Rhetorical Agency: Mind, Meshwork, Materiality, Mobility

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4. Conventionality in the Rhetorical-Humanistic Landscape

Back there in the social-structural perspective on rhetorical agency, every standardized practice associated with rhetorical transaction would resemble an artifact of subjectivity, thus risking quite merciless interrogation under the light bulb of “normativity.” Therefore, to understand how rhetorical conventionality might somehow tamper with, rather than merely reinforce, the present dispensation requires that we shift to a world in which this second aspect of rhetorical agency can indeed make things otherwise than they are. Having addressed the “I” of “I am a woman’s rights, of that thesis-like claim which features so prominently in our case study, we’ll now treat the “rights” as leading to a place where rhetorical conventionality is central, and where the local theorists are among those protecting its centrality (Campbell 3).

De-Leviathanizing the Normative

Here, in the rhetorical-humanistic landscape of agency, rhetorical transaction is animated not by nothing, but by ideals, visions of the good, and so on, all of which, because they function as “terms” irreducible to their “relations,” remain separable from social structures and the like (Baugh 36; Colebrook 5). Part of our responsibility, then, is to inquire as to where such collective guidelines could be coming from. After all, from the vantage point of our own (assemblage-theoretical) approach, even shared values have to be seen as produced—maybe not created from scratch, but, in any case, continually raised to salience.

We should therefore consider the work of at least some of the actors who have been producing all of these commonly accepted measures to begin with. Although the label “rhetorical-humanistic” derives, somewhat indirectly, from the work
of Michael Leff (2003), we’ll treat the activity of such theorists as Bryant (1953), Wallace (1963), and Weaver (1970) as exemplifying the rhetorical-humanistic drive to shore up rhetorical conventionality precisely by assembling it on the basis of values held in common. According to these writers, rhetorical agency isn’t just any stream of transparent norms, but, rather, a bridge between *embodied* subjectivity (or experience) and *collectivized* subjectivity (or shared guidelines).

Donald Bryant emphasizes rhetoric’s concern, on the one side, with our “thoughts, feelings, motives, and behavior” and, on the other side, with our “ideas” and “values”—with what we as members of a collective know about and consider “worth doing” (412-13, 415).

Rhetorical agency, then, is an emergent property of, as Bryant explains, the “whole” person, in whom are hybridized the materiality of, say, behaviors, and the sociality of, say, ideas (Bryant 414). Karl Wallace, too, highlights the role of “ethical and moral values,” and he affirms that rhetoricity draws not only on functions belonging to “social rewards and sanctions” (from which we learn “right” and “wrong”), but also on functions belonging to “the individual organism” (240, 244). Thus rhetorical agents are linked through “commonalities of meaning and partial identities of experience,” and these, again, are the links between the materiality of an organism and the sociality of a collective (239). Similarly, Richard Weaver insists that rhetoric seeks to engage (what else but) the “whole” person—much of whose wholeness is sustained through “this subjectively born, intimate, and value-laden vehicle which we call language” (Weaver, “Language,” 316). All of these writers are building rhetorical agency out of an articulation between, on the one side, the evaluative criteria shared within the community and, on the other side, the sort of embodiment that’s universal among all of the group members.

To size up this notion of shared values, we’ll turn to the account Weaver offers in “Language Is Sermonic”—a statement quite canonical for the rhetorical-humanistic perspective. Weaver acknowledges rhetoric’s amphiboly: on the one side, it refers to an “independent order of goods,” involving a “vision of how matters should go ideally and ethically”; on the
other side, it proceeds from “an order of desire,” involving the “particular situation,” the “special circumstances of the auditors” (309). Here, we have a distinction between the aspect of rhetoricity that goes with communal guidelines, operating ideally and ethically, and the aspect that goes with embodiment — operating specially, particularly, situationally.

Even so, the presumption is that there are commonplaces for mediating between the timeless, “independent” order of goods and the dependent special circumstances, for such are the commonplaces, the reconciliatory ways and means, that we’re now calling shared values.

They’re like ribbons, streamers, fixed at the one end (where they’re nailed into the independent order of goods), but free at the other (where they can be manipulated over to just any situation, within the dependent order of desire, where they’re applicable). We can therefore say that rhetorical-humanistic agency is a hybrid between the cultural-anthropological and the biological-anthropological, for it’s as much anchored in some unspecified range of deeply entrenched, yet redirectable social guidelines as it is in the Standard Human Complement.

The term “Standard Human Complement” refers in this study (though it originates in certain slightly ironic usages from elsewhere) to whatever array of traits and faculties may be held to define human beings as (a) members of a single, notably embodied, fallible species, and (b) capable of thinking and communicating so as to reshape the objects, problems, and situations that they’re faced with (Lodge 299; Thomas and Turner 95). Such an array, such a Latourian “black box,” working well enough that almost nobody worries about its “internal complexity,” could certainly collect a number of those items appearing in the “long list of terms associated with agency”: “self-hood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity” (Latour, Reassembling, 304; Emirbayer and Mische 962).

However, according to the rhetorical-humanistic model, while people do possess a general sort of agency just by virtue of being people, this inherent agency isn’t, in isolation, enough to make them rhetorical agents. For that, there needs to be a connection between, over here, the inalienable proper-
ties of the human actor and, over there, the collective properties (most of all, the locally-shared values) characterizing the group to which both the speaker and the listener belong. With the linkage in place, then —yes— everyone is now a rhetorical agent, and also, for that matter, a cyborg. The name for this rhetorical agent (this network) is, as we’ve seen, the whole person. And what makes the actor “whole” is that she is the complete reconciliation between, on the one side, those ideational and affective guidelines characteristic for her group and, on the other side, the Standard Human Complement which everybody possesses simply by belonging to the same species.

