

## Race, Class, and Gender in the Western Rhetorical Tradition

*The Western rhetorical tradition, on which the modern academy in the West was founded, has race, class, and gender constructions woven through it. Active Voices seeks to demystify the language of the academy and thereby make room in the academy for other voices and ways of knowing.*

Here's a simple question: Which came first? Human beings or human language?

While the question may seem ridiculous at first glance—"How can there be human language without human beings to produce that language?"—the ramifications of answering the question are immense.

### Language is a Human Construct Designed to Do Things in the World

I said "ridiculous" because it seems obvious that without humans, there would not be human language. This means that language is a product of human beings. It also means that language is not some naturally occurring object or phenomenon existing in nature, like some geological formation or the weather. It is the product of people.

This means that a particular language is shaped by particular people in particular places, or more precisely, by a group of people in a particular place and over a long period of time. That is why we have so many languages and so many dialects within language: each represents the needs and circumstances of the people who produced those languages and dialects.

So what's the big deal with that?

Well, we have to look at what languages *do* in those places. And that little verb, "do," has all sorts of implications. It's very easy to think about what language *is*. We're trained and schooled to do that from an early age. We're taught to read and write "correctly," identifying complete sentences so we can put a period or question mark in the right place. Perhaps we're taught to correct subject-verb agreements in sentences. But anytime someone has told us to write or speak "correctly," they were treating language as an object, as something that "is."

And of course, language is that. But it's not only that and it's not even most importantly that.

Language really is about doing things in the world.

It's about creating an agreement, for example, about who does what kind of work: "You go do that and I'll do this and when we're finished, we'll share the results." And it's about establishing a relationship among individuals: "This is my daughter" or "This is my best friend." And it's about creating values in the world: "Always speak the truth" or "Treat others as you'd have them treat you." And it's about creating meaning in an otherwise alien world: "This is *our* shared territory, and these are *our* homes." Together, these and many other kinds of activities make language the means by which human beings construct their worlds and their worldviews. Without language, and the concepts it expresses and creates, we would not be human at all.

### With Language Comes Culture, the Water We Swim In

So, we can say that human beings create language and, in so doing, create their world as a meaningful one. But now we're in a bit of trouble. Why?

Well, it's obvious that language cannot exist without human beings to speak (and write) it. But saying that human beings *produced* language isn't so easily supported. It suggests that human beings existed *prior to* the invention of language. But as we've just seen, language creates a human worldview. Without a human worldview, what would a human being be?

In other words, a more tenable answer to the question of the relation between humans and language would be to say that the two came into being at the same time: as early humans developed language, their language developed them and their groups into modern human beings living in human cultures.

That's a long introduction to get to the question of how race, gender, and class are woven into Western rhetoric. But it's important to recognize that human cultures and human languages are one in the same thing. Those languages may not always be spoken or written. Fashion is a kind of language, one that can be read and spoken. We know this every time we get dressed for class or for work: dressing "inappropriately" has meaning and consequences. Popular music is also a language, with different artists talking back to the artists that came before. A way to say this is that culture is symbolic: a set of interlocking symbols, a language, that make a network of meaning together.

All aspects of culture are similarly symbolic: the way we greet one another, the kind of music we listen to, the kinds of religious ceremonies we participate in (or not), the kinds of art we create. These all mean something and have symbolic value. They are all part of a large network of symbolic systems that have evolved over millennia and which we have inherited from our parents and grandparents and the generations before us. We are born into our culture, which is why our culture is so hard to see: it's the water we swim in.

*Active Voices* very much "swims" in the water of the Western rhetorical tradition. By this, I mean a tradition of language use that can be traced back through Western Europe (mostly northern) through the Roman Empire to the Ancient Greeks. The "fathers" of Western rhetoric can be said to be Aristotle and, to a somewhat lesser degree, Plato and Socrates, along with rhetoricians like Isocrates and Quintilian. It is these men who, in the Western rhetorical tradition, first systematically examined the relationships between truth, language, and being. They asked, "Can a good speech be made by someone who is not a good man?" And "Is it possible to speak well without first knowing what's true?"

These are heady questions but they form the fountainhead of the wellspring of Western rhetoric. Western rhetoricians and philosophers, politicians and statesmen, have been debating these questions ever since, through the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, through the scholasticism of the Middle Ages and the rise of modern Western European educational and governmental systems, since the seventeenth century.

