Multicultural Public Spheres
and the Rhetorics of Democracy

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It was heartbreaking to proceed, from that point. Everyone in the room realized that our decision in favor of Black English had doomed our writings, even as the distinctive reality of our Black lives always has doomed our efforts to “be who we been” in this country.

—June Jordan

The contemporary emphasis on linguistic conformity to the dominant ethnic of this new twentieth-century American aristocracy has the same objective as the old: to make the rising plebeian outsiders talk and thereby think and act like the ruling-class insiders.

—Geneva Smitherman

He who sets the terms, set the limits.

—Scott Lyons

Years ago, I was lucky enough to be in the audience when Gloria Anzaldúa spoke to a crowd at the University of Arizona. Some of her discussion centered on Borderlands, her bi-lingual, multi-genre analysis of the epistemology of language, religion, culture, gender, and sexuality. During the question and answer period, a young man made a comment that began along the lines of “Why do you want to alienate white men?” The gist of his question was that her blunt criticism and blatant anger had alienated him, and that this alienation was a problem since she had not persuaded white men to join her Chicana, queer, feminist causes. The speaker didn’t see a place for himself in the public reader that she was

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calling up in her writing, and he wanted to hold her accountable for this absence. In response to this question, another person—not Anzaldúa, but a white woman—came to the microphone and asked the man, “Do you remember the sections of her book where Gloria talks about the small group of men whom she sees as her allies? Why don’t you identify with them?”

It was a remarkable moment in many ways: the respondent noted the range of potential reader positions offered in the book and called the young man on his choice. As I see it now, it was a moment about *publics*. The man in the audience sought to name and solidify a particular public, a particular body of stranger-reader-citizens who might pick up Anzaldúa’s book, and he wanted to point out a gap between the public she had invoked and a “real” American public—the people who are responsible to create social change, he claimed, were white-identified and male-identified. But the woman who intervened did not accept either of those premises; instead, she called upon the young man to take responsibility for aligning himself with that version of “the public.” Since that kind of redirection of public identity is what *Borderlands* is all about, I am certain that Anzaldúa could have responded to this man herself. But the intervention of the white woman was a critical performance as well. The white man had invoked a particular, racialized public in his question, and he was calling on a woman of color to justify her desire and authority to invoke an alternative, mixed-race public. When the white woman responded, she transgressed the white solidarity implied in that question.

I introduce this story to highlight my main thesis in this article: that publics are rhetorical, that the invocation of a “public” is a move in an ongoing struggle that is constitutive of that public. Through choice of style, genre, evidence, grammar, language and other discourse conventions, writers and readers negotiate the framework in which we might speak and that we will accept as “public discourse” when others speak. In the case of the American public, the struggle over such conventions is a necessary and vital part of our democratic process; stylistic differences can be attempts to create rival publics, even when the “interactions . . . seem to have no manifest political content” (Warner 14). But such struggles are often overlooked in the debates about how to prepare citizens for democratic participation. Those conversations tend to either
focus on teaching student-citizens only how to participate in the dominant American public discourse, or, alternatively, they recognize the limitations of the current dominant discourse and desire an (impossibly) accessible, universal, inclusive standard for a single public discourse. Rather than take either of these paths, I argue, we need to value the rhetorical struggle itself as an ongoing part of democracy.

In this article, I draw on Michael Warner's analysis of the concept of "publics" to connect together—and then extend—a series of arguments about what literacy students must attain to enter the public sphere. First, I turn to the work of E.D. Hirsch, Jr. to demonstrate the most common renditions of the arguments about "public literacy": that the current expectations for American public discourse are neutral and universally accessible, and that their value lies in their ability to ensure clear communication across diverse groups. In response, I synthesize a range of critiques of these claims, demonstrating that these conventions are not applied equally, do not guarantee access to "public" discussions and, in turn, exclude some people and concepts from public discussion.

The second section of the article considers how the concepts of "diversity" and "tolerance"—values that seem so central to the American ideal—are invoked in the struggle over public rhetorics. A central tenant of a "public" is that it is constituted of strangers; members of a public cannot all know each other personally and intimately, and when a public is invoked, its audience recognizes this tension as the text seeks to encompass both the "known" and "unknown" members. Public texts, for example, often perform formality as a way of acknowledging that the speaker is addressing strangers. But "strangers" is a category that is broader than "public." A "public" invites strangers but also delimits the circle: the "public" is an invocation of a particular identity that the members agree to take on. "To address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one's disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology" (Warner 11). What do the conventions for public discourse in America reveal about how these tensions are worked out? How do our linguistic conventions delimit the kinds of "strangers" that will be included in American public discourse, and how do people
justify these constraints without abandoning the American values of “tolerance” and “diversity”? Here is where conventions about decorum, anger, and evidence serve to solidify a certain white, middle-class ideology.

Finally, I consider how the rhetorical conventions of the dominant public sphere position interlocutors as individuals with particular, atomized roles in a rational-critical discursive exchange. Since the 1800s, the concept of “the public” has naturalized assertions that its purpose is to create a place where “individuals” “reason” things out and decide on actions. Alternative American publics invoke relationships that are not so isolated, and when a reader-listener-citizen agrees to participate in those publics, she/he may experience new conceptions of knowledge, new ways of arriving at knowledge together, and new relationships among citizens. Participating in alternative public discourses is not just about tolerating difference; it’s about experiencing how language conventions shape our worldviews. To teach “public literacy” for a multicultural society is to teach the logic and argument of multiple rhetorics.

The Traditional Public Sphere

The commonplace argument about the nature of the contemporary American public sphere is twofold. First, for strangers to come together and communicate effectively, they need a common body of knowledge and common conventions to govern the communication. Second, this common body is neutral and inclusive; once it has been taught and explained, everyone can participate equally and fully in the public conversation. A lot of people, including E.D. Hirsch, Jr. have made compelling arguments for the first point. My concern, however, is that in making the case for greater access to the currently dominant public sphere, people too often slip into the second argument, asserting that sphere as neutral and inclusive. Examining this slippery move provides an opportunity to think critically about the nature of the dominant sphere and its relationship to the larger collection of people in America.