So, while our rhetorical-humanistic competencies belong to us as members of the worldwide, anthropological community, our rhetorical-humanistic shared values belong to us as members of the local, historical community. But rhetorical agency is still not some special power, accruing to an elite. It’s the ordinary ability to link values and object(ive)s within a collectivity where differences are shallow, constituting an overlay easily rubbed off to disclose the continuity beneath. After all, just anyone possessed of the Standard Human Complement can help her neighbors come to see themselves, their problems, their situations in terms of the shared values which have always kept the community together.

For language is, on this view, constitutive only in the sense that it’s a humble “system of imputation, by which values and percepts are first framed in the mind and are then imputed to things” (Weaver, “Language,” 316). The percepts, as manifestations of the Standard Human Complement, can take care of themselves. Therefore we, as investigators, may concentrate on asking what could possibly authorize the ongoing rhetorical-humanistic imputation of values to things. This is not, for the locals, a trivial question, given that rhetorical transaction, far from automatically placing a seal of approval on whatever exists, typically thrives upon our righteous indignation, our “sense of the ought,” our “vision of how matters should go” (Weaver, “Language,” 309, 315).

Particularly in the case of Weaver, the “ought” might perhaps be emanating from some Platonic realm of ideality. Yet it’s in Weaver’s own reference to what is “intimate” about language
that we find the more likely rhetorical-humanistic answer, involving a proximate rather than ultimate origin (Weaver, “Language,” 316). The intimacy is of a kind obtaining among family and friends, much as in the ancient notion of *oikonomía* (see Eden 1997). It’s intrinsic to just the sort of ecumenical economy that makes a household of the entire, expansible flock. But this derivation of agency from the hearthside implies that the rhetorical-humanistic “ought” must be arising from within none other than those intimate, value-laden, conventionally-articulated guidelines which are always already inherited by any bona fide rhetorical agents.

*From Normativity to Shared Values*

The fact is that rhetorical theorists who appeal to shared values do not often interrogate the genesis of the very guidelines they’re invoking. We know this to be the case because, as Calvin O. Schrag (1997) points out, it is an *innovation* for Ramsey and Di Mare, with their “politics of critical rhetoric,” to have shown that even “ideals” are mutable, both in themselves and in the effects they promote (74). So the rhetorical-humanistic appeal to collective guidelines, the latter coming from who knows where, does look to be another instance of theoretical fiat, with writers assuring themselves that shared values are necessarily sources of agency simply because they’re shared. Yet, in fields quite other than rhetorical studies, as in social theory and cultural theory, commentators have begun arguing, cogently enough, that it may be less important to scrutinize the origin of shared values than to grasp that the shared values, once they’re present, can serve as resources helping actors evade normative, indeed oppressive constraints.

We can consider, for the sake of an outside example, the introductory notes which Pisters and Staat provide in *Shooting the Family: Transnational Media and Intercultural Values* (2005). Taking issue with the view of family as a kind of bunker for hegemony (a “backlash resource”), the authors explain that “the intercultural values of migrant families are as particular and contrary to universalist (that is, modernistic) values as natural family values were in the counter-Enlightenment”
For, in “transgressing the borders of the nation-state,” these “families make clear that the public realm of nation-state institutions cannot contain the contemporary significance of real families.” And so, as in this example concerning the political normativity of the modern(ist) nation-state, commentators from even beyond the discipline of rhetoric are agreeing with the rhetorical-humanistic position, reinforcing its doctrine that the shared, valuated guidelines keeping the group together still don’t have to exist in any necessary homology with the hegemonic.

Now, it’s conceivable that “norms” and “values” might still be ideological. However, in the rhetorical-humanistic landscape, shared values can only become ideological if they’re blended with other elements (objects, aims, ideas, purposes, practices, and the like) to form an ostensibly seamless fabric. Yet shared values, i.e., pure and simple, clearly remain detachable from their contexts. They’re not even unconscious, since rhetorical agents can effortlessly draw them to attention, as when arguing that only these, and certainly not those, are the right shared values for the situation.

A case in point is that “patriotism” can prove to be a shared value irreducible to (and de-linkable from) any particular ideology, including among present-day Americans. For there are, evidently, a number of persons who, adhering to “a moral framework that goes back to this nation’s founding, and that is inherently progressive,” already live “by such principles as service, stewardship, tolerance, and equality of opportunity,” showing by example that “devotion to this nation means working to help America reach its exceptional potential and promise” (“Welcome to the True Patriot Network”). In that case, from a rhetorical-humanistic perspective, to say that shared values are ideological wouldn’t be accurate. They might be social, cultural, collective, conventional, and so forth, but still without being determinative. And that’s exactly as for those true patriots adhering to a moral framework which they declare to be inherently progressive, persons whose stated values it would be quite a stretch to label normative as well.
A Tribe of Equals

When rhetorical transaction is constructed as depending simultaneously on shared human propensities and on shared societal values, it’s construed as re-affirming affinity. This pre-occupation with like’s giving rise to like can explain why rhetorical-humanistic agency is so readily figured as love. An exemplary statement is Richard M. Weaver’s “The Phaedrus and the Nature of Rhetoric” (1953), with Wayne Brockriede’s “Arguers as Lovers” (1972) adding some further nuance. Both take for granted, and both perpetuate, the conviction that rhetorical agency, whenever worthy of its name, necessarily involves the (re)affirmation of a bond between, on the one side, some set of auditors and, on the other side, a rhetor who, in caring for what they value, cares for them as well. For, while the shared values can certainly do the heavy lifting, they cannot lead anyone astray, not here in the rhetorical-humanistic landscape of agency. Instead, any disastrous manipulation, ventriloquation, or zombification must be blamed upon the unworthiness of the interlocutors, especially of the rhetor, who’s more than likely mismanaged, if not abused, the freedom to articulate “values” with “things” (Weaver, “Language,” 316).