## Western Rhetoric, Gender, and Race

Above I posited the question, "Can a good speech be made by someone who is not a good man?" The use of the term "man" is not an accident. In the Western rhetorical tradition, until very recently, women were always spoken *of* but were almost never the speakers. The consequence was a network of meaning—a worldview—created by men that devalued women and women's ways of knowing and speaking. Whether women even had "souls" was seriously debated. These debates and understandings both described and preserved the divisions and, inevitably, the inequalities.

We're still fighting these battles today. Women still earn less than men for equal work. We still have not had a woman US President. Only twenty-six of 100 US Senators are women in 2020; only forty-eight of 127 women serving in Congress are women of color. Only thirty-seven of the Fortune 500 companies in America are run by women (7 percent); no women of color run businesses on this year's list. Yet women account for over half the adult population.

These economic, social, and political facts are not the consequence of some natural order of things but, rather, the material result of a political and rhetorical tradition that goes back to the beginning of the Western world. The way we talk and think about a group of people determines their place in our cultural makeup and these are realized in our political documents. It was no accident, in other words, that women did not have the right to vote in the United States from 1789 through 1920, a period of over 130 years. And women of color would be blocked from voting for decades longer.

While race has been a potent rhetorical category, race is not a biological fact. Humans' wide variety of physical features form a spectrum without any clear dividing lines. Moreover, these differences are literally skin deep, the result of migratory patterns and environmental factors. Race is only a social construction, meaning we construct the ideas of different races rhetorically through the words we use to describe people. These words carry values and combine to tell stories about people and so exist as part of our society though not part of our biology. These stories form a part of our worldview, the water we swim in.

The White men of the Western rhetorical tradition conceived of people of other cultures—African, Asian, Native American—with different physical features just as they did women: they were "not us," meaning "not White," and consequently "less than." As such, the language—the rhetoric—of these "other" people, which constituted their

worldviews, were correspondingly “other” and “less than.” The constructed hierarchy of species, with human beings on the top, had a corresponding constructed hierarchy of cultures/races in the Western tradition with mostly Northern and Western White Europeans on the top. These hierarchical constructs did not have any relation to biological facts but only social values.

## Language Has Power

If you identify as a member of one of these historically othered races, genders, or cultures, you might be having an emotional and physiological response right now. And that is completely understandable. Words have power: the power to approve or disapprove, the power to enfranchise or disenfranchise entire populations, the power to make certain groups and people feel unsafe, feel less than, be silenced. Words have power and are sometimes used to order people with arms to enforce the meaning of words.

Thomas Jefferson, a man steeped in classical Western rhetoric, wrote perhaps the most famous sentence in American history:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

It is commonplace to say that Jefferson had no intention of including women nor the people he had enslaved on his plantation in Virginia nor the Indigenous peoples who lived near his home. Who the “we” and “all men” referred to was clear in this document even though the issue was hotly debated by many of those around Jefferson. But Jefferson resisted that questioning and instated the primacy of the White, educated, and property-owning man as the center of meaning making, making them the only Americans afforded full rights as citizens and, therefore, the only Americans considered “fully human.”

The Declaration of Independence, and after that the Constitution of the United States, are rhetorical and linguistic acts that created a worldview we live with, however fully or unwillingly—a worldview that created a nation with women and people of African descent at the margins, at best, or enslaved, at worst, and with the Indigenous people of the Americas excluded completely.

But let’s go beyond individual words and what they mean or who gets to decide their meaning. Let’s look at another aspect of the Declaration of Independence, its rhetorical structure. Following the famous words quoted above, Jefferson writes:

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Notice the formality of Jefferson’s language, the appeal to cool reason, and the very carefully constructed argument, almost like a mathematical equation. “All men have the right to X. Governments are created by those men to effect X,. But when governments do not do X, then . . .”

The structure of the argument is it expressive of some natural phenomenon. It’s a kind of syllogism, with the structure of “if, then, therefore,” and it does not exist in the world but as a rhetorical form created by certain groups of human beings. Though careful reasoning has been around as long as humans have, this kind of formal thinking was first developed and taught in the Western world by classical-era Greek philosophers and rhetoricians.

