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***White Guy, Black Texts:  
Appropriateness and Appropriation across Racial Difference***

Rhetorical critics in speech communication have not come to any particularly enduring agreement as to their preferred object of study. Historical speech texts may still provide the paradigm case, but—as the contributions to the current forum suggest—they enjoy nothing like hegemony. Some scholars urge that the study of such a notoriously instantiated art necessitates perceiving it in all of its habitations; others fear that a globalization of rhetoric dangerously stretches the concept beyond coherence; and others insist that this globalization has already occurred and that rhetoricians need to articulate productive responses to it (Simons; Campbell; Willard; Keith et al.).

Perhaps, one side or the other is right. But what interests me here is the way such debates sometimes can elide the rhetorical character of rhetorical texts. Because they concentrate on the shape of rhetoric that emerges from collective patterns of selection among practicing rhetorical critics, agency—in Kenneth Burke's sense—rests almost entirely with the critic. In effect, such discourse can push rhetorical critics outside the audience of the rhetoric that they study, at least to the extent that the rhetorical effects of texts upon the critic do not enter into the discussion. As Edwin Black reminded us many years ago, "it is quite diffi-

cult to discuss processes in the English language," and therefore essays of rhetorical critique often sound as though they are about stable entities when they really are about continually evolving interactions (135-36). Probably, disciplinary debates among speech communication rhetoricians are cases in point, and the apparent elision is merely a linguistic artifact. But this makes it all the more imperative that our discussions about the state of our art include a sensitivity to the ways that these texts address us as audience.

Rhetorical discourse may, for example, "constitute" its audience. Maurice Charland augments Black's notion of a "second persona" with Althusserian "interpellation" to argue that rhetorical discourse might bring its ideal audience into being at a moment of rhetorical interaction. Ideologies and attitudes latent in the text and its auditors are animated through this interaction. This conception does not erase critical agency, nor does it suggest that criticism can occur only from within the position of the ideal audience. But it does invite us to assess some of the ways that a text might exert its influence upon a critic.

A focus on the ways that a rhetorical text might constitute a rhetorical critic necessitates a self-reflexive mode, so the remainder of this short essay concentrates on my relationship to a set of texts with which I am currently working—the rhetoric of Malcolm X, especially after his split with the Nation of Islam.

Malcolm speaks to me across a chasm of history, space, and time. He was a black nationalist, and because the purpose of such discourse is not to alter the thinking of the white race but rather to change the ways that blacks think about themselves, it generally is thought of as being directed toward an African-American audience. Malcolm's immediate and primary audience, both while he was a minister in the Nation of Islam and after, was "drawn largely from that section of the black population receiving the brunt of white or systemic oppression—the lower level of the socioeconomic scale" (Hall 225; see also Lincoln 20-31). When Malcolm was shot to death in Harlem in February 1965, I was a three-year-old white boy growing up middle-class in California. Today, I read his speeches and write about them from a relatively small Midwestern college town where encounters with African-Americans are rare.

Yet Malcolm does speak to me. Indeed, while he was alive, he came under repeated criticism for speaking too much to white audiences. Benjamin Karim, one of Malcolm's few long-time associates, recalls that officials within the Nation of Islam complained that "Malcolm was spending too much time outside the temple ... speaking for the most part *to* the white devil" (128). White college students were among Malcolm's favorite and most enthusiastic audiences; as Archie Epps points out, Malcolm X was, in 1964, "the second most sought-after speaker on college campuses"—behind Barry Goldwater (32). I am, at least in

part, a member of Malcolm's intended audience. He wanted me, and people like me, to hear and understand his message; I, and people like me, have a responsibility to do so.

But there are more significant ways that Malcolm X speaks to me. Malcolm not only calls to me across the chasm that separates us but bids me occupy it. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois eloquently described the African-American experience as a "double-consciousness," a site of unresolved agon. He recognized the motivation to "merge [this] double self into a better and truer self" but also declares that he "would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa," and at the same time, he "would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for ... Negro blood has a message for the world" (5).

It is into one manifestation of double-consciousness that Malcolm's discourse invites its auditors—including me. On the one hand, Malcolm is participating in a long and vibrant black nationalist rhetorical history. While such rhetors as Martin Luther King, Jr., offered jeremiads that urged white America to return to its moribund ideals, Malcolm argues that those ideals themselves are hopelessly corrupt (Lucaites and Condit). But at the same time, Malcolm does not advocate a wholesale separatist rejection of those ideals. Rather, his discourse constitutes an audience who occupies what I have called the *borderlands*, a symbolic space between assimilation and separation from which his audience might engage in critique. For example, in such speeches as his "Rochester Address," delivered just a few days before he was assassinated, Malcolm X compares the status of people of African descent in the United States to their position internationally and rejects identification with either scene. At the border between the two, Malcolm and his audience are liberated from the confines of the domestic scene without relinquishing their rightful claim to participate within it.

The borderlands represent a liminal space both apart from and a part of the US dominant culture. As Victor Turner puts it, individuals or groups occupying a liminal position are "betwixt and between all fixed points of classification" (*Dramas* 232) and therefore might "acquire a special kind of freedom" because their position "liberates them from structural obligations" (*Ritual* 26- 27). Malcolm has invited his audience beyond their limitations, to a site where they are free to "think hard, about cultural experiences they had hitherto taken for granted" (*Ritual* 42). It is here that Malcolm invites me, as a member of his audience. The discourse of the Other has sometimes been appropriated in an exoticized effort to free oneself from transparent ideology, but Malcolm's texts resist such an effort. Malcolm will not be constrained, and his discourse presents no stable, colonizable subject position. He calls me outside of myself

and toward liminality, a space that is, as Turner reminds us, particularly conducive to insight.

This also is a space that amplifies the importance of rhetoric. Throughout his last year, Malcolm schooled his audience in the ability to discern the means through which the dominant culture distorts the language that defines the African-American experience. Repeatedly, he illustrates in his speeches the oppressive manipulation of symbols; he demonstrates, for example, the way that the racism of the white dominant culture is manifested through "a science that's called image making" designed to make it "look like the victim is the criminal, and the criminal is the victim" (151). This "science" is Malcolm's term for the way that African-American self-perception is rhetorically constructed by the dominant white culture, and he works to help his audience learn to see this science at work. In other words, language for Malcolm is not merely a neutral conduit through which meaning flows but constitutive of meaning itself. Malcolm shoulders-and invites his audience to shoulder as well-the burdens of the "strong case for rhetoric," for in this view rhetoric "emerges not as ornamentation, nor as an instrument for disseminating truths gained through other means, but as the very medium in which social knowledge is generated" (Leff 63). In other words, the rhetoric of Malcolm X constitutes his audience as rhetorical critics.

When Malcolm's discourse constitutes me as a member of his audience, I am no longer free to read it as I will. If a work of rhetorical criticism is a sort of residue that remains after a critic encounters a text, then those texts must be granted agency. Authorship, then, is diffuse; Malcolm will be heard, and at the very least I am not quite myself.

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