3. 
Subjectivity in the Social-Structural Landscape

What would happen to an exemplary rhetorical artifact were it situated within a theoretical context that defines every mode of perception, affect, thought, and ideation as socially constructed to begin with? For some insight, we’ll read the famous Sojourner Truth speech of 1851 from the social-structural perspective, though we’ll also turn our assemblage-theoretical attention to the manner in which rhetorical subjectivity itself is being produced, here in a landscape (an enframing, an environmentalized imperative) where rhetoric’s general will to matter is localized as the will to make interiority matter. But, in addition to inquiring into the processes through which rhetorical subjectivity is produced, we will also ask whether the output could help even an exemplary rhetorical agent to effect any genuine social change.

Co-Constructing Constraint

With respect to the ideational formation of the social-structural landscape, we should reflect on the overview provided by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (2005). As both a participant in and a representative on behalf of this social-structural frame, she’s conceptualizing rhetorical agency from inside a “linguistic” turn nestled into a “social” turn (Crowley, “Response,” 1; Lunsford, Wilson, and Eberly xxi). In other words, she’s among those contemporary writers on rhetoric who are left struggling with the problem of “how to theorize the existence of an agent within the constitutive rhetorics of omnipresent ideologies” (Barnett 13).

The “constitutive rhetorics” part of Scot Barnett’s formulation evokes the *linguisticality*, and the “omnipresent ideologies” part the *structured* sociality of the theoretical perspective at issue. We might notice, for example, that in the social-struc-
tural landscape of rhetorical agency, “interpellations” don’t merely invite us, on occasion, to assume this or that subject position; instead, as Judith Butler asserts in “Performativity’s Social Magic,” they constitute the foundation of all foundationalisms, manufacturing “effects” which are “neither linguistic nor social, but indistinguishably—and forcefully—both” (126). And then the very most salient of these social-and-linguistic effects must be the production of no less than our subjectivity.

Now, one should concede that this model, according to which rhetorical agency reduces to a *subjected* interiority, has elicited some spirited critique. Nevertheless any critique would (by social-structural definition) miss the point, which is that critiques themselves can emanate only from suspect subjectivities. The more pragmatic option for us, then, is simply to investigate the concrete functionality of the social-structural perspective, in this way uncovering the attendant implications for the study of rhetorical transaction. After all, so long as subjectivity can be said to play a part in the constitution of rhetorical agency, and so long as there’s an entire assemblage devoted to translating rhetoric’s (general) will to matter into a (specific) will to make subjectivity matter, the social-structural model is destined to remain invulnerable, deflecting every external assault as wishful thinking.

Even so, let’s at least acknowledge the influential response of Herndl and Licona (2007), who have suggested that the subject-agent might be able, kairotically, to exploit certain moments of slippage in collective structure—certain gaps at the intersections among social positions. Yet that’s no refutation. It’s only to affirm that, while nobody can say whether the ginormous egg precedes the itty-bitty chicken, there’s still no reason not to celebrate the latter’s ability to peck.

Then again, there have also been some attempts to turn the tables, to redirect the social-structural argument in just such a manner as to confound its proponents. The attempts most worth mentioning are from Marilyn Cooper (2011) and from Thomas Rickert (2013), though neither is capable of so much as impinging upon the social-structural sphere of influence, other than, perhaps, by way of theoretical fiat.
Cooper’s position, as in the preamble to her “neurophenomenological” account of agency, is that, because social-and-linguistic arguments about subjectivity do tend to leave us in despair, we should start ignoring them. Certainly, any theory of agency that depends upon a notion of the subject is…hamstrung at the start, struggling with how to account for any action that is not either determined by or resistant to semiotic, social, political, and material others or orders. (423)

And that, as Cooper emphasizes, is why every theory conflating agency with subjectivity remains inherently defeatist, incapable of helping us see why rhetorical transaction should ever make any non-trivial difference. It’s why Carolyn Miller has to explain agency as a merely subjectivist “attribution made by another agent,” and it’s “why Herndl and Licona can offer only an agent function” (i.e., a socially-determined role for a socially-determined subject), and it’s why Thomas Rickert, at least in 2007, cannot envision any but “fleeting and provisional” means for “achieving resistance through subjective transformations,” and, finally, it’s why “Judith Butler’s performative notion of agency as repetition with a difference is in the end so unsatisfying,” considering that “the subject’s actions are inevitably structured by the very norms that it attempts to resist” (423–424).

Cooper really is onto something: all of these social-structural, or social-and-linguistic theorizations are to guarantee that the agent-as-subject remain a hapless creature of the collectivity. Yet Cooper errs in maintaining that “a workable theory of agency requires the death not only of the modernist subject but of the whole notion of the subject”—even in its “poststructural, postmodern, and posthumanist” variations (423). She’s mistaken precisely because there’s nothing workable about wishing the subject away, certainly not so long as the entire social-structural assemblage keeps producing a socially-determined subjectivity that’s, in turn, bent on continuing to matter.
As for Rickert (2013), who must have taken Cooper’s criticism to heart, his position has become that deterministic theories, such as those about the social construction of subjectivity, are only world views, and that mere vagaries of opinion cannot, in the long run, make any difference, and that even the most socially-constituted of subjectivities are dwarfed by everybody’s “fundamental weddedness to world” (xvi). But, again, it’s Rickert who’s missing the point. The inhabitants of the social-structural landscape of rhetorical agency (this factory for generating rhetorical subjectivity) have already placed the subject under the thumb of the social, and, by now, there’s just no contradicting them.

