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# Transgression & Apologia: Disjoining Standpoints of Justice, Publicity and Drama: Commentary on “The Stance of Personal Public Apology”

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**Abstract:** This paper responds to Professor Martha Cheng’s standpoint analysis of transgression and apologia in three twenty first century media-promoted controversies: Tiger Woods, Paula Deen, and Bryan Williams. Argument strategies are differentiated by genres that aim at justice, publicity, and drama. Forensics, public relations, and entertainment mix across media apparatus. I emphasize the disjunctures among these acts of argument and thereby provide an alternative to analysis and synthesis of the argumentation as discourse.

**Keywords:** Apology, transgression, public relations, forensics, race, infotainment, argumentation, cognition, standpoint theory.

## 1. Introduction

Argumentation appears in many guises these days. Old genres find new voice. Mass and new media technologies constantly churn events of the world into words of passion. These hot items draw attention. Over the last decade, the genre of kategoria and apology has exploded. A genre of argument constitutes symbolic action that generates swirls of pros and cons. The drama of accusation and self-defense takes many forms. Typically, the press has ginned publicity when reporters and columnists build a reputation, then rip it down. These rise and fall narratives spread with the proliferation across media outlets. Social media gossip generates frenzy. The argumentation traffics in the novelty of inversion; defaming past figures, while honoring those condemned in their own time. Professor Cheng’s paper reminds us that reputation controversy comprises a powerful argument genre defining our times.

The private life of Tiger Woods and Paula Deen, followed by the fantasies of Bryan Williams are emblematic of a transition between mass media and social media. There is change going on, a move from controlling, groomed, professional narrative frames of corporate branding and public relations coifing to the routine ugly avalanches of crude gossip and speculation. Industrial strength ad hominem argument—against real and imagined, accidental and calculated deviations from social norms—appears to be the fare of the contemporary publics.

Professor Cheng draws our attention to paradigm cases of apologia. She draws contemporary rhetorical theories into standpoint argumentation in order to provide a discourse analysis that identifies linguistic and informal logical features of argument. She compares the respective speeches, calling attention to similarities in kind and differences in proportion. She shows that the examples are consistent with sociolinguistic theories of repair, meta-discourse, disagreement, modality and representation. The analysis does indicate how a specific stance is developed. The read is a useful, analytic identification of several examples. Standpoint analysis is laid out side by side with ancient and contemporary rhetoric. This strategy invites a dialogue about argument and language. I begin this dialogue by illustrating differences where useful and resisting synthesis.

Bondy, P., & Benacquista, L. (Eds.). *Argumentation, Objectivity, and Bias: Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA), 18-21 May 2016*. Windsor, ON: OSSA, pp. 1-7.

## 2. Rhetoric, public address & public relations

First, the work of Ware and Linkugel (1973) is based on a tradition of public address. The long line of speakers who spoke in defense of themselves turned to the public bar to defend themselves. (Image repair work is a corporate strategy of late capitalism.) Rhetorical argument defined the scope of public deeds. Deliberation offered a fact based form of public address. Its aim to answer the question: What to do in the future. Forensics, too, is a fact based form of argument based on getting-right cases that raise questions of justice. Guilt or innocence is at issue; justice rides on the verdict of judge and jury. Rhetoric is action, deeds done in words. Ware and Linkugel (1973) develop their idea of apologia from a long line of research on cognitive psychology on belief dilemmas, which extended over time into perception formation and attribution theory.

Ware and Linkugel (1973) worked from speeches across history, but their theory was grounded in well-known models of cognitive psychology directed to understanding belief dilemmas. Standpoint theory's triangular relationships follow a similar scheme or pattern similar to balance theory, cognitive dissonance, and attribution theories. Whereas standpoint analysis seems but to lead to descriptive accounts of language use, Ware and Linkugel (1973) offers a genre that explains why certain stances are taken, the limits for each stance, and the driving motivational force. From an informal logic perspective, rhetorical genre should involve the dialogical pair of pro and con, hence *kategoria* and *apologia*. Professor Cheng invites us to think whether standpoint theory is an advance over psychology or an extension that offer greater attention to specific aspects of language use.

