

Seton Hall University

From the Selected Works of Jon P. Radwan

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Rhetoric and Race - Background and Assignment - SHU MLK Symposium 2020

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SHU - 2020 MLK Day Symposium

Academic Content – Subject Area 6 – RACE and RHETORIC

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Introduction

“Rhetoric” denotes the influential or persuasive energy within communication and social interaction. Contemporary rhetorician Barry Brummet defines the *rhetorical dimension* as “that part of an act or object which influences how social meanings are created, maintained, and opposed.” A culture’s history is driven by “rhetors,” or people who make strategic efforts to affect meaning, and “rhetorical critics” pay close attention to how these rhetors use language and other symbols to form and reform society.

“Race” is a contested term that rhetors use to posit sub-groups within humanity; its meaning has shifted over time and continues to change. Ancient peoples addressed race in varying linguistic, religious, and geo-political terms. In the Enlightenment era, while the United States was becoming a country, scientific classification systems from the physical and biological sciences were erroneously applied to humanity. Hierarchical taxonomies claiming to identify racial sub-groups in terms of anatomical characteristics, intellectual/moral traits, and genetic essence were developed and widely distributed (see Linnaeus, 1735). This shift in the meaning of race enabled dominant Euro-American groups to naturalize privileged positions and justify imperial expansion and colonial subjugation and/or enslavement and/or genocide of indigenous peoples and other social out-groups for centuries. Contemporary researchers have disproven the idea that humans inherit traits from racial groups. Today environment, culture, education, and circumstance are all recognized as exerting profound and complex influences on personal development. Despite this scientific and scholarly consensus, race-driven rhetorics continue to influence what genetic/physical characteristics such as skin pigmentation mean within American culture.

Humans are part of the animal kingdom, but we live within languages and cultures and the other animals do not. Genetically, we are all members of a single species. From a rhetorical perspective race is a symbolic construct that has been used to divide humanity, creating a dysfunctional socio-relational dynamic that has caused centuries of misery and bloodshed. Cultural interaction patterns are not predetermined by nature, and learning to critique the ways that race is rhetorically constructed can help show how our institutions and ultimately all of social reality is collectively accepted and built up together. With this approach *rhetorical criticism* is empowered discernment and *rhetorical activism* becomes a moral imperative. Corrupt meanings for race and related terms like class and gender can and should be opposed and healthy relations between groups can and must be created and maintained. Just as discrimination and domination are the brutal material effects of divisive rhetoric, so are harmony and peace the tangible fruits of ethical rhetors. This unifying point is especially important for Catholic communities like Seton Hall. Scripture teaches that “[t]here is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The names of some of our divided groups may have changed, but the same message that St. Paul brought to heal ancient Galatia is sorely needed in today’s America.

Assignment Options

“Engaged scholarship” is research that helps advance society. In the broadest sense all valid research can improve society, but too many research projects do less to help our world and more to advance the interests of researchers or their employers. For your assignment, you must select a research project that will contribute to a just understanding of race in America. Select one of the following two options.

ASSIGNMENT OPTION 1 - Interview Project – “Local Voices on Race and Racism”

PART 1 - Interview a person from the Seton Hall community (faculty, staff, student, administration, or alumni).

Suggested time duration: 15 minutes.

- Create an AUDIO, not a video, recording of the conversation.
- START the interview by inviting your partner to state their name, date, location, and consent to be recorded.
- Required Prompts:
 - o What does “racism” mean to you?
 - o What does liberty mean today?
 - o What is 21st century emancipation?
 - o What’s the difference between FREE people and a FREED people?

- Describe calling people out versus calling people in. Which is most persuasive and why?
- END the interview by asking your partner, “Is there anything else you’d like to say?”
- Take a selfie/photo with your interview partner.

PART 2 - Create a VIDEO essay of you and your response to your findings.

Prompt: What parts of your interview did you find interesting, moving, or surprising?

Duration: 3 to 4 minutes.

In a separate document: Pull a quotation from your interview partner’s answer to the prompt, “What is 21st century emancipation?”

HOW TO SUBMIT: UPLOAD **audio interview, selfie, video essay, .doc with culled quotation** -- to a personal Google Drive File and submit Google Drive LINK to Blackboard.

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ASSIGNMENT OPTION 2 -- Research and reflection paper – “Abolishing Modern Slavery”

In the 18th and 19th centuries ABOLITIONISTS were activists working to end chattel slavery and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Unfortunately, modern forms of slavery persist, calling for a new local and global network of 21st century abolitionists. The Freedom Center offers this definition of slavery: “Slavery can be defined as the total physical and/or mental control of a person, for purposes of exploiting that person’s labor and body for the commercial or personal gain of another.” In a 2-3 page research paper with full citations, describe a modern day *abolitionist rhetor* working within one of the frameworks of the systems they intend to disrupt. Include multimedia evidence of modern slave rhetoric (symbolism, photos, video links etc.). Upload your paper to Blackboard. Your paper’s outline should . . .

1. Describe the frame, form, and practice of the offending institution. How does it extend the legacy of racism and slavery overtly and covertly?
2. Reflect upon what abolitionist rhetoric might look like to dismantle that system. What would a modern-day abolitionist say and do to disrupt? Describe the work of current modern day abolitionists in that movement.

Institutions and frameworks to consider in answering the above prompt appear below with suggested sub-categories to research and explore; choose ONE major category.

Industry, i.e. modern day slavery propagated by corporate industry and profiteering/product. i.e. forced labor and servitude, sugar, cocoa, diamonds, sweatshop labor (Global)

Human trafficking, i.e. sex slave trade, indentured servitude, international adoption, child exploitation (Global)

Education system, i.e. school segregation, bussing, school to prison pipeline, suspensions, curricula and text book design, teaching modalities, teacher demographics (Local American and global)

Criminal justice system, i.e. police brutality, minority incarceration rates, mandatory minimum sentencing, background checks, voting rights and felony convictions, juvenile detention, the bail system, legalization of marijuana and expunging records for non-violent felony convictions, surveillance state (Local American)

Politics and civic engagement, i.e. voter registration, voter suppression, redistricting, community organizing (Local American)

Labor, i.e. minimum wage, poverty line, cost of living, undocumented labor and with-holding wages, domestic workers and intimidation, reparations, economic human rights (Local American)

Healthcare, i.e. universal health coverage, opioid and crack epidemics, criminalization of mental illness and addiction