A TRAVELLING, FOUR-FOLDED RHETORICAL AGENCY

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For the degree of Master of Arts in
Communication Studies

By

Les Belikian

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The thesis of Les Belikian is approved:

Dr. Bernardo Attias
Date

Dr. Kathryn Sorrells
Date

Dr. Peter Marston, Chair
Date

California State University, Northridge
Dedication

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ABSTRACT

A TRAVELLING, FOUR-FOLDED RHETORICAL AGENCY

By

Les Belikian

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In the following thesis, employing an assemblage-theoretical approach, and addressing a particularly canonical rhetorical text, I investigate the prospects for conceptualizing rhetorical agency as producing social change. I propose, drawing on current research into subjectivity, convention(ality), transcendence, and materiality, that rhetorical agency can indeed be viewed as transformative if it is construed as four-folded, as traveling, and as irreducible to any of its co-constituent terms.
Chapter One: Introduction

In the following study, adopting an assemblage-theoretical approach, and drawing for material on a rhetorical text which has become canonical, I’ll investigate the prospects for conceptualizing rhetorical agency as an enactment of social change. It’s true that rhetorical agency is more often studied as a potential, a capacity which speakers and listeners can arguably hold in reserve and, in principle, bring to bear during rhetorical transaction (see Campbell, 2005, or Herndl and Licona, 2007). But to my mind, it’s important to theorize rhetorical agency as more than a hypothetical capacity: as (so to speak) a kinetic manifestation, and not only a potential supply of communicative energies. After all, were the status quo ever to suffer from some distemper, then we should certainly wish to know how rhetoricity might serve more as a remedy than a placebo. And to situate rhetorical agency in this way — as an actualization — encourages us to seek a concrete effectivity for rhetoric itself, so that we avoid settling for any view in which communication appears only to mirror the conditions already in place.

Productivity as a Context for Theorizing Rhetorical Transaction

But, to begin with, is it possible conceptually to link rhetorical functionality with social change? It certainly ought to be. While definitions of “rhetoric” abound, the most familiar must be that furnished by Aristotle, describing rhetoric as an ability to find the means of persuasion in any given case, and implying that rhetoric’s very rationale is to facilitate the processes of social change. Further, in Book 1, Chapter 2 of the Rhetoric, Aristotle writes (here in George Kennedy’s translation) that “most of the matters with which judgments and examination are concerned can be other than they are, for people deliberate and examine what they are doing, and [human] actions are all of this kind” (Aristotle: On Rhetoric 42). Similarly, in Book 6 of the Nichomachean Ethics, as William McNeill explains, Aristotle portrays “the deliberative faculty” itself as that through which we engage “things that are variable” — not simply things that can “move,” but “things that in their very being can be otherwise than they are” (32).

Today, we are all the more inclined to view social relations as among these variable, contingent things, these things which, through deliberation and other forms of collective action, can be made otherwise than they are. In that case, it ought indeed to be possible conceptually to link rhetoric with social change, and even a project of demonstration along such lines ought to be as simple as showing, in more or less detail, how the former might, in fact, produce the latter.

However, many theorists have come to consider the Aristotelian view excessively instrumentalist, reducing rhetorical functionality to all the causal efficacy of, say, a slingshot. Indeed, some have discerned in this view a “primeval elitism” which ascribes to certain special speakers a resistless will to suasion, an ability to galvanize into action an audience that would otherwise remain inert (McGee 22). To be sure, not everybody within contemporary rhetorical studies has found the Aristotelian position so exceptional. It does, after all, situate the audience as “more than a target, more than a consumer,” indeed, as “a kind of collaborative agency for making ongoing judgments” (Farrell 96). Even so, rhetorical theory has developed several alternatives to this
perceived instrumentalism, each seeming to accord less and less agency to the human actors who would actually have to operationalize any genuine social change.

These alternatives have, in the long run, contested not only the Aristotelian view in particular, but all the rest of the “logic of influence” as well, this latter being the presumption that rhetoric would work in such a manner as to “modify attitudes or induce action on the part of consummate individuals” (Bieseker 232). So the successors to the Aristotelian view (which might well be called the cornerstone of the traditional view) have been to undermine not only the notion that rhetoric could simply express the will of the rhetor, but also the notion that rhetoric could simply stage-manage the thoughts and behaviors of subjects who are otherwise stable, fully-formed, and self-sufficient. The alternatives, however, have not abolished every last trace of instrumentalism, causality, or influence, for they have not left us with a vision of rhetoric as contributing nothing whatever. Instead, the alternatives, each of them in turn, have displaced the locus of effectivity in a new way.

Yes, the traditional perspective on rhetoric may have located all the effectivity in the purposiveness of speech, in the interested negotiation taking place between rhetor and audience. But in a perspective that succeeds it, where rhetoric is epistemic, speech is taken to be the intersubjective construction of meaning. Commentators might affirm, for example, that rhetoric can lead the interlocutors to an enhanced, negotiated understanding of their shared commitments (Scott 1976). Thus, whenever rhetoric is importantly epistemic, its effectivity belongs to the knowledge, or meaning, or understanding that is formed and transformed during rhetorical transaction (see Jasinski, 219–228, on the contributions of Brummett, Cherwitz, Croasmun, Farrell, Hikins, Leff, Scott, and others).

The view of rhetoric as epistemic, venerable as it may be, has often been overshadowed by a perspective on rhetoric as constitutive — as fabricating group identities for audiences to adopt simultaneously with all the rest of their interaction (see Jasinski, 106-108, on the influences and/or contributions of Althusser, Black, Burke, Charland, Farr, Mailloux, McGee, White, and others). So, where rhetoric is importantly constitutive, its effectivity lies not precisely in “meaning,” but, rather, in its capacity to generate the very frameworks within which sense-making becomes possible.

The constitutive rhetoric in turn has lent some theoretical heft to a critical rhetoric (see Jasinski, 116–125, primarily on McKerrow, but with some reference also to Cloud, Condit, Shome, Sloop and Ono, and others). The latter proceeds on the assumption that to reverse-engineer the fabrication of group identities must be to uncover the occluded social forces motivating the fabrication in the first place (McKerrow 1989; see also Greene’s rejoinder of 1998). From what we might call a critical-constitutive perspective, then, rhetoric’s effectivity belongs to the powerful interests that are operative in communication, so that speech is always interpellation, always the call or hailing through which “ideology” fulfills its function, that of constituting “concrete individuals as subjects” (Althusser 171).

Nevertheless, where rhetoric is constitutive, the emphasis falls on construction in general, not necessarily on manipulation in the service of discernible interests. As a result, even the “critical” rhetoric seems to have become absorbed, contained, and domesticated under a resurgence of the very constitutive rhetoric ostensibly providing its theoretical support. In any case, the constitutive rhetoric is by now all the more strongly shaped by postmodernist and poststructuralist visions according to which knowledge,
meaning, truth, understanding, ideology, and the like, are all effects generated through the workings of discourse itself.

Thus, in the resurgence of the constitutive, the locus of effectivity shifts once again. Rhetoric is no longer primarily the vocalization of any shared commitments, let alone among any mutually responsive individuals. But, by the same token, it’s no longer primarily an utterance betraying, as in silhouette, the aims of any ideology, either. After all, from a rigorously constitutive perspective, even interpellation becomes “disassociated from the figure of the voice,” appearing now as “the instrument and mechanism of discourse whose efficacy is irreducible to the moment of enunciation” (Butler, qtd. in Greene, 1998). Thus the constitutive rhetoric currently exercises its effectivity as the continuation of social construction by other-than-instrumentalist means, and, most of all, through the operations of signification, this latter construed as an almost autonomous suturing of the bits and pieces that build the status quo.

And with this resurgence of the constitutive, rhetoric becomes labeled productive and/or articulatory. The rhetorical theorists, distancing themselves from the “logic of influence,” move increasingly toward a “logic of articulation” (see Greene, 1998, citing — respectively — Biesecker, 1989; Cox, 1993; Grossberg, 1986, 1992; Greene, 1993; Hall, 1980, 1985, 1986; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). For, here in Lawrence Grossberg’s words, “articulation” itself is a form of constitutive production: the “production of identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices. Articulation links this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality” (qtd. in Greene, 1998, 34-35). Theorists such as Ronald Walter Greene can therefore view rhetoric not only as constitutive, productive, and/or articulatory, but also as joining forces with all the other moving parts required for the “governmental” construction—impersonal, quasi-mechanistic, but efficacious nonetheless — of the immediately-given social dispensation (Greene, 2009, 53).

However, even if there have been shifts in the characterization of the properly rhetorical mode, rhetorical effectivity is still located somewhere. Clearly, it’s not located exclusively at the instrumentalist site of a purposively-collaborative intentionality, or exclusively at the epistemic site of intra-collective knowledge, or exclusively at the constitutive site of interpellative expression and/or self-generating symbolization. Instead, rhetorical effectivity is today located at all of these sites, the lot of them bundled up into what at least some commentators might think of as a social totality.

When we reflect on these contemporary viewpoints on rhetorical functionality, all of which involve the (often occluded) assumption that rhetoric does retain its own effectivity, we see that they share an emphasis on rhetoric as productive, whether or not that label actually appears in their description. After all, when rhetoric is epistemic, it must be the production of precisely the sort of meaning, or understanding, or knowledge which (to the extent that it does support the enterprise of intersubjective agreement) holds forth the promise of a somehow emancipatory consensus. When rhetoric is critical-constitutive, it must be the dubious production, on the part of the usual suspects, of truth, identity, essence, status, and the like (for which reason it certainly requires interrogation, reverse-engineering, and disclosure as the ruse adopted by power). When rhetoric is constitutive, pure and simple, it’s the production, though no longer by anyone in particular, of social reality quite generally, and not only in the form of ideological mystification. And when rhetoric is articulatory, it’s still production, but this time by
means of the linkage and suturing required for the unreflecting construction of the status quo. But the point is that, so long as there’s rhetorical effectivity (so long as rhetoric is, indeed, productive), then it oughtn’t be difficult to find a theoretical justification for linking rhetoric with collective action, and then, in principle, with social change.

Unfortunately, under present circumstances, rhetoric is not only epistemic, duplicitous, constitutive, and articulatory, but also, as it appears, increasingly woven into the fabric of an autopoetic social logic, into a collective trajectory in which speakers and listeners are caught up, but over which they have precious little say. My own project, then, will be to help repopulate rhetorical transaction by uncovering precisely the sort of agency through which rhetoric would articulate with social change. Yet this contribution will be to lay out, perhaps in opposition to much of the rhetorical-theoretical common sense about such matters, a conceptual argument designed to unsettle and redirect our present notions as to the functionality of a “productive” rhetoric — notions evidently demarcating a trend to de-emphasize the role of any merely human actors. And the point of my diverging from the trend isn’t to bypass the study of agency as undertaken within recent rhetorical scholarship. Instead, it’s to rework the common sense in order to arrive at a solution.

Therefore, I should at least describe the problem which the solution is to engage. It’s that rhetorical scholarship has arrived at an impasse in which all the different conceptualizations of rhetorical agency, rather than reinforcing one another, are effectively undoing the agency they ought to be uncovering. The result is that not even the theorists of an epistemic, constitutive, productive, and/or articulatory rhetoric can, at present, offer a very cogent account of the manner in which rhetorical functionality would link with social change.

A Miscellaneously Self-Effacing Rhetorical Agency?

To explain rhetoric’s effectivity in keeping with accounts provided by contemporary theorists of rhetorical agency is actually quite challenging. Such theorists, it’s only fair to acknowledge, would object that, but of course, the whole purpose of their theorizing is to “reestablish the primacy of rhetorical agency,” the reestablishment of this primacy being prerequisite to any arguments about what rhetorical agency might then be able to accomplish (Gardner 203). So, to rescale the objection, to bring it down to size, I’ll emphasize that rhetorical theory has, at present, little conceptual wherewithal for reestablishing the primacy of rhetorical agency in the first place. Let me then provide a brief introduction to the lexicon, the idiom, in which contemporary theorists are tending to talk about agency in general, as well as to their manner of formulating the agency that would, in particular, be operative during rhetorical transaction. For the conceptual vocabulary in which rhetorical agency is currently theorized militates against the claim that there can be any agency proper to rhetoric to begin with.

To be sure, the question of rhetorical agency, which has recently emerged as a topic of some strenuous debate, brings to light the ways in which agency is conceptualized in a very wide range of disciplines. As an initial approximation, though, we can say that most rhetorical theorists would probably accept a definition of agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act,” especially in the context of “language” understood as “social action” (Ahearn 110, 112). They would also tend to agree that
rhetorical agency, in referring to “the capacity to act,” simultaneously refers to “the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one’s community” (Campbell 3). As one can imagine, the question of such agency must be significant indeed for rhetorical studies. The entire discipline presupposes the existence of some communicative power along just these lines, some factor which can be said to underlie rhetorical functionality, and which can then be investigated, delineated, critiqued, perhaps even inculcated.

Nevertheless, the notion of a peculiarly rhetorical agency has surfaced as something with an extensive pedigree, and yet as something alarming new as well. Perhaps this matter of “the currency of agency” does betoken a kind of emergency-situation in rhetorical studies, where agency, that otherwise taken-for-granted “capacity” or "competence," seems only just now, after all these millennia, to have started calling for a name and local habitation (Barnett 1; Campbell 3). That, certainly, is the implication when Sharon Crowley (2003) notes, and at this late date in the twenty-five hundred year old history of the discipline, that there may “simply” be “no point in our continuing to study rhetoric unless we are able to forge a notion of rhetorical agency that satisfies current scholarly assumptions about how language and human behavior work” (“Response” 1–2). Yes, but, as I will try to explain, the fly in the ointment is that most of the commentators on rhetorical agency, perhaps in their preoccupation with satisfying the currently scholarly assumptions, appear to be arriving at a conception so miscellaneous as to leave us all the more mystified as to how rhetorical transaction would work.

True, the rhetorical theorists aren’t very egregiously remiss in their efforts to forge the requisite notion. Researchers everywhere do find themselves bedeviled by “agency” as, in the words of Jean and John Conaroff, an “abstraction greatly underspecified, often misused,” and “much fetishized these days” (qtd. in Ahearn 5). Similarly, Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998) have described “the concept of agency” as “a source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought,” with various schools having “defended, attacked, buried, and resuscitated” this concept in “often contradictory and overlapping ways” (962). For them, “the term agency itself” has “all too seldom inspired systematic analysis, despite the long list of terms with which it has been associated: selfhood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity” — a list, incidentally, from which we can infer that, in the social sciences and humanities quite generally, “the term agency itself” has often been treated as all but interchangeable with the term subjectivity.

More recently, a 2005 reference work includes numerous references to agency in its contemporary sense, where the term often does connote people’s ability to alter the present dispensation. Here, agency is, so to speak, the active ingredient in action, as when Maureen McNeil explains that “nature” has long denoted “all matter that exists in the world without the intervention of human agency or activity” (Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris 236). We see, then, that “agency” is a term that can be used in more or less the same breath as “activity,” implying not only that “agency” is becoming an all-purpose label for whatever might explain action, but also that it is an indeterminate something that theorists will tend to adduce in accounting for change. Meanwhile, rhetorical theorists, too, are finding themselves having to conceptualize agency as an enigmatic something, only, this time, a something which would account for any changes that might somehow take place in connection with communicative interaction. Yet theorizing about agency
within rhetorical studies is still taking place in “ways” that are just as “contradictory and overlapping” as Emirbayer and Ann Mische noted, as far back as 1998, with respect to theorizing about agency within the social sciences and humanities more generally (962).

Citing works from Ahern (2001), Geisler (2004), O’Hair et al (2003), Turnbull (2004), Campbell (2005), and Koerber (2006), Amanda Young (2008) notes that while rhetorical agency is “key to rhetorical inquiry,” its definition looks to be inordinately “slippery and fluid” (227). Christine J. Gardner (2011) evidently concurs. She adds that even if rhetorical agency does somehow involve “the capacity to act,” recent scholars have defined “this slippery term,” rhetorical agency, in quite a “variety of ways” (203). The variety itself reflects an effort to rehabilitate rhetoric in the face of “a postmodern critique” that, decentering the subject as traditionally conceived, all but “reduces rhetors” to perfunctory “points of articulation” (Gardner 203). Thus, while rhetorical agency cannot, of course, any longer be defined as the province or possession of a sovereign subject, it can sometimes be defined as ideology (Gaonkar), sometimes as power (Blithefield; Brower), sometimes as responsibility (Geisler), sometimes — perhaps a bit disingenuously — as human potential (Gunn), sometimes as resource (Geisler), sometimes as performance (Lucaites), and sometimes as illusion (Condit; Gunn), all of these now considered equally acceptable descriptions (Gardner 203).

No wonder Amanda Young would take such care to emphasize that, when it comes to talk of rhetorical agency, “the challenge is not simply” to define it, but “to recognize it in context,” the implication being that each definition, in stipulating its own preferred context, can dictate which sorts of evidence may be admitted in the first place (228). But this must be why rhetorical agency is so slippery and fluid: it’s everything from the quintessentially ideological and the authentically responsible to the inherently performative — and, on top of all that, the merely illusory to boot. Remarkably enough, though — as Young further explains, drawing on pieces by Turnbull (2004), Young and Flower (2001), Flower (2003), Koerber (2006), O’Hair et al (2003), and Campbell (2005) — rhetorical agency has also managed to acquire certain “fundamental properties” (not to say that these would be the properties of autonomous individuals), and they include questioning, negotiation, choice, and evaluation (Young 228).

The conundrum, then, is that rhetorical agency is currently being conceptualized in a manner that precludes any reestablishment of its primacy, since this is evidently an agency whose own contents, ranging from “choice” to “ideology” — the very opposite of choice — must forever be undertaking a sort of mutual effacement. And to pursue this point a little further, if only for the sake of clarity, let’s consider what happens to rhetorical agency when, as under present-day theorizations, it’s conceptualized in terms not only of “ideology” but also of “choice.” For this amounts to theory’s giving with one hand while taking away with the other, as by devising a view in which rhetorical agency is indeterminately voluntaristic, but, then again, indeterminately deterministic, too.

**Rhetoricity Bound, Unbound, or What?**

If we could try to keep “ideology” and “choice” apart for just a heuristic moment, then “ideology” would refer to a framework (for our thought and action) which is, by and large, directive, justificatory, comprehensive or totalistic in tendency, and unconscious, whereas “choice,” by contrast, would refer to our ability willfully to opt out of any given
framework whatever, no matter how directive and totalistic the framework might be. But the definition of “ideology” contradicts the definition of “choice,” just as the definition of “choice” contradicts the definition of “ideology.” And even if choice really is a “fundamental property” of rhetorical agency, there’s no self-evident method for distinguishing between, on the one side, a determined, ideological modality of choice and, on the other side, an untrammeled, voluntaristic modality of choice (Young 228). The result, or so it would appear, is that a rhetorical agency in which “ideology” is theoretically sutured to “choice” must be next to useless, for the reason that it is too voluntaristic to be tenable, and yet too deterministic to make any difference.

To be sure, many would hew to the position that even ideology can’t be seamless, that it necessarily betrays internal fissures and inconsistencies. As Christian Lundberg (2009) asks, in rejoinder to Ronald Walter Greene, what about “failed interpellations,” and what about “impotence in the governing apparatus?” (183). But the question as to interpellative failure and/or managerial incompetence is still separate from the question as to choice. For choice, pure and simple, would be to choose against even successful and competent interpellations. Therefore “choice” remains tied to voluntarism, whereas “ideology” (successful, incompetent, or whatever) remains tied to determinism instead. At the same time, so long as rhetoricity is promiscuously distributed between an unworkable determinism and an improbable voluntarism, then to say that its agency equates to “human potential” is to say little about it at all (Gardner 203).

If we were in a position to recognize whether it’s the deterministically ideological that trumps the voluntaristically chosen, or whether it’s the other way around, then we would be able to decide, on that very basis, whether rhetorical transaction can make things otherwise than they are. But not only are we not in any such position, we are not even in a position to rule, other than by resorting to theoretical fiat, on the difference between the ideological and the chosen in the first place. For, on the one side, there’s the never-ending regress of the ideological, to which theorists can retreat whenever the question of voluntarism arises, and, on the other side, there’s the never-ending regress of the chosen, to which theorists can retreat whenever the question of determinism arises. And the only way out of either regress appears to be to make a willful declaration of faith, whether to the effect that, no, determinism trumps voluntarism, or to the effect that, no, voluntarism trumps determinism.

That this does appear to be the case, that the only current alternative does appear to be that between alternative regresses, is suggested when we look to the example of Marilyn Cooper, who, in “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted” (2011) tries quite explicitly to evade the one regress (where the determinism involves “subjectivity”), but who still ends up falling, if more covertly so, into the other (where the voluntarism involves “responsibility”).

Cooper notes that theorizations relying on the category of the subject are inevitably tied to theorizations presupposing the category of the object, with the question of agency soon degenerating into a debate as to which of the two categories the agent would actually belong. More specifically,

Any theory of agency that depends upon a notion of the subject is . . . hamstrung at the start, struggling with how to account for any action that is not either determined by or resistant to semiotic, social, political, and material others or orders. (Cooper 423)
So all of that, as Cooper suggests, is why Miller has to explain agency as a merely subjectivist “attribution made by another agent,” and “why Herndl and Licona can offer only an agent function” (i.e., a socially-determined role for a socially-determined subject to occupy), and why Rickert cannot envision any but “fleeting and provisional” means for “achieving resistance through subjective transformations,” and “also why Judith Butler’s performative notion of agency as repetition with a difference is in the end so unsatisfying,” considering that “the subject’s actions are inevitably structured by the very norms that it attempts to resist (423–424). Therefore, the only sensible move, according to Cooper, must be to defenestrate the opposition as such, recognizing that “a workable theory of agency requires the death not only of the modernist subject but of the whole notion of the subject” — in other words, even in its “poststructural, postmodern, and posthumanist” variations (423). And this would mean adopting a view, or so we can infer, in which the rhetorical agent, now construed neither as subject nor as object, would no longer be amenable to either voluntaristic or deterministic description.

But then, turning to “neurophenomenology” for an alternative to the “troublesome,” indeed unworkable “subject-object dyad,” Cooper explains that agency has, in any case, little to do with the hypothetical condition of the subject, and much more to do with the agent’s sense of responsibility (421, 424). True, viewing “agency as emergent from embodied processes that take place largely without the agent’s awareness may seem both commonsensical and trivial,” but this is simply “the way a person becomes who one is, and it provides the motivation for taking responsibility for one’s actions” (436). Now, that’s as may be, but there’s a question left hanging as to where the responsibility would ever come from, in order for anybody to go ahead and embrace it. Besides, who, if not a subject, could possibly care about the responsibility she had?

Yet the author has no cogent answer to such questions. She merely rehearses the beneficial consequences of responsibility, citing them from Bruno Latour’s Politics of Nature (2004), which affirms that responsibility, once it’s there, ensures that “all propositions, entities, voices, and stakeholders are heard in the deliberations that compose” the “collective” (Cooper 445). So, yes, that does sound about right: it’s important to be “responsible for oneself, for others, and for the common world we construct together” — and, true, rhetorical agency itself may be a “big responsibility” (Cooper 444–445). Yet we still don’t know, even when rhetorical agency is neurophenomenological, why responsibility should so decisively be trumping, say, normativity, other than on the basis of the theorist’s implicit declaration of faith.

Cooper’s essay of 2011 is then only another illustration of rhetorical theory’s current freedom to slalom between two equally ungrounded viewpoints: rhetorical agency operates primarily behind the agent’s back, and rhetorical agency remains primarily in the agent’s hands. Consequently, rhetorical transaction would appear, while remaining incapable of making any special difference to the present social dispensation, also to remain capable of making all the difference in the world. Thus we do find, in the endeavor to conceptualize rhetoric’s effectivity, a sort of collaborative misunderstanding, where the theorists of a more or less explicit determinism and the theorists of a more or less covert voluntarism are together building a rhetorical agency that is inherently vitiated, unworkable, perpetually effacing itself from within. To return to the analogy I’ve proposed at the beginning, where the present social dispensation might be like a disease, and rhetorical agency like a remedy, some of the theorists are positioning the
cure as a *bona fide* antidote (replete with choice, responsibility, voluntarism), others as a mere nostrum (the wishful invocation of “human potential”), and yet others as the (power-saturated, ideological, deterministic) exacerbation of the initial distemper.

As for the question of consensus, well, according to Christine J. Gardner and others (see, for example, Lundberg and Gunn’s provocative Ouija Board article of 2005, especially page 102), the very best that contemporary rhetorical theory has to offer in the way of a guiding heuristic, in the way of a statement that “captures the essence of the plurality of views,” must be Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s celebrated argument of 2005, an argument in which rhetorical agency is disclosed as promiscuous, protean, perverse, and even paradoxical (Gardner 203). Indeed, if research into agency is travel, then Campbell’s “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean” has become a must-see attraction in its own right, highlighted as such in a very substantive and sumptuous brochure titled *The Sage Handbook of Rhetorical Studies* (2009), edited by Lunsford, Wilson, and Eberly. That reference work begins with a series of “road-maps” for the student of rhetoric, one of them explaining exactly where to look for “Rhetorical Agents and Agency” (xxi–xxiv). Many individual studies are cited there, though in a manner so economical as to seem downright abstemious. It’s only in the case of Campbell’s text that the editors choose to include entire paragraphs, one after another. And this must be to leave no doubt that, no matter how many miscellaneous treatments there may be to choose from, Campbell’s “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean” is, for the foreseeable future, pretty much the last word on this slippery and fluid topic.

But if rhetorical agency can really be as miscellaneous as Campbell indicates, then it will have to be not only slippery and fluid but *homogeneous* as well. It will have to populate the black box of rhetorical transaction with, for example, “power” as indistinguishable from “illusion,” and “ideology” as coextensive with “choice,” all of these considerations inhering, precisely as theorized in contemporary rhetorical studies, in one and the same rhetorical agency. And any rhetorical agency conceptualized in this way will forever be canceling itself out. For, under a description of rhetorical agency as so interminably miscellaneous, whatever is (for example) authentically and voluntaristically progressive about rhetorical agency can, in theory, also prove to be, or else mutate into, whatever is treacherously and deterministically retrogressive about rhetorical agency. And then the problem — the problem for which my paper will be proposing a solution — becomes that, so long as rhetorical agency is all things to all rhetorical theorists, it’s just too plain fluid and promiscuous ever to help us establish any clear-cut connection between rhetorical functionality and genuine social change.