Consider a visual analogy that might help illuminate some of the commonplace assumptions about what a public is. Let’s assume that all
people in America are represented in a large circle, a circle that includes multiple languages, cultures, religions—a full spectrum of folks, some who identify with the mainstream culture and some who do not. A smaller subset of people determines what will be considered good and right and proper in that larger circle by working out, together, a series of legal, social, and cultural expectations for public behavior. This smaller sphere is constituted by government leaders and others who have influence in national conversations. For democracy to work, people from all over the larger circle must have access to the smaller circle so that their concerns and values might be included in the legal and social rules that govern society. In this sense, the "public" is not the actual decision makers, but all those strangers who gather together to reason out what good policy should be, and who then influence those in the inner circle to consider their proposals. For Jürgen Habermas, whose theories of the public sphere guide much of my analogy here, the public sphere is constituted in all those places where strangers meet to deliberate: coffee houses, salons, street corners, and the like; it is made possible because of the group's literacy and access to a range of public texts.

Education for democracy, this reasoning goes, must introduce all citizens to the discourse conventions and background knowledge necessary to be part of the American public: learning how to behave as a stranger among strangers, learning how to reason and deliberate and how then to bring this public opinion to bear on public leaders. As Hirsch writes in his new book *The Knowledge Deficit*, "To assure communication when I address a stranger, I have to estimate what I can assume and what I must explain. Hence, my knowledge of what I can take for granted in communicating with strangers is critical to my successful membership in a speech community... This shared, assumed knowledge is something our children must learn if they are to become competent readers and writers" (45).

Hirsch's assertion here meshes well with theories of "publics," which are understood as constituted by "a circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity" (Warner 11-12). Hirsch carries this idea into American public schools through his "Core of Knowledge Foundation"; hundreds of American public schools, from preschool to eighth grade, are using his
books and training their teachers to infuse more content into their reading and writing instruction so that students gain the background knowledge they need to participate as readers and writers in national conversations (Méndez). Schools must teach this knowledge explicitly, Hirsch says, to deliberately address an imbalance: “advantaged” students, whose parents have a higher education, absorb more of this required knowledge from home, reading, and other venues than do their “disadvantaged” counterparts (62). Through explicitly teaching cultural background knowledge, he proposes to bring more “disadvantaged” students into the “mainstream of American life” (5).

In *The Knowledge Deficit*, Hirsch does a much better job than in his 1986 *Cultural Literacy* of acknowledging some of the power dynamics and potentially dangerous ways of applying his theory. Hirsch points out that the standard language of American public discourse is not natural, but is manufactured, and he warns teachers against presuming that the standard language is superior to students’ home languages (56). Nevertheless, he does not respond to concerns that reinforcing this central core of knowledge consolidates the power of the status quo; rather, he continues to assert that the process of bringing all students into the mainstream is neutral and democratizing. He says, that to be “conservative in the means of communication,” regardless of the political stance one takes, is “the road to effectiveness in modern life, in whatever direction one wishes to be effective” (23). The means by which we communicate are “not the province of any single social group” (21), he argues:

Literate culture is the most democratic culture in our land: it cuts across generations and social groups and classes; it is not usually one’s first culture, but it should be everyone’s second, existing as it does beyond the narrow spheres of family, neighborhood and region. As the universal second culture, literate culture has become the common currency for social and economic exchange in our democracy, and the only available ticket to full citizenship. Getting one’s membership card is not tied to class or race. Membership is automatic if one learns the background information and the linguistic conventions that are needed to read, write, and speak effectively. (21–22)
In the first paragraph, Hirsch acknowledges that literate culture is *not* everyone's second language, but he begins his next paragraph asserting that it is *universal*. Thus, there is a contradictory proposition: "literate culture" includes all people even as it is composed of a subset of people. He asserts that the core knowledge is elastic: as new people and ideas join the ongoing conversation, the core knowledge will expand and change, but he rejects the idea that people are transformed as they acquire new literate practices. What kind of transformation happens when one moves from being a member of the larger circle, gains the "currency" of the national vocabulary and linguistic conventions, and "buys a ticket" into the smaller circle? Is the process simply a matter of acquiring a new thing, or is one transformed during the transaction? Can anyone "buy" anything or does the ticket have limited use? Note that composition teachers are complicit in all of these questions: we are the ones charged to "sell" the literacy currency. To answer these questions, we need to examine the linguistic conventions closely.

**Double Jeopardy:**

**Marginalized Groups and the Dominant Public Spheres**

Contemporary scholarship points out two main flaws in claims that the discourse conventions of the public sphere are open to all and that they assure better clarity of communication among all American citizens. For one thing, feminist scholars have demonstrated the double standard that greets women who enter the public sphere: they are admonished to take on the rational, direct mode of engagement but then are considered "unfeminine" for having done so. African American linguists note that when the dominant public insists on a uniform, standard language in order to assure "clarity," they often do so even when the meaning in a particular exchange is already quite clear: the demand for "clarity" is often an assertion that the public has not agreed to be hailed by an accented voice or nonstandard dialect.

In the traditional model of the public sphere, status markers—race, class, gender—disappear. Habermas argues that in the bourgeois public sphere, status markers no longer guarantee that anyone will have prior
authority or that anyone will be excluded; rather, the merits of one's contributions are borne out through the reasoned discussion of the participants. Nancy Fraser disagrees: "Protocols and styles of discourse [are] themselves correlated with and markers of status inequality" (119). Her observations echo those of feminist sociolinguists. Robin Lakoff observed in her early work Language and Woman's Place that girls are taught to use discourse styles that they are later penalized for using. Lakoff's book, along with more recent work by Deborah Tannen, argues that women and girls use more tag questions, insert more qualifiers, and ask more questions as a way to facilitate conversations. The gendered attributes of discourse are made more fully apparent when considering transgendered citizens and the advice given to them: male-to-female transsexuals usually receive speech therapy to help them adjust to the new expectations for their discourse, whereas little advice is given to female-to-male transsexuals. As Don Kulick notes, "The absence of literature advising FTMs how to talk like a man is an ideological fact. . . . It both reflects and invokes widespread cultural attitudes that hold that being a man is self evident, whereas being a woman is a complicated set of procedures that require careful adherence to detailed, explicit instructions (often issued by men) about how to walk, talk, sit, eat, dress, move, and display affect " (609).

The very features that women are expected to adopt as women prohibit them from being heard in mixed company. From the context of male discourse conventions, asking questions signals one's lack of authority on an issue, and using qualifiers indicates a lack of confidence. Should a woman be taught, then, to speak the dominant discourse of using more assertive statements? Because of her gender, a woman's assertiveness will be interpreted differently than a man's: she is likely to be dismissed as crossing a line and being pushy. If she interrupts as often as a man does, she will be perceived as ruder than he is. (That such discourse might also lead listeners to perceive her as a lesbian suggests that the linguistic codes are heterosexual as well; see Kulick). Thus, the discourse conventions are not available equally to all participants. To argue otherwise is to ignore the power dynamics of the public sphere.