In any case, regardless that the local commentators might consider “bad rhetoric” to be a contradiction in terms, the point remains that, in this world, good rhetoric is efficacious when it is animated by shared values. Yet, eternal as these shared values may appear to be, they are, to the contrary, under constant production, and by agents including the local commentators themselves. That’s the explanation as to how such core beliefs, though periodically “forgotten,” can so routinely and immediately be remembered, i.e., whenever it’s time to close the gap between “existing and desired conditions” (Sheard, qtd. in Villadsen 42).

Let’s turn to a couple of contemporary illustrations, good for showing how rhetorical-humanistic theorists can reterritorialize rhetorical conventionality by deploying techniques of consolidation. Such expedients are designed to protect the agency that simply must accrue to shared values in order for rhetorical conventionality to make any difference to speak of.
In his essay on Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, Hansen (2004) seeks to explain the “endurance” of that certain kind of rhetorical text which is not “exhausted by its situation” (224). He draws on a method of “re-creative criticism,” positing that producer and receiver can be linked transhistorically (227). True, “the agency of the producer of the text and its fit audience are mutually dependent, one calling out the other, the absence of one leading to the absence of the other” (230). Nevertheless, any agency worth mentioning must certainly bespeak the continuity between rhetor and audience.

Such continuity would obtain not at the level of some hegemonic subjectivity, but at the level of the more deeply-entrenched values which normativity can only contextualize. For, while “ideologies” may come and go (“coruscating and evolving”), collective values persist (252). Reactivated by features of textual language, style, and form, they establish, in this case, a bridge between Lincoln’s neck of the woods and ours. The present-day audience — at least, the part of it that’s “fit” — sees past its own provincial ideology, and then the message comes home, animated by the shared values that have been there all along (230).

Interestingly, Hansen speaks not of reconciliation but of revolution: Lincoln’s audience, “transformed by the radicalizing knowledge that the speaker has presented,” finally “gains new instruments to enact new abilities” (250). At the same time, though, the audience, whether past or present, will be agreeing to just exactly the “instruments” (charity, firmness, self-suppression of malice), and just exactly the goals (unity, peace) which the speaker has been recommending, and these will be thoroughly familiar to the audience, anyway (251). So rhetoric is revolutionary, transformative, and radicalizing not in calling for everything to change, but, instead, in framing “desired” conditions in terms of those familiar, shared values which are always already there, even if they have momentarily “been forgotten” (Sheard, qtd. in Villadsen 42).

Villadsen (2008) analyzes a ceremonial speech aimed at creating a “recommitment to values fit to inspire future collective action” (42). Yet some of the speaker’s choices prove to be blunders that “complicate” or undercut his rhetorical agency.
The speech starts functioning as “a site of rhetorical agency for its audiences,” who come to understand themselves not as neutral bystanders but as agents who can “partake in an ethical re-evaluation” (40, 43). The most important implication, then, is that rhetorical transaction succeeds when the interlocutors are (in Weaver’s terms) imputing the same shared value to the same thing, just as rhetorical transaction falters when they impute that shared value to different things altogether.

For, in Villadsen’s case study, the Danish Prime Minister, while apologizing for a former government’s collaboration with the Nazis, is applauding the Danish resistance movement for having fought, anyway. By now everyone’s remembered the shared values, and no-one disagrees with the imputation of oppression (bad) to the Nazis, or of resistance (good) to the Danish freedom fighters. Then it transpires that the Prime Minister means also to impute “oppression” to an Iraqi regime, and “resistance” to the U.S.-led effort, recently supported by the Prime Minister’s own government, to overthrow that dispensation.

Certainly, the same shared values are still in play. The problem is that different (indeed, contextually opposite) objects are now becoming articulated with the shared values, which latter haven’t changed at all. From the speaker’s perspective, the U.S.-led effort properly articulates with resistance. But, as it happens, “many Danes” at this time perceive the “war in Iraq” as “illegal” to begin with, so that, for them, the U.S.-led effort properly articulates with oppression (Villadsen 40). This is why they balk, why the rhetorical transaction falters, and why the speaker loses agency. Yet the shared values have simply stayed there, remaining capable of empowering or disempowering just anybody. In fact, the same shared value of resistance both empowers the speaker (when he articulates it with the Danish freedom fighters) and also, albeit by contrast, empowers the audience (when the speaker tries to articulate it with the American forces as well).

So, in the rhetorical-humanistic world, the shared values that are so central to rhetorical agency are not the same as hegemonic norms, for they refer to the desirable rather than the “expected,” coming into play especially when the expected
should not, in fact, prevail (see Barker, 1995). Further, the shared values are accessible to all, regardless of the agents’ collectively-determined identities, subject positions, or social roles. And these shared values, as deserves some emphasis, are heterogeneous, rather than homologous. To stipulate valuation X of an object would not, after all, be structurally or functionally equivalent to stipulating valuation Y of that same object. That’s why the “many Danes” of whom Villadsen has been writing are left annoyed, not apathetic or impressed, when their Prime Minister shows he can’t differentiate between an object properly to be linked with “resistance,” and an object properly to be linked with “oppression” (40).