**Variegation**

We do seem presented with a conception of rhetorical agency as, on the one side, very, very complicated (for this is an agency that can collocate everything from hard-core power to solipsistic illusion) and yet, on the other side, inordinately single-minded (for this same sort of agency is not just sometimes but *always* slippery and fluid). Still, if the line of reasoning pursued by Campbell does remain helpful, then we should take quite seriously the possibilities it discloses. For it’s the internal structure of Campbell’s own argument (a structure which I’ll visit at more length in the next chapter) that suggests an expedient for simplifying the busyness, and yet for complicating the single-mindedness,
that attends the present-day theorization of rhetorical agency. The simplification might be
to correct the notion that agency is inexplicably various. And the complication might be
to correct the notion that agency is indifferently homogenous, that is, every bit as
“perverse” when it’s underwriting genuine social change as when it’s leaving things
substantially the same (Campbell 2, 14). For, even as “Agency: Protean and
Promiscuous” describes rhetorical agency as always undoing itself, it also describes
rhetorical agency as always proceeding from somewhere — and not just anywhere, but
from four sites in particular: the sites of what we can refer to as rhetorical subjectivity,
rhetorical conventionality, rhetorical transcendence, and rhetorical materiality.

In other words, right there in Campbell’s essay (as I’ll argue more fully in the
next chapter), we notice four main collectors into which it seems possible to distribute all
the otherwise miscellaneous features, characteristics and/or properties that theorists have
recently come to associate with rhetorical agency. For subjectivity might be a collector
for what writers such as Gaonkar would call the ideological, and for what writers such as
Condit or Gunn would call the illusory (Gardner 2011; Young 2008). Materiality
(whether referring to a pre-formed sort of materiality, or a performed sort of materiality,
or some other sort of materiality) might be a collector for whatever aspects of rhetorical
transaction involve an object-like exteriority (Young 2008). And then convention, or
conventionality, might be a collector for significations, discourses, social norms, mores,
shared values or anything else that would function as a “resource” tending to facilitate
“negotiation” (Gardner 2011; Young 2008). Finally, transcendence might be a collector
for “human potential,” understood in terms of “choice,” “questioning,” “evaluation,” and
“responsibility (Gardner 2011; Young 2008). For these latter references, to human
potential and so on, would then be references to the role that rhetoric can arguably play in
creating a better shared world for all the participants (Gardner 2011).

But to complicate rhetorical agency by folding it into four is not to suggest that
any particular feature, dimension, and/or property of rhetorical agency — such as
“power” — would belong, without question, in this, that, the other, or the next of the four
collectors (Gardner 203). To the contrary, such a feature, dimension, or property might
very well remain nomadic, capable of migrating among the sites of subjectivity,
conventionality, materiality, and transcendence. Yet the point is that to fold rhetorical
agency into four would still be to highlight the potential for an interactive, rather than an
internecine collaboration among its constituents. For while it’s merely self-defeating to
decide that rhetorical agency can be the stapling of “ideology” to “choice,” it does seem
workable to shift to a view of rhetorical agency as containing room enough for both
subjectivity and transcendence — if it’s understood that these, in remaining distinct and
separable, would remain irreducible to one another. Under such circumstances, rhetorical
agency might prove internally heterogeneous and yet parliamentary, as in Kenneth
Burke’s sense of the term, where all the participatory “sub-certainties,” none of them
either “precisely right” or “precisely wrong,” are equally “contributory” (Permanence
and Change 512, 513).

For now, though, we are left with a rhetorical agency so uniformly fluid, so
universally promiscuous, and so unanimously perverse as to constitute not a conversation
but a collective misprision. It’s a misapprehension in which the theorists of a voluntaristic
rhetorical agency and the theorists of a deterministic voluntarism are always talking past
one another, and always in a slaloming “monologue” that, leaving all the “sub-
certainties” precisely wrong, effectively reproduces “everything in its image” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 512). Thus some hypothetical eavesdropper, curious to know whether rhetorical transaction can conduce to any genuine social change, would hear (out of the left side of her headset) that it can’t, and also (out of the right side) that it can, and she would be left utterly nonplussed as to how rhetoricity could ever live up to its rationale, that of helping make things otherwise than they are.

My suggestion, then, is that, conceding rhetorical agency to be both deterministic and voluntaristic, we treat the concession itself, with the internal heterogeneity it actually bespeaks, as warrant for the claim that rhetorical agency is irreducible to any unitary substance, no matter how protean and promiscuous. For example, to return to the cautionary tale unwittingly furnished by Cooper’s essay of 2011, we should recognize the futility of attempting to theorize rhetorical agency without reinstating the category of the subject, since it’s none other than the subject who’d need to appreciate the prospects for exercising this agency, anyway. Yet even if we do continue referring to something like “subjectivity,” we can also try to keep the voluntarism and the determinism apart, instead of turning a blind eye as they theoretically merge together. We can acknowledge that rhetorical agency involves not only the rhetorical subjectivity, rhetorical conventionality, and rhetorical materiality that continually constitute things as they are, but also the rhetorical transcendence that continually makes things otherwise. Thus the hypothetical eavesdropper might begin to hear, out of both sides of her headset, that the productivity of rhetorical transaction is such as to conduce to genuine social change, regardless of rhetorical determinism, and regardless of rhetorical voluntarism as well.

**Chapter Plan**

The next chapter, which includes a selective, purposively focused, and yet critically oriented (rather than somehow impartial) literature review, sketches out a theoretical basis for maintaining that rhetorical studies already integrates resources for conceptualizing rhetorical subjectivity, rhetorical conventionality, rhetorical transcendence, and rhetorical materiality as equally contributive to rhetorical transaction. It shows that the four terms (which, in my view, refer to the four co-constituents of rhetorical agency) are not only adumbrated but also linked together, no matter how obliquely so, in “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean,” Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s important essay of 2005. Further, it introduces a conceptual argument for approaching the rhetorical forms of subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality as entirely separate considerations which, though related, are irreducible to one another. Finally, it suggests that, if rhetorical studies currently lacks a tenable conception of rhetorical transaction as conducing to genuine social change, then this may indeed be because it currently lacks a view of rhetorical agency as the dynamic, productive interaction among just those four constituents.

Chapter Three proposes not only the adoption of an assemblage-theoretical method for investigating rhetorical agency, but also the application of that method to certain materials from the case study provided by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (2005) herself. It’s a case study addressing the exemplary speech reportedly given by the African-American rhetorician Sojourner Truth, at a women’s rights convention of 1851. More
specifically, though, the chapter sets the stage for the argument to follow by engaging three inter-related purposes.

To begin with, that third chapter presents an approach for treating the rhetorical forms of subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality as if these are all being produced from within their own theoretical-and-practical assemblages, here referred to as the contemporary landscapes of rhetorical agency. Next, the chapter explains a methodological difficulty associated with the speech on which Campbell relies in developing her well-known generalizations about rhetorical agency, and it describes an informal schema for sidestepping the methodological difficulty. Thus it undertakes some investigative triangulation, or corroboration, to discover which features of the (hypothetical) Sojourner Truth speech can legitimately be theorized as playing any role in the agency of this rhetor, this exemplary practitioner whose activity is, by extension, to illustrate the workings of rhetorical agency more generally. Finally, the chapter previews the rest of the study, where the triangulated contents of the speech are read from the differential perspectives of each of the four contemporary landscapes — in other words, each of the four theoretical-and-practical assemblages implicated in the production of a four-folded, traveling rhetorical agency.

Chapters Four through Seven develop an argument for viewing rhetorical agency (or its four co-constituents) as stable enough to persist, but mutable enough to adapt. They investigate the hypothetical, though now triangulated Sojourner Truth speech as it would be received within each in turn of the four contemporary landscapes of rhetorical agency. These chapters show how the speech becomes a different speech, all depending on which theoretical-and-practical landscape it happens to be situated in at the time. But they also frame the selected rhetorical practitioner, Sojourner Truth, as in some ways reinforcing (reterritorializing), and in other ways unsettling, even transforming (deterritorializing) the landscapes through which she migrates, toting her speech around with her. In Chapters Four through Seven, then, the four co-constituents of rhetorical agency prove both persistent enough and yet adaptable enough to explain how rhetorical transaction would actually articulate with genuine social change.

Chapter Eight, the conclusion, gathering up the prospects disclosed by the investigation as a whole, proposes a tentative model for theorizing the sort of rhetorical agent that might be consistent with rhetorical agency conceived not as a promiscuous and protean substance, but, instead, as a traveling, four-folded dynamism.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

In my opening chapter, I’ve suggested that, today (even under circumstances where rhetoric is conceived as, in one way or another, “productive”), rhetorical agency is still being theorized as too protean to explain why rhetorical transaction should ever produce any alteration in the present social conditions. So I now undertake a highly selective review of the literature, focusing on exemplary, if often problematic treatments of what I do refer to as the four irreducible co-constituents of rhetorical agency. Pointing out the role played by four key terms — subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality — in an important essay from the rhetorical theorist Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (2005), I address certain of the conceptual distinctions among the terms themselves, arguing that to respect and reinforce these distinctions, rather than to condone their elision, can (by helping us recognize the internal heterogeneity at stake in the constitution of rhetorical agency) support the continued theoretical project of linking rhetorical transaction with genuine social change.

A Four-Folded Rhetorical Agency

Admittedly, “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean,” Campbell’s canonical essay of 2005, runs through so many considerations as to imply a quite possibly infinite number of features, or aspects, or dimensions of rhetorical agency. Yet the multiplicity resolves into just a few thematic clusters, the latter rendered coherent within a configuration, a gestalt. So rhetorical agency turns out, after all, to involve only four really different considerations, and these are what keep it together despite its internal differences.

For rhetorical agency involves a certain interiority, and this is the theme that Campbell addresses in her references to subjectivity, i.e., to the private, though socially-framed “condition” of the agent construed as a thinker and perceiver, and not only as a producer and/or recipient of communication (3). But agency also involves a certain exteriority, and this must have to do with what is often called the materiality of the actually-existing world — including, of course, the human corporeality which acquires “identities related to gender, race, class, and the like.” That’s not all there is to the sense in which agency is implicated in a reality external to subjectivity. Someplace beyond the rhetorical agent is a system of (obviously public) communicative resources, referring, on the one side, to structures of “institutional power” and, on the other side, to structures of symbolism, linguisticality, invention, artistry, and so on (“Agency” 1). These collective resources all point to the externality of convention. Nevertheless, not even the subjective, the material, and the conventional put together are enough to account for rhetorical agency proper. There must also be a place or moment for that certain slippage through which rhetoric, as abstract, symbolic action comes to participate in concrete, historical action as well. The label that Campbell adopts for this slippage is transcendence — a term which must refer to rhetoric’s role in creating change, and emancipatory change, at that (8).

So I’m discovering the notions of rhetorical subjectivity, rhetorical conventionality, rhetorical transcendence, and rhetorical materiality to be adumbrated, and linked, in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s own “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean” (2005). Yet it’s not as if Campbell is the only theorist to have engaged these four terms,
or to have highlighted their association with rhetorical functionality. It’s just that she’s the only theorist to have so noticeably gathered all four of the terms into the one place, at least implicitly acknowledging their inter-articulation within the very constitution of rhetorical agency. While each of the four terms adduced above might be employed to cover an array of more technical meanings, we should at least address their baseline usages. And we should do so in the interest of keeping the denotations apart, of protecting them from dissolution into one another. For if we inspect the concepts at stake in the terms “subjectivity,” “conventionality,” “transcendence,” and “materiality,” we find that these are not, in fact, synonymous, but clearly distinct.

The term “subjectivity” does gather up the conditions, properties, and qualities, the constructs and perceptions, belonging to the mind, rather than to whatever might lie beyond the mind. Certainly, there are philosophical disagreements as to the constitution of this interiority, which might today be conceptualized either as the sovereign subjectivity held to have proliferated during modernism, starting circa 1650, or else as the subjected subjectivity held to have entered the scene with postmodernism and poststructuralism, or even as the ambiguous subjectivity (held to be socially-constrained in some ways but left free in others) posited in existentialist, phenomenological, and hermeneutic visions of the self. But those disagreements don’t impinge upon the basic distinction between interiority and everything else.

It’s conceivable that there might be nothing lying beyond the mind. Yet there does remain a counter-conception, and this is to argue that, lying beyond the mind is something at least external enough to matter. For the counter-conception refers to an outer rather than an interior reality, to a world whose spatiotemporal features, certainly including those of our corporeality (in some ways resistant, and in some other ways malleable) are such that we are routinely required to engage them in a manner other than by merely thinking about them. Thus the term “materiality” refers to the spatiotemporal features of an external reality conceived as lying someplace beyond even our own minds. It might very well be that materiality itself is a production on the part of human interiority, but this wouldn’t be a particularly disabling truth, not automatically so, since (again) we engage the features of the outside world exactly as if they do exist beyond us.

At the same time, it’s evident that the spatiotemporal features of the external, outside world include the other people, just as it’s evident that we ourselves, regardless of how much interiority, how much subjectivity we may have to our credit, do not interact either with the spatiotemporal features in general, or with the other people in particular, on an exclusively ad hoc, let alone arbitrary basis. To the contrary, we routinely collaborate, and in a regularized rather than chaotic manner, with these disparate components of the outer, external world. But the various means for collaboration available to us (ranging all the way from the grammatical resources upholding our capacity for predication, to the guidelines we adopt in our engagement with others — and not only with human others) are not, in fact, synonymous with our subjectivity, nor are they synonymous with any features of the outside world. Instead, they highlight the always-revisable relationships, the bridges, between the interior and its counterpart.

This latter point is worth elaborating for the reason that, with the entrance into contemporary theorizing of a Nietzschean hermeneutics of suspicion (see not only Ricoeur, 1970, but, rather more sardonically, Greene, 1998), every conventionalized “truth,” and about anything from the workings of communicative reference to the
workings of sociality as such, seems unmasked as a sort of collective imposture, albeit an imposture “binding for all” (Nietzsche 146). Certainly, as Nietzsche does emphasize, an important consideration with regard to lying that it leaves the liar vulnerable to the same risk as just anyone bypassing the “established conventions,” this being the risk of embarrassment upon exposure (143). But to concede that point is still not to concede that all of conventionality is only imposture.

We don’t, for example, view conventional medicine, or conventional mortgages, or conventional welding techniques, or conventional religion, or conventional warfare as if these are as meaningless, as empty as is the conventional wisdom. Instead, we classify them with *practices*, which are not synonymous with any “established” proprieties. For practices can often be included among the efficacious, if not necessarily the optimal ways of (as we say) getting things done. So convention, as in the conventionality of practice, remains halfway between the negotiated and the ineluctable. To the extent that it’s revisable, convention may seem arbitrary. But to the extent that it’s *practicable*, then it can’t be so arbitrary, after all, for it’s the interface between people and a world not built entirely to their specifications.

It does seem that collaboration can take place only with the aid of a shareable repertory for making connections, for mediating between interiority and exteriority. So the term “convention” must refer neither to a unidirectional constraint imposed, as by an autonomous subject, upon the merely hapless world, nor, of course, to a unidirectional constraint imposed, as by an autonomous world, upon the merely hapless subject. Instead, in describing the collectively adoptable means for interaction, convention refers to those variable *styles* of linkage connecting whatever lies within our interiority to whatever lies outside it.

Already, we can see that subjectivity, materiality, and conventionality are three entirely unassimilable considerations. If there were only subjectivity, then we wouldn’t interact with anything beyond our own minds, in which case we wouldn’t be so preoccupied with the very concept of materiality — the concept attaching to things and objects and corporealities. On the other hand, if there were only materiality, then we wouldn’t be preoccupied with any concepts at all. So, just as the concept of subjectivity argues that there’s materiality, the concept of materiality in turn argues that there’s subjectivity, and neither of the concepts is optional. Meanwhile, if there’s subjectivity on the one side and materiality on the other, and if the two sides have to be linked in a regularized, non-arbitrary manner, then the concept of convention isn’t optional, either. Instead, the terms “subjectivity,” “materiality,” and “conventionality” are equally mandatory, and this is for the reason that each of the three terms has to remain separable from its others in order actually to connect them.

But when it comes to the concept of “transcendence,” we discover that it cannot be contained by or subsumed under the three, equally mandatory terms that we’ve considered so far. The transcendent is always conceived as that which *exceeds* any ordinary limits, whether of subjectivity, of materiality, of conventionality, or even of all three put together. In a quite common usage, of course, transcendence might refer simply to excellence — to a certain going beyond, albeit pretty far beyond, all predictable expectations. But transcendence might also describe the shift from contradiction or opposition to dialectical resolution; or the shift from aggregation to mereology (such that parts are then related to wholes, and vice versa); or the shift from quantity to quality. The
most important consideration, then, seems to be that “transcendence” always signifies a radical departure, and a desirable departure at that, from whatever there already is. So that we do have this concept, this term for exceeding ordinary limits, argues that transcendence cannot be coterminous with subjectivity, or with materiality, or with conventionality, or even with their collocation, but must, instead, be different from all three. Therefore “transcendence” is exactly as mandatory as “subjectivity,” “materiality,” and “conventionality,” regardless that it’s exactly other to them as well.

Of course the four terms, the four concepts, are related. For subjectivity, materiality, and conventionality are related in that they’re linked to one another, and then transcendence is related to those three in that it exceeds their ordinary limits. Yet the four concepts are related not through some inherent sameness, but, to the contrary, through an irreducible difference. It’s a difference marking, on the one side, the otherness intervening among subjectivity, materiality, and conventionality, and, on the other side, the otherness of change itself. For if alteration can at all be transformative, rather than always recuperative, then change is construed as exceeding, even revolutionizing, the ordinary constitution of everything as it currently is.

At this stage, we can say (along the lines developed by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell) that rhetorical agency, at least in any transaction worth noting, always involves some subjectivity, some conventionality, some materiality, and some transcendence, and we can even add (along the lines developed by me) that these four terms — which, when considered as operative during rhetorical transaction, become the four constituents of rhetorical agency — are distinct, mandatory, irreducible, and folded together. In fact, we can say that these are so disparate and concomitant as to be axiomatic for rhetorical agency (almost as if they’re given, self-evident, and unquestionable). So rhetorical transaction must be bound up with all four of the constituents simultaneously, i.e., with (a) the interiority of speakers and listeners, (b) the exteriority of the world they share, (c) the means of linkage available for connecting the interiority with the interiority, and (d) rhetoric’s ability to help make things otherwise. And we can use this axiomaticity to help us protect the four constituents of rhetorical agency from dissolution into one another. For if rhetorical agency is the folding-together of all four constituents, and if each is conceptually different from the rest, then all four of them do have to play a part in the rhetorical agency being theorized.

But, having highlighted the senses in which the four co-constituents of rhetorical agency should be considered not only distinct but also mandatory, I’d like to explore a little more fully the sense in which they should be considered irreducible. For, come to think of it, this cannot be that each is simply given. After all, rhetorical subjectivity would refer to the interiority of the rhetorical agent, and yet it doesn’t seem that the interiority attributable to speakers and listeners at the time of, say, Aristotle, or of the mid-sixteenth century logician Peter Ramus, or of the enlightenment-era rhetorician Richard Whately should be considered identical with the interiority attributable to the rhetorical theorists and/or practitioners of today. But what goes for rhetorical subjectivity goes for the other three terms as well: neither rhetorical conventionality, nor rhetorical transcendence, nor yet rhetorical materiality can very well have stood still during the very long stretch between the ancients, the moderns, and us. Instead, each must continuously have become other than itself — while remaining itself, anyway.
If the four constituents of rhetorical agency do remain conceptually irreducible, then their irreducibility, so far as concerns their manifestation in rhetorical transaction, ought to be a proleptic, forward-looking, rather than an analeptic, backward-glancing sort of irreducibility. They ought to be irreducible in the sense that they’re processual, emergent, produced. For that reason, it does seem worth looking into the possibility that a “productive” rhetoric, whether conceived as epistemic, constitutive, articulatory, or something else, might in fact be producing the co-constituents of rhetorical agency themselves. In the next section, though, we’ll see that, while rhetorical studies often addresses rhetorical subjectivity, rhetorical conventionality, rhetorical transcendence, and rhetorical materiality, commentators don’t seem at all to have considered that these might be irreducible along the lines suggested here.

**Duly Tetradic Diligence**

Rhetorical transcendence as *responsibility, conscience, or questioning*, has been theorized, respectively, by Schrag (1997), Hyde (1994), and Turnbull (2004). It’s also invoked by Georges Gusdorf (1965), by Ernesto Grassi (1980), and Hans Blumenberg (1987), all of whom locate transcendence in *language*, and who find it manifested, as Grassi says, in our anxious, ceaseless, and indeed revolutionary “concern” with “the formation of “human existence” (113). Gusdorf, for instance, writes that “the human word” bespeaks, in service of “the establishment of man,” an “overturning of the conditions of existence” — that it bespeaks “a breaking-up of the situation . . . an escape from the constraint of the present in order to take up” a more forward-looking, if also extremely difficult, “position in the security of distance and absence” (7, 9). Further, communicative transcendence (as a transition from mere sameness or recuperation to genuine otherness and change) is central in the work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1961), to which certain of the more rhetorically-inclined writers on transcendence, notably Calvin O. Schrag, have turned for support.

This line of reasoning, consistent with a more or less unreconstructed view of rhetoric as epistemic, as operating inter-subjectively, may not be ubiquitous within rhetorical studies, but it’s obviously available, and it does parallel developments in other fields as well. The philosopher and social theorist Lewis R. Gordon suggests that transcendence is implicated even in *theorizing* about agency. For in “African-American Philosophy, Race, and the Geography of Reason” (2006), he affirms that, regardless of our social, cultural, and ideational positioning, we do remain capable of “teleological suspension” (34). Thus, just as “faith transcends” even “the universal,” a certain theoretical *counterpart* to faith can underwrite our non-reductive critiques and conversations, validating our credence in a transcendent human potential. In short, the case for rhetorical transcendence is at least strong enough not to be brushed aside as trivial. And this is just as it should be, considering that rhetoric, for well over two thousand years, has always been conceived as a resource through which human actors can make things otherwise.

We might not, as yet, have all that much in the way of support for the claim that rhetorical transcendence must be an irreducible, as well as a mandatory participant in any transaction involving rhetorical agency. It’s just that, if rhetorical transcendence were *not* irreducible in this way, then we would lack any rationale for maintaining that rhetorical
transaction can continually (i.e., on an ongoing basis, and not only just for now) make things otherwise than they are. And it does seem that, to be conceptualized as irreducible, rhetorical transcendence ought actually be conceptualized as emergent, and, what’s more, as arising in keeping with, rather than somehow autonomously from, whatever presently-given realities may require transcending to begin with.

Meanwhile, rhetorical conventionality has been addressed, for instance, by Sharon Crowley (2003), who seems representative of theorists struggling, under a view of rhetoric as constitutive, to reconcile the concept of agency with the concept of convention, which here would be construed most of all in terms of normativity (see also Barnett, 2005). Crowley argues that, if there’s a hypothetical “spectrum” of agency, then theorizing in the “rhetoricity range of the spectrum” is quite demonstrably concerned with the “little agency” perspective (3). There, all the way to the left of the spectrum, the agent is seen, for reasons of “linguistic determinism,” as accessing agency only to the extent prepared for by language. By contrast, theorizing in fields more or less sympathetic to “biologism” is placed all the way to the right, at the “big agency” end of the spectrum.

To be sure, Crowley herself notices (and encourages) the trend in which rhetorical theorists are beginning to shift just a little “rightward,” a little more toward the center (6). However, what she means by the shift toward the center is the shift toward the positions of, as she specifies, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, and Judith Butler. And, as a matter of fact, all of these theorists (with perhaps the exception of Bourdieu, albeit with the addition of Michel Foucault) have, since the time of Crowley’s essay, become increasingly influential upon rhetorical theory, where rhetoric is epistemic only to a limited extent, much less so than it is constitutive, productive, and/or articulatory.

Thus the shift toward the center that Crowley describes in 2003 is further witnessed in the Biesecker and Lucaites collection of 2009, highlighted both in the latter’s disparate inclusions, and in the editors’ introduction as well. For ideas from Lacan, Derrida, and Butler do appear quite often in this volume as a contribution to the present debate over rhetorical functionality. Nevertheless, for writers such as Crowley, and for most of those whom she cites with such approval, language, or speech, or rhetoric, is nothing if not normative, so that theorizing within Crowley’s “rhetoricity range of the spectrum” would not appear particularly helpful for our understanding conventionality as conducive to social change.

After all, in a rhetorical-theoretical adaptation of Lacan from 2009, even those communicative interactions that betray the work of the unconscious, to say nothing of the more routine exchanges necessary for upholding the status quo, can prove to be no more than the rearrangement and redeployment of “all the possible” linguistic devices “potentially inhering in a signifier” by way of past and present usage (Lundberg, “On Missed Encounters,” 171). And, in a rhetorical-theoretical adaptation of Bourdieu, rhetorical conventionality can equate to habituated action, as in the title for Dana Anderson’s essay of 2004. We might, incidentally, compare this viewpoint to that of Carolyn Miller (2007), who can write of rhetorical agency — or, more specifically, of “attributions of agency” — as relying on those “prefabricated conventions, ideologically imposed or culturally given,” which demarcate the “habitual or imposed patterns of attributions that rhetor or audience is prepared to make” (151). And then, in a 2009 rhetorical-theoretical adaptation of Butler and Foucault (together with Althusser),
rhetorical conventionality can take the form of “interpellation” as “a general process of all discourse,” expressed in “repetitive citationality,” and generated in the very “communication skills” by which by a presently-operative “governing apparatus” articulates itself “to the problems associated with the speaking subject” (Greene, “Rhetorical Materialism,” 47, 55, 57). Thus, under the current trajectory, rhetorical conventionality doesn’t evoke any unpredictable emergence, implying only the reinforcement of the practices that are always already there.