Likewise, we need to interrogate calls that public discourse must adhere to a "standard" language so as to be "clear" and "accessible."

The
call for standard English usually is justified in language that ignores the power dynamics of the decision. Hirsch tells an anecdote about the scientists who decided on the length of the standard meter: his point is that the length chosen was arbitrary and unimportant; what was significant was that everyone agreed to use it as the standard measure (*Cultural* 79). He refers to the decisions to standardize language and national vocabulary in its current form as arbitrary, or as "accidents of history" (see, for example, *Cultural* 26, 28, 96). He also insists that, because of its longevity and prominence in public discourse, this "accident of history" is immutable. Even as he acknowledges, for example, that verb forms in Black English are much more efficient than the standard form, he remarks that standard English will not change because "it exists in millions of books and magazines and is broadcast to billions of people. It's pretty safe to predict that *am, is, are, him, her*, etc. will be with us as long as English is. Children need to learn these and all of the standard forms of the print code accurately in order to learn reading, writing, and formal speaking" (*Knowledge* 53; see an identical argument in *Cultural* 80).

Hirsch identifies quite rightly that the power of the dominant discourse is rooted in its large circulation: the public is reinforced through the regular *public-*ation of itself: because this version is invoked and adopted by writers and readers in millions of texts daily, it has a powerful presence. But such an explanation ignores the constant struggle and violence that is required to maintain this standard code, a struggle that happens in schools as well as in publishing houses, two places that control and monitor what counts as speaking "like an American."

When we say that someone speaks "like an American," we usually mean that she speaks with some variation on the speech of white Americans, whether Boston Brahmin, Texas drawl, or Midwestern or Bronx accents. Far from being paradigms of American speech, accents that bear the markers of non-white identity are viewed as barriers to the speakers' access the public sphere. This is evidenced in the way such students are encouraged/required to abandon their speech patterns by their language educators (whether at school or at home). In *Talkin That Talk*, Geneva Smitherman recounts her college experience of taking a "speech test" to qualify for a teacher preparation program. She flunked and was sent to a speech therapy class with other African Americans,
Native Americans, Latinos, and working class whites from Appalachia. Smitherman writes,

It wasn’t that young people of Color and whites from working-class backgrounds could not be understood. By this stage in our lives, we had developed adequate enough code-switching skills that we were intelligible to those who “carry on the affairs of the English-speaking people.” Rather, the problem was that there existed a bias against this different sounding American English emanating from the margins. Yet our sounds were as “American as apple pie,” having been created as a result of the historical processes that went into the making of America—the African Holocaust, the conquest of the Native American peoples, the disenfranchisement of Latinos in Westward Movement and American expansionism, and the exploitation of people for profits. (2)

Smitherman points out how the linguistic differences that marked this class resulted from American historical conquests. Erasing those accents and dialects would help to reinforce the hegemony of white America and would allow the dominant class to assert its own identity as the central, public experience of America.

The consolidation of a particular white, middle-class public identity takes place in the publishing industry as well. This point is made painfully clear in June Jordan’s account of her students’ desire to write a Letter to the Editor that would honor a brother killed by police brutality and that would simultaneously honor Black English: she writes “Everyone in the room realized that our decision in favor of Black English had doomed our writings, even as the distinctive reality of our Black lives always has doomed our efforts to ‘be who we been’ in this country” (207). The local and national newspapers to whom they sent their letters did not publish them.

Smitherman challenges the consolidation of “standard” English as the only public language in Talkin and Testifyin, where she argues that Black English is a language, with its own grammar and usage, and where she explicates the ideological attributes of that language. The conventions of Black English, she argues, convey West African values (more on this later). As she makes this argument, Smitherman herself changes it up, frequently moving from academic, “standard” English prose to Black
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English; her point is that she can make the same intellectually astute observations in Black English and, in the process, affirm an alternative discourse, with all its stylistic ideologies. But, while her publishers were willing to print the content of her claims, they hesitated to go so far as to allow her to use Black English. Even writing on this topic, she was expected to eradicate traces of nonstandard English. She could not invoke a community of Black English readers as part of her audience. The gatekeepers of academic and general circulation continue to reinforce the concept of the American public as one that that speaks and reads standard English; as a result, few other publics can circulate through these venues of publication.

So far, I’ve concentrated on how access to the dominant public sphere is constrained through discourse conventions. Because the members of the dominant public sphere wish to see themselves as inclusive in their means of communication, the conventions of the public sphere minimize all markers of difference, such as gendered language habits or accents or non-standard Englishes. In the process, however, there is an ongoing struggle to maintain the myth of the neutrality of that discourse; the consolidation of the dominant public sphere takes place in schools, publishing houses, and everywhere the conventions for entering “the” public are reproduced, shared, and taken up.

Yet, it’s important to recognize that the struggle of the American public is not only a struggle for access—it’s not just a matter resolving the double standards in the discourse conventions that currently penalize women for speaking like women and also for being women who speak like men; it’s not just a matter of developing new discourse conventions that would allow marginalized citizens to enter into the public domain without having to hide the marks of their colonization. Rather, public discourse conventions are sites in which particular ideologies are manifest. The ongoing struggle to solidify a single image of an American public discourse is an attempt to naturalize a set of assumptions about who Americans are, how we related to each other, and how we carry out “American” values.

Invoking (as a writer/speaker) and accepting (as a reader/listener) a particular discursive mode is an act of sharing in the language ideology of that public. The public that currently belongs to the dominant public
invites people to "belong" in that group by sharing this linguistic style. But this "sharing" is not without its price. The discourse conventions of the white middle class are embedded with ideologies that maintain the privilege of that group. We must interrogate the ideologies of those conventions and offer citizens a chance to engage in the critical debate about what kinds of publics they wish to produce as reader and writers. In the following two sections, I examine how the discourse conventions that privilege the "good will" of interlocutors reinforce individualism and hamper critiques of systemic oppression. In a later section, I consider American publics that provide alternatives to the rhetoric of individualism.

The rhetorical conventions of the dominant public sphere privilege ideologies of individualism, autonomy, efficiency, abstract reason, and naïve multicultural pluralism, ideologies that privilege whiteness. If we wish to create a more truly democratic public sphere, we need to reexamine critically the conventions of the public discourse, to name them for what they are: access to a language of power that shuts down critiques of white privilege. Despite claims to the contrary, America's distrust of multiculturalism is manifested in dominant discourse conventions. Consider the relationship between individualism and the rules of decorum.