*Keeping Shared Values between the Ceiling and the Seat*

An important difficulty, from the rhetorical-humanistic perspective, is that the participants in some given transaction might not, at any given moment, be sharing the same values. In that case, theory risks opening the door to a merely relativistic rhetorical agency, that is, of the sort that would exist for those who currently shared the values, but not for those who didn’t. Therefore, rhetorical-humanistic commentary (exercising its will to make conventionality matter) has developed a safeguard for ensuring the preponderance of shared values, and, in consequence, for upscaling the reality of the agency that derives from them.

The safeguard, at least conceptually, is to minimize the number of auditors who don’t, in fact, share the same values, and to maximize the number of those who do. What this amounts to in practice (and here one means practice as adumbrated by the theorist) is, in effect, the judicious elimination of just as many of the auditors as necessary, leaving in their seats only those who certainly share the same values. We’ve already witnessed this safeguard in operation. We’ve discovered that, according to Villadsen, rhetorical agency belongs not merely to those who value resistance over oppression, but to those who value the alignment of each with its proper objects. Similarly,
we’ve seen Hansen, in his essay on Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, insisting that the audience be “fit” for rhetorical agency — qualified, that is, by its responsiveness to exactly those shared values which underwrite the worthy speaker’s message (230).

If we were proceeding as rhetorical-humanistic theorists, we might find it natural to rule out of consideration anyone theoretically unfit to serve as a rhetorical agent. But, since we are proceeding as assemblage-theoretical researchers, our obligation is to scrutinize the collaborative processes by which rhetorical agency is manufactured for distribution. If we look into the support system for theorists like Hansen and Villadsen — technicians bent on spinning rhetoricity directly out of shared values — we’ll find the New Rhetoric of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958) to be foundational. In fact, that canonical work serves as an instruction manual for leaving in their seats only such auditors as are fit for rhetorical agency.

Here, the salient point of view might appear to be that adopted by the initiating agent. For it’s the rhetor who selects, from the options available within the bona fide collectivity, whichever configuration(s) and application(s) of shareable values are parametric for the transaction. On the other hand, everything still rises or falls in accordance with whatever the audience will stand for.

True, “the status of an audience varies with the concepts one has of it,” implying that it’s primarily the rhetor, the audience rather less so, who determines what the latter would find acceptable (Perelman and Tyteca 34). But if the rhetor could wish herself into speaking before the “universal,” or best-possible audience, then she could ignore the stance of any actual audience whatever (Perelman and Tyteca 33). She could dismiss the whole congregation as “recalcitrant,” and all on the basis that they didn’t actually share the values which the best-possible audience, as she envisioned it, would certainly share. It’s exceptional for the rhetor’s universal audience to coincide with her actual audience, and she must be careful not to charge too many with recalcitrance. Thus she ought to deploy values lowly enough for even the majority to share, which is again to say that everything turns on the audience’s approval.
So the theoretical expedient for maximizing rhetorical agency is two-folded. The rhetor gains agency partly by lowering the ceiling, and partly by raising the floor. For, as Perelman and Tyteca explain, “There can only be adherence to this idea of excluding individuals from the human community” if

the number and intellectual value of those banned are not so high as to make such a procedure ridiculous. If this danger exists, recourse must be had to another line of argumentation, and the universal audience must be set against an elite audience, endowed with exceptional and infallible means of knowledge. (33)

As necessary, the speaker is to keep dropping her standards to the next-best level, constituting the audience as sharing values just about high or noble enough to make the recommended course of action seem substantive. In this way, she constitutes her audience as fit, as qualified to accede to her own rhetorical agency. And, again as necessary, she constitutes as recalcitrant those hypothetical auditors unlikely to meet even the lowered level of expectation.

That’s how the rhetorical-humanistic speaker so often manages to make things otherwise than they are. Picking her battles wisely, she argues for the value of altering the present dispensation by just enough, but never too much. She shores up her own agency by imputing recalcitrance, not to mention imbecility, to any hypothetical auditor who’d undervalue this indisputably moderate, though still desirable degree of change. Meanwhile, both the ground floor and the ceiling are projections from the value-set which the rhetor always already shares with the bona fide community, with the result that the transaction only ever takes place among those who are welcome at the familial hearthside.

We now see that it’s theoretically possible for rhetorical conventionality to transform rhetorical subjectivity itself, as when shared values enable a speaker situationally to redraw the boundary between the “fit” and the “recalcitrant” (Hansen 230; Perelman and Tyteca 33). In the rhetorical-humanistic world, “terms” — here, with reference to shared values — can
exceed any “relations” in which they’re temporarily embedded, which is to say that social structures, significations, subject positions are not internalized constraints, but “external” to the values traveling through them (Baugh 36; Colebrook 5). In addition, the rhetorical-humanistic paradigm not only illustrates but even operationalizes the synergy obtaining between “reterritorialization” and “deterritorialization” (Palmås 3). Rhetorical agents can reterritorialize rhetorical conventionality by conceptually banishing those who don’t share the same values. Consequently, they can deterritorialize rhetorical subjectivity, stretching it out with the aid of those standards that are indeed held in common by the remaining interlocutors.