Yet we should not overlook that Derrida, too, is somewhere near the center of Crowley’s hypothetical or heuristic spectrum of agency, and that his concept of différence — with “its difference and its deferral” — can also apply to rhetorical conventionality (Rufo 236). Thus we’re not, after all, limited to construing this rhetorical form of conventionality as stable. Instead, we can think of it, first, as betokening the revisable linkages between interiority and exteriority and, second, as having a future, and not only a past and a present. We can view it as irreducible to the sort of citation that merely reiterates, reinforces, reproduces the status quo. In this way, rhetorical conventionality might be seen as a mutable, emergent resource, supporting rhetorical transaction not by remaining static, but, to the contrary, by remaining redirectable.

Rhetorical subjectivity is featured prominently in the literature of rhetorical agency, for many writers, hewing to an understanding of rhetoricity as constitutive, actually treat rhetorical subjectivity as coextensive with rhetorical agency. Thus rhetorical subjectivity becomes an issue in works by Kirkwood (2005) and by Foss, Waters, and Armada (2007), where rhetorical agency itself is described as the capacity for imaginative ideation, for (re)interpretation. Similarly, Lundberg and Gunn suggest there should no longer be any rhetorical action other than in meaning. In their clever “Ouija Board” essay of 2005, the authors ask, “If as subjects we are interpellated by ideology to invest in our own unhappiness, who is responsible?” (94). But the point isn’t to try answering; it’s to become “agnostic” enough to make a “decisive analytic cut” between “agency, understood as the production of effect or action, and the agent as the presumed origin of effect or action, which can be a subject, language, ideology, perhaps even a spirit” (85, 88). The authors add, "Because addressing the question of rhetorical agency solely in terms of 'agent' and 'agency' implies that material change is . . . reducible to the action of the agent, we prefer refiguring the question in terms of subjectivity and effect" (88). They are implying, remarkably, that it is somehow not reductive to account for “material change” by populating subjectivity with whatever effects impinge upon it from who knows where.

Other investigators, referring to the “agent” as synonymous with the “subject,” seem especially concerned with framing agency as a positioning, emphatically not a possession, of the subject. Thus the very notion of "positioning" may be a backlash against the imputation that the rhetorical agent might be the modernist, sovereign, or self-sufficient subject, also known, in the literature, as the individual (Geisler, 2005; Winsor 2006; Herndl and Licona (2007).

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (2005) is, in fact, adamant on maintaining a separation between the contemporary subject-agent and its modernist precursor. “What needs to be resisted,” she affirms, “is a simplistic, humanistic view of agency rooted in the theory of George Campbell and his contemporaries” (16). But what is so simplistic about George Campbell? As Joel Weinsheimer explains, that particular writer by now represents
something of the embodiment of “the epistemological individualism fundamental to philosophy of knowledge from Descartes to Kant” (142). So it appears that the imperative for theorists of rhetorical agency has been to find an alternative “epistemological” reckoning, an upgraded philosophy of knowledge, for the rhetorical agent, and this must then be with regard to the agent’s rhetorical subjectivity.

Certainly, Richard Scot Barnett (2005) proceeds as if we cannot even investigate rhetorical agency without first demolishing the modernist subject. We need to know that “in place of rationalism’s coherent and unified individual,” poststructuralism “positions a constituted subject” whose “will to act” is "conditioned and constrained by ideological discourses that serve to shape behaviors and identities so that they are congruent with the specific subject positions called for by constitutive discourses” (1). We hear very often such death-chants for the modernist minotaur. Illustrations appear in Campbell (2005: 2), in Leff and Lunsford (2004: 62), in Herndl and in Wells (both cited in Geisler, 2004, 10), and in Herndl and Licona (2007) for whom, even after the “widely accepted poststructuralist critique of the individual,” theory is still polluted by “the vestiges of humanist models of action” (140). Lundberg and Gunn (2005), and, for that matter, Gunn by himself (in two essays from 2004, and another from 2006), deserve special mention for their diligence in discovering so many synonyms and hiding places for this yeti of cerebration, every last trace of which must be eradicated until nothing can remain to taint whatever might emerge, no matter how indeterminate, to function as its successor.

Further, James Jasinski (2001) writes that “the anti-humanist attack on the autonomous individual” (and the prospective replacement of the latter with “the decentered subject”) is taken by some thinkers also to entail nothing less than “an attack on the possibility for human action” (564). So it’s as if even the notion of social change has to be bracketed until this business about the subject can somehow be squared away. For now, though, there is little consensus — not among the theorists of rhetorical subjectivity — as to how to think of the subject as such, and theorizing often gravitates to the perhaps more manageable topic of the subject’s positioning. In positionalist reasoning about rhetorical subjectivity, agency becomes a socially-invented, socially-maintained, and socially-policed force field for subjects to navigate. It’s a train of thought evidently to be associated with a viewpoint on rhetoric as constitutive, as implied in Richard Scot Barnett’s (2005) explanation, based on an argument from Bradford Vivian, that, although “brought into being by discourse, the agent retains the capacity to shift among positions, to ignore some positions altogether, or to inhabit several positions at once” (7). Similarly, Cheryl Geisler (2005) does ask us to think of agents as those who “occupy subject positions strategically fragmented to get work done” — as if agency would accrue to a mental hop-scotching across fissures in the social (“Teaching” 108).

A fuller treatment than Geisler’s comes from “Rhetorical Maneuvers: Subjectivity, Power, and Resistance” (2006), where Kendall R. Phillips proposes a tactic of resistance-in-identification, a reconfiguration of one’s subject position in relation to that of the audience. The idea is that the speaker can opt to highlight only those, rather than those, aspects of her socially-constrained identity, with the result that she makes her own interests seem more palatable to an interlocutor otherwise inclined to reject them on the grounds of their difference. Yet, in a locution bringing to mind that particular game of physical contortion requiring we place one hand here, one foot there, on a playing surface
of very large, brightly colored dots, Phillips writes, not that articulation becomes, say, the creation of connection across difference, but, rather, that “the performance of this reconfiguring entails a kind of turning or twisting of one’s self against the defined contours of one’s position” (“Rhetorical” 326). In this way, Phillips, with his spatially-oriented rhetorical maneuver — the latter staged as an asymptotic reaching toward the boundaries of one’s allocated slot within the collectivity — seems quite as representative as do Barnett and Geisler of that contemporary trend in which rhetorical subjectivity is construed as a (re)positioning within a pre-constituted social space, the trend which William C. Trapani has now illustrated so copiously, and critiqued so heavily, in his “Materiality’s Time” (2009).

Clearly, theorists do remain preoccupied with the question of rhetorical subjectivity, just as is emphasized in Marilyn M. Cooper’s “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted” (2011). There, in a section titled “Death to the Subject,” Cooper expresses, let’s say, grave misgivings about a number of recent subject-assassinating treatments, which, for her, actually reinstate the subject-object binarism they ought to be defenestrating. Therefore, when Cooper observes that “Reports of the death of the subject seem to be premature,” what she means is that, in contemporary rhetorical studies, the subject isn’t anywhere near dead enough (though, as I’ve noted earlier, it’s Cooper herself, with her covert voluntarism, who demonstrates for us the futility of attempting to kill off the subject, anyway).

There is, in the literature, quite an emphasis on theorizing rhetorical subjectivity as part of theorizing rhetorical agency. But we are not left with an impression of rhetorical subjectivity as irreducible, at least not in the sense I’ve been developing above. For, as the discussion provided by William C. Trapani (2009) implies, the trend in rhetorical studies has been to frame the agent’s interiority as quite fully circumscribed within social space, such that communication can, at best, shift the agent from one more or less pre-scripted subject position to another. What’s lacking, then, is indeed a view of rhetorical subjectivity as irreducible, and not in the sense that it’s inevitable, but, rather, in the sense that it’s unpredictably emergent.

Finally, rhetorical materiality is explicitly featured in *Rhetoric, Materiality and Politics* (2009), co-edited by Biesecker and Lucaites. Of course, the writers featured there, while tending to hew to the position(s) that rhetoric is constitutive, productive, and/or articulatory, do offer up some very disparate visions as to what should count as rhetorical materiality. Yet most of these are not accounts helping us understand how rhetorical materiality might be simultaneously emergent and irreducible. They turn out to favor either a “material rhetoric,” where materiality implies only the tangible means by which signs and discourses are circulated, or else a “rhetorical materialism,” where materiality implies only rhetoric’s absorption into the general dispensation of things (Greene, “Rhetorical Materialism,” 49). Incidentally, Greene does provide a listing of earlier examples of the material rhetoric (44, 61-62), while Lundberg more fully describes the premises attaching to the two versions of the “materiality of rhetoric thesis” mentioned above (162)

Still, some of the sources collected in Biesecker and Lucaites also exemplify the (slightly faded) material rhetoric. John Sloop, although writing about physical objects — automobiles — indicates that rhetorical materiality inheres not in the objects themselves, but, rather, in the narratives sutured to them, just as Joan Faber McAlister, in writing
about the panoptic suburb, indicates that rhetorical materiality inheres not in the
physicality of the buildings but in the (largely reactionary) “material aesthetic” adopted
and promoted by their designers (101). Writers such as Gronbeck, Morris, Showalter,
Giner, and even Rufo (who, like Trapani, draws on insights from Derrida) explain that
rhetorical materiality bespeaks the materiality of mediation, simultaneously reinforcing
and unsettling the symbolizations it conveys. Yet this material rhetoric does seem to
reduce rhetorical materiality to a support system for the management of just those signs
and discourses that are already salient.

Other sources in the Biesecker and Lucaites collection, by contrast, illustrate the
increasingly valorized “rhetorical materialism.” McGee, in an essay first published in
1982, describes rhetoric’s material dimension as involving the social relationships that
rhetoric not only inherits but also anticipates, that is, through its creation of “predictive”
models (36). Additional contributors offer an upgraded version of this position by
focusing on the discourse that makes the social relationships and predictive models
possible in the first place. Christian Lundberg argues that rhetorical materiality is
manifested in the very process of signification, that it betrays the work of an unconscious
impulse, which, according to Lacanian theory, underlies the use of tropes more generally,
whether these involve the familiar linguistic devices of the present, or else the occluded
linguistic devices left over from the past. And William C. Trapani suggests that adopting
a Derridean perspective on temporality can help rhetorical theorists see that even pre-
established discourses establish new opportunities for invention. Meanwhile, Dana Cloud
portrays a more or less traditional dialectical materialism as providing the requisite
viewpoint on rhetorical materiality, that is, by registering those “objective class
relationships” which can, at kairotic moments, be transformed through the inculcation of
a revolutionary class consciousness (297). Yet such treatments still imply that, in this
“rhetorical materialism,” it’s actually subjectivity (betokened by the social logic that must
be at work in the predictive model, the linguistic device, the salient set of significations,
the revolutionary consciousness) that always comes first, with materiality simply falling
into subjectivity’s service.

Indeed, the Biesecker and Lucaites collection shows that rhetorical subjectivity
and rhetorical materiality have not only been addressed in the literature, they have
sometimes been addressed in the very same breath, as we see in the inclusion from
Ronald Walter Greene. There, rhetorical subjectivity becomes no less than an output of
rhetorical materiality, as when the “rhetorical subject” is collectively “formed” by
“productive apparatuses” — as if unintentionally, autopoetically so, and yet somehow in
order to “generate” the sorts of “cultural, political, and economic value” required for
maintaining the present dispensation (60-61). So at least Ronald Walter Greene is
recognizing rhetorical subjectivity as, in some sense, produced — though, even on his
account, it would appear that a constrained, interpellated subjectivity is again coming
first, and then (ineluctably) generating exactly the material means necessary for
perpetuating itself.

At the same time, the Greene essay might stand as representative of a movement
to theorize rhetorical materiality not in conjunction with, but, rather, in diremption from
the study of rhetorical agency. For, if we were to consult the index to Biesecker and
Lucaites (to a volume which includes thirteen separate contributions on rhetoric’s
materiality, plus an overall introduction), we would find that the term “rhetorical agency”
is referenced only five times, i.e., seven times fewer than the currently unpopular term “persuasion.” Thus Greene himself, the author of "Rhetoric and Capitalism: Rhetorical Agency as Communicative Labor" (2004), now seems loath to mention rhetorical agency at all. These days, his term for the entity known elsewhere as the rhetorical agent is the “rhetorical subject,” and this is apparently to highlight a trend in which rhetorical materiality is being construed as external to rhetorical agency (and the latter itself as synonymous with subjectivity).

As we can see, rhetorical theorists, whether viewing rhetoric as epistemic, constitutive, productive, articulatory, or some combination of these, have certainly recognized the importance, in rhetorical transaction, of subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality. So what I’ve called the four constituents of rhetorical agency are already in place — already in the literature. Yet their general recognition hasn’t, on balance, proven so helpful for our understanding how rhetorical transaction would ever conduce to social change. And this may well be because the various sorts of theorists haven’t often approached the four terms as equally, and separately, and particularly salient, let alone as traveling together in a four-folded, internally heterogeneous dynamism. Instead they appear more often to have understood the four constituents of rhetorical agency only to be mingling indiscriminately among all the other multifarious features or characteristics of rhetorical transaction.

Disaggregating the Co-Constituents of Rhetorical Agency

So, yes, everyone knows there’s something subjective, and conventional, and transcendent, and material about rhetorical agency. But the specialists have moved on to add, for instance, that that there’s something duplicitously ideological, and something purely illusory, and something fundamentally authentic about rhetorical agency, as well (see Gardner, 2011). Rhetorical theory, as if confident that the subjective, and/or the conventional, and/or the transcendent, and/or the material can hardly help but come along for the ride, has already turned its attention to whatever else — predictive models, kairotic fissures in social structure, neurophenomenological affordances, and so on — appears to be involved, and all the more interestingly so, in the workings of rhetorical transaction (see, respectively, McGee, 1982; Herndl and Licona, 2007, and Cloud, 2009; Cooper 2011).

But researchers have yet to consider that the four co-constituents of rhetorical agency ought, theoretically, to be kept apart. That may be why the inter-subjective transcendence theorized by Schrag, Hyde, Turnbull (as responsibility, conscience, questioning) seems so difficult to pry free from the subject-building conventionality theorized by Crowley. That, too, may be why the materialized subjectivity theorized by Greene simply morphs into the subjectivizing materiality also theorized by Greene. And a failure to keep the four terms apart might explain why rhetorical agency now seems too locally various (i.e., self-contradictory) and yet too globally singular (i.e., seamlessly fluid) ever to manifest its own efficacy, in other words, ever to articulate in any intelligible manner with social change. After all, theory hasn’t even clarified why the four constituents folded together in rhetorical transaction wouldn’t be synonymous.

For example, even if rhetorical agency does have certain “fundamental properties” (questioning, negotiation, choice, evaluation), and even if these ought actually
to be among the indicators of transcendence, they are currently arraying themselves not under the purview of transcendence, but, instead, under the purview of subjectivity, and/or conventionality, and/or materiality (Young 228). That’s as implied in the theoretical trajectory where rhetoric’s transcendent capacity for critiquing, contesting, and transforming the present dispensation can seem quite thoroughly domesticated under the constitutive and/or “governmental” constraints upon symbolic action (Greene, “Rhetorical Materialism,” 53). Transcendence would then appear superfluous, epiphenomenal to the present social conditions. And if transcendence can be demoted in this way, degenerating into a mirage-like illusion fostered by the status quo, then rhetoric loses its rationale, its claim actually to alter, as Aristotle says, those “things that in their very being can be otherwise than they are” (McNeill 32).

So a solution, a way out of this impasse in which rhetorical agency is so unworkably perverse, might be for us to recognize the irreducibility, the sheer disparateness of the subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality that travel together, and axiomatically so, in the form (in the company, as it were) of rhetorical agency. After all, if the four terms are conceptually distinct, then they ought to be theoretically separable as well. Nietzsche does say that “concepts” are themselves “as bony and eight-cornered as a dice” (147). Yet our present discussions seem to leave us conceptualizing rhetorical agency, its four co-constituents and all, as too fluid, too glutinous, and too non-cornered for us to understand how rhetorical transaction would actually articulate with genuine social change.

What, then, ought we to expect from theoretical discussions addressing the concepts of rhetorical subjectivity, rhetorical conventionality, rhetorical transcendence, and rhetorical materiality? Why, we should expect each of the terms to be treated as contributing something which is not the same as the contribution of the others. For, whenever rhetorical agency is speaking, its co-constituents must be speaking, too, each adding its own heterogeneity to the conversation.

Thus the rhetorical forms of subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality should indeed to be theorized as distinct, mandatory, and irreducible, such that each would be playing its own role in the four-folded constitution of rhetorical agency. And, if we reframe the discussion as necessary, we can certainly arrive at some theoretical justifications for viewing subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality as separable, disparate enough to be collaborating, rather than (to borrow a term from Paul Virilio) always endo-colonizing one another. It’s just that we have also to recognize their irreducibility as a continual emergence into difference, and not as the ineluctable return of the given.

Therefore, in what follows, I’ll be arguing that rhetorical agency isn’t so protean, slippery, fluid, and homogeneous, after all. To the contrary, I’ll maintain that rhetorical agency is a four-folded, internally heterogeneous and participatory dynamism, in which subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality travel together while remaining unassimilable. Furthermore, at least on my account, rhetorical agency travels in more than just the one sense. For, while it’s mobile in that it crosses all sorts of social locations (remaining accessible to agents regardless of their positioning), it’s also mobile in that it’s continually becoming other than itself. And, in that case, what we need next is a suitably rhetorical perspective on rhetorical agency, or on its four co-constituents, as remaining not only irreducible but emergent as well.
A Willfully Productive Rhetorical Agency

Such a perspective on rhetorical agency is suggested by a recent essay characterizing all of action, including rhetorical action, in terms of an ongoing will to matter. The essay is Nathan Stormer’s “Encomium on Helen’s Body” (2009), and one of its “provocations” does seem to address all four of rhetorical agency’s constituents together (Stormer 220).

The provocation at issue concerns the purposive quality (as it were, the rhetoricty) of action in general. For the author observes that

The media that connect one to another, the materiality of objects that signify, the embodiment of perception, the messages interpreted from the rest of nature (from genetic codes to animal behavior) — all . . . confound the issue of “what is rhetorical action” and beg us subtly but significantly to alter the question to “what is rhetorical about action?” (224)

In this passage, Stormer is referring to the tendency of everything to participate in the world (as in the proclivity of media to forge connections, the inclination of objects not only to signify but also to remain material, the predisposition of bodies to perceive, and the propensity of the rest of nature to generate messages), and this is the very tendency that he’s opting to call the “will to matter” (220). In short, if rhetoric does tend to participate in the world, at least to the same extent as, say, animal behavior, then rhetoric can be said to express the will to matter, too.

Even so, the vector that Stormer is describing isn’t limited to the will to “power,” to “knowledge,” to “truth.” Rather, it’s broader, more promising and capacious than these, for it includes such wills among its internal differentiations. Indeed, the will to matter, which Stormer derives by reworking concepts from writers ranging from Baruch Spinoza and Friedrich Nietzsche to Judith Butler, might also be known as the general, even universal “desire to persist” (220). And, as Stormer explains, this is an imperative to flourish, not independently from others, or in spite of them, but, with their interactive, mutually transformative aid. Thus the will to matter, as Stormer theorizes it, includes a will to “recognition,” and a will to change as well. In short, it’s the impulse to make a difference, even an intensive or self-reflexive difference, just so long as this is the sort of difference that actually matters. In that case, if the tendency to make such a difference is, after all, rhetorical (expressing, for example, the drive to make things otherwise than they are), and if this is, furthermore, a tendency to change in the very process of making a difference, then all of action, and not only rhetorical action, is, indeed, rhetorical.

Stormer’s theoretical resituating of all action as rhetorical (as pushy and yet responsive) offers us a new way to think about the vaunted productivity of rhetoric itself. For while rhetoric can still remain productive in the sense that it’s epistemic, constitutive, articulatory, and so on, rhetoric can now become productive in the additional sense that it’s continually producing itself anew, continually enduring even as it adapts to changing circumstances. And if we make the conceptual transition from the willful persistence of rhetorical action to the willful persistence of rhetorical agency, we can say that this agency itself is productive, on the one side, in tending to make things otherwise than they are, and, on the other side, in tending to adapt in response to the very changes it produces.
Actually, Stormer’s account of this variegated will to matter (a will made up of some internal, co-constituent wills) does seem to parallel my own account of a variegated rhetorical agency, the latter itself a dynamic gathering among heterogeneous forces. And, in that case, we can think of each of the four, axiomatic co-constituents of rhetorical agency as expressing its own variant of the more general will to matter. At the very least, we can think of each as expressing the will of certain rhetorical theorists and practitioners to make it matter. Meanwhile, to say that something expresses the will to matter is already, as we’ve seen above, to say that it endures while also changing. And this might be quite a helpful way to think about a four-folded rhetorical agency whose co-constituents can remain themselves even in undergoing continual, symbiotic alteration. For in their persistence, each of the axiomatic co-constituents would instantiate a will to endure, while, in their mutability, each of them would instantiate a will to flourish, i.e., interactively, in the company of others.

At this stage, we have arrived at a way of thinking about rhetorical agency as made up out of four axiomatically distinct, mandatory, and irreducible constituents. All of these constituents evidence the productivity of rhetorical transaction by (persistently) remaining themselves even while (adaptively, interactively) becoming otherwise as well. But rhetorical agency’s four constituents cannot any longer be construed as axiomatic on the basis that they’re given, self-evident, or unquestionable, for they are clearly under production, too. Instead, their axiomaticity becomes a question of the theoretical and practical work required to keep them durable enough to persist, but interactive enough to adapt. And if the broader challenge is for us to conceptualize the mechanisms through which rhetorical transaction might conduce to social change, then the task is not merely to reframe the co-constituents of rhetorical agency as both persistent (or irreducible) and mutable (or emergent), but, beyond that, to explain how they impinge upon the activities taking place among rhetorical agents as such.

Therefore, on the theoretical side, we need an investigative method for examining the processes of production, and, on the practical side, we need some cases in which to situate the rhetorical agents participating in the production. To that end, I propose in the next chapter that we adopt a method consistent with the assemblage theory that is utilized in a number of social-scientific and other fields (Wise, 2005; Phillips, 2006; Marcus and Saka, 2006; DeLanda, 2006; Venn, 2006, Srnicek, 2007; Livesey, 2010). And I further propose that we draw at least our main examples from the case study furnished by none other than Karlyn Kohrs Campbell — the writer, it’s true, from whom I’ve derived an account of rhetorical agency as four-folded, but also the writer most directly responsible for propagating the idea that rhetorical agency must be so protean and promiscuous as to remain inexplicable.
Chapter Three: Methodology

I’m suggesting, then, that we begin to think about the rhetorical forms of subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality not as given but as produced — co-constructed, collaboratively enacted, and so on. Here, the investigative framework, involving a form of assemblage theory, will derive from the ideas of Gilles Deleuze, a philosopher often invoked in contemporary rhetorical studies (see, for example, Barnett, 2005; Stormer, 2009; or Greene, 2009). But it will be supplemented by constructs from actor-network theory (which attends to the ways in which collectivities are assembled and/or disassembled), as well as from object-oriented ontology (which attends to the ways in which assemblages can endure even as they continue to change). And the method will be applied most of all in an attempt to rethink a case study provided by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (2005), who treats an 1851 speech reportedly given by Sojourner Truth as exemplifying rhetorical agency.

An Assemblage-Theoretical Method

As Graham Livesey explains, the concept of assemblage derives from the English translation of *agencement*, referring, in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, not to any sort of finished product, but, rather, to the very “processes of arranging, organizing, and fitting together” (18; see also Dosse 43). So “assemblage” (which, when rendered as *agencement*, is all the more resonant with “agency”) highlights the activity through which disparate elements are somehow becoming related, forming a collectivity with new, emergent functionalities of its own.

Assemblages are conceptualized as, so to speak, unsystematic systems, tentative gatherings of bits and pieces into provisional, always mutable compositions. And, as deserves some strenuous underlining, the bits and pieces are never representational or symbolistic alone. Deleuze and Guattari do say that even “desire” is an assemblage, clarifying that assemblages don’t have to be objects in a purely physicalist sense (*Kafka*, 56). On the other hand, as Levi Bryant emphasizes, “there are no assemblages composed entirely of signs and utterances”: all assemblages involve at least some non-discursive, extra-propositional, or sub-representative components as well (“Deleuze on Assemblages”). Assemblages might then be instantiated by anything from the “behavior patterns of an individual” and the “organization of institutions” to “an arrangement of spaces” or the “functioning of ecologies” (Livesey 18). Each “transpires as a set of forces coalesces together,” producing “complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories” that persist “for varying periods of time,” and that can “create new ways of functioning.”

Further, any assemblage will also unsettle the “division” between “the natural and the artificial, between “matter and consciousness,” between “who makes and who is made in the relations between human and machine” (Strathern, *Partial Connections*, 36). For what we are here calling the assemblage is a genuinely open, revisable, cyborg-like system, an entity probably best described as “more than one and less than many” (Mol, *Body Multiple*, 84). Yet assemblages are still collectivities, and they “have function”: they are “productive” (Livesey 18). So they are not only cyborgs; they are also loosely built or provisional networks. Their productive functionality, as expressed in “action,” is
“a property of associated entities,” and it’s operationalized by “Agent 1 plus Agent 2 plus Agent 3,” where the disparate agents (or actors, actants, participants, constituents) themselves are the sorts of objects, bodies, expressions, forces, and so on, theorized as co-constructing the assemblage itself (Latour, *Reassembling*, 185).