**Individualism and Opinion: Decorous Deflection**

A celebration of individualism floods the national culture. One of the dominant myths in America is the "self-made man," the typical protagonist in Horatio Alger stories. Rooted in these American stories is the ideology of individualism: that one is responsible for him or herself, and that through hard work, dedication, and will power, a person can overcome great odds. America provides the ladder of opportunity, and any individuals who have enough desire can climb up the ladder. However, the myth also implies its opposite: if one slips down the ladder or, even worse, does not begin to climb it, then the problem lies in the individual's lack of ingenuity or drive. David Bleich describes the dangerous edge of this philosophy bluntly: it leads to "the belief that social injustice is usually the fault of the victim" (164).
Two elements of this "American" story directly impact the discourse conventions of the public sphere. First, the public sphere is made up of a collection of *individuals* who see themselves as *autonomous*: they believe they landed where they are because of their own hard work. Second, they welcome all others who have demonstrated their commitment to the same. Thus, at the same time that the "American" national culture values individualism, it also prides itself on its tolerance and diversity. The American story is not just about the person who rises from poverty; it is about the (legal) *immigrant* who rises from poverty. The dominant myth posits America as a culture that constantly provides the opportunities for the outsider who learns the etiquette of the national culture and then acts on the many opportunities that become available. Indeed, whenever a new person arrives with a particularly unique narrative of surmounted obstacles, his or her entrance into the group is welcomed with a round of backslapping and congratulations. It serves as proof that the literacy "ticket" into American public life is inclusive.

"Tolerant" "individualism" leads to a particular version of multiculturalism, a kind of naive pluralism that ignores issues of power and the institutionalization of oppression. This liberal multiculturalism sees social injustices such as racism as individual problems as rooted in some people's ignorance. Thus, racism is be solved by "educating" individual racists, who presumably are the way they are because they haven't had the opportunity to look around and see that their views have been based on provincial experiences. Likewise with other "social problems"—sexism, classism, homophobia, ableism, ageism, and so on—within the framework of liberal pluralism, these injustices are to be corrected individually and can be overcome individually.

Kenneth Burke admonishes us to look carefully at those times when we claim ourselves as individuals, isolated from other systems around us. When we do so, he tells us, we blind ourselves to the larger forces we are implicitly identified with. His classic example is that of the shepherd:

> If the shepherd is guarding the sheep so they may be raised for market, though his role (considered in itself, as guardian of the sheep) concerns only their good, he is implicitly identified with their slaughter. A total stress on the autonomy of his pastoral specification here functions *rhetorically* as a mode of expression
whereby we are encouraged to overlook the full implications of his office. (302)

Whatever the shepherd's intentions, his role is the larger system of animal husbandry is harmful to sheep. Thus, an emphasis on "good will" and "good intentions" performs the rhetorical function of pushing members of the public sphere to concentrate narrowly on people's individual behavior and expressed beliefs, and to overlook the full implications of power imbalances. In particular, it creates a safe place where those in power—whites for example—can expect to be treated as benevolent and well-intentioned, even when, because of their whiteness, they maintain a position of privilege.

Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee point out how the contemporary concept of "opinions" maintains this same rhetorical function: it keeps the emphasis on the individual and makes it very difficult to challenge people's assertions. In Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students, Crowley and Hawhee argue that opinions are seen as part of a person's identity—views that she has developed individually and that, in turn express who she is individually.

The belief that opinions belong to individuals may explain why Americans seem reluctant to challenge one another's opinions. To challenge a person's opinion is to denigrate that person's character, to imply that if he or she holds an unexamined or stupid or silly opinion, he or she is an unthinking or stupid or silly person. (9)

"Opinions" are seen as a dramatically different category than "facts." While "facts belong to everybody," "opinions are intimately tied up with an individual's thought and personality" (9). It becomes impolite, then, to challenge a person's opinions for fear of being seen as attacking her character and identity. An expected polite deference to others' "opinions" reinforces the sense that opinions and attitudes—whether racist or otherwise—come from internal and psychological places rather than from larger societal structures. The expected solution is to let it be, to attribute the opinion to that person, and to move over to create space for this opinion among the many, autonomous other opinions out there.

Picture those conversations in bars or coffeehouses where one person in a group makes a racist or homophobic comment. Anyone in the group
who is offended by the comment must decide how much to say in response. There is the very real possibility, in many settings, that calling the person on the offensive comment will be seen as such a breach of etiquette that the group would ostracize the person who points it out. The offended person is expected either to remain silent or to speak in such a way as not to create discomfort. Add to this picture the American belief in diversity and we have an image of the ideal public sphere where people of all races, classes, genders, etc. gather amicably, where everyone behaves with decorous politeness—where everyone agrees implicitly not to jeopardize the image of harmony and equality in the group.

Bell hooks dismisses this colorblind public sphere as "the comforting 'melting pot' idea of cultural diversity, the rainbow coalition where we would all be grouped together in our difference, but everyone wearing the same have-a-nice-day smile" (31). When we are expected to "[wear] the same have-a-nice-day smile," it's hard to challenge the privilege accorded to different groups based on race, class, gender because these are not grounded in individual intentions; they are bigger, more pervasive. To suggest that intentions are not one of the most significant aspects of a person's role in the public sphere violates a central concept of the public sphere—that the public sphere functions precisely because of the good will that individuals have toward each other.

Once we acknowledge an imbalance of power, the image of a public sphere comprised of autonomous individuals engaged in harmonious pluralism cannot be the foundation for truly democratic public interactions: rather, during negotiations, rhetors must constantly examine how their own positions are intertwined with others and with the larger cultural and social institutions around them. The dialog needs to be one where people are made to confront their complicity in the oppression of others.

Anger as Art of the Contact Zone

In her 1996 College English article, "Freshman English as a Middle-Class Enterprise," Lynn Bloom observes that composition teachers have clear
expectations about appropriate topics for first-year writing courses. She writes,

No matter what kinds of writing assignments we give, as middle-class teachers we expect freshman papers—on whatever subject—to fall within the realm of normative discourse in subject, point of view, values implied. . . . When we receive a paper that incorporates what Mary Louise Pratt calls “unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique” and—intentionally or unwittingly—transgresses these normative boundaries, we go to pieces. (659)

Bloom equates “unsolicited oppositional discourse” with papers that are “racist, misogynist, sadistic, or otherwise debased or debasing” (659). She describes offensive essays about gang violence or gay bashing, and examines the teacher’s uncomfortable responses. The main taboo of these papers appears to be their rejection of the American ideal of equality. Although many teachers refuse to challenge the student’s positions head-on, they express their disapproval indirectly. By refusing to accuse the students of having violated any social taboos, the professors demonstrate their good will (and their presumption of the students’ good will) and model the decorum of the imagined public sphere.