That’s why it’s still worth our while to scrutinize the work continually taking place in the social-structural landscape. For some data, we’ll return to that theoretical statement from Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (2005), to that essay which has so influentially demonstrated rhetorical agency to be coextensive with a certain collectively-determined interiority.

In surveying the relevant (not only, as it were, the “constitutive,” but also the “critical-constitutive”) literature, Campbell discovers that rhetorical agency in principle reduces to exactly the subjectivity proper to a creature of the status quo. Thus she prefaces her entire discussion with a somewhat disconcerting manifesto, assembled on the basis of works from Michelle Baliff, Judith Butler, Louis Althusser, and Pierre Bourdieu. It’s to frame rhetorical agency as coextensive with the interiority of what we’ll call, repurposing a usage from Anton and Peterson (2003), the structural subject.

For, while theorists such as Campbell do proceed from within rhetoric’s constitutive turn, they don’t consider discourse to be constitutive from scratch. To the contrary, on their account, it’s actually “the community” which establishes all the “externals” governing rhetorical transaction in the first place (Campbell 9). For example, it’s the group that “confers identities related to gender, race, class, and the like on its members and by so doing determines not only what is considered to be ‘true,’ but also who can speak and with what force.” And, yes, Campbell’s labor on behalf of the (incontrovertible)
social-structural perspective is indeed supported by, and, in turn, supportive of, quite the rhetorical-theoretical crowd.

From Michelle Baliff, Campbell hears that the speech act is the sacrificial ritual which maintains the polis and secures the community...[B]y being subjected to gender, the self is sacrificed upon the altar of the polis, offered in the name of solidarity, order, harmony, peace...In this way, the political subject and the speaking subject...gain identity — recognition by the polis as legitimate.” (3)

So, on the social-structural account, the rhetorical agent is the authorized (if thoroughly subjected) agent, dispensing occluded social forces with her every word. Besides, she’s not just a political subject, but a speaking subject as well, and then her speech, if it’s to be so much as registered, must be consistent with the discourse, signification, or rhetoric already approved for circulation within the collectivity.

From Judith Butler, Campbell learns that agency itself must be co-extensive with (pre-structured) subjectivity:

“[T]he agency of the subject appears to be an effect of its subordination” or, referring to...Althusser’s doctrine of interpellation, “existence as a subject can be purchased only through guilty embrace of the law.” (3)

What’s more, “agency is always and only a political prerogative,” for “if the subject is constituted by power, that power does not cease at the moment the subject is constituted”; to the contrary, the “subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and time again” (Butler, qtd. in Campbell 15). In that case, the perspective which Campbell is helping to construct must be one in which subjectivity is not so much “produced” as re-produced. For example, while the interiority of the rhetorical agent is said to reflect the latter’s ongoing subjection (time and time again), there’s not the slightest suggestion that such interiority might ever be formed other than in
keeping with the dictates of the immediately given dispensa-
tion.

Next, from Pierre Bourdieu, Campbell discovers that all of comunicative agency is locked irremediably into place within the status quo:

“competence” in linguistic performance...includes “the right to speech”...the right to speak “the autho-
ized language which is also the language of author-
ity. Competence implies the power to impose recep-
tion.” (15)

Clearly, such official control over expression then becomes an insurmountable constraint upon the very rationality which subject-agents share as members of the collective.

It’s from this perspective that Campbell finally calls upon none other than Aristotle to testify on behalf of the social-structural paradigm. Citing various passages from the Poetics and the Nichomachean Ethics, and tacitly linking these to ideas in the Rhetoric, Campbell indicates that Aristotle’s conception of “art” or techne (which involves a “reasoned habit of mind”), and also his conception of “thought” or dianoia (which refers to “the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances”), not to mention his conception of practical judgment or phronesis, must already be consistent with the work of “Foucault and Bourdieu,” where subjectivity, certainly subsuming Aristotle’s conceptions of art, reason, and tact, emerges as the output of one or another governing appa-

Consequently, in Campbell’s social-structural assemblage, all of the (let’s say) constitutive mechanisms — the common-
places and communicative techniques at work in rhetorical transaction — turn out to be much the same as those through which the Bourdieu-styled habitus would generate (what else but) habits of mind. Such commonplaces, techniques, and hab-
its of mind are now byproducts of just those “recurrent prac-
tices” which, once “internalized,” provide sociality not only with “powerful engines” for “affecting and constraining future
behaviors” but also with the means for controlling consciousness, rationality, and rhetorical transaction itself (5-7).