In this view, however, the assembled, cyborg-like network isn’t in any sense designed to fulfill a purpose imposed upon it from outside. Instead, when the participants interact (attempting to achieve their own interests, to exercise their own propensities), the collective functionality of the group arises as, quite literally, a network effect. So there is no “master builder” (least of all a human subject) to manipulate the collectivity from behind the scenes, not even one that might be known under such pseudonyms as "society, nature, fields of force, structure" (Latour, “Promises,” 31). All of the building, all of the production, is attributable to the interactive labor being performed by the interested, emphatically heterogeneous agents in the collectivity.

We can therefore posit of any assemblage that it’s a collective facility within which disparate participants, not all of them tied to human subjectivity, happen to be collaborating to *produce* something. And, from my perspective, rhetorical agency is a coalition of just that kind, its primary function being to produce some genuine social change. Yet, as I argue, it’s an alliance made out of four other assemblages, networks, or cyborgs, each of them traceable to a different quarter within contemporary rhetorical studies. Each of these four constituent assemblages is populated by an array of theorists, critics, and practitioners, all engaged in gathering and deploying resources for producing this, that, the other, or the next of rhetorical agency’s four constituents.

So I refer to the four theoretical-and-practical assemblages (the networks or cyborgs accountable for producing the rhetorical forms of subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality) as the four contemporary landscapes of rhetorical agency. I don’t mean to suggest that researchers just everywhere wouldn’t already be studying all four of the co-constituents of rhetorical agency. Instead, I mean that, within any of the four given landscapes or assemblages, only one of the co-constituents can, in the final analysis, prove really dominant. For example, in the social-structural paradigm, the study of rhetorical subjectivity will seem central, and then any discoveries about conventionality, transcendence, or materiality will be submitted to any discoveries about subjectivity. Or, in the material-semiotic perspective, it’s materiality that will be taken, as it were, for the planet, while subjectivity, conventionality, and transcendence will be taken for the satellites.

Even so, the productive functionality of any assemblage (its characteristic trajectory or primary line of force) is *itself* emergent, under production. For the interaction among participants can give rise, and unpredictably so, to “composite goals differing from the existing ones” (Spinuzzi 88). So we should not assume that the rhetorical subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality that are being produced, each from within its own landscape of agency, will always be the same subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, or materiality. To the contrary, their production can also give rise to a *different* subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, or materiality (with the result that the axiomatic co-constituents of rhetorical agency remain themselves while becoming otherwise as well).

That’s how we can account for both the persistence and adaptability of rhetorical agency, the qualities that the rhetorical theorist Nathan Stormer associates with the will to
matter, and with all of action. We can now explain these in terms of the work that the various theorists, critics, and practitioners must be doing to ensure that each of the co-constituents of rhetorical agency does, in fact, remain persistent and adaptable. For, in framing rhetorical agency as assembled, we should keep in mind that any assemblage is characterized simultaneously by “territorial sides,” which “stabilize it,” and by “cutting edges” of “deteriorialization,” which “carry it away,” so that it’s able to endure even as it’s able to change (Deleuze and Guattari, ATP, 88). And reterritorialization and deteriorialization, the “processes that stabilize/consolidate and destabilize/dissolve (respectively), the identity of the assemblage,” do explain how the co-constituents of rhetorical agency can persist while also changing (Palmås 3).

After all, reterritorialization is the work that participants within the assemblage can do to shore up their collectivity, to protect it from dissolution, and in such a manner that it does, in fact, retain its productive functionality. So the reason for which the rhetorical forms of subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality remain so persistent is that they are continually being reterritorialized by just those theorists, critics, and practitioners who are the most willfully interested in preserving them.

Meanwhile, deteriorialization is the work that the participants can do to transport resources across the borders of their own assemblage, over into a liminal space where those resources can make contact (can enter into unpredictable relations) with resources belonging to yet other assemblages. For, just as reterritorialization is the moment of recuperation, of maintenance and shoring-up, deteriorialization is the countervailing moment of hybridization, emergence, and adaptation. And, in that case, the reason for which the rhetorical forms of subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality remain so adaptable is that they are continually being blended at their borders. That’s where the different theorists, critics, and practitioners are, whether intentionally or otherwise, helping carry bits and pieces among landscapes, such that subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality are continually altering one another at the margins, even as they continually shore themselves up at the center.

So the question arises as to why deteriorialization from the viewpoint of one assemblage wouldn’t automatically become reterritorialization from the viewpoint of another. We might wonder, for instance, why the rhetorical form of conventionality, or transcendence, or materiality should interact with rhetorical subjectivity, producing a newly hybridized version of that subjectivity, rather than simply dissolving into it.

For an answer, we can turn to a premise which Deleuzean thinking shares in common with object-oriented ontology. It’s that assemblages are made up out of terms (or parts, or components) which, though they may be linked under a “dominant relation,” do not reduce to that relation (Baugh 36). Instead, the terms can migrate between assemblages, between alternative dominant relations, always retaining something of their own functionality.

Indeed, with respect to any assemblage, the relations holding the terms together are “external” to the terms (Colebrook 5). For the terms remain excessive, irrecuperable, evading containment by any structure, configuration, or relation within which they are implicated. As Deleuze and Guattari explain,

if we discover . . . a totality alongside various separate parts, it is a whole of these particular parts but does not totalize them; it is a unity of all these
particular parts but does not unify them; rather, it is added to them as a new part fabricated separately. (*Anti-Oedipus* 46)

In other words, the “whole” remains an ostensible totality for only so long as the “parts” are held together in a particular relation, this latter itself becoming, as Levi Bryant puts it, an additional part to be investigated along with “the other parts” (“Deleuze on Assemblages”). And even if the nominal whole does support an emergent functionality, the constituent terms or parts can, to some important extent, retain their own powers, carrying these with them wherever they go. As a result, the bits and pieces of rhetorical subjectivity, rhetorical conventionality, rhetorical transcendence, and rhetorical materiality can, in principle, bring along their own character, even as they migrate into alternative assemblages, where they might then interact under an altered, perhaps entirely unwonted “dominant relation” (Baugh 36).

Yet it’s important to take seriously the premise that “assemblage” refers to “inter-relationships” between “elements” which are emphatically “heterogeneous” (Venn 107). In this case, the emphatic heterogeneity means that the sorts of assemblaging to be addressed will have to involve not just discursive, representational, symbolistic, or subjectivistic elements, but non-discursive, non-representational, non-symbolistic, and non-subjectivistic elements as well. For were we to view rhetorical agency’s four constituents as, at base, representations, as mere ascriptions, then we’d be unable to conceptualize them as separate from (and irreducible to) one another. They would seem to dissolve into the significations providing our only access to them. If so, we’d be left thinking that none of these co-constituents could ever really be itself, but only the subjectivized representation of itself, and then we would remain mystified as to how rhetorical transaction would actually contribute to any social change.

By contrast, in adopting an assemblage-theoretical perspective — a stance consistent with Deleuze’s *transcendental empiricism* — we can start approaching the four constituents of rhetorical agency not as given to us in representation alone, but as produced through significations in conjunction with irrecuperably, excessively “sub-representative” (or “extra-propositional”) experiences (see especially Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 1994, but also Bryant, *Difference and Givenness*, 2008). We can begin to see rhetorical interchange as implicating non-discursive realities together with represented realities. And then, by the way, we can refuse to frame the task of rhetorical analysis as that of merely finessing alternative representations, of merely detecting or effecting reconfigurations among signs (as in, say, Sloop’s “People Shopping” of 2009), just as we can refuse to frame the task of rhetorical theory as that of investigating “the productivity of rhetorical practices in opposition to the interpretive function of rhetorical criticism” (Greene, 2009, 45).

By now, we can infer that each of the co-constituents of rhetorical agency would actually come from a different theoretical-and-practical landscape, a terrain whose “dominant relation” is being reinforced whenever the local theorists, critics, and practitioners are deploying the local resources in just such a manner as to reterritorialize (to uphold the reality of) rhetorical subjectivity, or of rhetorical materiality, or of rhetorical conventionality, or of rhetorical transcendence (Baugh 36). That’s how the four co-constituents of rhetorical agency would stay axiomatic, distinct, and mandatory, since the terms out of which they are being constructed would include the theorists, critics, and
practitioners who are participating, and all so willfully, interestedly, even purposefully, in their ongoing manufacture.

But we can add that the terms for building subjectivity, materiality, conventionality, and transcendence would also include, among the resources being deployed by the theorists, critics, and practitioners, resources too excessive for containment within any of the dominant relations at all. For the resources would include both discursive statements and “sub-representative” experiences. They would then be resources whose portable, modular, and intrinsic (in this sense, immanent) powers, traveling with them wherever they went, would continually return us to the questions of, respectively, (a) the interiority of speakers and listeners, (b) the exteriority of the world they share, (c) the styles of linkage available for connecting the interiority with the exteriority, and (d) the capacity for change inherent in all of the above, and always such that no single axiom or structural totality could account for any of them exhaustively.

Yet there is one more assemblage-theoretical precept to adduce, and it’s that, enmeshed among the disparate agents, among the interested participants shaping both the functionality and the destiny of the assemblage, is none other than the researcher investigating the assemblage in the first place. It’s a matter of the investigator’s responsibility, yes; but it’s also a matter of what the investigator is actually contributing to and/or withholding from the processes of assemblaging already under way. And that’s because the assemblage, network, or cyborg (or else alliance, association, or mesh: many near-synonyms are available) isn’t identical with what we study. To the contrary, the assemblage includes our interference with what we study (see especially Mol, 1999).

Indeed, Michel Callon, among the architects of actor-network theory, has emphasized that, once the researcher recognizes the agencement (or assemblage) to be the object of the investigation as hybridized with the report on the investigation, then there is nothing left outside agencements: there is no need for further explanation, because the construction of its meaning is part of an agencement. [An] agencement includes the statement[s] pointing to it, and it is because the former includes the latter that the agencement acts in line with the statement, just as the operating instructions are part of [a] device and participate in making it work. (qtd. in Palmås 2)

In other words, the assemblage (the ongoing enactment drawing together some kinds of agency or functionality while giving rise to others) is what emerges “in connection with” what we say about it — that is, from our statements together with the contributions, affordances, and resistances supplied by the others folded into in this provisional unity, this processual composition, this ongoing co-construction (Phillips 109). And that’s why we do need to add that the very act of studying any of these networks, cyborgs, or alliances is already a contribution to the processes by which the assemblage is brought into being.

Those are the concepts which, together, comprise the investigative framework to be adopted in the rest of the study. Rhetorical agency will be produced out of its four co-constituents, each of them stable enough to persist, yet mutable enough to be altered during the interaction with its others. The co-constituents, each associated with its own assemblage, its own landscape of agency, will be made up out of terms in relation, and the terms will include, for example, theorists, practitioners, discursive statements, and sub-representative experiences, together with the researcher who is studying them.
Triangulating for Rhetorical Agency

At this point, we have settled on an assemblage-theoretical approach to help us conceptualize the movements of stabilization or reterritorialization (of shoring-up) and also the movements of transportation or deterritorialization (of emergence) that are at stake in the investigation of rhetorical agency as a four-folded dynamism. But we still need some examples to show that rhetorical transaction really does involve the ongoing persistence-and-transformation of the four co-constituents of rhetorical agency.

I’ll recommend we draw our main examples from the case study provided by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in her influential essay of 2005, the essay arguing that rhetorical agency is too promiscuous and protean for any clear-cut explanation. For Campbell also attends to an exemplary rhetorical artifact: the 1851 speech attributed to the African-American rhetor Sojourner Truth. And if we gather up all of this work of Campbell’s, folding it together with the explanation provided by one of Campbell’s own sources, the historian Nell Irving Painter, we see that we have available to us a *bona fide* verification that rhetorical agency resides not just in some hypothetical potential, but out there in the world as well.

Let’s start with some of the most important facts. As Painter, a scholar of African-American history, points out, it’s the consensus that, in her famous speech of 1851, Sojourner Truth has actually — by means of speaking — “inserted black women into women’s reform” and, in the process, “reclaimed physical and emotional strength for all women” (“Difference” 140–141). So, before the speech, black women are not, for all intents and purposes, really part of the women’s reform movement of the mid-nineteenth century; but then, after the speech, they are. This is not a case in which it’s easy to mistake chronology for causality: the causality is quite evident. For the speech of 1851 doesn’t merely reflect a social change simply occurring at the time. To the contrary, it helps enact, realize, or materialize the social change, doing its part to create the social change as such. That’s because the speech *itself* is the (more or less unexpected) insertion of black women into women’s reform, as well as the reclamation of physical and emotional strength for all women. Therefore, this celebrated artifact from Sojourner Truth already confirms that rhetorical agency exists, so that the greater part of the challenge is to discover how rhetorical agency operates.

In the following chapters, I situate this Sojourner Truth speech in one theoretical-and-practical framework after another, attempting in this way to trace the movements of reterritorialization and deterritorialization at stake in the constitution, i.e., the production, of rhetorical agency. These will be the activities of shoring up, and also of adaptation, taking place among the sets of theorists and practitioners — of rhetorical agents — who are in some respects protecting, and in other respects modifying (indeed, hybridizing) the terrains of rhetorical subjectivity, rhetorical conventionality, rhetorical transcendence, and rhetorical materiality.

To be frank about it, the main practitioner will be Sojourner Truth herself, though she’ll be treated as irreducible to any of the theoretical-and-practical relations within which she’s implicated. Meanwhile, refraining from treating the rhetorical critics as a special group, I’ll assume that they are “uncertainly” implicated among the theorists and the practitioners, anyway (Lundberg 2009, 162–163). As for the theorists, these will include commentators whose work, as we’ll see along the way, shows they’re bent on
producing, preserving, and perpetuating this, that, the other, or the next of the four co-
constituent assemblages which are axiomatically bound up in rhetorical transaction.

Further I’m locating the very production of the four constituents of rhetorical
agency in certain assemblages, in certain territories of theory-and-practice (which, again,
I refer to as landscapes.) These, as I argue, are formations that we should make every
effort to keep apart, lest we unwittingly facilitate their suturing, and in just such a manner
that each appears to be colonizing its others. Thus, in the chapters that follow, all of
which integrate premises from current arguments about the manner in which rhetorical
transaction does appear to work, I situate the contemporary theorizations of rhetorical
agency (which is to say, of rhetorical agency’s four disparate co-constituents) separately
from one another, within their respective landscapes.

But I also attempt to show how the exemplary rhetorical practitioner herself is
carrying bits and pieces of rhetorical agency among the different landscapes. Her activity
will prove both to be drawing upon and unsettling the dominant relations presupposed by
such commentators as would assume the priority, in rhetorical transaction, of
(respectively) this, that, the other or the next of the constituents of rhetorical agency.
Thus Sojourner Truth’s activity will also instantiate the manner in which practice can
corroborate theory while contesting it nevertheless.

However, we’re to face an important methodological difficulty. For, from a
strictly historical perspective, there isn’t really any Sojourner Truth speech from the
women’s rights convention of 1851. There are only alternative paraphrases,
performances, productions of this rather conjectural artifact, some of them less reliable
than others. At the same time, if we’re to understand how our exemplary rhetorical
practitioner could ever have managed, in 1851, to insert black women into women’s
reform, there has to be precisely such a speech anyway. And my proposed solution to the
methodological difficulty is — by looking to the intersection where the two most
substantive versions of the speech agree — to attempt some triangulation. In other
words, I plan to juxtapose these alternative accounts of what Sojourner Truth must have
said (attending to their correspondences, side-stepping their divergences) so as to arrive
at a reliable equivalent for the otherwise hypothetical speech. That does seem like a way
for us to document, i.e., from a rhetorical perspective, the concrete activity of a
practitioner whose work might actually clarify the nature of rhetorical agency itself.

As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell explains, what we’re given to think of as the authentic
text of the Sojourner Truth speech is only one of a number of (mostly fragmentary)
renditions. The very best known is “a fiction created some twelve years after the event”
by “an ambitious white woman”: Frances Dana Gage, a journalist with strongly activist
(abolitionist and feminist) leanings who had acted as the president of the women’s rights
convention where Sojourner Truth must have spoken (Campbell 9, 13). And Campbell
does rely on this particular rendition to support her now-influential propositions about the
perverse and protean nature of rhetorical agency. Her explanation for privileging this
simulation, this fiction created by the “ambitious” Frances Dana Gage, is that it’s “longer
and more frequently cited” than the other versions (“Agency” 12, 17). And yet the Gage
version is so replete with fabricated details as to add up to a “characterization . . . not
supported by other accounts” (Campbell 12).

Now, it’s not as if we ought simply to abandon the Frances Dana Gage version of
the speech, the version which Campbell is turning into a case study of rhetorical agency
as such. To the contrary, it’s that, since the Gage version is already there, what with its being so frequently cited and so on, we ought to be triangulating as much of it as we can. For, with respect to the central claims which Gage reports, and which Campbell repeats for our benefit, it’s possible that Sojourner Truth could have made them all. Gage was certainly present when Sojourner Truth delivered her speech. Further, she was “known throughout her life as a woman’s rights woman” in the very “vanguard” of the antislavery branch of the women’s movement — a fairly prolific journalist who “focused her women’s rights rhetoric on strong, working class women” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 177). And so Gage’s version of the content should still count as a form of documentation, other than where there’s nothing but her word to go by.

Unfortunately, as the historian Nell Irvin Painter explains, Gage doesn’t just report the speech in the manner of some eyewitness-turned-amanuensis. She integrates statements from other — subsequent — occasions entirely. She conflates the speaker with other persons she’s encountered as a journalist, and with characters she’s simply made up to populate her stories. She designs her reconstruction of the speech to function as a satire against one of her personal enemies, the prominent, if conservative feminist Jane Swisshelm. Finally, she devises this iconic scenario in which Sojourner Truth utterly silences all the patriarchs-and-racists then purposing to shout her down. Yet, in reality, the speaker would have proceeded with the full “support of the men who were there,” and even the “antiblack setting, though crucial to latter-day users of Sojourner Truth the symbol,” is mythical (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 125, 169).

Since Campbell has acted as one of Sojourner Truth’s editors, she of all people would know that, from a bibliographical perspective, this heavy reliance on Gage must be controversial. For example, she knows that Nell Irvin Painter — who, in “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean,” becomes Campbell’s acknowledged interlocutor and even antagonist — has questioned Gage’s version in the strongest terms. The historian clearly maintains that the account furnished by one Marius Robinson, though a little briefer (and considerably less histrionic) than that of Gage, is the more reliable source both on what Sojourner Truth would actually have said, and on the circumstances under which she would have said it (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 125-128). For Marius Robinson (Sojourner Truth’s personal friend, not to mention a respected clergyman and abolitionist of the day) was the acting secretary at the convention where Sojourner Truth spoke, and we should not let his version of the speech go to waste.

Yes, by all means, let’s concede that the Gage version is the one in which Sojourner Truth’s persona is the more memorably “dramatized,” such that it does at least help us grasp that image of herself which the historical speaker is known to have constructed and deployed during her public appearances of the mid-nineteenth century (Painter, “Difference,” 151, 154). But if so many of the details as reported (including, evidently, most of the fireworks) are Gage’s interpolations, even her inventions, then we should not, I think, be allowing her rendition to serve as our sole source on the speaker’s rhetorical agency, let alone — by implication — on everybody else’s as well. For we wouldn’t want rhetorical agency itself to be a fiction promulgated by a certain mid-nineteenth century journalist, no matter how much of a feminist, an activist, and an abolitionist the latter must have been.

Fortunately, this other eyewitness, Marius Robinson, did publish (just a month after the event, and not, as in the case of Frances Dana Gage, twelve years later) a version
of the speech that’s almost as lengthy, just as interesting, and, according to Sojourner Truth’s own historians and biographers, even more trustworthy than the version which Karlyn Kohrs Campbell portrays as epitomizing rhetorical agency. So my proposal is that, rather than continue, as Campbell would recommend, tracing the speaker’s rhetorical agency to Gage’s imagination, we can instead try tracing it to an artifact whose value, no matter how hypothetical, we can somehow corroborate with the help of Marius Robinson himself.

Of course, in the Robinson account, the closest analogue for the famous “A’n’t I a woman?” (which we’ve inherited directly from Gage) appears not as a rhetorical question, but as a flat-out declaration: “I am a woman’s rights.” And it’s Campbell’s very use of “I am a woman’s rights” that inspires my project of triangulating for rhetorical agency in the first place. For the theorist herself is the one treating that line as verification that, even if Sojourner Truth never really asked whether she was a woman, she must still, in her speech of 1851, have said something to that effect. For that’s precisely as documented by this parallel statement, this “I am a woman’s rights” (whose source Campbell nevertheless leaves anonymous).

We should not, however, presume that Marius Robinson is only good for supplying us with this cryptic “I am a woman’s rights,” this fragment which Campbell appropriates exclusively in the interest of authenticating the Gage account. Indeed, to imply that’s all he is good for would be to add insult to injury. For, back in June, 1837, Marius Robinson (then speaking in Salem, Ohio, “on behalf of the anti-slavery movement,” and planning to “vindicate the Bible against the charge of supporting slavery”) was dragged into the street by a mob, rushed off, with considerable violence, for about a mile, and then tarred and feathered, in a certain back-handed recognition of what we, today, should be calling his own rhetorical agency (Baker). But Robinson prevailed, becoming the editor of the local Anti-Slavery Bugle, and later the acting secretary for no less than the 1851 woman’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio. This is how it comes about that Marius Robinson bequeaths to us the very account of the Sojourner Truth speech which “historians,” if not necessarily rhetorical theorists, now “judge the more reliable” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 174; see also Lerner 59; King 137–139; Fitch and Mandziuk 18, 74).

So we should treat Marius Robinson (by way of his own contributions to the literature) as an informant not only with respect to what Sojourner Truth would have said in 1851, but also to what she wouldn’t have said at all. In this way, even the Marius Robinson whom Campbell would leave so anonymous, so fungible, can participate in the process by which rhetorical agency is assembled. But, as to the project of triangulation (the project of gathering resources out of which to produce not just any version of the Sojourner Truth speech, but a corroborable version), we should take some care to sidestep the attributions which appear for the first time in the Gage version of the speech, and not in the version that’s by far the more “reliable,” namely, the one from Marius Robinson (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 174). For those would be the attributions which, because they appear only in the fictionalized Gage rendition, we shouldn’t accept at face value, but, to the contrary, should interrogate and/or bracket, even if they do include all the makings of a quite chimerical rhetorical agent.

According to Gage, then (the anti-slavery feminist), but not according to Robinson (the anti-slavery clergyman), Sojourner Truth, at the woman's rights
convention of 1851, spoke in a dialect most obtrusively marking her as African-American. She integrated a paradoxically and perversely authentic use of the “n-word” (Campbell, 13). She noted that she’d never in her life been helped into carriages or pampered in any similar respect (with the implication that, whatever she’d managed to accomplish, she’d managed to accomplish entirely on her own). She referred to her experience as a mother who had seen most of her thirteen children sold off as slaves, not to mention as a woman who, in her own person, had been forced to “bear de lash” (Agency,” 10). She uncovered her right arm all the way up to the shoulder, specifically in order to show her tremendous muscular power. And she directed certain witheringly pointed asides, one after another, at these hecklers, these “traditional male religious authorities” who, infiltrating and practically overrunning her immediate audience, had established “a scene of great tension and hostility” there at the 1851 women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio (9). But Marius Robinson (who, one would think, having once been tarred and feathered at the hands of an angry, anti-abolitionist mob, ought to have remembered at least the part about bearing the lash) doesn’t corroborate any of these details at all.

Yes, such details would obviously be speaking to realities faced, on the one side, by nineteenth century abolitionists and women’s rights activists and, on the other side, by the historical Sojourner Truth, together with, in Campbell’s turn of phrase, her “slave sisters” (“Agency” 14). Even so, our methodological difficulty can’t be surmounted by any rehearsal of the preceding. The problem is that the very most memorable details from Gage’s account — the obtrusive dialect, the close-to-thirteen children sold away, the bearing of the lash in person, the uncovering of a laborer’s arm to the shoulder, the patriarchal-and-racist hecklers, even the famous “A’n’t I a woman?” — are all missing from the Marius Robinson version of the speech, appearing only in the fictionalized version from Frances Dana Gage. So those must be the features that we cannot, after all, assume to be playing any part whatever in the speech that Sojourner Truth gave in 1851. They appear only in Gage’s fabrication, adding up to the “characterization” that is “not supported by other accounts” (Campbell, “Agency,” 12). And this remains the case even if Karlyn Kohrs Campbell is bent on treating those same memorable turns of phrase as if they help us theorize the way in which rhetorical agency would actually work.

Yet we are not left with the fabricated Gage version alone, for we also have at our disposal the considerably more reliable version from Marius Robinson. So let’s start by reflecting on the overlap between the two accounts, including the manner in which each of them approximates the very thesis of the hypothetical speech. In Gage, as we know, it’s “A’n’t I a woman?” and, in Robinson, it’s “I am a woman’s rights.” Now, the “I am a woman’s rights” from the Robinson version does seem functionally interchangeable with the “A’n’t I a woman?” from the Gage version. This means that we can look to “I am a woman’s rights” as an alternative, corroborative formulation of whatever it was that Sojourner Truth must have been claiming. We can treat it as triangulable, and we can ask which particular features, dimensions, or realities of rhetorical agency the various parts of this flat-out declaration might be addressing. But that’s hardly to say there’s nothing else to triangulate. For Gage and Robinson, eyewitnesses the both of them, do agree in some additionally noteworthy ways.

Among the points of agreement between these two evidentiary sources is that the Sojourner Truth speech, as we ourselves can reassemble it, is undeniably about gender,
since that’s a theme clearly accessible through both “A’n’t I a woman?” and “I am a woman’s rights.” In addition, the reality of race certainly functions as a fundamental condition of possibility for Sojourner Truth’s statement as a whole. What’s more, the hypothetical speech must surely be addressing what Painter calls “work, mind, and biblical precept” (three central “aspects” of 19th-century “women’s identity”), considering that both Gage and Robinson do portray the speaker as employing those three topics to refute what Campbell, for her own part, calls “all of the major arguments (biological, theological, and sociological)” then available “against woman’s rights” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 126; Campbell 12).