While I agree that such over-careful politeness can deflect more critical responses in such moments, I want to call attention to different move within this passage. Bloom equates the idea of “unsolicited oppositional discourse” to papers describing gang violence and gay bashing. Given her reference to Mary Louise Pratt, the leap that she has made is a telling one. In Pratt’s famous “Arts of the Contact Zone” essay, rhetors who practice oppositional discourse do so in order to intervene in the stories that the dominant culture tells itself—to force the dominant culture to see how its own myths of success, tolerance or benevolence cover over oppression. While Bloom’s examples depict readers who are made uncomfortable because writers have violated the American ideals of tolerance, what Pratt is talking about are occasions where writers point out how their readers have violated that American value. This is a much different interaction. It’s not the situation of a self-defined “tolerant” person trying to decide how to point out politely that the comment her
colleague made was offensive. Rather, a person who thinks she is "tolerant" is forced to hear that she has been racist. "Unsolicited oppositional discourse" is the rhetoric that is used to attack the benevolent self-image of those who are complicit in oppression.

Bloom argues that the typical middle-class response to essays that are blatantly racist or homophobic is to find a way politely and indirectly to call attention to the problem, and to do so in a way that does not cause discomfort to the listener. I would argue that the appeal to decorum is also the means by which the dominant culture shrugs off the much more pointed and discomforting challenge of "unsolicited oppositional discourse." Such a challenge is dismissed as rude because precisely because it positions us in an uncomfortable position. This is especially true if the author of the oppositional discourse expresses any anger.

"Good" public writing is seen as calm, rational, and unemotional. Anger is allowed only for those issues that the group has already agreed are worth being angry about. One can rage about deadbeat dads, for instance, or terrorists, or snipers. The rhetorical effect of such anger is to rally the group to reinforce the current value system. However, what if one seeks to critique the dominant group? Then, the rhetor is expected first to establish a connection and identification with the group and second to set out a rational and deliberate argument. The calm tone is thought to demonstrate the rhetor's belief in the goodwill of the audience and the rhetor's desire to maintain a relationship with them. According to dominant discourse conventions, anger and rage make such relationships impossible. I disagree.

In celebrating a rhetoric of anger, as I do here, I do not presume that all anger is productive, or that all contexts in which a person speaks with anger include within them an invitation to enter into a relationship to learn together. Anger can be a tool of exclusion, a tool of authority that shuts down inquiry. Anger can be a method of silencing the listener. My claim is not that all anger is productive, but rather that some anger can be productive, and that therefore we need to make sure that we fall into the easy habit of not listening to anger because it violates the expectations of public discourse. Banning the expression of anger is not the only possible rhetorical response.
In "The Uses of Anger," Audre Lorde writes to all women to encourage them to speak their anger about racism, and she writes to white women to encourage them to hear it. Lorde argues that anger offers both parties—the angry speaker and the person who hears it—possibilities for growth: "My fear of anger taught me nothing," she writes, and "your fear of that anger will teach you nothing, also" (124). Hearing anger offers the possibility for growth precisely because it dismantles the presumption that the only way to demonstrate goodwill is to remain calm. If a person is speaking angrily to me, then—because of the very fact that the conversation is happening—a relationship has been established between us. The angry person is speaking to me; she wants me to hear her; she expects me to listen. There is, by default, an expression of goodwill in that very act.

Yet, if I refuse to listen because she is angry, then I am denying this gesture of goodwill and refusing to respond to it; I am only acknowledging that her anger makes me uncomfortable. The discourse conventions in the dominant culture see anger as pushing people away, and teach us, as listeners, to see only half of the interaction. If I cannot learn to hear anger as an act of goodwill—as a sign of possibility for a new kind of relationship—then I have already found a way to refuse that new relationship. Lorde writes, "My anger is a response to racist attitudes and to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes. If your dealings with other women reflect those attitudes, then my anger and your attendant fears are spotlights that can be used for growth in the same way I have used learning to express anger for my growth" (124). But more often what happens, she asserts, is that when people hear her anger, they say, "Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I can't hear you." But is it my manner than keeps [them] from hearing, or the threat of a message that [their lives] might change?" (125).

Although Pratt doesn't name it as such, I would argue that expressing righteous anger is an art of the contact zone. It is an art, like the others she names—parody, satire, humor, imagined dialog, denunciation, multilingual expression (590)—that allows people to call attention to the rules of culture that exclude them; it is a strategy that can expose how rhetorical conventions themselves create and reproduce that exclusion. But as with the other arts of the contact zone, it is rarely taught and often discouraged.
The Epistemology of Lived Experiences

La Facultad is the capacity to see in the surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant "sensing," a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. ... When we are up against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we'll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away. ... It's a kind of survival tactic that people caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate.

—Gloria Anzaldúa

If people whose experiences are not reflected in the dominant culture respond in anger to their exclusion, they can be dismissed as rude and untrained in polite discourse. One reasonable alternative might be for the excluded rhetors to share personal experiences so as to allow others to see how they have arrived at their different understandings. But there's a catch-22 here as well: within the traditional public sphere, differences are to be bracketed; the speaker in the public sphere, who addresses strangers, is expected to maintain a certain level of anonymity to assure that the comments and discussions focus on public, rather than intimate, personal matters. Therefore, calling attention to personal experiences that will themselves call attention to the differences among the members of the public is taboo. Warner explains:

The bourgeois public sphere claimed to have no relation to body image at all. Public issues were depersonalized so that, in theory, any person would have the ability to offer an opinion about them and submit that opinion to the impersonal test of public debate without personal hazard. Yet the bourgeois public sphere continued to rely on features of certain bodies. Access to the public came in the whiteness and maleness that were then denied as forms of positivity, since the white male qua public person was only abstract rather than white and male. (166)

The rhetorical quandary is this: anything that could be interpreted as a narrowly self-interested position—something that pertains to you be-
cause of your race, gender, sexuality, etc.—must be presented in such a
way as to prove that, to the contrary, it is a broadly self-interested
position, a position in which every individual can recognize his or her own
self-interests.