Staying the Same by Doing Something Differently

Returning, even while we’re here in the rhetorical-humanistic world, to the Sojourner Truth literature, we can start seeing how an exemplary practitioner could parley the topics of race, gender, work, mind, biblical precept, and embodiment, together with a certain metaphor about the pint and the quart, into a means of transforming the sorts of interiority prevalent within the status quo. In this case, the agents of change happen to include certain shared values. They facilitate the emergence of an alternative way of knowing and acting, such that the interlocutors can agree on the justice of granting to the disenfranchised, or at least to one or two sub-sets of them, the same legal rights as any other bona fide members of the collectivity. But, in that case, the famous speech of 1851, rather than attempting to frame the natural rights as already formidable (i.e., in the social-structural manner considered earlier) must be attempting precisely the opposite. It must be portraying the natural rights as languishing in exile, such that its own function becomes to bring them back into the familial fold.

In nineteenth-century America, natural rights are as familiar as legal rights, though the two kinds of rights are, at this moment, in contradiction. To resolve the contradiction requires the adjustment of legal rights until they are consistent with natural rights. Yet this will be the alteration of the status quo, taking place through the reconciliation of a presently
hegemonic discourse (that of legal rights) with a presently marginalized discourse (that of natural rights). Such a reconciliation can take place if the two discourses are rendered commensurable, as on the basis of any values shared by the adherents to the discourses themselves.

Again, it’s the task of the whole person — at least, when she’s acting as rhetor — to speak in a manner that, manifesting love, shifts the collectivity back to the future. For, in helping us recollect the shared values that have always kept us together, the exemplary rhetorical practitioner helps us adapt. She helps us become otherwise than we are, and precisely so that we can stay lovable (albeit, from now on, a little more so than of late). To do that, she constitutes herself as a docent, someone who helps us revisit, remember, reinterpret our shared values, so that we come to see for ourselves the “disparity between existing and desired conditions,” the mismatch that, before our very eyes, becomes “the subject of critique” (Sheard, qtd. in Villadsen 42). This docent will indeed serve as a kind of lover, just as in Weaver (1953) or Brockriede (1972). Yet she may as well serve as a teacher, a guide, a parent.

In both the Gage and Robinson versions of the speech, this agency of the docent is manifested wherever the speaker frames her audience as children. The underlying appeal, ostensibly from maternal authority, isn’t to sassify the speaker: O, that authentic Sojourner Truth, so down-home and so country! Instead, it’s to reassure, and to comfort, and to inculcate trust. Let’s recognize, therefore, that “children” is a rhetorical-humanistic technique — not too different from, say, “Four score and seven years ago.” It’s a transition, much like a cinematic wipe, but placing us within earshot of an interpreter, of someone who recovers and reminds us about our collective values. Of course, just about anybody in our community may need such reminding. But, then again, just about anybody can act as docent.

For the reminder doesn’t have to come from some credential-bearing specialist; it’s not a question of scholastic training or fancy paraphernalia. To the contrary, the reminder can come from just any speaker who’s remembered the familiar,
ecumenical guidelines, those that can help her decrease the space between ceiling and floor.

Now, it's true that, in the rhetorical-humanistic landscape, an appeal to “common values, undisputed though not formulated,” can only be made “by one who is qualified to do so” (Perelman and Tyteca 53). But this isn’t so exclusionary a requirement as it may sound. The docent gets to be qualified in the same, perfectly manageable way as does the docent’s beneficiary: by clearly not being “recalcitrant” (Perelman and Tyteca 33). This means that the rhetorical agent is anyone whose values are the same as ours. And if it happens that she’s just as comfortable in her impromptu role as in her own skin, i.e., in her possession of the Standard Human Complement, then so much the better for the recovery of our collective values.

In the rhetorical-humanistic world, the docent can always draw upon certain local conventions, for example, of genre. But even the genre-conventions will be perfectly accessible. Certainly, the nineteenth-century rhetor might invoke the time-binding powers of narrative. That’d be a way of universalizing what’s all too easily mistaken for a regional contingency— as with the famous opening for Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. But, then again, she might as readily appropriate the genre conventions of the come-all-ye, that populist sort of utterance to reappear, so much later, in the songs of Woody Guthrie: “Well, gather ‘round me, children, a story I will tell / ’bout Pretty Boy Floyd the outlaw, Oklahoma knew him well.”

Always, though, the message rests between shared values, those which the docent has bolted into place, forming upper and lower brackets for the problem confronting the group:

As through this life you ramble
As through this life you roam
You’ll never see an outlaw
Drive a family from their home.

So the shared values that the docent invokes will not have to do with any pre-determined social identity, essence, or station in life. They won’t even have to do with the currently privileged medium of communication, not so long as story exceeds the
provenance of alphanumerical text. This is precisely why nobody who inhabits a world like the rhetorical-humanistic would ever find it paradoxical for an “old, illiterate, former slave woman” to be acting as a docent, as a bona fide rhetorical agent (Campbell 9).