Further, in connection with the argument as to “mind” (belonging to a nineteenth century debate over whether women and African-Americans were intelligent enough to deserve full membership in the social), there’s also a kind of second-order agreement. For Robinson and Gage together corroborate the role in the speech of a curious analogy, that of the pint and the quart, which must therefore be playing an important, perhaps even crucial part in the communicative transaction.

Finally, there’s something else, separate from anything stipulated in the catalog above. Its presence is palpable in both the Gage and Robinson versions, each of which refers, though each in a different way, to the corporeality, indeed, the sheer physicality at stake in the delivery of this famous speech. But it won’t be until later in our investigation that we’ll be positioned to grasp the nature of this remaining source or component of Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency. Let’s provisionally refer to it as embodiment, employing that term, for present purposes, as a placeholder for one or another conception of materiality.

These several elements go together in a thematic bundle. It’s a package establishing rather precisely (Mikhail Bakhtin might say, “chronotopically”) which of the details really do have to be included in Sojourner Truth’s speech, and in just such a manner as to account for most, maybe even all of the rhetorical agency articulated, manifested, or deployed in that statement. We might think of the package as the core of the speech, though there’s a sense in which it’s a lamellation as well. For the speech is assembled out of layers — of “race,” “gender,” “work,” “mind,” “biblical precept,” the pint-and-quart analogy, and something rather like “embodiment.” All of these lamellae do lie at the core of Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency. And they do articulate with “I am a woman’s rights,” which is the capsulation, the thesis, the handle for pretty much everything else that has to go into this famous, if hypothetical speech of 1851.

By now, we have at our disposal not only an assemblage-theoretical approach, but also some evidentiary materials to which to apply the approach. So what we should do next is firm up the itinerary. For we’ll wish to undertake a systematic investigation of the Sojourner Truth speech in keeping with the activities of reterritorialization and deterritorialization that are taking place within the four landscapes of rhetorical agency.

**An Investigative Itinerary**

Let’s agree, then, that the “I” of “I am a woman’s rights” must be referring to the rhetorical agent in its aspect as the subject, which contemporary theory might call that of the speaking subject, the subject of enunciation, the political subject, or something else along those lines. Still, if the remaining string of terms — “am a woman’s rights” —
were there in the manner of a glorified appositive, then nothing new could possibly result as an outcome of this instance of mere expression. For this would be an utterance from someone who, in 1851, is attending a convention the very purpose of which is to generate the women’s rights that don’t, at this moment, exist.

In that case, noting that the speaker’s subjectivity, identity, essence, or status can’t, automatically, help her insert black women into the women’s reform movement, let’s try to put that fact to use within the very methodology for the study. Let’s structure the investigation in such a manner as to take seriously each of the four terms in “I am a woman’s rights,” discovering what each can contribute to Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency. Let’s then frame each of them as an agent, indeed, an informant speaking on behalf of one or another assemblage of its own.

Thus we’ll proceed by treating the “I” as pointing to the social-structural (or social-and-linguistic) landscape of agency. In other words, we’ll accompany Sojourner Truth as she carries her speech over into this first assemblage, where we’ll notice that an axiomatic rhetorical subjectivity (viewed as merely given, as fully-fixed and unalterable) is being treated as coextensive with rhetorical agency itself. Unfortunately, we’ll find that just about everything highlighted in the speech will, under rhetoric’s constitutive turn, seem to disappear into a sort of social-and-linguistic loop. As a result, the local theorists (exemplified most of all by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell herself) will appear hard pressed to explain, if not through a mere declaration of faith, how the rhetorical agent could ever break out of her own interiority, let alone reposition others to break out of theirs, i.e., in order actually to participate in effecting some genuine social change. So this will be an object lesson underlining that rhetorical agency cannot be a matter of rhetorical subjectivity alone.

But we will still have to address an “am,” a “woman’s,” and a “rights,” and these are not to be written off as simply elaborating the condition, no matter how “unavoidable,” of an I who is only a subject (Campbell 3). So we’ll treat the “rights” as pointing to the axiomatic role in agency of the conventional, and therefore as directing our steps to the rhetorical-humanistic landscape. That’s where conventionality will, perhaps a little unexpectedly, prove to bespeak not the normative, more or less constitutive signs and discourses addressed, for example, by Crowley (2003), but, rather, the shared values that are binding all the listeners and speakers together. In this second landscape, we’ll see (with the aid of theorists including, though not only, Richard Weaver and Chaim Perelman) that our exemplary practitioner, by finessing certain of the themes and images included in her speech, is parlaying some rhetorical conventionality into an articulatory if also constitutive mechanism for transforming rhetorical subjectivity itself, i.e., for producing it, to a very considerable extent, anew.

Thus we’ll become far better placed to account for rhetorical transaction as conducing to genuine social change. Yet we’ll be left with a nagging question as to why rhetorical agency should be so dependent on a rhetorical conventionality which, in privileging the shared values holding the group together, is continually overlooking, even effacing, the alterity of the group members. And we’ll have to consider that rhetorical conventionality, even where it takes the form of shared values, still needs supplementation by something else, something just as irreducible to rhetorical conventionality as it is to rhetorical subjectivity.
So we’ll treat the “am” of the statement as registering the diachronic and emergent character of human existence, i.e., as invoking the axiomatic role of rhetorical transcendence. The “am” is then to lead us all the way into the existential-transversal landscape of agency, where it’s an authentic claim to life, quite untrammeled by any shared values, that counts for everything. And then we’ll see that our exemplary practitioner, in deploying the life-affirming resources folded into her speech, is acting to operationalize rhetorical transcendence, thereby producing some genuine social change.

Yet, as we’ll notice, most of the existential-transversal theorists, tacitly assuming that rhetoric is epistemic, will, in fact, be viewing transcendence as ordinarily immanent to consciousness. So they will remain bedeviled by the difficulty of conceptualizing transcendence as separate from socially-determined subjectivity. They will then be forced into a fideism of their own. For they will have to posit, in addition to an ordinary transcendence, an extraordinary transcendence, neither deterministic nor voluntaristic, descending into communicative transaction from beyond, though just as often as the existential-transversal theorists may require.

During our visit to this third theoretical-and-practical perspective, then, we ourselves will have to participate in some assemblage-theoretical intervention, if only to help certain of the local agents recognize the additional conceptual resources available within their own landscape of agency. With the aid of yet another local theorist, the material phenomenologist Michel Henry, we will undertake to show that the inhabitants of the existential-transversal landscape needn’t locate transcendence within human interiority, but, to the contrary, can locate it within human exteriority instead. Thus we’ll advise the theorists of rhetorical transcendence to ground this latter in the original body that all of the human interlocutors actually hold in common.

Under this revised existential-transversal perspective, it will transpire that what our exemplary rhetorical practitioner is doing in her speech is establishing consubstantiation with her audience. Still, she won’t be doing so by means of any pre-established subjectivities, or by means of any merely-given shared values, but, rather, by means of the corporeality through which people are always already connected. Nevertheless, we will then be left with another vexing question, this time, as to why it should be that rhetorical transcendence (in animating genuine social change) would involve nothing more than some human corporeality plus an authentic claim to exist.

Thus we’ll move on to treat the “woman’s” as pointing to the axiomatic role in agency of the material, and, for that reason, as pointing to none other than the material-semiotic landscape of agency. There, it will turn out that nothing is merely given. Instead, whatever exists is produced, though always from somewhere in the midst of things.

Yet, in this context, production will not be symbolistic production alone, even if the rhetorical theorists of this fourth landscape might tend to treat it that way. So, when we do reach the material-semiotic paradigm, we’ll have to undertake yet another of our interventions. We’ll attempt to show that Sojourner Truth, our exemplary rhetorical practitioner, is able—with the aid of her radically heterogeneous allies—to produce a new reality, and not out of just nothing, but as the material-and-relational output of a quite unprecedented assemblage.

This new assemblage will, however, remain consistent with our expectations as to the most important of the themes we’ve associated with Sojourner Truth’s celebrated speech of 1851. For we’ll be conceptualizing “race,” “gender,” and “biblical precept” as
strata (social territories) whose bits and pieces this exemplary practitioner is gathering and connecting as she speaks. The speaker and her auditors will then collaborate in constructing an alliance with unwonted functionalities: those that are conducive to genuine social change. Thus the exemplary (if hypothetical) rhetorical agent, too, will participate in building a meshwork, a cyborg capable of enacting, or realizing, or materializing rhetorical transcendence itself.
Chapter Four: Subjectivity in the Social-Structural Landscape

We’re beginning the study proper by accompanying Sojourner Truth (who is carrying her famous if hypothetical speech with her), into the social-structural landscape. This is a framework within which the local theorists are tending to conceptualize rhetorical agency as all but indistinguishable from rhetorical subjectivity: they are, in effect, positing not a four-folded, but a unitary agency, where subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality would practically be synonymous.

Obviously, we will want to understand how an artifact like the famous Sojourner Truth would be read in a theoretical-and-practical landscape like this, where rhetorical transaction is taken most of all to reflect the workings of a “rhetorically” shaped interiority. But, because we are adopting an assemblage-theoretical approach, our own methodology is to prevent us from taking for granted that rhetorical subjectivity can simply be given, and that the role of the rhetorical agent can simply be to operationalize it. Instead, we must remain attentive to the manner in rhetorical subjectivity itself is being produced, on an ongoing basis, through the collaboration of precisely those participants who are the most interested in producing it. So the question to keep in mind during what follows is that as to whether the rhetorical subjectivity which is being assembled in this social-structural landscape of agency would actually be able to help Sojourner Truth (our exemplary rhetorical agent) effect any genuine social change.

The Co-Construction of Constraint

For an answer, certainly with respect to the “theoretical” dimensions of the social-structural landscape, we can reflect on the overview provided by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (2005). She’s representative for the social-structural (which is also a social-and-linguistic) frame more generally, as she’s conceptualizing rhetorical agency from within the parameters of a “linguistic” turn nestled into a “social” turn (Crowley, “Response,” 1; Lunsford, Wilson, and Eberly xxi). Indeed, she’s among those contemporary writers who, as Barnett (2005) says are struggling with the problem of “how to theorize the existence of an agent within the constitutive rhetorics of omnipresent ideologies” (13). Thus, here with reference to Barnett’s formulation, we can say that the “constitutive rhetorics” part evokes the linguisticality, and the “omnipresent ideologies” part the structured sociality of this perspective. It’s a perspective where discourse is held to create identities and social roles for interlocutors to slip into, though not just as it pleases, but always in keeping with pre-existing (for example, ideological) constraints upon thought and action. Thus, in what I call the social-structural viewpoint on rhetorical agency, “interpellations” are not mere invitations to assume this or that subject position; instead, as Judith Butler says in "Performativity's Social Magic," they are “performatives” their “effects . . . neither linguistic nor social, but indistinguishably — and forcefully — both" (126).

In addition, though, Campbell is the writer who has so influentially positioned the Sojourner Truth speech itself as exemplifying the workings of rhetorical agency. And, in surveying the relevant literature (which, in this scenario, becomes not just the relevant “constitutive,” but also the relevant “critical-constitutive” literature), Campbell discovers that this same rhetorical agency ought, in principle, to reduce to nothing other than the subjectivity proper to a hapless creature of the status quo. For Campbell prefaces her
entire discussion of rhetorical agency with a manifesto (a somewhat disenchanted manifesto) deriving from the works of Michelle Baliff, Judith Butler, Louis Althusser, and Pierre Bourdieu. It’s to the effect that rhetorical agency should henceforth be conceptualized as coextensive with the interiority of what, repurposing a usage from Anton and Peterson (2003), I’d call the *structural subject*.

My own reference to “structure” is to highlight the collective constraints theorized to be operating upon any subject’s interiority, thereby domesticating or recuperating even the content that can be communicated among the participants in rhetorical transaction. For, again, while theorists such as Campbell do proceed from within rhetoric’s constitutive turn, they don’t consider discourse to be constitutive from scratch. To the contrary, on their account, it’s actually “the community” which establishes all the “externals” contextualizing rhetorical transaction in the first place, for the group “confers identities related to gender, race, class, and the like on its members and by so doing determines not only what is considered to be ‘true,’ but also who can speak and with what force” (9). Thus Campbell’s labor on behalf of the social-structural perspective is supported by, and supportive, of the work of several other theorists.

From Michelle Baliff (who happens, conveniently enough, to be speaking to the entire rhetorical tradition, from the classical era to the present day), Campbell derives such claims as that the speech act is the sacrificial ritual which maintains the *polis* and secures the community . . . [B]y being subjected to gender, the self is sacrificed upon the altar of the *polis*, offered in the name of solidarity, order, harmony, peace. . . . In this way, the political subject and the speaking subject . . . gain identity—recognition by the *polis* as legitimate.” (3)

So, on the social-structural account, the rhetorical agent is the authorized, if quite thoroughly subjected agent, dispensing occluded social forces with her every word. After all, this is not just a political subject, pure and simple, but a *speaking* subject as well, and then her speech, if it’s ever to be registered at all, must be identical with the discourse, signification, rhetoric already approved for use within the collectivity.

In Judith Butler, Campbell finds practically mandated the view that agency be considered co-extensive with a pre-structured subjectivity:

> “[T]he agency of the subject appears to be an effect of its subordination” or, referring to . . . Althusser’s doctrine of interpellation, “existence as a subject can be purchased only through guilty embrace of the law.”

(Campbell 3)

What’s more, and again according to Butler, “agency is always and only a political prerogative,” for “if the subject is constituted by power, that power does not cease at the moment the subject is constituted”; to the contrary, the “subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and time again” (qtd. in Campbell 15).

But, in that case, the perspective which Campbell is helping to construct seems to be one in which subjectivity is, in fact, not so much “produced” as *re-produced*. For the interiority of the rhetorical agent would reflect the latter’s ongoing subjection (time and time again), and yet there’s not the slightest suggestion that such interiority might be formed other than in keeping with the dictates of the immediately given dispensation.
Finally, Campbell turns to Pierre Bourdieu to help her lock all of communicative agency into place within the status quo. Bourdieu, as she takes care to explain, has specified that

“competence” in linguistic performance does not mean grammatical correctness or clarity; rather, it includes “the right to speech”. . . . the right to speak “the authorized language which is also the language of authority. Competence implies the power to impose reception.” (15)

Unsurprisingly, this assumed policing of all expression becomes, on Campbell’s account, an insurmountable constraint on the interiority, indeed, the very rationality, which subject-agents must share as members of the collective.

It’s from this perspective that Campbell calls upon even Aristotle to testify on behalf of her social-structural paradigm. Citing various passages from the Poetics and the Nichomachean Ethics, and tacitly linking these to ideas in the Rhetoric, Campbell indicates that Aristotle’s conception of “art” or techne (which involves a “reasoned habit of mind”), and also his conception of “thought” or dianoia (which refers to “the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances”), not to mention his conception of practical judgment or phronesis, must already be consistent enough with the work of “Foucault and Bourdieu,” where subjectivity, now evidently subsuming Aristotle’s conceptions of art, reason, and tact, would itself appear to be the output of one or another governing apparatus (Campbell 6-7).

Consequently, in Campbell’s treatment, all of the (let’s say) constitutive mechanisms — the commonplaces and communicative techniques at work in rhetorical transaction — turn out to be much the same as those through which the Bourdieu-styled habitus would generate (what else but) habits of mind. All of these commonplaces, techniques, and habits of mind now become byproducts of just those “recurrent practices” which, becoming “internalized,” provide sociality not only with “powerful engines” for “affecting and constraining future behaviors” but also with the means for controlling consciousness, shaping rationality, and defining rhetorical agency itself (5-7).

And what can we, so far, surmise of the processes through which this social-structural machine is manufacturing a rhetorical subjectivity that could, arguably, serve as proxy for all the rest of rhetorical agency? Well, first, we’ve seen that rhetorical subjectivity is being constructed as the constrained interiority necessary for filling out all the structural roles (whether dominant or marginalized) integral to the status quo, such that rhetorical subjectivity itself turns out to be an effect of the overarching social logic organizing the totality. Second, we’ve seen that rhetorical subjectivity is also being constructed as coextensive with rhetorical conventionality, for it’s the constitutive output of just those discursive practices which are already authorized for use within the group. Third, we’ve seen that rhetorical subjectivity is being constructed as coextensive with rhetorical materiality, too, for it’s the re-production of just those “externals” — those “identities related to gender, race, class, and the like” — which the group continually “confers,” or projects, “on its members” (Campbell 9).

So, we can surmise that these are processes through which rhetorical subjectivity is being assembled on the model of the state. For it does appear that the so-called community is a nation (with the smaller locales tucked, homologously, into a more global totality), and that collectively-determined identities are social or structural roles, and that
any privileges accruing to the identities are political capital, and that constitutive discourse is the law, and, finally, that the rhetorical agent is the subjugated citizen.

Clearly, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, our representative social-structural theorist, is correct to emphasize the communal dimension of agency, which — exactly as she explains — has featured in discussions of rhetorical functionality ever since the time of the ancient Greeks. And, yes, subjectivities, identities, and social roles are obviously shaped by collective ways of speaking which, in turn, do have to be processed and deployed in a manner consistent with the subjectivities, identities, and social roles themselves. So it’s unsurprising that Campbell, like other contemporary theorists, would think of rhetorical subjectivity as the key to absolutely all of rhetorical transaction.

For example, some rhetorical theorists have been able to show that “change” itself (the sort of change that rhetoric might actually effect) is indistinguishable from whatever impression of change might happen to make its way into the depths of our interiority. In “Liminal Spaces in Popular Culture: Social Change through Rhetorical Agency” (2005), Roxanne Kirkwood marshals various theoretical resources to help her argue that rhetorical agency accrues to identity, and that to shore up a marginalized identity in resistance against the status quo is already to manifest rhetorical agency. Now, according to Kirkwood herself, there is evidence enough to show that “identity is merely a form of interpretation,” and yet a “reasonable assumption would be that any identity is real if it means something to the person claiming it” (32). So if rhetorical agency accrues to the personalized interpretation of identity, and if it’s this sort of personalized interpretation that accounts for social change, or at least for the impression of the latter, then rhetorical subjectivity ought to be able to explain social change all by itself.

Along roughly the same lines, Foss, Waters, and Armada (2007) argue that rhetorical agency need never leave the domain of interiority at all. Rhetorical agency, in their view, is a function of the agent’s “interpretation” (which is a “source of power” in its own right), for which reason the agent “has unlimited access to innovative rhetorical options” (219). Thus even in “extreme cases such as imprisonment or genocide,” agents do "have choices about how to perceive their conditions and their agency” (223). All it takes, evidently, is for the perceiver to appropriate the relatively more promising interpretive possibilities available even in the most extreme of cases.

Meanwhile, as noted in Christine J. Gardner’s report from 2011, theorists such as Joshua Gunn and Michelle Condit have entered into a debate not precisely over whether rhetorical agency is a fantasy, but, rather, over whether it would be good for rhetorical agency to be a fantasy. Thus Condit expostulates that, even if agency is an illusion, it’s a "necessary illusion" nonetheless — and then Carolyn Miller (2007) cites Condit and agrees with her, adding that agency is illusory in two senses at once (Miller 151-152). It’s illusory in that it is a "constructed (or pre-constructed)" attribution, and in that it is "an ideological construct."

So Karlyn Kohrs Campbell is obviously not manufacturing rhetorical subjectivity all by herself, nor is she alone in treating it as if it’s coextensive with all the rest of rhetorical agency. After all, “the term agency itself” has commonly been theorized in keeping with a “long list of terms” including “self-hood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity” (Emirbayer and Mische 962). All of these are terms which, if filtered through the precepts constructed by Althusser, Bourdieu, and Butler, can quite readily be viewed as outputs of an overarching or
underlying social logic, with the result that rhetorical subjectivity can indeed be portrayed as interchangeable not only with rhetorical agency, but also with the collective constraints which the group “confers” upon its members (Campbell 9).

Yet it’s not strictly necessary to describe rhetorical agency as indistinguishable from rhetorical subjectivity, nor to describe identity (also known as social positioning) as an entrapment within the status quo, nor to describe discourse as the perpetual reproduction of the law. It’s at least as tenable to describe sociality in general, and communicative exchange in particular, as far less constrained than that.

Bruno Latour, for example, has explained the confusion, the over-extension, that can occur when the collectivity in general is conceived on the model of the “body politic” (Reassembling 161). For, while the latter abstraction might be applicable to the study of structural roles within a closed system, it’s not so applicable with regard to the proclivities, capacities, or contributions either of such actors as may slip into or out of the structural roles, or of such actors as may remain entirely beyond the purview of the body politic, anyway. Consequently, while it’s clearly possible to frame the rhetorical agent as exclusively a subject-citizen, this might not be the very best option in town.

Further, almost any community can readily be conceived as too variegated, too internally heterogeneous, for description as an authoritarian bloc. Alejandro Grimson (2010) has emphasized that culture and identity (both of which someone like Campbell might regard as homologous aspects of the collective) actually refer to “analytically different aspects of social processes,” and that “no relationship between the two can be presupposed or generalized to fit all cases (Grimson 75). The point is not that there isn’t any relationship at all between (say) culture and identity as dimensions of collective life. It’s that we should not presume to know the relationship ahead of time, let alone decide, a priori, that every collectivity must be a sort of totalitarian state (where all the available subjectivities, identities, and social roles would simply mirror whatever principle is held to be organizing the whole). Instead, we should remain open-minded enough to recognize that, when it comes to investigating social interaction, ”each empirical case” can “yield its own set of answers” (Grimson 76). If so, then there is really no need for anyone to perseverate on constructing agency, that of the community member, as exclusively a form of subjection.

And, even if discourse is in some sense constitutive, there’s still no reason to equate all of it with the law. Calvin Schrag has pointed out that “the Greek concept of the polis” itself is “not isomorphic” in the first place with “modern and postmodern concepts of the political” (76). Thus we do need to be attentive to the polysemous vocabularies that have traveled with the concept of the polis throughout the ages, for example, society, socialization, state, government, civilization, and culture” (76). In other words, different sorts of collectivities may very well be constituted differently from one another (thus requiring polysemous vocabularies for their description), and they may very well support different, and not necessarily repressive sorts of discourses. And, in that case, not even the polis need be construed as so constrictive as perpetually to determine what’s “true,” or “who can speak and with what force” (3).
So, Can the Speaker Speak?

Drawing on all sorts of resources that are available in this first of our four theoretical-and-practical landscapes, and, as it seems, with the full support of quite a number of the local participants, Campbell concludes not only that the agency of the agent must be identical with the agent’s socially-constituted subjectivity, but also that this “condition” of the agent, i.e., as a mere byproduct of social force, is utterly “unavoidable” (3). And then, to verify that rhetorical agency is, by definition, subjection, she presents Sojourner Truth as a special case, a particularly dramatic illustration, of the subjection of rhetorical agents more generally.

For, when introducing the nineteenth-century activist Sojourner Truth (among whose names was Isabella van Wagenen) as the very embodiment of the rhetorical agent, Campbell emphasizes the odds against this sort of a subject’s ever making any special difference at all. More specifically, Campbell writes that Isabella or “Bell” was an illiterate slave, freed by New York law in 1827, who endured the trauma of seeing her siblings, her husband, and her children sold away from her, and her elderly parents left destitute when freed. She faced other formidable obstacles. Because she originally belonged to a Dutch master, English was a second language, and she remained illiterate. (8)

Thus, rehearsing Frances Dana Gage’s characterization of Sojourner Truth as, by 1851, “an old, illiterate, former slave woman,” Campbell maintains that for any such person to be “able to speak at all” (i.e., to her society more broadly, and, a longue, to ours), then that — here in quite an intriguing turn of phrase — is nothing short of “a miracle” (8-9). It’s as if Campbell, along with her social-structural cohorts, has just now happened upon a rhetorical-theoretical answer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s question, “Can The Subaltern Speak?” (1988). For the rhetorical-theoretical answer appears to be, “Yes, and, on all the most important accounts, it’s impossible for her to do so.”

Unfortunately, the theoretical frame which Campbell is building with the aid of her allies is a perspective according to which any speaker, any nominal rhetorical agent, must be totally subjected to the state. So of course it’s theoretically mystifying whenever the subaltern does manage to speak. But while it might be manageable enough to quiet down the subaltern in theory, it does seem that the subaltern’s more-than-likely silence ought also to be mirrored in practice, lest there appear to be something wrong with the theory to begin with. Thus Campbell, as a social-structural theorist of rhetorical agency, would be obligated to shore up the theory of the theorist by undermining the practice of the practitioner. She’d have to show that not even an exemplary rhetorical agent ought, in principle, to be capable of saying anything that could actually make a difference.

In this instance, where her own case study concerns a speech delivered at a gathering among women’s rights activists, Campbell obviously cannot go ahead and argue, at least not without some serious theoretical embarrassment, that the practitioner ought somehow to be crippled by her gender. So, instead, Campbell chooses to dwell on the practitioner’s dialect, which would at least betray something about the latter’s social status. And the reason for which the speaker’s dialect becomes so important for Campbell is that it seems to constitute proof that anything the speaker could possibly say ought
automatically to become an expression of her social identity, and therefore (in this instance) of her marginalized structural role within the collectivity.

Certainly, dialect can be tied to socially-determined identity — “race, class, and the like” — and, in this way, to subjectivity (Campbell 3). Hence, to demonstrate that it’s never actually the rhetorical agent that’s speaking, only a pre-established structural role that’s speaking through her, Campbell devotes considerable attention to the non-standard English in which Sojourner Truth appears to be expressing herself in the speech of 1851. To be sure, it’s only in the fictionalized Frances Dana Gage version of the speech that any of this non-standard dialect is to be found in the first place. But, here, we’re concerned with the work that the social-structural theorist is having to do in order to undermine the practice of the practitioner, and that’s why we’re so interested in exploring the uses of the quite bogus dialect which Frances Dana Gage, Campbell’s preferred source in this context, has sutured to Sojourner Truth’s statement.

It’s not precisely that the dialect saturating the Gage version is “degrading” (13). For while Campbell finds this language to rehearse, and to be “deformed” by, the “argot of blackface minstrel shows and the racist caricatures of writers such as Thomas Dixon and Thomas Nelson Page,” she adds that even degradation and deformation can be virtues in disguise. For a degrading and deformed language would help us “imagine,” and in several registers at once, the marginalization, and then — on this account — the subjectivity, identity, and agency that we ought to be associating with Sojourner Truth and her “slave sisters” (14).