William Benoit (1997; 2014) who is often confused as part of this tradition, instead, draws from public relations to extend *apologia* into image repair work. Public relations and advertising are areas of studies circumscribed by the need to demonstrate effective strategies of influence in order to massage public opinion. Public relations and advertising are instruments of late capitalism that promote habits of consumption, including purchase of secure, moderately pleasurable lifestyles—including golfing, cooking, and the news. Lifestyle are commodified into value through celebrity performance connected with advertising campaigns.

Benoit's 'image repair work' features a mass media outlook where star quality depends upon associations with glamour, for golf-a turn of talent, for cooking-a style of hospitality, and for news an anchor referencing field credentials. The argumentative qualities of the event in part did turn upon statements. The major arc of the argument, understanding what the more general stakes were for image-work, exceeded what any character could do or say. Goffman (1971) and Cheng (2016) hold that *apologia* is a 'type' of "remedial work." Signs can be reduced to a single end. Symbols take on multiple meanings Language activities do a number of things. Working rhetorics engage in remedial appeals, but there is always more that exceeds any classification. Whereas the genre of *kategoria/ apologia* find their end in justice, the image repair work of mass and new media generates an economy of attention that thrives off rituals of purification and pollution, featuring colorful deviance from social norms. Image repair does deals with perceptions, values, and purging impurities. The genre for this sort of effort is epideictic. The controversies that surround each of the cases provide a window into rhetorical culture and its 21<sup>st</sup> century activities.

## **2. Tiger Woods: golf, private life & the color line**

Tiger Woods' persona was geared to gain for golf the mix of youth, mixed-race, and celebrity. Long a space of segregation, golf benefited from such a hero who could renew and widen its appeal. The lives of black men generally and athletic heroes occupy a problematic position in the public sphere. All are praised and blamed frequently in the rituals of sports reporting and news. Woods blowup punctured media the heavily invested equation of beauty and goodness. The color line in the United States limits framing from classical views of apology, itself based on slave culture where credibility and conditions of torture were fused. Scandal media made the most of salacious news; golf commentators talked of Tiger's issues among whiffs and puts, the matter receded as did the legend's golf game—which never returned to par. There is a sort of moral justice to the narrative, perhaps bespeaking the effectiveness of public relations to dissociate advertising commitments and to limit the damage. What is interesting is that Tiger's imbroglio anticipated a current genre where the relationship controversies among sports family partners, men and women. Black athletes have become a major source of discussion over partner violence. Philandering rather than drug use constituted a relatively singular focus of Tiger's argument.

## **3. Propriety, food politics, and social media**

The New South has been ever busy re-discovering itself. Racism is both a legacy and a reality with which its daughters and sons need address. Like Tiger, Paula Deen offered an attractive persona. Cooking, not sport, constitutes her lifestyle performance. The southern chef fused food traditions and family. Deen was the face of an extended marketing campaign that included name brand cook ware, books, and foods. Capital extends reputation through branding and product integration. Her admission of use of the n'word was a transgression made significant by recent media drama. Public relations scholars are used to mass media strategies for image repair work, but Paula Deen was operating in the new hybrid world of laws suits and social media (Alan 2013).

Contemporary, transgression and apologia became defined by a case of explosive, entangling controversy in 2010. Trent Lott was the first social media casualty. As an undergraduate, Lott had tried to discourage mob violence against James Meredith at the University of Mississippi; but, he also had regard for Strom Thurmond, a segregationist candidate, and spoke at his birthday party, saying "When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems all these years" (Hulse 2002). The speech act is contextualized as well-wishes for a senior event. The media got hold of it and contextualize it in memories of racism.

Lott gave an interview with Black Entertainment Television explaining himself and repudiating Thurmond's former views. Bloggers did not let the story die, however, and eventually he had to resign from the leadership of the Senate. Lott's apologia was not successful, not because of its standpoint flaws but because publicity was available by defaming and unseating a powerful figure over a statement that was understood commonly to be offensive. Defaming is a rhetorical apparatus that symbolically escalates speech act transgressions into signs of defilement and judgments of disgust. Initially, the category of katagorein referred to accusation. The major development in apologia genre among today's publics are spokesmen and women who refuse to accepted apologies, to remain offended, and to fan the flames of suspicion,

fear, and doubt in order to promote social change. Transgressions are not so much important in themselves. Rather, these are converted into sign arguments and standpoints develop in the triangulation of wedge issues.