**Maximizing Assent by Minimizing Recalcitrance**

The technical use of “children” tells us we’re in the presence of someone activating what is axiomatically conventional about rhetoricity—in this case, by bringing collective values into the transaction. But the docent won’t bring in just any collective values, only those which are suited to the situation. For we, the undecided auditors, do need to undertake some self-modification, as by returning (from our idiosyncratic preoccupations) to our communal roots. Indeed, it’s in recalling just those few collective guidelines which we’d forgotten, and in reviewing them under the tutelage of the docent who loves us, that we’re to become otherwise than we are, though remaining lovable all the while. And that, the assemblage-theoretical investigator should conclude, must be why Sojourner Truth isn’t actually asserting the rightfulness of “natural rights,” pure and simple, let alone the wrongfulness of say, social, political, or legal rights as presently constituted. For to valorize natural rights over everything else would be to insinuate that the American republic must be unlovable by design.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, to hew too closely to a natural-rights position would be to shift the focus from what binds us to what divides us, the divisive reality, in this particular instance, being that of class. Admittedly, Sojourner Truth does hint, in both the Gage and the Robinson versions of her speech, at how often she (as the representative of an entire constituency) has been left hungry. She’ll “eat” as much as she can “get,” but that doesn’t mean she always gets enough to eat (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 125; Campbell 10). Still, it’s possible, even in the rhetorical-humanistic landscape of agency, that the unfortunate might be so for any number of reasons; and, in any case, the speaker isn’t betraying the least suggestion that
slavery and/or women’s subjugation, or even exploitation based on class, might be wrong in principle.

That would be precisely the kind of argument, the argument from ideality, that we should expect to hear from any purism of natural rights: some set of claims to the effect that slavery, women’s subjugation, and class exploitation are inherently wrongful. But there’s nothing along those lines in the Robinson version of the speech, and this, as we’ve noted in an earlier connection, would appear to be a remarkable omission on the part of someone who’d been tarred and feathered for the ardency of his own natural-rights abolitionism. Meanwhile, there’s nothing like it in the Gage version, either, regardless that the latter does imply there to be some “rights” which “are not conferred but inhere in persons” (Campbell 10).

So what could be the rationale for the speaker’s outright avoidance of the least suggestion that slavery, sexual subjugation, exploitation of the subalterns by the elites, might be wrong in principle? Well, the answer is that, while everyone in the audience can accept that some of their practices may call for revision, not everyone can accept that some of their principles may need revision too. If the speaker is refraining from asserting the supremacy of natural rights, pure and simple, that’s because she knows better than to advocate a morally unimpeachable stance which would, for that very reason, be politically untenable.

Thus, if we do triangulate (looking to the intersection where Robinson and Gage agree), we’ll notice just how cautious is Sojourner Truth, as she dwells on the topics of work, biblical precept and mind, to skirt the topics of property, dispossession, and class. Still, it’s precisely because shared values are heterogeneous, strategically separable, that they can be deployed, rather like the croupier’s rake, for finessing auditors into the familiar fold. Indeed, the speaker can gather up any number of auditors, just so long as these do not bring along with them the sharable value of ownership. That’s very much as we’ve seen above, where Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca do emphasize that any rhetor must be circumspect enough to lower her standards when necessary.
As an exemplary rhetorical agent, Sojourner Truth would recognize that to associate ownership with recalcitrance would be to banish from the conversation the majority of her own (actual, and perhaps even potential) auditors, indeed, practically everyone but the slave and the pauper. For, according to the rhetorical-humanistic perspective, rhetoric does come into its own by offering something for everybody, that is, for everybody who shares the same values. But there wouldn’t be something for everybody in a jeremiad on exploitation — whether on that of the factory worker by the industrialist, or on that of the wife by the master of the house, or on that of the domestic servant by the wife herself. Ownership, property, class: these would only separate us, and, if the point is to keep us together, then why bring them up at all? So, the speaker can hardly be expected to pitch her appeals at the loftiest level imaginable, as by asking the auditors to indict themselves for their complicity in economic, sexual, and racial exploitation. Instead, she can be expected to invoke some lowlier criteria than that, leaving almost all the auditors in their seats, but giving them something to rise for, too.

Thus we come to see the docent as appealing not to the taintless, unimpeachable values of an ideal audience but to the relatively more humble values of an “elite” audience (Perelman and Tyteca 34). The elite audience in this case simply consists of those whose “knowledge” is at least “exceptional” and “infallible” enough for them to know the value of work, and of biblical precept, and of mind. If it happens that Sojourner Truth’s elite-enough audience additionally subscribes to values conducing to class exploitation, dispossession, and the like, then that’s truly unfortunate. But it’s still no reason not to grab onto any handles available for aligning listeners with their better natures, if not absolutely their best. Besides, an audience that can be constituted as valuing work, biblical precept, and mind is also an audience ready to recall that all of these do lie at the very intersection between natural rights and legal rights.

Let’s therefore consider that, if the Sojourner Truth speech does emphasize the hard work that our docent, or persons like her, have already performed, then this is not a self-advertising of physical prowess but a verification that the presently-mar-
ginalized do share the work ethic already valued by the speaker’s audience. For who but a social-structural theorist could think that the rhetorical agent, in arguing for equality of rights, must also be arguing that she is naturally built for all of this back-breaking labor, in other words, perfectly suited to her structural role?

Instead, the speaker is showing that she, like those for whom she speaks, understands very well that it’s only work, not something disturbing like ownership, which is at issue now. It’s this appreciation of the value of work, this cognizance of the obligation to help make the social world go round (as Nell Irvin Painter says, in the way of “production,” “transportation,” and “consumption”) that unifies the speaker—indeed, her rights-less constituency—with an undecided audience positioned to make a difference (Sojourner Truth 126–27). So the examples from personal experience are there to argue for “equality of opportunity” not by invoking natural rights, but by invoking the work ethic that just any auditor would share, other than, of course, in cases of recalcitrance (Campbell 10).