The question that follows, then, is who in Jefferson’s time had access to that kind of language? Where did one learn it, if it’s not a natural phenomenon but a cultural and rhetorical one?

In Jefferson’s age, and even in ours, only people of a certain race, class, and gender got to learn to speak like that. Jefferson was the son of a wealthy landowner, Peter Jefferson, slaveholder of the second-largest number of enslaved people in Virginia. In his teens, Jefferson was sent to study law at The College of William & Mary, the second university to be founded in the American Colonies. None of his sisters had such options and certainly neither did any of the enslaved

people who worked his father's plantation, who were not only discouraged from learning to read at all but were likely punished if they were found to be able to.

So if you wanted to write and speak like Jefferson, you'd have been wise to be born male into a White family with the economic means to allow you to spend your days with books and, even better, to be sent away to a private school and college. Otherwise, you would grow up learning a different kind of language, the language of the home or farm or factory, the language of workers and people of non-White races. If you were not of Jefferson's class and race, you might not even be able to read.

Jefferson, speaking from the center of his world and identifying himself as fully human and, therefore, deserving of certain unalienable rights, wrote into the very fabric of the American founding documents—into the very sentences and linguistic structures—what it meant to be human. And if you didn't speak that language, if you were Black or a woman or an uneducated White man, then you were a second-class citizen if you were a citizen at all. Your right to vote, to own property, even to be free to reject enslavement were not guaranteed—the long history of the fight for voting rights is one obvious example; the anti-miscegenation laws that forbade interracial marriage in the US until 1967 is another. The “right” to be fully human had to be earned or granted or fought for—your very humanity was in the hands of others, and these others were invariably White men, the heirs of Aristotle and Plato.

It would be nice to be able to say that Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers, as well as the writers, philosophers, and statesman of the Enlightenment—the era from roughly 1685 to 1815 that gave rise to modern democracies—were not intentional in their exclusion of women and people they deemed non-White. It was just the water they swam in. But I cannot say that.

At the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, there was already a strong abolitionist movement. Many argued vehemently for the emancipation of enslaved people and women's rights to full citizenship, including the spouses of some of the Founding Fathers. These powerful voices were rejected by the majority of men in power, using rhetorical means—careful reasoning, eloquent speech, interpretation of Christian texts—designed to justify disempowering or enslaving large groups of peoples, all ultimately backed by force.

The Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution are brilliant expressions of egalitarian themes and the dignity of the individual. They were and remain truly revolutionary. It is not an accident that the Constitution was designed to form “a more perfect Union”—it was not then nor is it now a perfect union and the original signatories knew it. There was much work to be done and, in a way, the work you are doing right now, learning about the power of rhetoric to construct racist and anti-racist worldviews through language choice and linguistic structures, continues that work.

## Rhetorical Choices Have Real-World Consequences

So it's obvious that rhetorical choices have real-world consequences, but it's not always obvious when we are making those choices.

In the introduction to *Active Voices*, I discussed David Bartholomae's groundbreaking work on language use and access to college. Bartholomae found that the process by which his institution, the University of Pittsburgh, assessed whether students were ready for college was completely unfair, as incoming students were being judged not by any neutral standard but by how well they knew and could exhibit the language of the academy, of colleges and universities—the “rhetorical patterns” of academic discourse.

Those from wealthy, White families (like Jefferson's) did very well; most others did not. Bartholomae, working in the early 1980s, saw that as unfair and sought to change the way colleges worked with such students, and much of the rest of American colleges followed.

But even here, Bartholomae's rhetoric carries racist threads.

At one point, Bartholomae presents the grounds for his perspective. He states, as if it were something “self-evident,” that there exists a “neutral language (a language whose key features [are] paragraphs, topic sentences, transitions, and the like-features of a *clear and orderly mind*” (12, emphasis added).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bartholomae, David. “Inventing the University.” *Journal of Basic Writing*, 5:1, 1986, pp. 4-23.

“Clear and orderly,” Bartholomae writes. Who is to say whose mind is “clear and orderly” and whose is not? In this worldview, the “clear and precise reasoning” of Thomas Jefferson would no doubt be considered “orderly,” perhaps the very model of it.