Yet the difficulty is that, on Campbell’s own admission, the non-standard dialect cannot be authentic in the first place. Researchers have combed through Sojourner Truth’s various communications to reconstruct what becomes a veritable catalog of speaking styles, its components ranging from “standard English with some oddities of syntax” to a “guttural Dutch accent,” the “broken English of white illiterates,” and an array of “elements derived from African and African American oral cultures” (12-13). So the historical Sojourner Truth, who was actually from upstate New York, might have spoken in a certain dialectal mélange, or perhaps a sort of serial dialect involving some code-switching. But, as Campbell concedes, our exemplary rhetorical agent would emphatically not have spoken as we hear her speaking in Frances Dana Gage’s rendition. Indeed, Gage created her fictionalized version of the famous speech “while living on the South Carolina Sea Islands,” and she misrepresented Sojourner Truth’s dialect by conflating it with the dialect she heard there (12, 18).

So to harness Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency, as Campbell does, to what isn’t Sojourner Truth’s dialect, anyway, and to place so much emphasis on this same irrelevant dialect (as, on the one side, “degrading” and “deformed” and, on the other side, authentically expressive of the speaker’s socially-determined identity) is clearly an optional maneuver. It’s justifiable not so much on the basis of any historical evidence, as on the basis of a theoretical perspective defining rhetorical agency itself as the manifestation of just the sort of interiority proper to a minion of the state.

It’s in this very connection that we’re reminded of the assemblage-theoretical premise that the investigator, too, is always among those who are producing the assemblage to begin with. For Campbell divulges that, once upon a time, she’d had been confronted with a problem of editorial craftwork that must have been a problem of
theoretical production as well. She’d had to decide whether to retain, or to else to excise, Gage’s interpolated (degrading, deformed, inauthentic) dialect:

When the text of Gage’s version of Truth’s speech was published in *Man Cannot Speak For Her*, I removed the dialect that smothers the speech with racist stereotypes. . . I now believe that it was wrong to do so, although it could not and should not have been published as originally written without the kind of analysis done here. (14)

To be sure, with respect to Campbell in that alternative role as editor, we should certainly recognize the challenge with which she must have been grappling. Yet, with respect to Campbell’s present role as a theorist of rhetorical agency, we cannot very well say that she’s simply attending to the evidence as given, that she’s merely inspecting the materials she’s inherited from elsewhere. To the contrary, she is demonstrating, and all before our very eyes, that she is still engaged in generating the materials that she’s ostensibly uncovering.

For Campbell is quite obviously manufacturing a justification for framing rhetorical agency in terms of the identity, subjectivity, interiority proper to the hapless creature of the state. And, in this instance, she’s doing so by inviting us to accept, as evidence of Sojourner Truth’s subjection, this made-up, if marginalized-sounding dialect that is supposed, by extension, to be symbolizing the subjection of rhetorical agents generally. After all, it’s Campbell, not someone else, who is opting, in her own essay on rhetorical agency, to treat as evidentiary a certain dialect which she herself acknowledges to be bogus. That’s a perfectly good example of how a social-structural theorist can go about reducing all of rhetorical agency to rhetorical subjectivity, to the interiority of a speaker filling out the structural role, occupying the subject position, that she’s been allotted within a “community” conceptualized on the model of the totalitarian state.

And it’s Campbell, knowing full well that Gage has fabricated the cartoonish language later attributed to Sojourner Truth, who is deploying the cartoonish language itself as evidence for the broader claim that agency is agency for precisely the reason that it is always already subjection:

agency is perverse: the stereotypes that gave rise to penning the speech in this demeaning argot ironically give the text special force . . . [manifesting] so painfully the terrible costs of slavery—the loss of literacy, the loss of education, the loss of access to public dialogue that, even when overcome, is constrained by being rendered in language that ridicules and demeans. (14)

Even so, we should note that this is actually to clarify that Sojourner Truth is not the only rhetorical agent in town — that Karlyn Kohrs Campbell can be a rhetorical agent, too, right along with the “old, illiterate, former slave woman” whose activity she’s studying (9). It’s just that Campbell happens also to be acting in the interest of shoring up the social-structural perspective on rhetorical agency, a perspective according to which subjectivity is so thoroughly constrained, so utterly determined, that it’s a miracle if anybody ever speaks at all, let alone if she’s heard over the noise of her own identity.

Yet the miracle here involves considerably more than the historical speaker’s participation in a woman’s rights convention of 1851. Let’s consider, even if Campbell doesn’t put the point this way, that Sojourner Truth’s very rationale for speaking ought, on this view, to be generated by all the same factors as are folded into the biographical
passage cited earlier. There, the rhetorical agent, instantiated by the young Isabella, has been described as necessarily produced through one or another form of socially-enforced “trauma” (8). If not for her marginalization (her exclusion, illiteracy, powerlessness, dispossession, victimization), the speaker — this miraculously expressive chunk of structure — would not be speaking in the first place. Therefore, all of those various impositions by the collectivity must deserve the credit not only for creating the speaker as a subject, but also for creating whatever she might possibly have to say. And then, by extension, any other rhetorical agent, and not only Sojourner Truth, must be an agent by virtue of none other than the subjugation that has constituted her to begin with.

It oughtn’t, of course, to seem exceptionable for a theorist to make an argument along those lines. Everybody ought already to understand agency to be just as productive of agents as agents are of agency. And then, if it’s true that subjectivity is an aspect of agency, it ought to make some sense for the theorist to argue that subjectivity might be just as productive of subjects as subjects are of subjectivity. But, in the social-structural landscape, where the agency of the agent and the subjectivity of the agent reduce to the self-same substance, there’s no discernible difference between agency-as-empowerment and agency-as-disempowerment. Thus to conflate the agent with the structural subject (i.e., the political subject, the subject of the social, and so on) is to insist that agency itself be conceptualized as nothing other than a form of subjection, and so much so that only a miracle could explain how speaking might ever make things otherwise than they are.

For the social-structural precepts put together would tend to dictate that the group be constituted as prior to its membership, so that the former could then “constitutively” be reproduced by the latter. The thrust of this social-structural view might be captured as follows. First, there ought already to be a community, a more or less unified body politic, and it ought already to be characterized by its own, locally-authorized ways of speaking. This is because the community itself is what “confers identities related to gender, race, class, and the like on its members and by so doing” constitutively “determines not only what is considered to be ‘true,’ but also who can speak and with what force” (Campbell 9). Second, all of the possible spokespersons ought to be constituted through the community’s locally-authorized ways of speaking, as this is just how the rhetorical agent would be “brought into being by discourse” (Barnett 7). Third, the rhetorical agent ought to speak in precisely such a manner as to be rehearsing the “sacrificial” discourse through which she has been constituted in the first place (Baliff, qtd. in Campbell 3). As a result, rhetorical agency ought, in principle, to be the perpetuation (rather than the transformation, much less the establishment) of the initial collectivity, just as it ought to be the perpetuation of the “identities” and locally-authorized ways of speaking that the collectivity already authorizes.

An Ineffectual Agency

Thus the social-structural perspective, ostensibly so “constitutive,” actually illustrates the workings of what I’d call a social-and-linguistic loop. Rhetorical agency is, in this view, a circuit, with some socially-enforced structure at the one end, some socially-constrained subjectivity at the other, and some socially-determined signification in the middle, connecting the two ends by filling up the conceptual space between. But this means that rhetorical agents can now be theorized as merely operationalizing the constitutive forces responsible for creating the rhetorical agents to begin with. Indeed, that must be roughly what Campbell has in mind when she writes that “agency is constitutive of collectivities . . . just as collectivities are constitutive of agency, however
paradoxical that may seem” (5). For, on Campbell’s social-structural account, it would certainly be paradoxical to think that collectivities could somehow be brought into being by speakers. Instead, the experts on the processes of discursive constitution, ranging from Althusser to Bailiff, Bourdieu, and Butler, have long since ascertained the situation to be exactly the other way around, with speakers — in principle — continually reproducing the collectivities to which they owe their social existence in the first place.

However, in this investigation, it’s not social-structural theory in isolation, but, rather, in conjunction with Sojourner Truth’s speech that’s to exemplify the workings of rhetorical agency. So we should move on to consider what would happen to such an artifact were it actually to be read in rigorous keeping with the paradigm which Karlyn Kohrs Campbell is promoting. What would happen, more than likely, is that the speech would prove not to be manifesting very much rhetorical agency at all, and this would be with reference not only to the constituency for whom Sojourner Truth would appear to be speaking, but also with reference to the constituency she’d appear to be speaking against.

First, according to Campbell’s social-structural logic, the speech ought to be doing next to nothing for just that audience with which the speaker herself would seem the most closely identified. Again, according to Campbell’s own (constitutive and critical-constitutive) argument, to speak at all would automatically be to recirculate the discourse prevalent within one’s given, pre-established, state-like community, for which reason the rhetorical agent would have to be a subject even before she could be a speaker. So the social-structural theorist, in this case, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, has now to cast around (a) for a candidate community to which the rhetorical agent might already belong, and (b) for a candidate discourse which the rhetorical agent might already be authorized to employ. Thus Campbell decides that the requisite community would be that already made up of, and the requisite discourse that already proper to, the disempowered African-Americans and women of the day, the disenfranchised persons with whom Sojourner Truth could already be affiliated by virtue of her race and gender.

Yet what we should recognize is that, if she really were speaking for a constituency unified by its own discourse, our exemplary rhetorical agent would not be able to say anything that could matter. For, if she were merely rehearsing the tenets to which the members of her community already subscribed, and in terms to which they already acceded, then it would be quite as if she wasn’t speaking at all. The unified community of African-Americans and women would already agree that African-Americans and women should certainly be granted their rights, and then whatever Sojourner Truth might say in support of this claim could not make any difference, not so far as they were concerned.

Second, if the speech were read in rigorous keeping with Campbell’s social-structural paradigm, then it ought to be construed as doing even less for the speaker’s ostensible opponents than for her ostensible supporters. Let’s consider that, in a social-and-linguistic view such as Campbell has been developing, speech itself ought to be the automatic reinstitution of the “unavoidable” condition of the subject (Campbell 3, 12). This, again, ought to be a subject constituted within the prevailing discourse, articulated to the prevailing social logic, and positioned in keeping with just the identities available at the time. So, in a model where rhetorical agency is membership within the status quo, somebody speaking for the minoritarian position oughtn’t actually be able to out-shout the majoritarians. To do that, the exemplary rhetorical agent would have to speak in so miraculous a manner as, avoiding the unavoidable, to convert her own, marginalized identity into a source of empowerment against the forces precluding such empowerment.
in the first place.

For there ought, circa 1851, to be a lot of thoroughly hegemonic (ideological, sexist, racist, patriarchal) thinking against which any radically oppositional speaker would have to compete. And, no matter how fervently such a speaker might be seeking to assert her own identity, and/or to remind her constituency of its subjection under the present dispensation, all of the hegemonic thinking put together ought, by definition, to preponderate within the status quo. Thus, for someone like Sojourner Truth to speak in just such a manner as to shore up the collective subjectivity of her own minority group oughtn’t, in principle, to make any difference — not from the perspective of the dominant contingent. For the latter would remain dominant, anyway, constituted as such within the prevailing discourse, and articulated as such within the prevailing social logic.

Of course, this is not how Campbell chooses to portray the situation. According to her, the Sojourner Truth speech exemplifies rhetorical agency precisely in that it positions the already-unified collectivity of the marginalized in resistance against the already-unified collectivity of the dominant. That, in a nutshell, is Campbell’s quite representative social-structural explanation of rhetorical agency. It’s the expression of an antagonism between fully-formed (albeit discursively constructed) subjectivities. So we’re invited to think that even here, here in this particularly dramatic example, rhetorical agency must be all sour grapes and ressentiment. For it’s instantiated, as appears, in the speaker’s urging the marginalized to thumb their collective nose in resistance against the dominant. And that’s just as we should expect from a theoretical perspective where the relatively more powerful subjectivities and/or discourses ought forever to be keeping their relatively weaker counterparts at bay, constituting them, again and again, as insignificant.

In short, to read the Sojourner Truth speech in rigorous keeping with the social-structural paradigm would leave us sensing that none of the claims, themes, images layered into this artifact could, very likely, make any special difference for either those auditors already on the speaker’s side, or for those auditors already disposed to reject her claim. Yet Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, who has already insisted that rhetorical agency be viewed as coextensive with subjectivity, is now suggesting, in addition, that it can be viewed as a capacity through which a marginalized subjectivity can miraculously overcome such social forces as, in theory, would be much more powerful than itself. For Campbell is asking us to envision (not actually to believe, but still to “imagine” as believable) the possibility that an “old, illiterate, former slave woman,” someone who “embodies the controversial link between abolitionism and woman’s rights agitation,” could not just confront, but indeed triumph over “religious male authorities in a scene of great tension and hostility,” thereby advancing the cause of just those marginalized, disempowered, disenfranchised persons who are subjugated within the prevailing social logic, anyway (9, 14).

However, that’s not an especially cogent account of the manner in which rhetorical transaction would seem to work. So, if it’s the case, as on the social-structural reckoning itself, that, in all probability, neither the position of those already constituted as the speaker’s supporters, nor the position of those already constituted as her opponents would be altered by anything that the speaker might actually say, then we should consider that all of the claims, themes, and images bundled up into Sojourner Truth’s speech ought to be there, actually, for the benefit of yet another set of listeners. They ought to be there
for the benefit of her *undecided* auditors, those who haven’t, as yet (at least not in connection with this particular debate), been constituted either way.

**Subtracting from Rhetorical Practice**

Though it might sound a bit instrumentalist to say so, the speaker must be thinking to create a coalition between her supporters and the as-yet undecided auditors, and to do so as a practicable way of swelling the pool of subjectivities in favor of extending equal rights under the law. After all, if the balance of power is somehow to shift because of the speech, and if nothing the speaker can say is likely to matter so much either to her supporters or to her opponents, then it seems reasonable to conclude that the speech must be addressed most of all to the auditors still in the middle. Therefore, from now on (in the remainder of the study as a whole, and not just while we’re here in the social-structural landscape of agency), we’ll simplify matters by positing that Sojourner Truth is speaking mainly to the undecided, to the auditors in the middle, such that not only “I am a woman’s rights” but also all the rest of her speech (comprising *gender*, *race*, *mind*, and so on) is always — maybe not exclusively, but primarily — for them.

True, this would be to assume there can actually be an undecided contingent, and the problem is that the social-structural perspective does tend to militate against that sort of assumption. After all, if everybody is already the subject of a “community,” and a community of the kind which “determines not only what is considered to be ‘true,’ but also who can speak and with what force,” then there wouldn’t appear to be very much theoretical justification for ambiguity, ambivalence, or indecision (3). But, even supposing that there is, in fact, an undecided contingent, we will also discover that to read the Sojourner Truth speech in keeping with the social-structural perspective is to conclude that the speech couldn’t be exercising very much rhetorical agency with respect to the undecided contingent, either. That’s as we’ll see when we turn to the hypothetical, if now-triangulated artifact itself — in other words, to Sojourner Truth’s thesis-like “I am a woman’s rights,” together with all the salient themes and images we’ve determined to be accompanying that central claim.

For, at least so far as concerns the undecided auditors, every term in “I am a woman’s rights” would start disappearing if it really did have to be read from the social-structural, or social-and-linguistic perspective on rhetorical agency, where rhetorical agency is coextensive with the interiority proper to the subject of the state. The “I” would refer to a black person, and therefore to someone who, at a time when most of the African-Americans are enslaved (and most of the rest politically invisible), is practically a non-entity, not at all someone for an undecided auditor to identify with. By the same token, the “woman’s” would refer to a merely subaltern contingent, while the “rights” would refer to a freightless counter-factual. For, in the historical setting for the speech, it’s the very reality of women’s rights (to say nothing of African Americans’ rights) that is still at issue, still the unknown quantity. And then, if the majoritarian contingent is anywhere near as hostile as Gage reports, and as Campbell continually insinuates, so much the worse for the tainted solidarity resulting from Sojourner Truth’s identification, marginalized as she is, with all the rest of the women’s rights activists, outliers as they are, too. Thus the various social-structural tenets are already, in effect, to stipulate that pretty much everything going into the speech (all of it there to develop “I am a woman’s
“Rights” as its kernel or thesis) will have to be squandered on a project lacking in agency from the perspective of the undecided auditors.

By now, we’ve already attended to the manner in which not only the thesis, but two of the supporting elements of the Sojourner Truth speech would have to function in a place like the social-structural landscape of agency. For, in noting the likely effacement of every term in “I am a woman’s rights,” we have already considered the likely effacement of at least two of the themes folded into the argument. The two elements in question are race and gender. After all, what appears to be happening is that two marginalized identities or subjectivities, one that of an African-American, the other that of a woman, are subtracting from, rather than adding to, the speaker’s rhetorical agency. But we’ll continue along these lines, anyway, gradually folding some of the remaining features of the speech (particularly mind, work, biblical precept, and the curious pint-and-quart analogy) into the social-structural paradigm as well.

As readers of her 2005 essay will know, Campbell does insist upon rehearsing almost every last nuance in a fiction, deriving from the account of Frances Dana Gage, about the way in which Sojourner Truth (who exemplifies the rhetorical agent, who has always already been both a woman and an African-American, and who shows up out of nowhere at the women’s rights convention of 1851) simply obliterates all the resistance on the part of her hostile, and theoretically indefeasible opponents (Campbell 9). And, as Campbell herself divulges, what’s difficult about this scenario is that the speaker — this figure who bears precisely the wrong markers of identity — is managing to rout her enemies by recycling the very significations that ought to be prevent her from accomplishing anything at all. Even so, as we glean from reading Campbell between the lines, there is available, in contemporary rhetorical theory, a quite reputable explanation as to how even an “old, illiterate, former slave woman” can exercise agency in the face of a racist, sexist, and generally oppressive form of sociality (Campbell 9). It’s that the exemplary rhetorical agent can harness the constitutive power of the discourses already circulating within her collectivity (5).

For, as Campbell indicates, the Sojourner Truth speech is situated within a set of nineteenth-century “principles” or commonplaces (“Agency” 14). These betoken what Campbell points out to have been the then-progressive discourses of (on the one side) natural rights, abolitionism, and women’s rights, and (on the other side) the then-conservative discourses of traditional religious authority, of legalized and monetized racism, and of patriarchal, “elitist conceptions” of “true womanhood” (Campbell 10, 14). So, according to Campbell’s reasoning, what must be happening in 1851 is that the speaker is seeing to it that the progressive discourses come to exert even more authority than do the conservative discourses. And it is marvelous indeed to think that the speaker could possibly exercise rhetorical agency by invoking just those forward-looking commonplaces which would already be held at bay in the operations of a backward-looking social dispensation. For, as I’ll try to explain next, in its departing from the ideologies then predominant within the status quo, a minoritarian discourse of natural rights would appear replete with liabilities, not assets, for anybody deploying it.

In supporting her argument about the communal basis of agency, Campbell tells us that “without the communities represented by abolitionism and woman’s rights, the natural rights principles underlying the arguments as reported in the newspaper accounts and incorporated into Gage’s versions of the speech would not have been available to
Truth” (14). The point is not that the speaker becomes an agent by appealing to natural rights; it’s that she becomes an agent by attaching herself to an already-approved discourse, which, in this case, just happens to be that of natural rights. That’s understandable enough, if discourses are proprietary to communities, and if communities themselves determine not only what’s considered to be “true,” but also “who can speak and with what force” (Campbell 3). At any rate, on Campbell’s account, it must be by dint of parroting the principles already acceptable to her target audience that our exemplary rhetorical agent has “responded to all of the major arguments (biological, theological, and sociological) against woman’s rights” (Campbell 12).

On this view, the speaker would be invoking natural rights in order to argue that the rights of women and African-Americans ought certainly to be added into the set of civil, legal, or statutory rights from which they are currently missing. Considering that the speech would, on Campbell’s own account, be placing the natural rights in opposition to the civil, statutory, or legal rights, we can then say, for short, that the speaker must, in theory, be exercising agency by elevating the minoritarian discourse of natural rights over the majoritarian discourse of legal rights. And to show how dubious is this (nominally “constitutive”) picture in which discourses are sources of agency simply because they’re collectively authorized, I’d like to critique the claim that for someone to invoke a locally-accepted discourse could convert her into a rhetorical agent, just like that.

For, if we reflect that the social-structural perspective would have to register the discourses in question as hierarchically disposed (i.e., within a sociality which itself is modeled on the state), we’ll begin to see that a discourse which is only locally normative cannot be any match for a discourse which is the all more globally normative than that. Indeed, according to the social-structural reckoning as such, the result ought to be that even a hypothetically undecided audience would become far more likely to side with the status quo than with a speaker who is deploying arguments which, though they might be efficacious for her own “community,” are all too easily recuperable into the logic organizing the society at large.

To be sure, the concept of natural rights has been defined in some extremely different ways, its formulation in the modern era drawing on ideas from Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Hegel, and many others. But the doctrine of natural rights most obviously at issue in the Sojourner Truth archive would be that reflecting the Jeffersonian division of rights into those which are alienable and those which are not, the latter including the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. One wouldn’t, however, have to be a constitutional scholar to know, perhaps even as well as any member of Sojourner Truth’s historical audience, that these ostensibly inalienable rights of the mid-nineteenth century exist simultaneously with their legalized effacement, not only in the practice of slavery, but also in the disenfranchisement of women.

Simply on the face of it, then, we have an inequality between the discourse of natural rights and the discourse of civil or legal or statutory rights. And, very much like the historical audience, we sense that this is an outright imbalance rather than some sort of stalemate. For just anyone can look around and see that reality itself, circa 1851, is weighing in on the side of the state, whose actions have long since verified that even natural rights can be brought under legal control. Still, since we’re asking after rhetorical agency, rather than social, or political, or some other kind of agency, we’d do best to determine even more accurately what role this question of natural rights could actually be
playing in the Sojourner Truth speech, this speech which is our case study for grasping the manner in which rhetorical transaction pretty much always has to work.

As we’ve discovered, through a process of triangulation, this is a speech in which rhetorical agency, while it will certainly have to do with race and gender, will have at least as much to do with the other contents of the speech as well. So, the question for us, now that we’re in the social-structural landscape of agency (where discourses, while binding upon subjectivities, are constitutive only to the extent allowable by law) is that as to the manner in which rhetorical agency would ever arise, even in theory, from the juxtaposition of (a) the minoritarian discourse of natural rights, (b) the thematic cluster comprising race, gender, work, mind, and biblical precept, and (c) the majoritarian discourse of legal rights.

Now, according to Campbell, the speaker in this particular study is warranting her claim for the expansion of legal rights by adducing a number of examples which draw on personal experience, scriptural precedent, and just plain common sense. All of these are then aimed at showing that women like Sojourner Truth are, as it were, ontologically or “naturally” equal to men (for which reason, surely, they should be granted their missing legal rights as well.) Yet these are precisely the sorts of examples that ought actually to be effaced under a perspective where somebody would become a rhetorical agent, first, by virtue of her “unavoidable” subjection under the social dispensation more generally, and, second, by virtue of her rehearsing precisely those commonplaces that only a local, pre-constituted audience would be likely to find intelligible (Campbell 3).

According to Campbell, the reason for which Sojourner Truth so carefully “details the heavy fieldwork she has done” is to demonstrate that women are physically capable of accomplishing every bit as much as men (Campbell 10). Thus, in order to establish that she, exemplifying all the rest of the disenfranchised, is certainly entitled to the legal rights available to others, the speaker shows that she has already proven herself qualified to fill out the social role of just any manual laborer. Yet it’s difficult to see why this, from the perspective of an undecided audience, should be an argument constituting the disenfranchised as entitled to the full range of legal rights. Instead, it should constitute them as entitled to continue doing all the heavy fieldwork.

But then, as Campbell would have it, Sojourner Truth also cites some scripture to demonstrate that the equality of women with men (if not, indeed, the superiority of the former to the latter) is part of the very fabric of the universe — for which reason their equality, if already protected by the cosmos, should certainly be protected by the state as well. For this, on Campbell’s account, must be the point not only of the speaker’s referring to “the Virgin birth, which presumably is a religious belief accepted by her opponents,” but also of her referring to the “power” of Eve, a power which even her “opponents,” the racists-and-patriarchs, would recognize, considering that they’d be none other than the “traditional male religious authorities” to begin with (Campbell 9, 11). So, on this view, at least the disenfranchised women are being constituted as entitled to legal rights, and all on the basis that they are affiliated with Eve and Mary, to whom the racist-and-patriarchal opponents would owe, respectively, their existence and their salvation. But, then again, it’s not so clear that Eve and Mary actually have any legal rights at this time, in which case it’s not so clear that invoking them would, by association, constitute any of the other women as entitled to legal rights, either. Therefore, on this count, too, the
hypothetically undecided audience still wouldn’t have any compelling reason to side with
the speaker, rather than with the status quo.

Finally, as Campbell argues, Sojourner Truth constitutively clinches the deal by
emphasizing her own intelligence. The idea, or so one infers, would be that women like
Sojourner Truth, in addition to being entitled to legal rights for the reason that they are
qualified to perform manual labor, and also on the basis of their genealogical affiliation
with Eve and the Virgin Mary, are further entitled to legal rights because of their
cleverness. And, true enough, it is indeed in connection with the problem of mind that the
curious image of the pint and the quart does come into play, as Campbell takes
considerable care to emphasize.

One hardly needs to argue for the importance attributed, in rhetorical studies more
generally, to tropes — to vivacious imagery, enargeia, figures of speech, comparisons of
all sorts, conceptual metaphors, frames, and all the rest. For such features of technique
have always been held to account for rhetoric’s storied power, now commonly labeled
“constitutive,” to help interlocutors see themselves, their situations, their problems,
differently than before. So we might well expect a perspective such as the social-
structural, so closely associated with critical-constitutive and just plain constitutive
theories of discursive construction, to be particularly helpful for explaining the operations
of this metaphor of the pint and the quart, whose importance is highlighted in both the
Gage and the Robinson versions of Sojourner Truth’s speech from 1851.