Since the Enlightenment, the rhetorical tool for persuading others
that something is not “self-interested” is the evocation of the scientific
method and the “objective” distance provided through careful observa-
tion. The rhetorical move goes like this: one claims that the proposed
position is not simply one’s own, but that it has been validated through a
scientific method that erases any biases that could have been caused by
one’s unique perspectives. The consequence of this emphasis on dis-
tance, objectivity and neutrality is that when people from the non-
dominant group develop theories from their lives and experiences and ask
the dominant culture to re-see itself through their eyes, their theories are
dismissed as “personal” and “subjective.” In order to appeal to “reason,”
people are expected to erase those characteristics that distinguish them
from the imagined “sameness” of the group. In this manner, the very
content of their critique—their lived experiences of oppression—are
dismissed.

At the same time, appeals to “scientific reason” assume that those
who have used the theory have, indeed, developed “universal” knowledges.
Feminist epistemologists reject the traditional Enlightenment “notion of
objectivity, that is, the ability of the . . . observer to remove himself from
what is being observed and to analyze rationally the data he gathers”
(Hekman 107). The scientific method does not erase all vestiges of the
ideologies and particularities of those who practice it. Claims to objectiv-
ity overlook the particular histories, experiences, philosophies and ide-
ologies that lead an “observer” to find questions as well as certain
interpretations more acceptable than others (see Harding).

For people who seek to develop theories about the world based on
their own lived experiences, the discourse conventions of the public
sphere trample them coming and going: when they develop theories
rooted in their worldview, they are dismissed as being too self-interested.
Yet, when others develop theories rooted in a dominant perspective, and
then validate their theories using methods that only appear to be neutral,
these theories are then assumed to be universal and nonpartisan. Bell
hooks writes that this rule against personal narrative as a method of knowledge-making is a tool of white supremacist patriarchy because the rule is applied differently to people in power and those outside of it. When only people of color are exhorted to resist making generalizations from their experiences, such exhortations serve as

a means of exerting coercive power [that] leaves unquestioned the critical practices of other groups who employ the same strategies in different ways and whose exclusionary behavior may be firmly buttressed by institutionalized structures that do not critique or check it. (83)

In my classrooms, I notice the disparity like this. When reading essays rooted in the experience of people of color such as those by hooks, Victor Villanueva or Gloria Anzaldúa, white students often respond by saying, “But this is only their experiences. They are making too much of these individual moments. How can they call these examples evidence of racism when it is just what happened to them?” Conversely, when we speak about issues such as affirmative action, the same students are quick to offer narrative proof of white friends or relatives who were passed over because of some affirmative action policy.

The different experiences of these narratives’ proofs are, I would argue, a matter of the authority granted to the underlying logic of the experiences. The students who challenge the interpretations of minority experiences do not recognize how the experiential arguments of minority writers may be based on a belief that (a) racism exists and (b) it is bolstered by institutional and cultural systems and therefore (c) personal experiences of racism in these institutions can be seen as evidence of the larger racist systems at work. At the same time, they implicitly recognize the ideology of autonomous individualism that is underlying their argument when they share their own experiences. Thus, as hooks points out, “the politics of race and gender within white supremacist patriarchy grants [many white male students] this ‘authority’ without their having to name the desire for it” (81). Some students can speak from experience and have that count as “knowledge”; others cannot. And the difference here is not random: the discourse conventions of the dominant culture demand that the people whose experiences do not already match the
ideologies of the status quo must do the extra work of making explicit the underlying generalizations they are making; those in the status quo do not.

I want to stress that this method of deflection is not only utilized by students, or by those who see themselves as defenders of the status quo. It is a strategy that all who have been disciplined into the discourse strategies of the dominant public sphere can draw on. For example, Chela Sandoval exposes this deflection technique in her analysis of histories of feminism. After recounting how Allison Jaggar’s typology of the feminist movement ignores the theories of women of color, Sandoval writes,

[Jaggar] claims that a specific U.S. third world feminist theory, method, and criticism “does not exist.” This dismissal is based on her understanding of the written works produced by feminists of color during the 1970s and 1980s (authors such as Paula Gunn Allen, Audre Lorde, Nellie Wong, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Toni Morrison, Mistuye Yamada, bell hooks, the third world contributors to Sisterhood is Powerful, or the contributions to This Bridge Called My Back), which, she claims, operate “mainly at the level of description.” (52)

According to Sandoval, Jaggar is unable to recognize the knowledge and theory production in the contributions of women of color because she is limited by her definition of what counts as knowledge and what counts as mere description.

In her analysis of academic studies of Native Americans, Malea Powell identifies how this knowledge/experience dichotomy erases non-dominant perspectives. She writes, “When scholars convince themselves that they cannot study Indians (i.e., others) from the basis of Indian experience and existence, that they must make their efforts ‘scientific’ and thus distance their work from Indian ‘reality,’ they displace the very voices—those of Indian peoples—that they claim they want to hear” (5). When critiques rooted in personal experience are dismissed as “merely personal” unless the claims can be “objectively” verified by people outside the “self-interested” individuals who are making those claims, then the critique is effectively blocked. The conversation circles around the question of validity rather than any real engagement with the critique being offered.
Personal Experience as the Epistemology of a Counterpublic

The insistence on using personal "interested" experiences as part of one's analytical critique of dominant ideologies is not "only" a stylistic choice. Rather, it is the move of a *counterpublic*, a demand that the stranger-relationship that constitutes the dominant public sphere be refigured, an attempt "to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity" (Warner 122). The use of personal narrative is a rhetorical decision that challenges the Enlightenment model and insists that people cannot be written out of the picture in an attempt to arrive at a clearer view of that picture. In the end, the use of personal narrative by marginalized groups is not an attempt to gain access to the dominant public sphere—not an attempt to correct an exclusion—but is a critique of the code of stranger-relationships that constitutes that sphere. Addressing a public in a new way conjures a new public:

One cannot conjure a public into being by force of will. The desire to have a different public, a more accommodating addressee, therefore confronts one with the circularity inherent in all publics: public language addresses a public as a social entity, but that entity exists only by virtue of being addressed. Its seems inevitable that the world to which one belongs, the scene of one's activity, will be determined at least in part by the way one addresses it. In modernity, therefore, an extraordinary burden of world making comes to be borne above all by style. (Warner 128–29)

Critiques of calm, rational, scientifically grounded prose expose how the requirements of that form sift out alternative epistemological perspectives. For me, this critique comes through most strongly in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, where she deliberately combines genres to help us see how traditional, academic discourse is based on a foundational belief in the Enlightenment split between "mind" and "body." By weaving brief personal narratives, images, metaphors, and poems into her book, she argues for alternate and subversive ways of arriving at and sharing knowledge. She seeks a way of defining knowledge-making as an intensely personal and physical experience. And for Anzaldúa, the intensely personal process of listening to her body is not something outside of cultural, ideological formations, but is simulta-
neously constructed by them and, as a site of contradictions and pain, a way of breaking out of them. So long as we pay attention to that most personal of things, our physical selves and the contradictory images and longings we have been taught to suppress, and as long as we examine the relationships among these and the dominant ways of knowing that have been passed on to us, we can arrive at new ways of viewing and talking about the world. That, I see, is the hopeful message Anzaldúa offers. She helps us recognize how tying ourselves to one form of writing means tying ourselves to one way of seeing the world; she offers an alternative.