Even the integration of biblical precept becomes articulated with the shared value of work, though in a manner perhaps more pointed for the historical audience than for the present day social-structural theorist. To be sure, in both the Robinson and the Gage versions of the speech, the speaker does refer to all the agricultural labor—plowing, reaping, husking, chopping, and mowing—that she’s done during her life. Nevertheless, it’s still the case, and in Robinson’s version of the speech as much as in Gage’s, that “work” is allied with “biblical precept” as well. So let’s examine the rhetorical process through which “work” starts traveling in the company of “biblical precept”—with “class” coming along, albeit invisibly, for the ride.

As Nell Irvin Painter acknowledges, while the historical Sojourner Truth contributed lots of “household work” (laundering, cooking, cleaning) in reciprocation to the various activist families with whom she “stayed for extended periods,” that’s simply not the kind of labor the rhetorical Sojourner Truth chooses to thematize (Sojourner Truth 126). Instead, our exemplary practitioner emphasizes “the work of the farm,” which she, “along with masses of other Americans, including other
rural women,” idealizes “as the embodiment of real work.” Yet we really shouldn’t stop there, i.e., with Painter’s historical-biographical suggestion that Sojourner Truth might be serving as yet another spokesperson for nineteenth-century pastoralism.

For what’s more rhetorically important is that the work of the farm (ontologically preceding any laundering, cooking, cleaning) is an activity from which all Americans benefit. It’s an activity in which many of them have first-hand experience, and, in any case, it’s an activity which most of them, not counting the recalcitrant, are likely to value. That’s the explanation for a folk song like the following, from Sojourner Truth’s own era, though circulated more widely during the populist movements of the 1890s:

You may talk of all the nobles of the earth
Of the kings who hold the nations in their thrall
Yet in this we all agree, if we only look and see
That the farmer is the man that feeds us all.

It’s back-breaking labor, yes. But at least it’s a sunny kind of backbreaking labor — and you’d be the salt of the earth if you knew it. For farm work really does offer something for everyone.

In short, there’s nothing more reconciliatory than to celebrate the sorts of “real work” through which we Americans do earn our keep, putting our rightfully-won bread on the family table (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 126). And just any non-recalcitrant auditor can sense that this work ethic (bespeaking authentic labor — the effort, for example, of those who do reap and sow and gather into barns, as in that passage from Matthew to which Sojourner Truth alludes in her speech) must be shared universally. That’s why so much of the speech would be about farming, in this way recalling the better part of the audience to its traditional family values.

What’s just as evident, though, is that Sojourner Truth is definitely citing scripture, since she’s doing so not only in Gage but also in Robinson. From this perspective, we can again see that Gage and Robinson are together drawing our attention to the rhetorical-humanistic agency that accrues to shared values.
They’re doing so whenever they report on Sojourner Truth’s incorporation into the speech of any Judeo-Christian references at all.

For the function of such references wouldn’t be to furnish the speaker with some theological or supernatural warrant in support of political enfranchisement. Instead, it would be to bring into the forum certain reminders of the shared, deeply-entrenched values which are keeping speaker and audience connected. True, it’s only in Gage that we find a line like this:

I have borne thirteen children, and seen ’em mos’ all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with [sic] my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! (Campbell 10)

But if we only look and see, we’ll recognize that the point isn’t to perseverate on what the speaker “has done as a woman and suffered as a mother” (10). To the contrary, it’s to establish the speaker’s ethos as someone whose scriptural values saturate her to the core. She remains bound to Jesus, even when the rest of us have forgotten that she actually shares our faith. Indeed, it’s her own faith, authenticated with each of her citations of a Judeo-Christian commonplace, that constitutes her as consubstantial with us. And then there’s no longer any reason for the other family members, those who aren’t recalcitrant, to wonder about any fundamental disparity between the speaker’s values and their own.

At this stage, we should be fairly clear as to how it is that “work” and “biblical precept” can, by way of shared values, become sources of rhetorical agency—the sort that translates convention into a means of altering sociality. It’s worth noting in this connection that the shared values can also fold race and gender, maybe even “embodiment,” into all the rest of the American collectivity. For all we have to do is open our eyes and look at who’s expressing these shared values, here at this woman’s rights convention of 1851. But what remains to be addressed is the topic of “mind,” together with the complex metaphor of the pint and the quart, a figure which itself proves
consistent with the shared values of “work” and “biblical precept.”

Again, given that we have shifted to the rhetorical-humanistic landscape, we will understand that what makes it possible for social realities to change, to emerge or come into being, is that the present dispensation can always be redeemed through the common language established by shared values. This lingua franca can even translate the discourse of natural rights into commensurability with the discourse of legal rights. Thus, if we do turn to the rhetorical-humanistic uses of “mind,” we’ll find that the Sojourner Truth speech must be invoking yet another shared value, that which accrues to none other than reasoned debate. This latter, of course, is “conventional” in that it’s just how we nineteenth-century Americans ordinarily go about negotiating our collective destiny.

Earlier, during the course of a social-structural reading of the pint-and-quart analogy, we’ve come to see that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the discourse of natural rights cannot, in isolation, count for very much, what with its already being trumped by a discourse indisputably more normative than itself. Nevertheless, there is still a way to bridge the discourse of natural rights with the discourse of, say, legal rights. Let’s recall that the political rationale for the republic has always been to uphold an alternative to government by arbitrary power. This alternative is validated by the people’s right publicly to discuss, revise, and select from the options available in the marketplace of ideas. Thus, even in the United States of Sojourner Truth’s day, the shared value of deliberation is hybridized, on the one side, with the discourse of natural rights and, on the other side, with the discourse of civil, or social, or statutory rights. The metaphor of the pint and the quart can capitalize upon both sorts of discourse simultaneously. It’s a reminder that reason isn’t, after all, a zero-sum game (everybody can have as much of it as they naturally do, without depleting anyone else’s), and it’s also a reminder that reason itself supplies an irrefragable justification for altering the present dispensation.