Yet Campbell, for all her social-and-linguistic presuppositions, seems to have
inordinate difficulty explaining how this particular figure would work. She even ends up
suggesting that the analogy might, after all, have a little less to do with highlighting
women’s intelligence than with urging auditors to support the expansion of legal rights
for the sake of seeming charitable. But, here, in any case, is how we find the figure
presented in Gage, that is, in Campbell’s preferred if often quite dubious source on the
details of Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency:

“Den dey talks ‘bout dis ting in de head; what dis dey call it?” (“Intellect,”
whispered some one near.) “Dat’s it, honey. What’s dat got to do wid
womin’s rights or nigger’s rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and
yourn holds a quart, wouldn’t ye be mean not to let me have my little half-
measure full?” (qtd. in Campbell 10)

Of course, the metaphor of the pint and the quart also appears, rather more intelligibly, in
the Robinson version of the speech, and it’s conceivable that Campbell, were she to take
that other version into consideration, might discover even this figure of speech to be
contributing to, or manifesting, a rhetorical agency that isn’t, after all, coextensive with
rhetorical subjectivity.

Under the circumstances, though, this is all that Campbell can find to say about
the pint and the quart as a constitutive, metaphorically-validated way of elevating the
discourse of natural rights over the discourse of legal rights:

The implied argument against women’s rights [has been] that women lack
the mental capacity for political and economic rights. [The speaker] rejects
the relevance of this issue to civil rights for women or African Americans.
Note that her words presuppose natural rights principles, that rights are not
conferred but inhere in persons. The case of equality of opportunity is
made with a vivid figurative analogy — even if my cup holds less than
yours, are you so mean you won’t give me my little half measure? (Campbell 10)

Consequently, with respect to “mind,” Campbell’s social-structural perspective on agency leads her to conclude that the speaker must (constitutively) be deploying the resources of language as a way of helping the auditors see that the natural rights of the disenfranchised do justify their being granted legal rights as well, even if that requires embarrassing the audience in the process.

Yes, but let’s think about what would be happening here — and on no less than Campbell’s own social-structural account. The metaphor of the pint and the quart would, in effect, be separating the discourse of natural rights from the discourse of civil rights, so that the two discourses were now talking past one another. For if the point were only, as Campbell assumes, to remind the auditors that naturally-occurring gifts such as intellect have nothing to do with civil rights, then all that the clever analogy between the pint and the quart could possibly accomplish would be to valorize a division, a veritable chasm, between natural rights and social rights. And, in that case, exactly as Campbell herself concedes, the intelligence of women and/or of black people would prove irrelevant to the question of social, legal, or civil emancipation. As a result, the hypothetically undecided audience would be left with even less reason to side with the speaker than ever before, since (on this account) the speaker herself would be arguing that natural rights have nothing to do with legal rights, anyway.

Thus it turns out that, on the social-structural account, the metaphor of the pint and the quart isn’t so very much “constitutive,” after all. Instead of creating a new way of seeing (such that those auditors subscribing to legal rights could find themselves connected with those subscribing to natural rights), the “vivid figurative analogy” seems to be inviting everyone to return to the shelter of the discrete discourses, the old ways of seeing, to which they’ve respectively been adhering all along (Campbell 10).

Yet the question remains, certainly if we ourselves are not social-structural theorists, as to how the exemplary rhetorical agent could effect any social change at all, if she’s limited to recycling a discourse which is marginalized to begin with. Again, anybody circa 1851 could simply look around and see that, while it might perhaps be true that metaphysical rights can’t be conferred or withheld, it’s absolutely true that legal rights can, in which case there’s no reason (at least, not any, as it were, structural reason) to link the one kind of right with the other.

For what’s difficult about the state of affairs that Campbell is sketching out is that, while natural rights might just naturally inhere in persons, these would be accessible only from within a discourse constituting them as naturally inherent. But if it’s the case that communities themselves determine what’s considered to be true), then it would appear that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the minoritarian discourse of natural rights ought to be decidedly less normative, true, or forceful than the majoritarian discourse of legal rights. Thus, on the view which Campbell herself is promulgating, it oughtn’t really to do Sojourner Truth any good at all to pose a question like “are you so mean you won’t give me my little half measure?” (Campbell 10). Very likely, the answer forthcoming from the constitutive discourse of legal rights (that is, from the discourse of inequality) would be, “But of course we’re not that mean! Whoever said you couldn’t have your little half measure?” In other words, the answer would probably be that your intelligence doesn’t have anything to do with your legal rights, anyway.
Besides, under a perspective where discourses are constitutive not as they please, but always in keeping with the prevailing social logic, the discourse of natural rights could quite readily be trumped by the discourse of legal rights. More specifically, as I’ll now try to explain, in a theoretical scenario where alternative discourses (or, in effect, competing identities) would simply find their proper places on the ladder of normativity, anyone at all could retain the natural, metaphysical, even God-given right to be identical with whatever she already was — strong, intelligent, industrious, religious, disenfranchised, or anything else.

Indeed, particularly according to the social-structural perspective, it oughtn’t matter that natural rights inhere in persons, as the discourse of legal rights would already be there to constitute the personhood of persons to begin with. For example, in nineteenth century America, it’s quite within the purview of the social contract to determine the actual percentage of a person that each structural or political subject can count for. So, in 1851, at the very moment when Sojourner Truth is speaking, any given slave will count for no more than three-fifths of a whole individual. And then Sojourner Truth’s undecided listeners might very well decide, not that it’d be only fair to grant the fractional person the same legal rights as the whole individual, but, to the contrary, that it’d be only fair to pro-rate and/or discount the legal rights of the fractional person accordingly. That’s why, on the social-structural reckoning, the metaphor of the pint and the quart, drawing to attention the relation between natural rights and legal rights, ought actually to be read as implying the disappearance of the former into the latter.

For there needn’t be any self-evident contradiction, from the perspective of Sojourner Truth’s undecided auditors (let alone from the perspective of the nineteenth-century status quo), between the ontology of natural rights and the ontology of legal rights. As a matter of fact, were we to reflect on the most salient of the natural rights, those to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, why, we would see that the discourse of legal rights could readily accommodate them all, so that any further arguments on behalf of, say, slaves or women might actually be superfluous. The right to life could certainly be protected under the law — if it weren’t already — and even with regard to the merely fractional person. As for the right to liberty, the law would in fact entitle everybody, including the disenfranchised, to every bit of the liberty to which it actually entitled them. Meanwhile, considering that there have always been, for different kinds of persons, different sources of happiness (duty, service, self-sacrifice, to name a few), it’s reasonable to conclude that the law might already be protecting the right to happiness as well. Indeed, the more promising option would probably be not to join the activists, but, to the contrary, to leave well enough alone, as if to say, “To you, Sojourner Truth, clever, old, illiterate, former slave woman as you are, it’s congratulations for a job so very well done — and under such trying circumstances, too!”

What Else Is Wrong with This Paradigm?

We might already have concluded that Campbell’s social-structural perspective (where rhetorical agency is, essentially, the interiority of the hapless creature of the state, where discourses are constitutive only in keeping with the dictates of the community, and where the marginalized subjectivities, identities, and structural roles have always to be trumped by their majoritarian counterparts) must actually be way of theorizing speech
as hardly conducing to any social change at all. Yet, in adopting an assemblage-theoretical approach, we do have to try to understand the processes through which the constituents of rhetorical agency are being constructed, manufactured, produced — and, in this particular instance, all in just such a manner as merely to be reinforcing the social conditions that are presently in place.

An efficacious way for us to proceed might be by noting that the social-structural viewpoint, in which all of rhetorical agency comes to seem indistinguishable from rhetorical subjectivity, is actually being assembled (in this instance, by actors including Althusser, Baliff, Bourdieu, Butler, and Campbell) in a manner quite contradictory to the tenets of the assemblage-theoretical approach that we ourselves are adopting. As we know, assemblage theory (in the variant I’ve proposed) holds that collectivities are built out of components — resources, agents, participants in general — that are irreducible to any of the structures in which they might become implicated. Although there are these “terms,” and although there are some “relations” (such as structural relations) among the terms, the relations remain “external” to the terms, and the terms remain capable of migrating into and out of the relations (Baugh 36; Colebrook 5). So an assemblage-theoretical perspective is to leave open the possibility that a term like “subjectivity,” though it might, in some respects be shaped by the communal structures into which it’s folded, might also, in some other respects, be able to exceed the constraints imposed by the structures themselves.

In the social-structural perspective, by contrast, the terms are always claustrated. They are internal to their relations, ineluctably bound by them, brought into being within their confines. That’s what it means to argue (as Campbell does, with the support of her social-structural allies) that speakers are miniaturized chunks of social structure, creatures of a collectivity that constitutes, subjectifies them, as by determining, on the one side, what’s considered to be “true,” and, on the other side, “who can speak and with what force” (Campbell 3). So rhetorical subjectivity is being constructed as if, arising from within a closed, self-contained system (as I say, a social-and-linguistic loop), it remains the only theoretically tenable source of rhetorical agency.

**A Chimerical Agency for a Colossal Agent**

We find that the social-structural perspective can’t, in fact, bring to light any very cogent link between rhetoric and genuine social change, since it can’t help anyone see how speech would ever facilitate the production of any alternative subjectivities. All the possible subjectivities will appear to have been formed ahead of time, and strictly in keeping with the dictates of the authoritarian, state-like community. And that this is not just a theoretical setback, but a practical setback, too, becomes clear when we consider that Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (who, along with her social-structural allies, has been conceptualizing most of the efficacy out of rhetoric, referring this efficacy primarily to the internalized social logic which rhetoric merely reproduces) has finally to justify rhetorical transaction by resorting to some theoretical fiat. For Campbell is obviously cognizant of the (defeatist) ramifications of the very perspective she espouses. And she has then to posit a chimerical rhetorical agency, together with a colossal rhetorical agent to operationalize it. That’s the only option left for theorizing the connection between
rhetoric and genuine social change, at least, under circumstances where, in principle, there oughtn’t to be any such connection at all.

So, to assure subsequent researchers that rhetoric does, after all, have its own role, its own task, even where theory leads to exactly the opposite inference, Campbell invites students to continue trusting in the constitutive powers of “alchemy” (13). For example, regardless that Frances Dana Gage’s version of the Sojourner Truth speech might be, in many ways, quite bogus, we can still pretend that it isn’t, and all so that we can cling to what we at least “imagine” to be the “originary moment,” at least choose to interpret as “the play of ideas,” the “metaphors,” the “interaction between Truth and her opponents” (Campbell 14). We just have to wish the rhetorical agent into being. For Campbell really does develop an argument along those lines. She says that rhetorical agency can inhere — if only we’d like it to do so — in any signs at all, even when these appear in the form of a “fictive recreation” by one Frances Dana Gage. In this case (serving as an example for other cases as well), we can derive, from Gage’s fabrication, a chimerical Sojourner Truth to serve “as an icon and symbol for her slave sisters” (13). Thus we can attribute some rhetorical agency to this impossible speaker’s “words as we imagine her to have spoken them” — regardless that we, at the same time, have every reason to believe that the “words” belong not actually to Sojourner Truth, but to a simulacrum constructed, twelve years after the fact, by an “ambitious white woman” (13).

It’s as if we can now have the best of both worlds, as by juxtaposing a critical-constitutive rhetoric with a constitutive rhetoric, and then proclaiming that rhetorical agency is currently to be found under whichever of these we happen to prefer. If we’d like to privilege the critical-constitutive rhetoric, then we can affirm that the rhetorical agent must be none other than the subjected minion of the community — the seamlessly totalitarian state which produces all the marginalized interiorities by ruling on whatever is to be considered true, and by stipulating exactly who is to speak and with what force. But if we’d like to privilege the constitutive rhetoric proper, then we can affirm that the rhetorical agent is no longer a disempowered structural subject, but, instead, a colossal individual who is inherently, authentically capable of bending the social to her will, and all of it just like that. For instance, she can come into view whenever the marginalized subaltern spins around, turning into “a very tall, strong woman of great presence with a commanding voice in speech and song,” someone with great “wit . . . skill at repartee . . . command of metaphor, and . . . courage in facing hostile audiences” Campbell 9).

Certainly, we ought to be able to read the rhetorical agent in keeping with whichever of the ways we prefer. For, as we know from Althusser, Baliff, Butler, Bourdieu, the right to speak already belongs to the structural subject, and to the structural subject alone. And, then again, as we know from the quite bogus account provided by Frances Dana Gage, this same structural subject (excluded, illiterate, marginalized, dispossessed, or whatever) can also speak in the very face (let’s say, the teeth) of the social, and even then get to be heard.

The problem for Campbell, though, is that to be able to deploy all these social-structural tenets against the grain (so that she can appeal to a simulated Sojourner Truth who is, optionally, theorizable under either a “critical-constitutive,” or else under a just plain “constitutive” view of rhetorical functionality) also requires that she do something decisively to undermine the mountain of concrete evidence presented by historians such as Nell Irvin Painter. All of this evidence is to suggest, or so it seems to me, that
rhetorical agents might be produced in some other way than by theoretical fiat. They might, to the contrary, be produced through the collaboration among heterogeneous constituents — actors, resources, terms of all sorts — that do not actually reduce to the relations or structures into which they might be embedded. While we're at it, then, let's take a look at Painter’s contribution in particular, and at Campbell’s explicit rejoinder, treating as a shortcut in each case a passage from the author’s conclusion.

Here, Painter is targeting not so much the general public, though her diction may imply it, as certain scholars whose work she has just finished critiquing. She writes, Americans of goodwill deeply need the colossal Sojourner Truth, the black woman who faces down a hostile white audience and, with a few choice words, gives direction to muddled proceedings. We need an authentic “Sojourner Truth” in our public life to function as the authentic black woman, as a symbol who compensates for the imperfections of individual black women — especially educated, and thereby inauthentic, black women. (Sojourner Truth, 284-285)

We shouldn't overlook the most important part of the remonstration — that to be “educated” (or, we might say, brought-forth, performed, constructed, indeed, produced) is supposedly to be “inauthentic,” while to be authentic is supposedly to exist without any concrete scaffolding at all, just like that imaginary sort of rhetorical agent who can pop right up whenever a rhetorical theorist wants her to.

But Campbell, in full awareness of all that Painter has done to deflate the myth of the colossally authentic speaker, still wants us to preserve that canard so we can (constitutively) exploit it. And here’s what Campbell actually says in that connection:

What Painter fails to understand is that Gage’s fiction has a dramatic agency as a performative text that is greater than historians’ facts. (14)

Surely, the reason for which Campbell is going out of her way to trivialize that alleged argument from “facts” is that she’s attempting thereby to protect and even perpetuate the argument from performativity. For Campbell, trapped inside a linguistic turn embedded within a social turn, has no access to anything more substantial than wishfulness, desire, theoretical fiat when it comes to explaining how rhetorical transaction would ever conduce to any social change.

**Collaborative Paralysis**

If Campbell is having to manufacture an untenable opposition between the structural subject and the colossal individual (and all in order to adduce a rhetorical agent capable of any resistance to speak of), it’s not because she’s being lax or evasive. It’s because she cannot see how her own theoretical-and-practical landscape would offer any resources — that is, beyond the false comfort of the imaginative — to support the existence of an agency that isn’t already under the thumb of the social. Indeed, other commentators who have spent too much time in this theoretical environment are also resorting to expedients just like Campbell’s. As I’ve mentioned, the debate among Condit, Gunn, and Miller has by now brought to light that rhetorical agency appears to be a “necessary illusion” (see Miller 151-152). All of these writers, landlocked into the social-structural perspective, are left looking around at the prospects for theorizing
rhetorical agency and concluding (to hybridize something from Plato with something from Heidegger) that only a Big Lie can save us now.

But my main point in this connection is that the social-structural perspective itself is being assembled in such a manner as to debilitate the practitioner, to weaken rather than to empower the exemplary rhetorical agent. As we’ve seen in the present chapter, theorists participating in the construction of this first theoretical-and-practical landscape have realized the “condition” of the rhetorical subject to be “unavoidable” (Campbell 3). On the basis of this unavoidability, they have quite justifiably concluded that rhetorical subjectivity must certainly have to do with rhetorical agency. But they have also decided, and this time without any special justification, that rhetorical subjectivity must long since have been produced, once and for all. In other words, they have concluded that the condition of the subject is always already given, such that it can only ever be reproduced, never assembled anew. In this way, the social-structural theorists, here exemplified by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, have overlooked their own role in perpetuating a framework within which communities are totalitarian states, discourses are constitutive in the manner of the law, and subjectivities are homologous with the structural relations in which they’re found.

So if we try to inquire into the manner in which theorists and practitioners might go about altering rhetorical subjectivity, the social-structural perspective is there to show that it simply can’t be done. For the local theorists are treating rhetorical subjectivity as if it stems from (structural) “relations” that, far from remaining “external” to the “terms” they organize, are thoroughly internalized by those terms (Baugh 36; Colebrook 5). Investigators are then invited to view subjectivity — the subjectivity of the practitioner — as epiphenomenal to an overarching social logic, held to be generating all the possible positions for subjects to occupy. Meanwhile, the social-structural theorists are also treating sociality itself as if it can be constructed out of “signs and utterances” alone (Bryant, “Deleuze on Assemblages”). As a result, they arrive at a version of subjectivity, and hence of rhetorical agency, which seems to be originating from within a social-and-linguistic loop (with some socially-determined structure at one end, some socially-determined subjectivity at the other, and some socially-determined signification in the middle), such that not even the theorists themselves can see how speakers and listeners would ever break out of this trap of discursivity.

In short, rather than viewing the community as internally heterogeneous (such that rhetorical subjectivity itself might remain mutable, deterritorializable), the social-structural perspective insists there can be no heterogeneity, not to speak of, within the seamlessly totalitarian collective. To the contrary, the law, the constitution of the state or body politic, must certainly be capable of keeping rhetorical subjectivity static, domesticated, and “sacrificial” (Baliff, qtd. in Campbell 3).

Similarly, and here with respect to the work of the rhetorical practitioner, the social-structural perspective is to militate not for, but against the subaltern’s ability to speak (Painter, “Difference” 140–141). After all, we’ve come to see that, on the social-structural account, nothing our exemplary rhetorical agent might think to say (whether, in this particular scenario, by affirming that she is a woman’s rights, or through her references to race, gender, work, mind, biblical precept, even to the metaphor of the pint-and-the-quart) ought to make any special difference even to the undecided auditors, let alone those dead-set against listening to the speaker in the first place. As a result, in their
determination to construct a constrained, victimized rhetorical subjectivity, and to present this as coextensive with all the rest of rhetorical agency, the social-structural theorists are, in effect, de-realizing rhetorical transcendence as well. For it’s as if they are reporting, to the rhetorical agent herself, that if she were ever to speak in a manner contributing to any social change, then that’d have to be a sort of miracle.

**Summation**

So far, we have at least visited a theoretical-and-practical landscape where rhetorical subjectivity has proven to be an irreducible, because unavoidable, aspect of rhetorical agency. Yet we can hardly see why the rhetorical subjectivity itself shouldn’t merely be to perpetuate the present social dispensation. In the next chapter, though, we’ll shift to the rhetorical-humanistic landscape, accompanying Sojourner Truth as she exits from the social-structural frame and enters one of its three alternatives. That’s where we’ll find that rhetorical subjectivity is being constructed, not in such a manner as to keep it static, but in such a manner as to keep it processual. For, in the rhetorical-humanistic landscape, interlocutors’ thoughts and attitudes are held to be reconfigurable with the aid of no less than rhetorical conventionality.
Chapter Five: Conventionality in the Rhetorical-Humanistic Landscape

In the social-structural perspective on rhetorical agency, any standardized practices at issue in rhetorical transaction would risk categorization as normative. But to understand how rhetorical conventionality might actually tamper with the present dispensation, we’ll shift to a perspective according to which this second aspect of rhetorical agency does motivate interlocutors to think and act differently than before. Therefore, having addressed the “I” of “I am a woman’s rights, featured so often in our case study, we’ll now treat the “rights” as leading to the rhetorical-humanistic landscape, where rhetorical conventionality is positioned as central, and where the local theorists themselves are protecting its centrality (Campbell 3).

In the first half of the chapter, we’ll look at the work that the rhetorical-humanistic theorists are having to do in order to construct (assemble, produce) rhetorical conventionality on the basis not of normative discourses, practices, or structures, but, rather, on the basis of shared values. Here, these latter will be resources with whose aid the very support systems for normativity can be critiqued — and, as necessary, overcome. Later in the chapter, we’ll start folding in the work of an exemplary practitioner. We’ll read Sojourner Truth’s statement, along with the thematic elements lying at its core, according to this perspective in which no less than rhetorical conventionality becomes a way of making things otherwise than they are.

De-Leviathanizing the Normative

Let’s begin by noting that, in the rhetorical-humanistic landscape of agency, ideals, visions of the good, and so on, are being constructed as if they are “terms” irreducible to their “relations” — separable from social structures and the like (Baugh 36; Colebrook 5). So we might wonder where collective guidelines would ever come from, i.e., so that they could then become central to rhetorical conventionality, and the latter, in turn, to rhetorical agency. Well, from the vantage point of the rhetorical-humanistic theorists and practitioners, the shared evaluative criteria would simply be given.

Even so, from the vantage point of our own, assemblage-theoretical approach, not even shared guidelines can be treated as simply given. They have to be treated as produced (if not created from scratch, then, in any case, continually raised to salience). For this reason, we should investigate the work of at least some of the actors who have been producing these commonly accepted measures to begin with. Though my label “rhetorical-humanistic” is actually based on ideas from 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 by assembling it on the basis of values held in common. For these writers, rhetorical agency isn’t a stream of socially-determined 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 says, the “whole” person, in whom are hybridized the materiality of, say, behaviors, and
the sociality of, say, ideas (Bryant 414). Karl Wallace, who similarly highlights the role of “ethical and moral values,” affirms that rhetoric 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). And language, of course, is the very most ubiquitous manifestation of the linkage between embodied participants and the groups to which they belong. All of these writers, therefore, are developing a view in which rhetorical agency clearly arises in an articulation between, on the one side, embodiment and, on the other side, the evaluative criteria shared within the community.

To explain a little more fully what I mean by shared values, I’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 rhetoric that goes with communal guidelines, operating ideally and ethically, and the aspect of rhetoricity that goes with embodiment, applying 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, and these are the reconciliatory means and ways that I’m 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 into just any situation, within the dependent order of desire, where they’re applicable).

It’s, in part, the emphasis on such articulation, such blendedness, that keeps rhetorical-humanistic agency distinct from modernist agency, and, even more to the point, distinct from that version of subjectivity, so allegedly pure and untrammeled, which appears to have arisen in the (more or less idealistic) philosophies of Descartes, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Husserl, Sartre, and others, and to have been carried over into more recent theories as well. For rhetorical-humanistic agency doesn’t involve any special purity of the subjective. Instead, it’s a hybrid between the biological-anthropological and the cultural-anthropological, anchored at one end in what would appear to be a Standard Human Complement, and at the other end in some indeterminate range of deeply entrenched, and yet redirectable social guidelines.

Actually, I adapt the term “Standard Human Complement” from the slightly ironic usages to be found in Rupert Clendon Lodge (1956) and in Thomas and Turner (1994), and I employ it to refer to whatever array of traits and faculties may be posited as (a) defining human beings as members of a single, notably embodied, fallible species, and (b) allowing them to communicate in such a manner as to reshape the objects, problems, and situations that they’re talking about (Lodge 299; Thomas and Turner 95). But this Latourian “black box” of a Standard Human Complement, working well enough
that nobody bothers about its "internal complexity," certainly does collect everything that appears 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, not even the general sort of agency is enough to make them rhetorical agents. For that, there needs to be a connection between the inalienable properties of the human actor and the collective properties (most of all, the locally-shared values) characterizing the group to which the speaker belongs. 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 obviously not that she’s a structural subject, someone whose whole function is to fill out the role or position allotted to her within the body politic. Rather, it’s that she herself is the complete reconciliation between, on the one side, those ideational and affective guidelines which are characteristic for her group and, on the other side, the Standard Human Complement which everybody possesses by virtue of belonging to the same species.

For, while our rhetorical-humanistic competencies (including our ability to choose, create, and so on) 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. Rhetorical agency, then, is not some special power that accrues 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 which anyone can, with a little effort, rub off to disclose the unbroken continuity beneath. After all, just any speaker possessed of the Standard Human Complement can, employing the powers of language, help her interlocutors come to see themselves, their problems, their situations in terms of the shared (articulable) values which have always kept the community together.

For language is, in this perspective, constitutive 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 might take care of themselves, as manifestations of the Standard Human Complement, but we, as investigators, ought to ask what could authorize the ongoing rhetorical-humanistic imputation of values to things. This is not a trivial question, for rhetorical transaction deeply implicates our “sense of the ought,” our “vision of how matters should go” (Weaver, “Language,” 309, 315).

In the case of Weaver, the ought might appear validated, ultimately, by appeal to some Platonic realm of ideality. Yet it's in Weaver’s own reference to what is “intimate” about language, i.e., as a “subjectively born, intimate, and value-laden vehicle,” that we find the more likely rhetorical-humanistic answer, involving a proximate rather than ultimate justification (Weaver, “Language,” 316). For the intimacy at issue is of a family-and-friends kind, roughly as in the ancient notion of oikonomia (see Eden 1997). It’s the notion of that sort of (as it were) ecumenical economy which makes a single household out of the entire, expansible flock. Thus the rhetorical-humanistic ought would be validated most of all by appeal to the intimate, value-laden, and yet conventionally-articulated guidelines that the rhetorical agents have inherited from their community.
From Normativity to Shared Values

The well-known reliance of rhetorical theory on the Weaver-style “independent” order of goods may seem an Achilles’ heel. We can understand why Kant, with his ahistorical categorical imperative, his deontological ethics, his faith in the rationality of the autonomous self, would have viewed persuasion as “heteronomous imposition,” anchored not in any independent order of goods, but, instead, frankly, in mere convention (Aune). To rely so heavily on the role of shared values then becomes quite a liability once post-Enlightenment critique de-authorizes convention, re-writing even common sense as a form of social logic in disguise. Certainly, our present-day measures have come to seem of suspect origin; but, then again, so have the prior standards against which we might think to test them. As a case in point, we might note one recent suggestion that, by recognizing the ways in which “powerful discursive forces . . . create value for and give shape to technological developments,” we can somehow “begin to regain some of our choices about the technological future” (Bazerman). But what, come to think of it, is there to regain? The very “choices” we associate with the past may themselves have been given their value by “powerful discursive forces” we’re no longer positioned to detect.