**Individual-Centered and People-Centered Rhetorics**

Rhetorical sovereignty is the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse.

—Scott Lyons

An individual’s language is intricately bound up in his sense of identity and group consciousness.

—Geneva Smitherman

If *Borderlands* invokes a counterpublic with new criteria for what counts as “knowledge” in public discourse, other American counterpublics challenge a different assumption in the dominant public sphere: the role of interlocutors as isolated individuals. The dominant public sphere in America operates on the assumption that the goal of public interaction is a particular kind of decision-making, the ability to congeal public opinion so as to pressure the state to take action. As Warner puts it, “The critical discourse of the public corresponds as sovereign to the superintending power of the state... Publics have acquired their importance to modern life because of the ease of those transpositions upward to the level of the state” (116). The public is called up in a series of strategic, though isolated, moments of interdependence among individual citizens, whose relationships then dissipate (except in a rather vague way) until the next encounter.
Because this dominant public is called into being through the circulation of texts,

The attribution of agency to publics works in most cases because of the direct transposition from private reading to the sovereignty of opinion. All of the verbs for public agency are verbs for private reading, transposed upward to the aggregate of readers. Readers may scrutinize, ask, reject, opine, decide, judge, and so on. Publics can do exactly these things. And nothing else. (Warner 123)

However, the model of democracy as a collection of individuals is not the only American model. Reading verbs are not the only actions available for publics: “Counterpublics tend to be those in which this ideology of reading does not have the same privilege” (123). We can see alternatives by examining the ideologies that undergird some Native American and African American rhetorics.

In “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” Leslie Marmon Silko describes the language practices of the Laguna Pueblo. Silko challenges the Western assumptions about the relationships among rhetor and audience. She explains, “The storytelling always includes the audience and the listeners, and in fact, a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener, and the storyteller’s role is to draw the story out of the listeners. This kind of shared experience grows out of a strong community base. The storytelling goes on and continues from generation to generation” (436). The stories emerge from the interaction. At the same time, the listeners trust the storyteller to guide the overall experience. Silko reminds her own audience, “As with [a spider’s] web, the structure will emerge as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust, as Pueblo people do, that the meaning will be made” (434).

According to Silko, the importance of the interaction is in the relationships that are developed and maintained through the ongoing cycles of storytelling. She says, “The stories are always bringing us together, keeping this whole together, keeping this family together, keeping this clan together” (437–38). Anthropologists and ethnologists classified old, traditional Pueblo stories as more important than contemporary family stories; however, Silko rejects that hierarchy: the purpose
of all stories is to provide a sense of location and relationship for the listeners within an ever-widening spiral of relationships—"so you can move, then, from the idea of one's identity as a tribal person, to a clan identity" (437). Allowing people to separate and isolate themselves from the group is dangerous:

When some violent emotional experience takes place, people get the urge to run off and hide or separate themselves from others. And of course, if we do that, we are not only talking about endangering the group, we are also talking about the individual or the individual family never being able to recover or survive. Inherent in this belief is the feeling that one does not recover or get well by one's self, but it is together that we look after each other and take care of each other. (437)

The stories serve not only to bring people into the community, but also to provide for them some critical perspective on their own experiences. "Keeping track of all the stories within the community gives a certain distance, a useful perspective which brings [any new and distressing] incidents down to a level you can deal with" Silko explains (437). The interactions of storytelling are crucial for survival, because storytelling provides both the distance to be able to understand each thing in context and the connection to be able to recognize that one is not alone in any suffering.

The interactive component of Pueblo storytelling reinforces the communal values. The conception of the "public" space that comes out of these rhetorical traditions is drastically different from the image of the collection of individuals in the commonplace public sphere I described earlier. The rhetorical dynamics insist on the equal importance of the storyteller and audience, and each has a role to play in maintaining the larger community. They are not individuals negotiating for self-interest, but a people guided by a commitment to the larger group.

Scott Lyons has elaborated on this concept in his essay, "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What American Indians Want in Writing." He writes, "A people is a group of human beings united together by history, language, culture, or some combination therein—a community joined in union for a common purpose: the survival and flourishing of the people itself"
Drawing on examples from early Cherokee towns in Georgia, Lyons describes a national identity where “reason and rationality were deployed always with an idealistic eye toward the betterment of the people, including but not limited to the individuals which constituted it, through the practices of tradition and culture” (455). Describing the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois League, he emphasizes that their purpose in negotiating with each other and outsiders was “for the sole purpose of promoting, not suppressing, local cultures and traditions, even while united by a common political project” (456). He stresses that the democratic model offered here goes beyond self-governance; it recognizes that the group is more than self-interested individuals, but is made up of individuals who have a responsibility to promote each other’s “local” interests and cultures, and the traditions that support them.

An additional example of rhetorical models that challenge the individualist paradigm of democracy can be found in Geneva Smitherman’s analysis of the language of Black America. Written in 1977, Talkin and Testifyin challenges the presumption that Black English is merely the result of African American’s laziness or simple ignorance of the rules of “proper” English. As she lays out the inherent structures and linguistic principles of Black English, Smitherman draws connections between these structures and those of the West African worldview from which they derive. One of these principles is:

Though the universe is hierarchical, all modes of existence are necessary for the sustenance of its balance and rhythm. Harmony in nature and the universe is provided by the complementary, interdependent synergetic interaction between the spiritual and the material. . . . Similarly, communities of people are modeled after the interdependent rhythms of the universe. Individual participation is necessary for community survival. Balance in the community, as in the universe, consists of maintaining these interdependent relationships. (75)

Within the modes of discourse in Black English, this worldview is exemplified most clearly in the tradition of call and response. In the call and response exchange, the audience responds with words, gestures, or sounds to the speaker’s statements. While the tradition is most often
associated with the traditional Black church, it carries into secular contexts as well. As with the Native Indian rhetorical conventions described earlier, the assumption here is that if only one person is speaking, the interaction is flawed. The participation of all parties is essential, and there is a wide range of appropriate responses to any rhetor's speech: "the only incorrect thing you can do is not respond at all" (108). Smitherman (drawing on work by Oliver Jackson) elaborates:

We are talking, then, about an interactive network in which the fundamental requirement is active participation of all individuals. In this kind of communicative system, "there is no sharp line between performers or communications and the audience, for virtually everyone is performing and everyone is listening." The process requires that one must give if one is to receive, and receiving is actively acknowledging another. (Talkin 108)

The system is not without hierarchy: the speaker still sets the agenda and manipulates the dynamic. But the audience must provide feedback, and the speaker is expected to adjust, to play (with) the audience. "Emphasis is on group cohesiveness, cooperation, and the collective common good" (109).