So here’s a rhetorical-humanistic gloss of the metaphor in question, a gloss which, rather than having primarily to do with
guilt, craniometry, physique, essence, or parody, has primarily to do with the shared value of reasoned debate. Sojourner Truth is saying that even if she and the members of her constituency were (naturally) endowed with a smaller-than-optimal amount of reason, their reason, whether it were measured by pint or by quart, would be reason nonetheless. Meanwhile, as everybody knows, this American experiment is such that superior, quart-sized reasons have incessantly to earn their keep by vanquishing inferior, pint-sized reasons. Since so many among the disenfranchised must possess at least some rationality, it’s no less than a political failure to discount their potential contributions, in other words, to rule out these same untapped reservoirs of reason, some of which might yet turn out to be quart-sized, after all.

Certainly, it makes good practical sense for us, the undecided auditors, to help expand the range of enfranchisement. As it is, we already appreciate the value of real work. So we just need to remember that intellectual labor is another of the practices that keep the nation humming along. In addition, there’s nothing for us to lose in emancipating at least one or two subsets of the currently marginalized. Should any among them, making their way into the public forum, betray their half-measured inferiority, that will just give us something to argue all the way back to the farm, the domicile, the factory. It’s how American democracy operates: by pitting the better arguments against the worse. Meanwhile, if any among the newly-enfranchised turn out to be competent, there will still be no problem. For this, too, is what it means for the better arguments to win. Besides, since reason is the currency of the political marketplace, it’s clear that statutory (or legal, or civil) rights are to be earned, indeed purchased through reasoned debate. In that case, to persist in silencing certain intellects on the basis of race or gender is to persist in vitiating the political process. It’s as inimical to the spirit of the republic as price-fixing would be to the spirit of free enterprise.

By now, we’ve indeed come upon a way to frame rhetorical agency as “conventional,” though without necessitating its pollution by normativity. In this extended example, the shared values accorded to work, biblical precept, and mind do return the
collectivity to a certain equilibrium, yet they do not function in a manner that can be called merely conservative. Rather, they effect what is simultaneously a reconciliation and a transformation. By linking alternative discourses, they promote inclusion and enfranchisement. And, in broadening the range of the ecumenical family, they help the collectivity remain itself by becoming otherwise, as by welcoming into the fold certain constituencies which, up to now, have (irrationally) been excluded from the household.

**Still Missing So Far**

As we’ve seen, the rhetorical-humanistic perspective explains rhetorical agency in terms of the deployment of shared values. Thus theory supports (rather than undermines) practice, for it frames collectively held guidelines as resources for reconfiguring rhetorical subjectivity. Yet the reterritorialization of rhetorical conventionality does require the elevation of certain values at the expense of others. For instance, as we’ve seen above, democratization might carefully be sutured to the value of work, biblical precept, and mind, but just as carefully amputated from the value of ownership, property, and cash money. This implies that rhetoric’s (Heideggerian) saving power might very well be founded upon no less than its exploitative danger. And the only rhetorical-humanistic defense for such duplicity seems to be that it is actually the rhetor’s duty to promote the greater good by whatever means are available.

To bring the duplicity more clearly into view, we’ll give it a face, acknowledging its likely impact on any human actors caught up in rhetorical transaction. So let’s consider the opinion of Emmanuel Lévinas, who, even as a philosopher of communication, denies that there’s any justification for rhetoric at all. Citing Plato’s *Phaedrus* as an illustration, Lévinas maintains that the “specific nature of rhetoric” is to inculcate “propaganda, flattery, diplomacy,” indeed, to effect “psychagogy, demagogy, pedagogy” (70). In short, rhetorical transaction looks to be all “ruse, emprise, and exploitation” (72). Although Lévinas provides only the most cursory analysis, his complaint still poses a problem quite devastating for the tradition, a tradition
in which Plato himself is continually tortured into admitting that, but of course, rhetoric’s true purpose is to uphold the (universally) greater good.

After all, while the *Phaedrus* does take the form of a dialogue, on the question of a true art of rhetoric, the true art uncovered there isn’t dialogic. According to Plato’s Socrates, the best of all possible rhetoricians will aspire to understanding things exactly as they are — aspire, that is, to grasping a “being that really is what it is” (Plato 33). So, once the requisite teleology establishes the frame for everything else, the task degenerates into audience analysis, also known as homework. But, in that case, rhetorical utterance isn’t conversation, it’s indoctrination. It’s to regroup the audience under the sign of the given, the unalterable, the “being that really is what it is.” There’s no provision in the true art of rhetoric for protecting, only for co-opting, the otherness of the interlocutor. And this, for Lévinas, is what counts as psychagogy, demagogy, and pedagogy.

It’s difficult to refute Lévinas by asserting that, no, regardless of what Plato or Socrates might say about the authoritarian, top-down trajectory of, frankly, even the most truly rhetorical communication, rhetoric is still, by and large, quite open to radical alterity. The basic criticism obviously applies to any rhetoric addressing its auditors “in the name of their highest good” (Weaver, “Language,” 309). For the Lévinasian indictment is correct: the rhetorical-humanistic tendency is to submit, indeed, to betray the person to the group. Under these circumstances, while there’s a social rationale for speech, there isn’t a human justification at all.