children do not need to see gangsters as heroes or role models for them." Foster engaged in hasty generalizations and ad hominem attack; she shot Malcolm X with more verbal bullets than his body had received physical bullets using acceptable, although defective and unethical, arguments to win. This shows that members of collectives should be careful about who we make our beds with, and Foster's selling out to the right and an ideal of family values to gain enhanced standing in public discourse damaged African American values in the public eye. Sleeping with the enemy in public intercourse keeps collectives speaking against ourselves in ways that harm collective in-

terest most. Again, each participant must question the rhetorical agenda of the media and determine the likely positions of the other program guests before going on the air.

Other media programs such as talk shows have a field day with squabbling from a range of feminist voices. Members of collectives cannot afford to consciously put the collective in the position of speaking against self in public discourse for the sake of getting press coverage for the issues or self. These members must demand more control over collective presentation, refuse to participate, or require a situation that schools the audience about the range of diverse voices on the issue. How many groups or individuals representing the marginalized ensure that there are image watchdogs aimed to monitor media coverage of "internal affairs" that help shape and mold public perception of the collective? Groups and individual members are responsible for presenting not only voices that will be heard but also voices that will be listened to, and someone needs to work toward battling against establishment control over public opinion about members. Until the groups and individuals stop pandering to institutional agendas and start defining them, pointing out faulty premises that underlie these rhetorical agendas, discourse of the oppressed will continue to be empty. In addition, members will be repetitious, caught in a never-ending cycle, shouting to be heard rather than listened to as we stay on the defensive.

If collective members question why oppressed collectives have to be univocal in the eyes of the public, then we are on the right track for eradicating the problem. If members talk about how ludicrous it is for anyone to expect univocal marginalized groups within oppressed collectives, then we are on the right track. But many are buying into faulty premises about collectives, even those who are members of them. Members must bring arguments against institutional agendas, even those of the media, into public forums as we challenge the very channels we use.

Ambiguity within the ranks of the oppressed operating as collectives or within full-blown social movements plays itself out in public discourse in extremely damaging ways, and, unfortunately, few from within the collectives have monitored

the perceptions created by these voices—blatant voices of disagreement in the eyes of the public. The varied interpretations of those voices created by the establishment and the oppressed who learn to play the game perpetuate the problem because the oppressed adopt establishment strategies—the very ones they claim are irrational and exclusive—to win without critiquing them and even flaunt the choice to participate in such strategies or structural setups.

Credibility and the Rhetorical Condition

Oppressed collectives' arguments on policy are squelched before they even assert them. The media's treatment of Lani Guinier, a law professor at the University of Pennsylvania and President Clinton's nominee for assistant attorney general at the Justice Department, is a classic example of structural strategies that silence African Americans by destroying credibility. The media labeled Guinier "welfare queen" and "quota queen" before she was officially nominated for the position or heard. In the aftermath of the bruhaha, Guinier (1993) expressed dismay over the ways in which she was quelled when she encountered the structures that had introduced her to the public. There was little opportunity to defend her position. Guinier, like many others, was forced into defining her identity after questions about her compatibility with the president's policies were raised.

Individuals within a collective gain enhanced standing through a polarizing voice about the collective. The media reward rhetorical polarization among oppressed collectives. As Guinier (1993) points out, one Black female scholar wrote a derogatory op-ed piece about Guinier for the *New York Times* without having reviewed the allegedly controversial work. Later, the author admitted that there was little sense to what she had written.

The criticism leveled against Toni Morrison's winning the Nobel Prize for literature that came from African American peers such as authors Stanley Crouch and Charles Johnson is another example. Scores of commentaries came from noted Black men willing to gain enhanced stand-

ing and profit from speaking out against a "sister." For example, Johnson referred to the act of awarding Morrison the prize as "a triumph of political correctness." Was it impossible to say, "It is about time"? Was it necessary to make a polarizing comment publicly?

Consider William Raspberry's column titled, "Finding What You Look For." Raspberry obviously views his work as a contribution to the discussion of problems within the African American community. The column referenced is about racial discrimination. Raspberry's (1993) recommendation is for African Americans to focus on garnering economic and educational empowerment rather than on identifying incidents of racial discrimination. The commentary included a quote from John Shipley Butler, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, who emphasized the need to focus on business and opportunity rather than rights and victimization.

Oppressed collectives often are forced into adopting defensive strategies in which we must assert our rights. We are constantly asked to define ourselves and establish our credibility before we can reveal any facts, policies, or prescriptions. It is extremely difficult to stay balanced with a focus on business and opportunities. Meanwhile, the establishment relegates oppressed collectives to obscurity and insignificance by misstating, misspelling, or exaggerating facts about us as we are introduced on the air or in publications. Another example of the rhetorical condition of dominance that keeps African Americans on the defensive is the location of public forums and conferences that feature oppressed collectives. They sometimes are held in the least appealing location or moved around so that there is ambiguity about location and time—a sure way to lose an audience. Another example is the naming of a person's racial identity within a news story when race has nothing to do with the story. How many times was Colin Powell referred to as the "Black" or "African American" joint chiefs of staff or general in the media?

Often, imminent scholars or celebrities are placed last on a television program or are invited to speak only about rights issues when their expertise is in another area. The media seeks to discover "opinion, feeling, and attitude" about

experience rather than perspective, the affective position rather than the reasoned one. The ground of argument is focused on attitudes about rights. Substantive issues, such as economic and social strategies, of marginalized populations are rarely discussed in the mainstream media. Such issues are not deemed newsworthy. Accusations of discrimination or racial intolerance are news. In sum, oppressed collectives are treated as object rather than subject. Oppressed populations are treated as human commodities, bought and sold on public demand, and given token status when deemed appropriate.