And what, so far, can we surmise of the processes through which the social-structural machine fabricates a rhetorical subjectivity that could, in turn, serve as proxy for all the rest of rhetorical agency? Well, first of all, we’ve seen that rhetorical subjectivity is being constructed as the interiority necessary for filling out all of the structural roles (whether dominant or marginalized) that are integral to the status quo. In other words, rhetorical subjectivity turns out to be an effect of the overarching social logic which organizes the totality. Second, we’ve seen that rhetorical subjectivity is also being constructed as isomorphic with rhetorical conventionality, for it’s now the constitutive output of just those discursive practices already authorized for use within the group. Third, we’ve seen that rhetorical subjectivity is being constructed as coextensive with rhetorical materiality, for it’s henceforth the re-production of just those “externals” — those “identities related to gender, race, class, and the like” — which the group continually “confers on its members” (Campbell 9).

We can therefore surmise that these are processes through which rhetorical subjectivity is being assembled on the model of the state. For it does appear that the so-called community is a nation (with the smaller locales tucked, homologously, into a more global totality), and that collectively-determined identities are social or structural roles, and that any privileges accruing to those identities are political capital, and that constitutive discourse is the law, and, finally, that the rhetorical agent is the subjugated citizen.

Of course, there might be some more or less impassioned rejoinders, such as those implied in the work of Schrag (1997), or of Latour (2007), or of Grimson (2010). But those rejoinders wouldn’t sink in, not among the inhabitants of a landscape whose will to matter is actually the will to make interiority matter, and in its most socially-determined form, at that.

Clearly, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell is correct to emphasize the communal dimension of agency, which — as she explains — has featured in discussions of rhetorical functionality since the time of the ancient Greeks. And, yes, interiorities, identities,
and social roles are shaped by collective ways of speaking, just as these latter, in turn, are processed and deployed in a manner more or less consistent with prior interiorities, identities, and social roles. So it does seem that Campbell, like so many other contemporary scholars, must have every justification in the world for treating a socially-constituted subjectivity as foundational for rhetorical transaction.

After all, some rhetorical theorists have been able to show that “change” itself is indistinguishable from the impression of change. In “Liminal Spaces in Popular Culture: Social Change through Rhetorical Agency” (2005), Roxanne Kirkwood affirms that rhetorical agency accrues to identity, and that, even if “identity is merely a form of interpretation,” it’s still “real if it means something to the person claiming it” (32). As a result, since it’s this sort of personalized interpretation that presumably accounts for everything, rhetorical subjectivity, all by itself, becomes the explanation for social change. Similarly, Foss, Waters, and Armada (2007) maintain that rhetorical agency is a function of the agent’s “interpretation” (a “source of power” in its own right), for which reason agents always “have choices about how to perceive their conditions and their agency” (219, 223). Meanwhile, as Christine J. Gardner (2011) reports, theorists such as Joshua Gunn and Michelle Condit have entered into a debate not over whether rhetorical agency is a fantasy, but, rather, over whether it’s good that rhetorical agency is a fantasy. Thus, after Condit proclaims that agency is a “necessary illusion,” Carolyn Miller (2007) agrees with Condit, adding that agency is illusory in two senses at once (Miller 151-152). It’s illusory in that it is a “constructed (or pre-constructed)” attribution, and in that it is “an ideological construct.”

In all these cases, and many more besides, the inhabitants of the social-structural landscape have so successfully reduced rhetorical agency to rhetorical subjectivity, and have so successfully placed the latter under the thumb of the social, that it’s simply irrelevant for writers like Herndl and Licona, or Cooper, or Rickert to come along and complain that the paradigm itself happens to be demoralizing.
For present purposes, though, what’s important to note is that Karlyn Kohrs Campbell is not manufacturing rhetorical subjectivity by herself, nor is she lacking for allies to help her frame this subjugated interiority as governing all of rhetorical agency. As we know, “the term agency” has commonly been theorized in keeping with a “long list of terms,” including “selfhood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity” (Emirbayer and Mische 962). All such terms, filtered through just the right concepts from Althusser, from Bourdieu, from Butler, can readily be viewed as outputs of an ineluctable social logic. And that’s how rhetorical subjectivity can emerge as quite perfectly coterminous with rhetorical agency itself (Campbell 9).

Can the Speaker Speak?

Drawing on all sorts of resources available in this first theoretical-and-practical landscape, Campbell infers that the “condition” of the agent, i.e., as a mere byproduct of social force, is by definition “unavoidable” (3). Then, to verify that rhetorical agency is the same as subjugation, she presents a dramatic illustration, a striking case, to exemplify the subjection of rhetorical agents categorically.