Paula Deen's managers had learned Trent Lott's lesson to build on and a progressive strategy in mind. Reputation managers plumb literatures to produce a constantly shifting state of the art for repair work. Traditionally, withdraw from public life offers a traditional route of mortification where a transgressor is allowed to reflect upon sins, forgiveness to occur, and time to move on. Deen was helped along this path when her levels of endorsement fell and her merchandise did not sell. The scandal spread over time (Fin 2013). Speech acts set in motion copia, repetition and variation in a mix of positive and negative trajectories. Arguments spiral. The genius of the Food Network came into play with promoting an alternative.

The Deen family had made the Southern restaurant business a family affair. Food Network featured chefs who took on celebrity status, a counterstatement to fast food nation. Jamie's younger brother Bobby put together a new Deen show *Not My Mama's Meals*." On the show, the son took "some of his mom's classic dishes and reworked them to be lighter, leaner, yet just as delicious" (Bobby Deen, n.d.). The apologia constitutes a collateral hybrid. Rhetoric invites cognitive complicity through indirection, suggestion, and collaboration—enthymematic reasoning. Standpoint theory does not work here. Nothing explicit appears. The apology is dialogical in form. Bobby triangulates healthy food, mixed race guests, and calls to his momma—as a standpoint alternative. Thus, the South renews itself—a new generation, with new ways, and new outlooks advances tastily, but together with warm family memories, closeness, and a boy who grows with the times but still respects for his mother. For the new South, propriety sutures transgressions with the embrace of fitting manners. Food Network nicely allows us to have our cake and eat it too.

#### **4. Anchors, infotainment, and tragedy**

The maunderings of Bryan Williams offers us a third example. The choice is an excellent one for exploring argumentation where *catagoria* and *apologia* define an ambit of debate over cultural performance: the news. As an aside, I think the example fits our inquiry, precisely because it does not obviously raise questions of the color line. The asymmetries among interlocutors who advance standpoints is central to understanding the historical stresses on and evolution of discourse "classification schemes." Race, ethnicity, gender, class, and preference are conditions intrinsic to the cultural, social and technical activities of language. Critical discourse work reduces these to semiotic analyses, but language use continues to stress and differentiate among what are and are not acceptable acts of arguing. Chen discovers these stresses across three instances. She chooses to emphasize types of similar situations and responses. My paper concentrates on dissensus, difference, and alternatives—semiosis in diachronic development. Woods and Deen model the changing relationships of transgression and race/gender in public exchange. Williams offers us an alternative that situates argument in exchanges over war experience and news reporting. His apology features narrator trust and social capital—ethos related to story is the heart of the issue.

The magnitude of a perceived transgression is written in relation to the status or reputation of the source who commits what is arguably a wrong. Mr. Williams at age 55 was "not only the head of the No. 1 evening news show, but also one of NBC's biggest stars, a frequent celebrity guest on "Saturday Night Live," "30 Rock" and the late-night talk show

circuit. Mr. Williams has been drawing 9.3 million viewers a night, and his position seemed unassailable.” Real-time digital news drew increasing attention, but Mr. Williams remained “one of the most trusted names in America and commanded the respect accorded predecessors like Walter Cronkite, Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings.” These men were icons of mass media, a successor to the still vibrant print industry.

In tragic drama, a hero struggles with hamartia, a flaw which predisposes him to what appears to be a trivial false choice that, unexpectedly, tumbles into consequences that spiral into dreadful outcomes. The American war of choice in Iraq constituted a setting for tragedy of epochal proportions. The invasion based on a set of lies by the Executive, a disingenuous debate in congress, and a request for the public to “shop”. It was an enterprise fraught with guilt. Williams claim to be in a follow on helicopter rather than the lead one; the latter struck by enemy fire, his not, turned him into a sacrificial victim. Cable News routinely trafficked in infotainment with swarms of lies, half-truths, fictions, and ideological fulminations. The evening news stood for a commitment to bringing perspective to events and affairs. Williams made the unpardonable sin, confusing fact and fiction—unexplainably—while occupying a script that mandated genuineness.