I want to stress that, although I am drawing examples from the traditions of Native American and African American rhetorics, I am not claiming that the rhetorics here are essentially Native American or African American. I heed David Holmes' warning that "if one is not careful, even the expression 'African American Rhetoric' intimates a narrow perception of what constitutes African American identity and experience" (61). Rather, they are deployed as rhetorical strategies for communicating value systems that many Native Americans and African Americans have embraced.

In these examples of Native American and African American linguistic traditions, the rhetorical interactions take place in the "safe houses" of the marginalized communities. Given the history of violence against both Native Americans and African Americans, it is not surprising that their rhetorical traditions would emphasize the need for communal identity as an element of survival. The expected roles of speaker and audience serve to reinforce an interconnection and identity as well as a sense of mutual
responsibility and activism: the role of both speaker and audience is to construct each experience, to shape it. To merely "receive" ideas or "give" ideas violates the interdependence needed for survival in a dominant culture.

But the dominant public sphere is not a safe house; as a public, it is in perpetual crisis, offering up its identity through the circulation of discourse and becoming reaffirmed only when someone takes up that circulation. The dominant public sphere operates at a site of contention, competing with counterpublics for that circulation. It would be misleading, naïve, and dangerous to presume that these rhetorical conventions of the counterpublic simply could be imported into the dominant public sphere. The struggle here is not a struggle for access, but a struggle for the recognition of alternate subject positions, alternative publics. The question is whether or not American—long trained to accept a particular, singular version of its discourse—can allow a range of discourse conventions to operate with legitimacy.

**Performing Rhetorics of American Public Spheres**

The discourse conventions of the dominant public sphere provide a particular relationship for speakers/writers and audience members: the focus is on individuals who tolerate each other, who occasionally identify with each other, who behave in ways to reaffirm a sense of goodwill and presumed generosity among members, and who present their arguments through a logic of reason that excludes certain kinds of knowing. These discourse conventions constitute a willful ignorance of the power dynamics that surround who is allowed to speak, what form that speech should take place, and what value systems are inherent in the roles that one must assume in the rhetorical situations.

The assertion that anyone who merely learns these conventions can "buy a ticket" into the inner circle and then can have an equal chance to be heard, understood, and to effectively persuade others in the public sphere leaps right over the privileges of race, gender, sex, class, and other dynamics that shape how people are heard. Furthermore, conventions such as the requirement to presume goodwill among all parties denies one
side the possibility of accusing others of benefiting from those privileges. These conventions serve to protect the dominant group from hearing critique, and provide them with an easy way to dismiss threatening arguments. The rhetoric of tolerant individualism shields them from the rage of those who are oppressed.

Let me be clear: it is not only that the discourse conventions of the public sphere make it difficult for people to critique the oppositional views of the American myths that privilege the dominant, white power in this county. Dismissing the way ideas are presented is but one mechanism for refusing to listen to them. But the refusal to entertain alternate rhetorical practices is a refusal to experience the alternative worldviews embodied in those discourses. When white American share in Pueblo storytelling or participate in African American call-and-response, they are forced to take on a new role as audience; they are forced to experience new stranger-relationships, new experiences of a public. The rhetorical practices force those involved to act out the values—to go beyond engaging intellectually with concepts such as communal identity and to perform those values in the dynamic of the rhetorical situation. When we do not allow for the alternative rhetorics of the counterpublics to circulate, when we insist that the current discourse conventions are adequate to addressing the content of all concerns that could be raised in the public sphere, we assert that the only way that people need to entertain alternative values is intellectually, not viscerally. The most anyone is expected to do is to think about things, not to change (inter)actions of the rhetorical situation in which they are thinking.

There are, of course, many, many additional values embedded in the discourse conventions of the dominant public sphere: an emphasis on linearity and directness ties with "America's" investment in progress narratives; an emphasis on efficiency and conciseness exemplifies a belief in "thrift"; a focus on moderation (in tone, development, style) coupled with an aversion to excess (seen as flashy, self-indulgent) projects a particular, value-laden aesthetic. Other scholars have explored the ways that these discourse conventions reinforce a particular and exclusive public sphere. See, for example, Gustavo Guerra's analysis of the NEH's dismissal of the "cluttered" aesthetic of Latin American artists, the many fine essays in Writing in Multicultural Settings (edited
by Carol Servino, Juan Guerra and Johnella Butler) and in *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition* (edited by Keith Gilyard).

I do not mean to presume to have covered all of the ways that the discourse conventions of the public sphere exclude alternative values and shut down critique. But I hope that I have offered enough examples and analysis here to challenge the assumption at the challenge of the public sphere is only about access—about providing entry to those who have been excluded. Because the discursive practices of publics require rhetors and audiences to perform certain identities—because they push rhetors and readers to see themselves and their world in different ways—we can best challenge those assumptions of neutrality by introducing students to the range of counter-rhetorics available in America, to ask students to experience them, and to analyze with them the ways that such rhetorics provide alternates for imagining and participating in multicultural public spheres.

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**Notes**

1. Although I am building from Hirsch as a contemporary example, the theory behind this image of the public sphere comes from Jurgen Habermas's analysis of the public sphere that he argues existed briefly in Europe in the 1800s. Both Hirsch and Habermas describe a public sphere in which status markers can be bracketed, to which everyone has access, and where the discussion focuses only on "public" issues deemed relevant to the "common good." For an excellent summary of Habermas and his critics, see Christian Weisser.

2. For example, the meaning of a sentence is perfectly clear from the pronouns when we say I be, you be, he be. Therefore, there is no grammatical need to conjugate the verb to be into I am, you are, it is, etc.

**Works Cited**


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