For, when introducing the nineteenth-century activist Sojourner Truth as the very embodiment of the rhetorical agent, Campbell emphasizes the odds against any such subject’s ever managing to speak. Perhaps, of course, Campbell means to deliver a bit of a pep talk: where there’s a will, there’s a way! Even so, in rehearsing Frances Dana Gage’s characterization of Sojourner Truth as “an old, illiterate, former slave woman,” Campbell affirms that, when such a person is “able to speak at all” (i.e., not only to her contemporaries but also, a longue, to us), then that, here in quite an intriguing turn of phrase, is nothing short of “a miracle” (8-9). It’s as if Campbell, in consultation with her social-structural cohorts, has happened upon an irrefragable answer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s question. Yes, everybody knows the subaltern can speak, regardless that, on all the non-trivial accounts, it’s impossible for her to do so.
Again, the theoretical frame which Campbell has assembled (with, again, the aid of her allies) is a perspective according to which any speaker, any nominal rhetorical agent, must be totally subjected to the state. So of course it’s mystifying whenever the subaltern manages to speak anyway. At the same time, though, we should notice that Campbell, as a social-structural commentator on rhetorical agency, is committed to shoring up the theory of the theorist by undermining the practice of the practitioner. For she’s demonstrating that not even an exemplary rhetorical agent ought, in principle, to be capable of saying anything that matters.

In this case, Campbell chooses to dwell on Sojourner Truth’s dialect, which would surely betray something about the subject-agent’s social status. The dialect then becomes important, i.e. in this representative social-structural reckoning, because it verifies that any utterance whatever would automatically become an expression of the speaker’s social identity, her structural role within the collectivity.

Let’s agree, without reservation, that dialect can indeed be tied, first, to one’s ascribed identity (“race, class, and the like”) and then to one’s subjectivity, in this way lending credence to the argument that it’s never really the rhetorical agent who speaks, but always a pre-established sociality that speaks through her (Campbell 3). To be sure, it’s only in a certain fictionalized version of the Sojourner Truth speech that any of the non-standard dialect exists to begin with. Nevertheless, since we ourselves are concerned with the work that the social-structural investigator is having to perform, namely, the work of undermining the practice of the practitioner, we should take a moment to examine Campbell’s preferred uses for the (bogus) dialect which Frances Dana Gage, our theorist’s privileged source in this regard, has sutured to Sojourner Truth’s statement.

The difficulty is that — by Campbell’s recurrent admission — the non-standard dialect isn’t authentic in the first place (12–13, 18). Therefore, to derive Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency, as Campbell does, from a spurious dialect, and to place so much emphasis on this same non-evidentiary dialect (as, on the one side, “degrading” and “deformed” and, on the other
side, authentically evocative of the speaker's identity) does look to be quite the social-structural sub-routine. If it's defensible, that's not on the basis of any historical evidence, but, rather, on the basis of a theoretical perspective which reads rhetorical agency as manifesting just that interiority proper to a minion of the state.

Thus we arrive at some corroboration for the assemblage-theoretical premise that the investigator, too, is always among those who are producing the assemblage under investigation. For Campbell divulges that, once upon a time, she'd been confronted with a problem of editorial craftwork that must have been a problem of theoretical production as well. She'd had to decide whether to retain or else to excise Gage's interpolated (degrading, deformed, inauthentic) dialect:

> When the text of Gage's version of Truth's speech was published in *Man Cannot Speak For Her*, I removed the dialect that smothers the speech with racist stereotypes...I now believe that it was wrong to do so, although it could not and should not have been published as originally written without the kind of analysis done here. (14)

With respect to Campbell in that former role as editor, we should indeed recognize the challenge she faced. Yet, with respect to Campbell's present role as theorist, we cannot very well say that she's merely attending to the evidence as given, that she's simply inspecting something inherited from elsewhere. To the contrary, she is demonstrating, and before our very eyes, that she is *still* engaged in generating the materials that she's supposed to be uncovering. After all, she's drawing her data from, and basing her analysis on, a speech which sometimes includes the bogus dialect but sometimes excludes it, all depending on the theorist's own interest in making the bogus dialect matter.

What the demonstration itself demonstrates is that Sojourner Truth is not the only rhetorical agent in town—that a theorist like Karlyn Kohrs Campbell can be a rhetorical agent, too, right along with the "old, illiterate, former slave
woman” whose activity she’s studying (9). It’s just that the theorist in this case happens to be working to advance the social-structural perspective on rhetorical agency. Under an environmentalized imperative like that, subjectivity is so thoroughly constrained, so utterly determined, that it’s a miracle when anybody speaks at all, let alone when she’s heard over the noise of her identity.

An Ineffectual Agency

The social-structural perspective, ostensibly “constitutive,” illustrates the workings of a social-and-linguistic loop. In this view, rhetorical agency is a circuit, with some socially-enforced structure at one end, some socially-constrained subjectivity at the other, and some socially-determined signification in the middle (connecting the two ends by filling up the conceptual space between). Rhetorical agents can then be theorized as merely operationalizing the constitutive forces that create the rhetorical agents to begin with. Indeed, that must be what Campbell has in mind when she writes that “agency is constitutive of collectivities…just as collectivities are constitutive of agency, however paradoxical that may seem” (5).