Williams was not the first modern newsman to make his bones from specious narrative. Dan Rather rose to fame covering hurricanes and allowed himself to be guiled into a trap of false information. What distinguished Williams is that he was among the last of the great white hope for an age rapidly in transition. “This was wrong and completely inappropriate for someone in Brian’s position,” Deborah Turness, the President of NBC News, memoed coldly, while colleagues expressed publically what a “painful” decision it was to relieve the anchor. Williams’ apology, then, could be read as words given in the line of duty. There was no excuse. The best he could do is to assert his dignity and to take his exile. When it comes to argument and apology, we should not be led to conflate image repair work (Turness’s maneuver) with human tragedy, Williams outcome. The Williams case is instructive because it illustrates the dramatic difference between Ware & Linkugel’s view of public address and Benoit’s neo-liberal image make-up do overs.

## **5. Transgression, declamation & empire**

Thank you, Professor Cheng for bringing these three instances of recent controversy over accusation and defense, *kategoria* and *apologia*. These are telling instances of how argumentation is being shaped and shaping our times. Your paper offers an opportunity to dialogue about argument. Stance theory is applied well in its analytic, synchronic, representational read of different situations resulting in quantitative variations on common maneuvers. I offer my read as complementary, focusing on the synthetic, diachronic, trope gaming reading of the stakeholders, stakes and agents arguing. What are the takeaways from this discussion? Several come to mind:

- (1) It is sometimes useful to resist the integration of theory and practice. Ware & Linkugel (1973) deal with genres of argument that address questions of justice. Bennet takes the point of view of corporate investment and efficacious defense of representation. When it comes down to it, the interests of capital depart from those of justice—when it comes to transgression.
- (2) Standpoint theory is an interesting perspective on linguistic analysis. It was preceded by a long line of inquiry into balance theory, persuasion, attribution and perception theories.

Studies of argument and cognition are warranted. Similarities and differences between standpoint and existing experimental work should be teased out, particular in relation to decision-making and judgment.

- (3) *Kategoria* and *apologia* are ways of conducting argument in public culture. The public sphere ideally accommodates questions of future fact in deliberation and past fact in questions of justice. Public culture offers epideictic *locus communes* where what matters is not so much the facts of a case per se as feelings attached to dramas of emotional explosion and catharsis.
- (4) Global public cultures are generated by communication networks. Apologies are used by various groups for to gain prominence or distance themselves from identification. The game of musical chairs has expensive reputations on the line. Incidents become transferred into events that are trivial in themselves but roll to significance along lines of outrage, fear, and collapse of augmented hopes. The reputation industry is succeeding mass media public relations by controlling ratios of positive to negative information.
- (5) *Apologia* in terms of mass and new media industry resembles fact-inconsequent epideictic argument. What is important to arguments about transgressions are not so much the genuine impact of things done as the register of emotion called up by act and response cycles. Old acts do become forgotten but remain unforgiven, and so pop up when to advantage. New energies become concentrated in the violation of the moment, represented of past slights, resentments and insensitivities.
- (6) *Acts of transgression—without apology* (ATWP) constitute the latest hybrid genre. One way power is demonstrated by elites is to resort to the crude, vulgar, unacceptable assertives to demonstrate power. The exceptional can say what they like. Vulgarity resonates with populist discourses that turn toward xenophobia, conspiracy, withdrawal and violence. Apology for some groups appears to be an act politically coded into rituals of forgiveness. The peculiar thing about TWP as a genre is that as acts of offense multiply, associate, and build into melodramas. Melodrama substitutes for news, documentary, history—any and all representational forms.
- (7) Declamation refers to a practice of public argument under conditions of empire. When publics no longer had the power to discuss issues without peril, they turned in Roman times to the arts of Declamation and Controversy. Students were trained to speak to situations that furnished dilemmas between duties to family and the imposition of the law. The torment of historical and fictional public figures who fall from grace resembles these debates, arguments that substituted show, display, and catharsis over more open horizons of invention, deliberation and judgment. *Apologia-kategoria* become a dominant genre under times of great wealth inequality, surveillance, and authoritarian rule.

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