But would the language of the enslaved man who worked on Jefferson’s plantation be considered “orderly” by the standards of the academy even if that person used language to run an entire agricultural endeavor? Of course not. Or how about the language of the worker in Bartholomae’s own Pittsburgh steel plants who oversaw the production of the steel that framed the building in which Bartholomae wrote? Not likely.

What “clear and orderly” means, then, is contextualized within a rhetorical tradition. Similar words, such as “correct” and “appropriate,” also only have meaning within a tradition. Women, for example, were often demeaned because, from a man’s perspective, they were seen as not having a “clear and orderly” mind but one instead “confused” by emotions. The language of many Black Americans to this day is considered by many people to be “incorrect” or “inappropriate” for school or professional life. According to whom?

By now it should be obvious that there is no natural law—physiological or biological—to make such a judgment. There’s only a long tradition of Western rhetoric, made consequential through documents of law, school curricula, and business practices, to support such claims.

And these claims were backed by force. State police guarded polling stations, for example, denying the right to vote to anyone—mainly African Americans—who could not pass a literacy test prior to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These same troopers were sent to protect Black children as they integrated schools after the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954. What words mean and who decides their meaning have very real impacts on how and even if people live.

## Different Does Not Mean Deficient

Is English inherently superior to Italian, Chinese, or Swahili? Certainly not. It probably goes without saying that no language is better than another language. There are simply differences. Same with dialects, varieties within a particular language, which every language has. Linguists identify up to twenty-four different dialects of English in the United States alone. And there are English speakers in dozens of other countries using their own particular kinds of English.

From this it should be obvious that different does not mean deficient.

Every language does what it is supposed to do. There is no “correct” language. There is not even any single “correct” English. Listen to any popular song and you’ll hear an effective use of language, regardless of how the grammar operates. Watch the groundbreaking musical *Hamilton* and recognize the power of Black speech patterns, of Black rhetoric, of Black music (not to mention Black actors playing White Founding Fathers), to make meaning in a way that could not be done in any other way. You’ll see that all languages and all language forms do things in ways that others cannot.

Yet *Active Voices* operates within the paradigm of the Western rhetorical tradition. It operates under the premise that having access to the “how” and “why” of that tradition can help all people, but especially those historically excluded, gain power and agency. It does *not* promote that tradition as inherently better than any other.

*Active Voices* presents the workings and meanings of the traditional Western academy. But you are encouraged to challenge the assumption that there is a single “right” way to read, write, or think. In other words, bring to the table what you know even as you learn about what the academy has historically stood for and how it functions today.

## In Sum

The Western rhetorical tradition is a tradition of language use that stretches back to the ancient Greek philosophers and rhetoricians. Woven through it are value judgments about what constitutes “humanness,” with White educated men standing at the center and others further afield: women, people of non-White races and ethnicities, and people of lower social classes. The Western rhetorical tradition is the stuff out of which the academy has been made. It is not a given, it is not better than any other rhetorical tradition. It is simply the historical language of those in power in the Western



world, those with economic and political power justified through the use of rhetoric, not because of any kind of linguistic or moral superiority. *Active Voices* seeks to demystify the language of the academy so that it can be better understood and you, as a student, can have greater choice in using and responding to the forces of that rhetoric.

## Extending the Conversation

### Activity 1

Talk back. Do a bit of research of your own on some of the key terms and key ideas presented here. What did I get right? What did I get wrong? Why do you think so? What consequences follow from your understanding in terms of rights and responsibilities?

### Activity 2

The Western rhetorical tradition, as commonly conceived, does not include Latin rhetoric, the rhetorical tradition that also arose from Aristotle but moved from Rome not to northern European universities but to the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East, through northern Africa and into Spain and from there throughout the world as part of the Spanish empire. Hispanic cultures today express a Latin rhetorical tradition that shares some but not all of the features of Western rhetorical tradition, for example on the value of personal narrative. Where does your family come from? How “close to the center” of the Western rhetorical tradition do you think your parents, grandparents, and ancestors were? How might that still influence you today?

### Activity 3



<https://youtu.be/-tLlZyLuYGo>

Check out this video where Lin-Manuel Miranda talks about how hip-hop informed the production of *Hamilton*. Maybe think about how an “othered” language has power: how “hip-hop was the only way” to tell Hamilton’s story. What other rhetorical traditions are you familiar with? What is their power?