Even so, in our present investigation, it’s not social-structural theory in isolation, but, rather, in conjunction with a certain case study (involving Sojourner Truth’s famous speech) that’s to illustrate the workings of a subjected rhetorical agency. Of course, it would also be manageable for us to dispense with the case study altogether. We might settle for quoting one or another of the assertions rehearsed above — say, the complaint that, in theories like that of Judith Butler, “the subject’s actions are inevitably structured by the very norms that it attempts to resist” (Cooper, “Rhetorical Agency,” 424). Yet, insofar as we are acting as assemblage-theoretical researchers, our task is not, in fact, to rehearse complaints; it’s to disclose connections and consequences. Thus we should simply ponder the destiny of our selected artifact, were the latter to be read in keeping with the social-structural paradigm. What would happen, more than likely, is that the speech would prove not to manifest very much rhetorical agency at all, whether for (a) the
audience to whom Sojourner Truth would be speaking, or (b) the constituency she’d appear to be opposing, or (c) the listeners who hadn’t yet made up their minds.

To begin with, the speech, according to social-structural logic, ought to do next to nothing for just that audience with which the speaker would seem the most closely identified. In this case, Campbell assumes that the audience in question would comprise all the disempowered African-Americans and women of the mid-nineteenth century, in other words, all the sorts of disenfranchised persons with whom Sojourner Truth could be affiliated, as if automatically so, by virtue of her race and gender. Yet our own observation should be that, were she really speaking for a constituency unified by its own discourse, our exemplary rhetorical agent would not be able to say anything that could matter. The unified community of disenfranchised African-Americans and women would already prefer that they be granted their missing rights, and then nothing Sojourner Truth might say in support of that preference could make any difference.

Certainly, as one might extrapolate from any public speaking textbook, Sojourner Truth may have in mind purposes other than to convince. She may be seeking merely to reinforce the predilections already in place. She may even be hoping to motivate some outright action. But, then again, those outcomes couldn’t matter either, not in a world where socially-constituted subjectivities would already determine which socially-constituted trajectories may prevail.

On the other hand, if the speech were to be read in rigorous keeping with the social-structural paradigm, then it ought to do even less for the speaker’s opponents than for her supporters. In a social-and-linguistic view such as Campbell’s, speech itself ought to be the automatic reinstitution of the “unavoidable” condition of the subject (Campbell 3, 12). So, under a model where rhetorical agency attaches to membership within the status quo, somebody speaking for the minoritarian position oughtn’t, in principle, be able to out-shout the majoritarians. To do that, the exemplary rhetorical agent would have to speak in so miraculous a manner as to convert her own, marginalized identity into a source of empowerment, and against
the very forces precluding such empowerment in the first place. But is that really what we should expect from a theoretical perspective where the more powerful subjectivities and/or discourses would forever be keeping their weaker counterparts at bay (constituting them, again and again, as insignificant)?

So, if it’s the case, as on the social-structural reckoning, that neither the position of those already constituted as the speaker’s supporters, nor the position of those already constituted as her opponents could be altered by anything the speaker might say, then, by process of elimination, we should conclude that all of the claims, themes, and images bundled up into Sojourner Truth’s speech must be there for the benefit of quite another set of listeners. They ought to be there for the benefit of the undecided auditors, those who hadn’t (in connection with this particular debate) been constituted either way.

Subtracting from Rhetorical Practice

At the risk of lapsing into some instrumentalism, let’s agree that the speaker must be thinking to create a coalition between her supporters and the as-yet undecided auditors, i.e., as a practicable way of swelling the pool of subjectivities in favor of extending equal rights under the law.

Therefore, from now on (in the remainder of the study, and not just while we’re here in the social-structural landscape of agency), we’ll assume that Sojourner Truth is speaking mainly to the undecided, the auditors in the middle, and that not only “I am a woman’s rights” but also the rest of her speech (comprising gender, race, mind, and so on) is primarily, though not exclusively, for them.

Unfortunately, so far as would concern any undecided auditors, every term in “I am a woman’s rights” would start disappearing if read from the social-structural perspective. The “I” would refer to a black person, and therefore to someone who (at a time when most of the African-Americans are enslaved, and the rest politically invisible) is practically a non-entity, hardly a figure for the undecided auditor to identify with. By the same token, the “woman’s” would refer to a merely subaltern contingent, just as the “rights” would refer to a freight-
less counter-factual. For, in the historical setting for the speech, it’s the very reality of women’s rights (to say nothing of African Americans’ rights) that is still the unknown quantity. And then, should the majoritarian contingent prove anywhere near as hostile as Gage reports, and as Campbell continually insinuates, so much the worse for Sojourner Truth’s (tainted) identification with all the other women’s rights activists, outliers as they are to begin with. Thus the various social-structural tenets already invite us to conclude that much of what goes into the speech (all of it there to develop “I am a woman’s rights” as its kernel, its thesis) must be squandered on behalf of a project lacking in agency for the undecided auditors.

By now, in noting the likely effacement of every term in “I am a woman’s rights,” we have simultaneously encountered the likely effacement of at least two of the most important themes folded into the speech. The elements in question are race and gender. After all, from the perspective of the undecided auditors, the speaker’s very dependence upon the two marginalized identities, one that of an African-American, the other that of a woman, must be subtracting from, rather than adding to, her rhetorical agency. But we’ll continue regardless, folding some of the remaining features of the speech into the social-structural paradigm as well.

