

The Stumped of Us: Why Teach Rhetoric in the Face of Racism?

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Since the late nineteenth century, most US universities have had a required first-year writing class, usually known as “composition.” That’s what I teach, mainly.

What does it mean to teach persuasion, in a context where persuasion has been so utterly powerless? And in a discipline which has, since its inception in US universities, so ardently served white supremacy (as 150 years of scholarship has amply demonstrated, to almost no practical effect)?

For several years before the pandemic, the first assignment in many of my rhetoric classes was called “The Bookstore Expedition.” Students were required to go to a local bookstore and purchase a nonfiction book that they would read and use for the basis of various assignments throughout the semester. Some students picked novels, and that’s how we wound up discussing the difference between fiction and nonfiction. Later, students would work on tasks such as a credibility assessment, information visualization, citation patterns, audience and reception analysis, and other tasks basically associated with the practice, the study, and the art of human communication (as Andrea Lunsford has defined rhetoric).

Some students picked accessible bestsellers, some picked coffee-table books, and some picked heavy, academic-leaning texts (plentiful in most San Francisco bookstores). I was like, “you don’t have to impress me, you should pick something that you are genuinely interested in.” But that’s how I first learned of Michelle Alexander’s 2010 book, *The New Jim Crow*. A white 18-year-old, given complete freedom to purchase any nonfiction book on the shelves of Green Apple Books, picked *The New Jim Crow*. If I were still doing that assignment, maybe a student would pick *The Sum of Us*.

But if they did, what would they learn about rhetoric as a course of study? While McGhee describes herself as “fundamentally a hopeful person,” her book is a long accumulation of indictments of rhetoric. Think of what you would want your students to learn in my first-year writing class: the ability to find and understand evidence and arguments, and to deploy rational and research-based discussions to illuminate

an issue or advance a debate.

In describing her work with the research and advocacy organization Demos, McGhee relates example after example of the failure of ethical persuasion—the kind of communication values and skills we would hope to amplify in our students.

McGhee relates the story of a person in government relations for a network of rural hospitals in Texas, who seems to have given up on attempting to persuade legislators with reason and evidence. He says, “We can prove to them all week long, they are never gonna...” She tells of her own efforts to bring evidence of the coming 2008 financial crisis to the halls of Congress, only to be told by a Senate staffer not to bother, since “banks own the place.” She relates how she came to realize that “Washington wouldn’t listen” (88) because “money can obscure the most obvious of truths” (97).

For years, I’ve told students that rhetorical power is power; that making ethical, evidence-based arguments is a fundamental value in our society. Yet McGhee’s book only dramatizes the impotence of rhetoric. Or rather, of “good” rhetoric.

Because Lee Atwater was also a rhetor. Atwater was the grinning, fluffy-haired racist strategist standing just behind Reagan and Bush in the 1980s; McGhee describes his evil work in her first chapter. Dogwhistling, gaslighting, stereotyping, manipulation, outright lying—these are also rhetorical strategies. Or as McGhee puts it, “sheer cultural marketing” (“marketing” is the word rhetoricians use for rhetoric we don’t want to be associated with).

We know this, and Aristotle knew it two thousand years ago. Aristotle really liked to classify things, but he had to admit that “the honest rhetorician has no separate name to distinguish them from the dishonest.” We hope our students will make this distinction; we hope to teach them to resist these dishonest strategies of “rhetrickery” and to avoid employing them, despite their obvious effectiveness.

A paradox, though: McGhee writes a book. The book rationally and with hundreds of pages of footnotes narrates the continual failure of rational persuasion and “good” rhetoric. McGhee, the optimist, echoes the ancient voice of Aristotle, who wrote that “Rhetoric is useful because things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites.” “It’s time to tell the truth,” she writes a few pages from the end, as if we hadn’t just read 270 pages illustrating the failure of the truth to have any significant impact.

My cynicism here is a clear manifestation of white fragility, but as a consequence of

reading *The Sum of Us* I wonder if instead of a Rhetoric department we should have a Clout department. We could have a required curriculum of “first-year clout”—maybe the study of rhetoric could be part of it, but rhetoric is not enough. How can we arm students (and ourselves) with clout?

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