So where do oppressed collectives go from here? How can we reverse the rhetorical condition, the structural dominance pervasive in our lives?

Public behavior changes will come with public mind changes, and it is at the level of the potential public listener that collectives must fight through public discourse. Those marginalized individuals who are determined to have access to communicative channels at public forums or through the media must work toward using such channels more effectively. How do the oppressed work toward persuading the public and capturing listeners?

First, alert the public about the "multiple voices" among African Americans, women, and other oppressed collectives in ways that encourage support despite differences over solutions.

Second, avoid pandering to the whims of the media by determining appropriate times to speak and to be silent because silence can be a rhetorical strategy. Raise questions about rhetorical agendas of dominant institutions and how they participate in weakening collective arguments while acknowledging that we live by discourse rules determined by a rhetorical condition of racist, paternalistic forces and that collectives must avoid substituting bad rhetoric with bad rhetoric and bad tactics with bad tactics. Collectives cannot take on the discourse of the oppressor for the sake of winning. We must challenge it at every front.

Third, question rather than accept unethical uses of argument such as *ad hominem* attack; do not use these tactics just because they are currently the "name of the political game" and foster

enhanced standing while attempting to win. Why do oppressed groups and individuals who represent us have to win against each other? Many have discovered that "loudness" and public fights bring attention to a particular issue within a group affiliation and engage in it for the sake of refutation. If social collectives can agree that the premise of univocal voices for us is false, then harmonize with that claim. Groups do not have to agree on everything on a political agenda to offer something unifying to the public about who we are and who we represent, but we must agree on a collective agenda. The cost is too great to long-term identity when we settle for reckless tactics to ensure that one version of African American culture or feminism wins social conversion. The cost may be "aversion" and "reversion" from the public.

Fourth, alert individuals to argumentative strategies that allow differences of opinion while deemphasizing differences and stressing commonalities. Clearly, one person or group cannot represent all people who are African American or all people who are women; however, the public expects univocal oppressed groups, assuming that anyone who fits the general definition functions like all others in that category—a faulty premise.

Fifth, create a more inclusive agenda that attacks those subliminal messages that come out of an establishment that reasons that divide and conquer works for oppressed collectives; go beyond the self-help discourse of fighting revolutions within our collectives. The next step is to move toward critiquing professionals and African American and feminist leaders who are catering to "macho discourse"—the "macho media machinery"—and recognize it as machinery to avoid falling into the establishment pit. Friedan's (1992) challenge to move beyond playing the role of victim and mobilizing new priorities that address polarization is on target. Guinier did the right thing following the 1993 media bashing incident when she took her concerns about the responsibility of the media to Black journalists at the National Association of Black Journalists in the summer of 1993. Another strategy might have been to bring the issue of media bashing to the attention of the public in a more forceful way by using the media themselves as an agency for a

reflexive dialogue. There frequently are opportunities to make the media themselves news. For the industry, news is news because most Americans will not turn off their television sets even when the media are criticized. It is now the name of the game. That should have been the responsibility of organizations representing oppressed collectives. There was no coordinated defense.

Until groups representing oppressed collectives operate at the higher levels of discussion, offering more internal rhetorical strategies and informing the public about the many structural constraints and manipulations of public discourse, the arena of issues that stifle credibility, members remain lone voices in the wilderness contributing to a repetitious discourse while there is low credibility with the public where establishment voices continue to shape opinion. Credibility comes not by simply speaking eloquently but by discerning when, where, how, and with whom voices will be listened to, not just heard. There is an urgent need for some individuals to move beyond being starstruck in that abstract and imperfect marketplace of ideas so as to collectively develop better strategies for living.

REFERENCES

- Asante, M. K. (1987). *The Afrocentric idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Friedan, B. (1992, March 9). The war against feminism. *Time*, pp. 50-57.
- Gresson, A. D. (1977). Minority epistemology and the rhetoric of creation. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 10, 244-262.
- Guinier, L. (1993, November/December). A challenge to journalists on racial dialogue. *Extra*, pp. 7-9.
- Kairys, D. (1982). Freedom of speech. In D. Kairys (Ed.), *The politics of law: A progressive critique* (pp. 240-271). New York: Pantheon.
- MacKinnon, C. (1987). *Feminism unmodified: Discourses on life and law*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Raspberry, W. (1993, September 3). Finding what you look for [column]. *Washington Post*.
- Sanders, D. (1991). Collective rights. *Human Rights Quarterly* 3, 368-386.
- Strauss, D. (1991). Persuasion, autonomy, and freedom of expression. *Columbia Law Review*, 91, 334-371.
- Williams, P. (1991). *The alchemy of race and rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

KEY TERMS

oppressed collectives discourse
rhetoric media
race

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Bowers is speaking primarily about African American groups. Can you identify other oppressed collectives to whom Bell's "rules of racial standing" might apply?
2. How do recent media examples (e.g., discussions about Oakland School Board and Ebonics issue) support Bowers's description of rhetorical rules imposed on oppressed collectives?
3. Bowers speaks from a critical perspective. How might a social science researcher investigate this same topic? How might an ethnographer of communication approach this topic?
4. What does Bowers mean by "If collective members question why oppressed collectives have to be univocal in the eyes of the public, then we are on the right track for eradicating the problem"?