As we glean from reading Campbell between the lines, there is available, in contemporary theory, a quite reputable explanation as to how even an “old, illiterate, former slave woman” might exercise agency in the face of a racist, sexist, and generally oppressive form of sociality (Campbell 9). It’s that the exemplary rhetorical agent can harness the constitutive power of the discourses circulating within her collectivity.

For, as Campbell indicates, the Sojourner Truth speech is situated within a set of nineteenth-century “principles” or commonplaces (14). These betoken (on the one side) the then-progressive discourses of natural rights, abolitionism, and women’s rights, and (on the other side) the then-conservative discourses of traditional religious authority, of legalized and monetized racism, and of patriarchal, “elitist conceptions” of “true womanhood” (10, 14). So, according to Campbell’s social-structural reasoning, what must be happening in 1851 is that the speaker
is seeing to it that the progressive discourses come to exert all the more authority than do the conservative discourses. And it is marvelous indeed to think that the speaker could exercise rhetorical agency by invoking precisely those commonplaces held at bay in the operations of a backward-looking dispensation. After all, in its departure from the ideologies then hegemonic within the status quo, a minoritarian discourse of natural rights would appear replete with liabilities, not assets, for anybody deploying it.

To support her argument about the collective basis of agency, Campbell avers that “without the communities represented by abolitionism and woman’s rights, the natural rights principles underlying the arguments as reported in the newspaper accounts and incorporated into Gage’s versions of the speech would not have been available to Truth” (14). The point, let’s recognize, is not that the speaker becomes an agent by appealing to natural rights; it’s that she becomes an agent by appealing to just any previously-approved discourse, for example, that of natural rights. For, according to Campbell, it’s by parroting the principles already acceptable to her target audience that our exemplary rhetorical agent refutes “all of the major arguments (biological, theological, and sociological) against woman’s rights” (12).

On this view, the speaker would be invoking natural rights to argue that the rights of women and African-Americans ought certainly to be added into the set of civil, legal, or statutory rights from which they are missing. So, to discover how dubious is this (nominally “constitutive”) picture, this scenario in which discourses are sources of agency simply because they’re collectively authorized, let’s investigate the claim that for someone to invoke a minoritarian discourse could convert her into a rhetorical agent just like that.

If we reflect that the social-structural perspective would require the discourses in question to be hierarchically disposed (i.e., within a sociality modeled on the state), we’ll see that a discourse which is locally influential really ought not to be any match for a discourse which is globally normative. As a result, and on the social-structural reckoning itself, we should expect any hypothetically undecided audience to become increasingly
inclined toward the status quo, rather than toward a speaker who is limited to deploying arguments which, though perhaps inspirational for her own disempowered “community,” are immediately recuperable into the logic organizing the society at large.

Now, the doctrine of natural rights most obviously at issue in the Sojourner Truth archive would be that reflecting the Jeffersonian division of rights into those which are alienable and those which are not, the latter including the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. One wouldn’t, however, have to be a constitutional scholar to know that these inalienable rights of the mid-nineteenth century do co-exist with their legalized effacement, both in the practice of slavery, and in the disenfranchisement of women.

Simply on the face of it, we have an inequality between the discourse of natural rights and the discourse of civil or legal or statutory rights. And, probably like the historical audience, we notice this to be an outright imbalance, rather than some sort of stalemate. For just anyone can look around and see that reality, circa 1851, is weighing in overwhelmingly on the side of the state, whose actions have long since verified that even natural rights are subsumed under legal or statutory rights.

Even so, according to Campbell — whom we’re consulting as a representative for the social-structural perspective more generally — the speaker in the case study is further warranting her claim (for the expansion of legal rights such that they also accommodate natural rights) with the aid of examples drawn from personal experience, and scriptural precedent, and just plain common sense. All of these are said to be showing that women like Sojourner Truth do remain ontologically or “naturally” equal to men, for which reason they should be granted their missing legal rights as well. Yet these are precisely the sorts of examples that ought to be neutralized under a perspective where somebody becomes a rhetorical agent, first, by virtue of her “unavoidable” subjection under the social dispensation, and, second, by virtue of her fluency in precisely such commonplaces as those to which only a local, pre-constituted, and grievously out-flanked audience could respond (Campbell 3).
Campbell reports that the reason for which Sojourner Truth so carefully “details the heavy fieldwork she has done” is that she’s thereby showing that women can be as physically strong—and hard-working—as men (Campbell 10). So, in order to establish that she, exemplifying all the rest of the disenfranchised, is certainly entitled to the legal rights that are currently missing, the speaker insists that she has long since proven herself qualified to fill out the social role of just any manual laborer. Yet it’s difficult to see why this, from the perspective of an undecided audience, should be an argument constituting the disenfranchised as entitled to the full range of legal rights. It could as easily constitute them as entitled to continue performing the heavy fieldwork.

But then, as Campbell would have it, Sojourner Truth also cites some scripture to prove that, because the equality of women with men is woven into the universe, it should certainly be protected by the state as well. For this must be the point not only of the speaker’s referring to “the Virgin birth, which presumably is a religious belief accepted by her opponents,” but also of her referring to the “power” of Eve—a power quite undeniable even by the speaker’s racist-and-patriarchal hecklers, considering that these latter would be none other than the “traditional male religious authorities” to begin with (Campbell 9, 11). Regrettably, it’s still unclear that Eve and Mary would, in the middle of the nineteenth century, have had their own legal rights, in which case it’s not self-evident that to invoke those figures would immediately constitute all the rest of the women as entitled to legal rights by association. On this count, too, the hypothetically undecided audience wouldn’t have any compelling reason to side with the speaker, rather than with the status quo.

Finally, or so Campbell argues, Sojourner Truth clinches the deal by emphasizing her own intelligence. The idea would be that women like Sojourner Truth are certainly entitled to legal rights because of their wit, their all-around cleverness. And it is indeed in connection with the problem of mind that the analogy of the pint and the quart comes into play.

One hardly need argue for the importance of tropes—vivacious imagery, enargeia, figures of speech, comparisons of all
sorts, conceptual metaphors, frames, and the rest. Such features of technique have always been associated with rhetoric’s storied power, now commonly labeled “constitutive,” to help interlocutors see themselves (their situations, their problems) differently than before. Yet Campbell, for all her social-and-linguistic presuppositions, runs into inordinate difficulty explaining how the pint-and-quart figure would work. Indeed, she comes close to suggesting that the analogy might, after all, have a little less to do with highlighting women’s intelligence than with showing how skillfully a woman can elicit charitable donations.

But here, in any case, is how we find the analogy presented in Gage, that is, in Campbell’s preferred, if often dubious, source on our exemplary rhetorical agent:

“Den dey talks ‘bout dis ting in de head; what dis dey call it?” (“Intellect,” whispered some one near.) “Dat’s it, honey. What’s dat got to do wid womin’s rights or nigger’s rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yourn holds a quart, wouldn’t ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?” (qtd. in Campbell 10)

And it’s noteworthy that the following is all that Campbell can find to say about the pint and the quart as a constitutive, metaphorically-validated way of elevating the discourse of natural rights so that it may henceforth compete with, and even overcome, the discourse of legal rights:

The implied argument against women’s rights [has been] that women lack the mental capacity for political and economic rights. [The speaker] rejects the relevance of this issue to civil rights for women or African Americans. Note that her words presuppose natural rights principles, that rights are not conferred but inhere in persons. The case of equality of opportunity is made with a vivid figurative analogy — even if my cup holds less than yours, are you so mean you won’t give me my little half measure? (10)
Consequently, with respect to “mind,” Campbell’s social-structural perspective does lead her to conclude that the speaker must be deploying the resources of language in order to frame natural rights as trumping legal rights, even if that also requires shaming the audience in the process.

Yes, but let’s think about what would be happening here—at least, on an appropriately rigorous social-structural account. The metaphor of the pint and the quart, that clever analogy, would be separating the discourse of natural rights from the discourse of civil rights, leaving the two discourses talking past each other. Exactly as Campbell concedes, the intelligence of women and/or of black people would prove irrelevant to the question of social, legal, or civil emancipation. As a result, the hypothetically undecided audience would be left with even less reason to side with the speaker than ever before, since the speaker herself would be arguing that natural rights had nothing to do with legal rights, anyway.

Thus it turns out that, from a social-structural perspective, the metaphor of the pint and the quart couldn’t be so very much “constitutive,” after all. Instead of creating a new way of seeing (such that those auditors subscribing to legal rights could perhaps find themselves connected with those subscribing to natural rights), the “vivid figurative analogy” would, more than likely, invite everyone to return to the shelter of the old discourses, the old rationales for remaining undecided, to which they’d been adhering all along (Campbell 10).

Yet the question remains, especially for those who are not social-structural theorists, as to how the exemplary rhetorical agent, were she limited to recycling a weakly minoritarian discourse, could effect any social change whatever, i.e., in the face of a robustly hegemonic discourse. Again, just anybody circa 1851 might look around and see that, while metaphysical rights can’t be withheld, legal rights obviously can, in which case there’s no, as it were, structural reason to link the one kind of right with the other.
What Else Is Wrong with This Paradigm?

In opting for an assemblage-theoretical approach, we’re having to ponder the processes through which the four different versions of rhetorical agency are being manufactured, even if one of the versions might prove only to be reinforcing the social conditions already in place. So let’s consider that the social-structural perspective, where rhetorical agency becomes indistinguishable from rhetorical subjectivity, is actually a way of flouting the assemblage-theoretical approach that we ourselves have begun to implement.

As we know, assemblage theory (in the variant adopted for this investigation) holds that collectivities are built out of components — resources, agents, participants in general — that are irreducible to any of the relations in which they’re implicated. So an assemblage-theoretical perspective leaves open the possibility that a term like “subjectivity,” though it might, in some respects be shaped by those communal structures into which it’s folded, might also, in other respects, exceed the constraints that are imposed by the structures themselves.

In the social-structural perspective, by contrast, all terms are claustrophobic, for they are synonymous or isotopic with a socially-determined interiority. In this case, subjectivity becomes the planet, and then conventionality, transcendence, and materiality become the satellites. Yet all of the terms exist as fully internal to their relations, as ineluctably bound by them. That’s what it means to argue (as Campbell does, albeit with the help of an entire social-structural support system) for speakers as miniaturized chunks of sociality, as creatures of a collectivity that subjectifies them, determining, on the one side, what’s considered to be “true,” and, on the other side, “who can speak and with what force” (Campbell 3). Thus, in a landscape where rhetorical subjectivity arises within a closed, self-contained system (a social-and-linguistic loop), it necessarily remains the only conceivable source of rhetorical agency.
A Chimerical Agency for a Colossal Agent

That this is not just a theoretical but also a practical setback becomes clear when we consider that any social-structural researcher will finally have to justify all of rhetorical transaction by theoretical fiat. Let’s again reflect on the plight of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, who is obviously cognizant of the (defeatist) ramifications of the perspective she espouses. To assure subsequent researchers that rhetoric does, somehow, retain its own role, its own task, even where theory leads to the opposite inference, Campbell invites them to trust in the constitutive powers of “alchemy” (13). Regardless that Frances Dana Gage’s version of the Sojourner Truth speech is in so many ways bogus, we can pretend that it isn’t. Instead, we can turn to what we “imagine” to be the “originary moment,” with its “play of ideas,” its “metaphors,” its “interaction between Truth and her opponents” (Campbell 14). That’s how we can wish the rhetorical agent into being. After all, rhetorical agency can inhere — if only we’d like it to — in any signs whatever, even those belonging to a “fictive recreation” (13). For example, we can derive, from the famous fabrication by Francis Dana Gage, a made-up Sojourner Truth to serve “as an icon and symbol for her slave sisters.” Thus we can attribute some rhetorical agency to this impossible speaker’s “words as we imagine her to have spoken them,” even when we have every reason to believe that the “words” belong not to Sojourner Truth, but to a simulacrum constructed, twelve years after the fact, by — as Campbell herself explains — an “ambitious white woman.”

It’s as if we can now have the best of both expedients, juxtaposing the basket of critical-constitutive rhetoric with the basket of just plain constitutive rhetoric, and proclaiming rhetorical agency to be hidden inside whichever of the baskets we prefer. If we’d like to privilege the critical-constitutive rhetoric, then we can affirm that the rhetorical agent must be the subjected minion of the community (i.e., the seamlessly totalitarian state, producing all the marginalized interiorities, ruling on whatever is to be considered true, stipulating exactly who may speak, and with exactly what force). But if we’d like to privilege the constitutive rhetoric proper, then we can affirm that
the rhetorical agent is only on occasion a disempowered structural subject, and, at other times, a colossal individual, inherently capable of bending the social to her will, and all of it just like that. In this case, she can come into view the very minute that the marginalized subaltern spins around, turning suddenly into “a very tall, strong woman of great presence with a commanding voice in speech and song,” someone with great “wit…skill at repartee…command of metaphor, and…courage in facing hostile audiences” (Campbell 9).

The problem for Campbell, though, is that to deploy all these social-structural tenets (and to invoke a simulated Sojourner Truth) requires that she undermine the mountain of concrete evidence presented by the historians whom she herself is citing, historians such as Nell Irvin Painter. All of this historical evidence is to suggest that rhetorical agents might be produced in some way other than through absolute subjugation and/or theoretical fiat. But Campbell, regardless of all that Painter in particular has done to demystify the colossally authentic speaker, wants us to preserve that canard so we can (“constitutively”) exploit it.

So here’s an illustration of the manner in which the social-structural perspective would (to repurpose a term from Paul Virilio), endo-colonize just any source materials it happened to fall upon: “What Painter fails to understand is that Gage’s fiction has a dramatic agency as a performative text that is greater than historians’ facts” (Campbell 14). Clearly, if Campbell is choosing to trivialize the argument from “facts,” then that’s because she’s attempting to protect the argument from performativity. Trapped inside a linguistic turn, the latter embedded within a social turn, a social-structural theorist like Campbell has no access to anything more substantial than wishfulness, or desire, or theoretical fiat when it comes to explaining how rhetorical transaction could ever make any difference under the present dispensation.

In short, our main discovery (on this first leg of the trip) has been that the social-structural perspective is a machine for debilitating the practitioner, for weakening rather than empowering the exemplary rhetorical agent. Yet the local theorists, here exemplified by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, keep overlooking
their own role in perpetuating this framework within which communities are totalitarian states, discourses are constitutive in the manner of the law, and subjectivities are homologous with the structural relations into which they’re embedded. Sadly, in their determination to construct a constrained, victimized rhetorical subjectivity, the latter coterminous with all the rest of rhetorical agency, such researchers have begun jeopardizing rhetorical transcendence as well. They are already reporting that, were any rhetorical agent ever to speak in a manner conducive to social change, it would necessarily be by miracle.