The fact is that rhetorical theorists who appeal to shared values do not often interrogate the genesis of the guidelines which 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 which they promote (74). So the rhetorical-humanistic appeal to collective guidelines, coming from who knows where, does look to be another of these instances of theoretical fiat, with writers assuring themselves that shared values are necessarily sources of agency because they’re shared. Yet, in fields quite other than rhetorical studies, as in social theory and cultural theory, commentators have also begun arguing that it’s 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 social and cultural actors evade normativity.

We can consider, for the sake of an outside example in support of the rhetorical-humanistic stance, 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 Staat 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” (13). Thus the shared values of these migrant families persist in a manner that cannot be easily explained by way of the customary references to hegemony, ideology, and the like. 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” (13). And so, in this example concerning in particular 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 the premise that the shared, valued guidelines that keep the group together still don’t have to exist in any necessary homology with the hegemonic.

Now, it’s still possible to theorize “norms” and “values” as interchangeably ideological. And yet this is not how they are theorized in the rhetorical-humanistic
landscape, where, as Weaver says, shared values refer to an independent order of goods, not to any mutable ideologies. The term “value” does imply the attribution of importance and desirability to anything from an entity or a presumed property to an affect, behavior, or goal. But, from the rhetorical-humanistic perspective, shared values aren’t inherently ideological. They only become ideological when they are conjoined with all sorts of other elements (objects, aims, ideas, purposes, practices, and the like) to form a framework which is not just directive and justificatory, but, beyond that, comprehensive, totalistic, and, most of all, unconscious. Even then, they remain detachable from their local contexts. And while shared values are not themselves comprehensive or totalistic, they’re not actually unconscious, since they do have to be drawn to attention, if only so that the interlocutors can decide whether they’re the right shared values for the situation.

Thus patriotism, for example, can certainly prove to be a shared value irreducible to (and de-linkable from) any particular ideology, and even for 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”).

Therefore, from a rhetorical-humanistic perspective, to say that shared values are somehow normative wouldn’t be to say so much. They might be social, cultural, collective, conventional, and so forth, but still without being determinative — exactly as for those true patriots who adhere to a moral framework which is inherently progressive, persons whose position it would be quite a stretch to call 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 constructed as forever re-working and attempting to affirm a prior affinity. This very preoccupation with like giving rise to like can explain why rhetorical-humanistic agency can so readily be 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 that rhetorical agency, at its worthiest, 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.

So, while the shared values are, so far as rhetorical-humanistic communication is concerned, doing the heavy lifting, the shared values themselves still can’t be leading anyone astray. To the contrary, any disastrous manipulation, ventriloquation, or zombification must be the participatory fault of the interlocutors. The rhetor must be mismanaging the articulation of “values” with “things,” and the audience must be perpetuating the bad trajectory which the rhetor has established (Weaver, “Language,” 316). But if it happens that the rhetoric is resisted, whether deservedly or not, then the audience’s purchase on the matching of values with things must be differing from that of the rhetor; and, in a case like that, affinity will be suspended, so that some of the interlocutors (temporarily) lose agency. Thus, although writers in the rhetorical-humanistic tradition might prefer to say that bad rhetoric isn’t really rhetoric, what’s
more important is that they view rhetoric as efficacious precisely to the extent that it reaffirms shared values: these latter, though they “may have been forgotten,” do remain available for use in closing the gap between “existing and desired conditions” (Sheard, qtd. in Villadsen 42).

Let me now turn to a couple of more recent illustrations. The first, Andrew Hansen’s “Dimensions of Agency in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address” (2004), shows that rhetorical-humanistic agency derives from the familial values which the interlocutors hold in common. The second, Lisa Storm Villadsen’s “Speaking on Behalf of Others: Rhetorical Agency and Epideictic Functions in Official Apologies” (2008), shows that rhetorical-humanistic agency belongs to interlocutors who are, in principle, *equally* empowered by their access to the pool of shared values. By the same token, these essays also show that rhetorical-humanistic theorists tend to reterritorialize rhetorical conventionality by deploying techniques of consolidation. Such expedients are to perpetuate the energy, power, agency that simply must accrue to shared values, i.e., 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” taking for granted that producer and receiver can be linked transhistorically (227). Of course, “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). Thus the “producer’s agency is limited” both “by the rhetorical ability to tap ideologies radiating from the forms chosen” and “by the sheer occurrence of future audiences” who “align with such bristling of forms.” Still, the point is that any agency worth mentioning would certainly bespeak the continuity between rhetor and audience.

Such continuity would obtain not at the level of some hegemonic ideology (for Hansen isn’t saying that our thinking is interchangeable with that of nineteenth-century Americans), but at the level of the more deeply-entrenched values which any normativity would merely contextualize, leaving the values untrammeled: “it is the language, the style, the form of the text — and the coruscating and evolving ideologies contained with them — that allow it to maintain a pull and an influence on our values, our interests, our sensibilities” (252). Therefore, in this example, while the ideologies come and go (coruscating and evolving), the values *persist*, forming a bridge between Lincoln’s time and ours, such that they are simply reactivated by the features of textual language, style, and form. The present-day audience — or, at least, the part of it that’s “fit — sees past its own provincial ideology, and then the message comes home, reactivating the shared values that have been there all along (230).

Interestingly, though, Hansen speaks not of reconciliation, as might be implied by the reaffirmation of values held in common, but, instead, of *revolution*: Lincoln's audience, “transformed by the radicalizing knowledge that the speaker has presented,” finally “gains new instruments to enact new abilities” (250). But what, precisely, would the transformation entail, and what would the new instruments be? In this instance, as it turns out, 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 yet these are means and ends which will be thoroughly familiar to the audience, anyway (251). So rhetoric is
revolutionary, transformative, and radicalizing not when it calls for everything to change, but, instead, when it frames “desired conditions” (as opposed to present conditions) in terms of the familiar, shared values which are always already there, even if they “may,” temporarily, “have been forgotten” (Sheard, qtd. in Villadsen 42).

Villadsen (2008) analyzes a ceremonial speech in which the rhetor strives, first, to create identification between himself and audience, then to rehearse the community’s shared expectations, and finally to arrive at 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 thus functions 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).

Actually, to say that the speech becomes a “site of rhetorical agency” for the audience is to say that the latter can balk at the speaker’s claims, and this means that the underlying model is of a universalism where everybody has the same agency, anyway. Still, the universalism attaches, quite specifically, to such shared values as can be deployed by just anybody who subscribes to them. Thus, the most important implication, as we’ll see in what follows, is that rhetorical transaction succeeds when the interlocutors do (in Weaver’s terms) impute the same shared value to the same problematic thing, but that rhetorical transaction falters when they impute it to different things altogether.

For example, in Villadsen’s case study, the Danish Prime Minister is apologizing for a former government’s misdeeds in cooperating with the Nazis during World War II, and he is, by the same token, applauding the Danish resistance movement of that time for struggling against the Nazi regime, anyway. At this particular moment, everyone’s in agreement as to the shared values (oppression is bad, resistance against oppression is good), and the rhetorical transaction is going well: nobody disagrees with the imputation of oppression to the Nazis, and of resistance to the Danish freedom fighters. But then it becomes clear that the Prime Minister further has in mind to impute oppression to Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi regime, and resistance to the U.S.-led effort — fully supported by the Prime Minister’s own government — to overthrow that regime.

Again, exactly the same shared values are in play, for everyone is still in agreement that resistance against oppression is good. But the problem is that different (indeed, exactly opposite) objects are now being articulated with the shared values, which latter don’t change at all. From the speaker’s perspective, the U.S.-led effort should rightfully articulate 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 is, instead, articulated with oppression (Villadsen 40). This is why they balk, and why the rhetorical transaction falters, and why the speaker loses agency. Yet the same shared values have simply stayed there, remaining capable of empowering (or disempowering) just about anybody, even as they remain articulable with all sorts of different objects. For one and the same shared value, that of resisting against oppression, can empower the speaker (when he articulates it with the freedom fighters struggling against the Nazis), just as it can equally empower his auditors (when they reject his offer to articulate it with the U.S.-led invasion as well).

So, in the rhetorical-humanistic world, the shared values that are so central to rhetorical agency are not at all the same as hegemonic norms, for they refer to the desirable rather than the “expected,” coming into play most of all when what’s expected
must not, in fact, be allowed to prevail (see Barker, 1995). Further, in this perspective, the shared values are accessible to all, regardless of the agents’ collectively-determined identities, subject positions, or social roles. And these shared values, perhaps surprisingly, are also heterogeneous, rather than homologous. After all, in any given situation, to deploy one shared value would not be functionally equivalent to deploying another. For example, the “many Danes” of whom Villadsen has been speaking are actually annoyed, not left apathetic, let alone impressed, when their Prime Minister purports to be deploying the shared value of resistance, but sounds as if he’s talking about oppression instead (40).

**Keeping Shared Values between the Ceiling and the Seat**

An important difficulty, from the rhetorical-humanistic perspective, is the possibility that certain of the participants in some given transaction might not share the shared values, after all. In that case, theory risks confrontation with a merely relativistic rhetorical agency, that is, of the sort that would exist for those who shared the values, but that wouldn’t exist for the rest. And so, in order to continue constructing rhetorical agency as robust, instead of relativistic, rhetorical-humanistic commentary has developed a safeguard for ensuring the preponderance of shared values, and, in consequence, for protecting the reality of the rhetorical agency that derives from them.

The safeguard is (theoretically) 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 I mean practice as adumbrated by the theorist) is the conceptual elimination of just as many of the auditors as necessary, leaving in their seats only those who share the same values. We’ve already seen this safeguard in operation. For we’ve discovered, in Villadsen, that rhetorical agency belongs not simply to those who prefer resistance over oppression, but, even more specifically, to those who share the value of properly distinguishing between “resistance” and “oppression” in the first place. Similarly, we’ve also noticed that Hansen, in his essay on Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, is insisting that the audience must be “fit” for rhetorical agency — qualified, that is, by its responsiveness to the shared values that underwrite the speaker’s message to begin with (230). So it does appear that rhetorical-humanistic theory, while attributing rhetorical agency to those who share the same values, is also defining rhetorical agency in a somewhat circular fashion, attributing it only to those who are “fit,” qualified to act as rhetorical agents, insofar as they actually do share the same values.

If we ourselves were rhetorical-humanistic theorists, we might find it natural enough to rule out of consideration anyone theoretically unfit to serve as a rhetorical agent. Yet we are instead adopting an assemblage-theoretical approach, and we are obligated to scrutinize, wherever we go, the collaborative processes by which rhetorical agency is, first, being manufactured and, second, either passed along to practitioners or withheld from them. Therefore, we should look more closely into the support system available to theorists such as Hansen and Villadsen, commentators bent on maximizing the reality of rhetorical agency, not just in any way at all, but by dint of maximizing the reality of shared values.

In this case, we can treat the *New Rhetoric* of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958) as a particularly important effort to shore up the centrality of shared values. For
this is a work which does include (among its many other precepts) some instructions for leaving in their seats only those auditors adhering closely enough to the appropriate guidelines to be fit for rhetorical agency.

Here, the salient point of view is that adopted by the initiating agent. Thus it’s the rhetor who selects, from the communal pool, whichever configuration(s) and application(s) of shareable values, are to set the parameters for the ensuing transaction. First, there are some selectable parameters for the ground floor: the judicious rhetor decides which deployments of which shared values the audience ought certainly be responsive to, i.e., as *bona fide* members of the collectivity. Anyone incapable of adhering to these minimal evaluative criteria isn’t really part of the audience at all. Second, there are some selectable parameters for the ceiling: the judicious rhetor decides what can be asked, without actually going too far, of the audience envisioned (depending on the circumstances) as responding to the very most noble shared values, or to shared values that are more noble than usual, or to shared values that are, in context, better than nothing. Importantly, though, both the ground floor and the ceiling are projections from the value-set which the rhetor shares with the *bona fide* community, so that the transaction takes place, from beginning to end, among only those who deserve to be gathered together by the familial hearthside.

In this world, everything rises or falls in accordance with whatever the audience is or isn’t willing to stand for. True, “the status of an audience varies with the concepts one has of it,” which does imply that it’s primarily the rhetor, the audience rather less so, who determines what the latter can be brought to stand for (Perelman and Tyteca 34). However, if the rhetor could routinely wish herself into speaking before the “universal,” or best-possible audience, then she could simply ignore the stance of any actual audience whatever (Perelman and Tyteca 33). She could dismiss those who disagreed with her as “recalcitrant,” and all on the basis that they didn’t actually share the ceiling-level values which the best-possible audience, as she envisioned it, would certainly share. But it’s rarely the case that the rhetor’s universal audience can coincide with her actual audience, and she has to be careful not to charge too many of her listeners with recalcitrance. For the values she deploys will have to be at least accessible enough —lowly enough — for the audience to share them as well, so that, in the final analysis, they will still be consistent with whatever the audience is or isn’t willing to stand for.

Therefore, 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. As necessary, she lowers the ceiling by 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 desirable. In this way, she constitutes her audience as fit, as qualified to accede to her rhetorical agency. And, again as necessary, she raises the floor by constituting as recalcitrant those hypothetical auditors unlikely to meet even the newly lowered level of expectation. 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)
From this perspective, we can see that rhetorical-humanistic agency resides in a hierarchy of shared values. The speaker can then preserve her capacity to effect social change through the expedient of lowering her standards. Picking her battles carefully, she can argue for the alteration of the present dispensation by just about enough, but not too much. At the same time, she can shore up this capacity of hers by couching as recalcitrance any appearance of unwillingness to accede to even this (clearly moderate, though still desirable) degree of change.

**Staying the Same by Doing Something Differently**

By now, we are already positioned to see how rhetorical conventionality can be assembled, certainly on the theoretical side, in such a manner as to conduce to the transformation of rhetorical subjectivity itself. First, the rhetorical-humanistic perspective highlights the capacity of “terms” — in this case, shared values — to exceed the “relations” in which they’re temporarily embedded, so that it treats social structures, significations, subject positions not as internalized constraints, but as “external” to the values traveling through them (Baugh 36; Colebrook 5). Second, the rhetorical-humanistic paradigm not only recognizes but even illustrates the synergy that can obtain between processes of reterritorialization and processes of deterritorialization. Participants can reterritorialize rhetorical conventionality by conceptually neutralizing, or driving out of the picture, those interlocutors who don’t actually share the same values. And they can then deterritorialize rhetorical subjectivity, reconfiguring it with the aid of those valuated standards which the remaining auditors actually do hold in common.

And it’s at this point that, returning to the Sojourner Truth literature, we can start making sense of the manner in which a rhetorical-humanistic practitioner could go about parlaying the topics of race, gender, work, mind, biblical precept, and embodiment, together with the metaphor of the pint and the quart, into a means of transforming the ways of thinking prevalent within the status quo. In this case, the agents of change would actually include certain shared values. These would facilitate the emergence of an alternative way of thinking and acting, with the result that the interlocutors could agree on the justice of allowing to those who are disenfranchised the same legal rights as any other bona fide members of the collectivity. Yet the speech, rather than attempting to frame the discourse of natural rights as resistlessly normative, would attempt precisely the opposite. It would portray the natural rights as wrongfully disenfranchised, and then its very function would be to bring them back into the familial fold.

In nineteenth-century America (or so the rhetorical-humanistic story would go), natural rights do remain quite as relevant as legal rights, and yet the two kinds of rights are, at this present 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 through the reconciliation of the one, presently normative discourse (that of legal rights) with the other, 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 the values shared by the adherents to the discourses themselves. But the restoration of balance will still require a change within the status quo, within this collectivity that has somehow lost track of the values keeping it together. So the rhetorical transaction in this case will involve the deployment of convention not to
reinstate what's normative or expected, but, instead, to tamper with the immediate, actually existing social dispensation.

As I've hinted earlier, it's the very function of the whole person — at least, when she's acting as rhetor — to speak in a manner that, manifesting love, actually 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 also helps us adapt. She helps us become otherwise than we are, and not for just no reason, but precisely so that we can stay lovable, this time a little more so than of late. To do that, she constitutes herself as a docent, someone who remembers and reinterprets our own shared values on our behalf, so that we come to see for ourselves the "disparity between existing and desired conditions," the mismatch that quite rightly, before our very eyes, becomes "the subject of critique" (Sheard, qtd. in Villadsen 42). This docent will indeed be a kind of lover, just as in Weaver (1953) or Brockriede (1972). Yet she will also be a guide, a teacher, even 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. Gage has "chilern" appear at the very beginning of the speech, implying that it's to refer to all the listeners at once. Robinson, by contrast, has it appear just before the conclusion, so that "children" functions as an apostrophe — an aside directed particularly to those who worry that expansion of equal rights to black people and to women might mean the end of the world. Certainly, the reference to children is in both places — in Robinson and Gage alike — so that it's undeniably part of the speech that we're studying. But its function isn't, after all, to sassify the speaker: O, that authentic Sojourner Truth, so down-home and so country! Instead, it's to reassure, to comfort, to inculcate trust.

Let's recognize, then, that "children" is a term of art — not too different from, say, "Four score and seven years ago," or even from "Open Sesame." It's a transition, much like a cinematic wipe, and its purpose is to situate us within the remit of the interpreter, of the speaker who reminds us about our collective values. Of course, just about anybody in our community may need reminding about these shared criteria. 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, say, scholastic training, or of fancy paraphernalia. To the contrary, the reminder can come from just any speaker who hasn't herself forgotten the familiar, ecumenical guidelines. Now, it's true that, in the rhetorical-humanistic world, this 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 quite so exclusionary a requirement as it might sound. The speaker, the agent, the docent gets to be qualified in just the same, perfectly manageable way as does the docent's beneficiary: by clearly not being "recalcitrant" (Perelman and Tyteca 33). This means that the qualified person is anyone who's establishing her values to be the same as ours. And if it happens that the docent is just as comfortable in her impromptu role as she is 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 nineteenth-century America, to be sure, the docent might perhaps draw on certain special conventions — those, for example, of genre. But even the genre-conventions would be perfectly accessible, serviceable, ready to hand. Narratives, of
course, whether full-scale (like epics) or miniaturized (like anecdotes) would be everywhere. Thus many a rhetor would draw on the time-binding powers of narrative as a way of universalizing (of raising to the level of the cosmic), what might otherwise be mistaken for a local contingency — as with the famous opening for Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. But, then again, the rhetorical-humanistic speaker, *circa* 1851, might also find ways to appropriate such genre-conventions as those of, say, the come-all-ye — as in that special kind of Anglo-American folk song, regionally topicalized, which (as the following from Woody Guthrie can illustrate) so readily becomes a populist morality tale:

> Well, gather 'round me, children, a story I will tell
> 'bout Pretty Boy Floyd the outlaw, Oklahoma knew him well . . .

Always, though, the salient part hangs on shared values, those which the docent is wrapping around the problem that confronts the group:

> But 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 certainly won’t have to do with any pre-determined social identity, essence, or station in life. They won’t even have to do with any privileged medium of communication: story exceeds the provenance of the printed word. 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* and non-chimerical rhetorical agent (Campbell 9).

**Maximizing Assent by Minimizing Recalcitrance**

The term of art, “children,” tells us we’re in the presence of an agency bespeaking what’s 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 exactly suited to the situation. For the situation is always such that we, the undecided auditors, are to undertake self-modification, not by launching off into our own disparate projects but, to the contrary, by returning, together, to our intra-communal roots. Indeed, it’s in recalling just those few of the collective guidelines which we’ve been forgetting, and in reviewing them under the tutelage of the docent who loves us, that we’re to become otherwise than ourselves, though remaining lovable all the while. And that, we 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 do so, to elevate natural rights over everything else, would be to insinuate that the American republic must be unlovable by design.

Indeed, in this case, to hew too closely to a natural-rights position would be to shift the focus, inappropriately and injudiciously, 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 people might be hungry for any number of reasons, and nobody can suspect Sojourner Truth of blaming her immediate audience for her personal problems. Besides, she isn’t betraying the least suggestion that slavery and/or women’s subjugation, let alone 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 proponent of natural rights, pure and simple: 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 I’ve mentioned in an earlier connection, would appear to be a noteworthy omission on the part of someone who’d been tarred and feathered for the ardentcy of his own natural-rights abolitionism. Meanwhile, there’s nothing like it in the Gage version, either, even if 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 their practices may call for revision, not everyone can agree that their principles may need revision as well. And if the speaker is refraining from asserting the supremacy of natural rights, then that’s because she knows better than to advocate a stance which, because it would be morally absolute, would also be politically untenable.

Thus, if we do triangulate (looking to the intersection where Robinson and Gage agree), we’ll notice just how cautious is the speaker, as she dwells on topics like work, biblical precept and mind, to evade topics like property, dispossession, and class. Still, it’s precisely because shared values are heterogeneous, strategically separable, that Sojourner Truth can deploy them as a way of gathering her auditors into the familial fold. For this is how the speaker can highlight all kinds of shared values that simply don’t happen to be the shared value of ownership. After all, in the rhetorical-humanistic landscape, rhetorical agency necessarily operates through the promotion of some standards at the expense of others, regardless that all of the standards are equally “conventional” or “collective” to begin with. That’s as we’ve seen above, where Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca emphasize that any speaker must be circumspect enough to lower her standards to just the extent necessary.

In the instance of the Sojourner Truth speech, then, the docent, our exemplary rhetorical agent, would recognize that to frame property ownership, class exploitation, and the like as 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 comes into its own precisely by offering something for everybody, i.e., everybody who shares the same values as the speaker. And there wouldn’t be something for everybody in the speaker’s harping on any blatant exploitation — whether that of the factory worker by the industrialist, or that of the wife by the master of the house, or 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 exemplary rhetorical practitioner can hardly be expected to pitch her appeals at the loftiest level imaginable, as by asking the auditors to indict themselves for already being complicit in economic, sexual, and racial exploitation. Instead, she can be expected to invoke some
lowlier criteria than that, leaving the most of 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). And 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 things like work, biblical precept, and mind. If it happens, by chance, 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 work, biblical precept, and mind as handles for pulling the listeners into alignment with their better natures, if not absolutely their best. For an audience that can be constituted as valuing work, biblical precept, and mind is also, as a matter of fact, an audience that can be brought to see work, biblical precept, and mind as lying at the very intersection between natural rights and legal rights.

Let’s 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 (for that would go for any beast of burden, though without presenting much of a case for the latter’s civil rights), but, rather, a verification that the speaker herself shares the work ethic already valued by her audience. For who but a social-structural theorist could think that the speaker, in arguing for equality of rights, is arguing that she herself is naturally built for all of this back-breaking labor, quite perfectly suited to her present structural role? Instead, the speaker is showing that she and those she speaks for understand very well that what they’re performing is work, and not something else. 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, or the rights-less constituency that she represents, with an undecided audience positioned actually to make a difference in the present dispensation (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 have to share in order not to be recalcitrant (Campbell 10).

Even the integration of biblical precept turns out to hinge on the shared value of work, though in a manner that might be more pointed for the historical audience than for us. To be sure, in both the Robinson and the Gage versions of the speech, the speaker refers quite clearly to all the agricultural labor — plowing, reaping, husking, chopping, and mowing — that she’s done during her life. Oddly, though, Gage represents Sojourner Truth as saying something untoward, which is that she’s plowed, and she’s planted, and she’s gathered into barns. This means that the speaker is, for some reason, citing a passage from the gospel of Matthew on the fowls of the air — the ones who don’t sow, don’t reap, and don’t gather into barns, in short, who don’t do much of anything. After all, “the point in Matthew is that God feeds the birds even without their doing this work, a theme incompatible with what Gage presents as Truth’s point: equal work demands equal pay” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 172-73). However, regardless of Gage’s mismanagement of the specific religious references, it’s still the case, and in Robinson’s version of the speech as much as in Gage’s, that “work” is becoming allied with “biblical precept” at the very same time as it’s becoming separated from class. So let’s examine
this (constitutive and articulatory) rhetorical process in which “work” seems to link itself with “biblical precept” — with “class” coming along silently for the ride.

As Painter acknowledges, while the historical Sojourner Truth contributed lots of “household work” (laundry, cooking, cleaning) as a way of helping out 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 where Nell Irving Painter does, i.e., with her historical-biographical claim to the effect that Sojourner Truth is acting as yet another of these spokespersons 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 participate, and, in any case, it’s an activity which most of them, not counting the recalcitrant, are likely to value. That’s why there’d be a folk song like the following, from Sojourner Truth’s own era, albeit circulated more widely by the Grangers, a noteworthy populist movement 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 there really is, in farm work, something for pretty much everybody.

In short, for the purpose of keeping us together, there’s nothing more reconciliatory than to celebrate the shared value of, well, obviously farming, but, even more generally, the sort of “real work” through which Americans characteristically earn their keep, putting their rightfully-earned bread on the family table (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 126). And all of the auditors, other than of course the recalcitrant, ought certainly to treat this value of work (of authentic labor, the effort of those, for example, who do reap and sow and gather into barns) as a universal value. That’s why, at least according to a rhetorical-humanistic perspective, so much of the speech would be about farming (rather than, say, factory labor), as this would be an instantly-recognizable way of recalling the better part of the audience to its own, traditional family values, including with respect to work.

However, triangulation doesn’t require us utterly to defenestrate Gage as a source of evidence for Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency, even if Gage herself might sometimes put exactly the wrong scriptural citation into Sojourner Truth’s mouth. It only requires that we determine which parts of Gage’s testimony are reliable. What’s clear enough, then, 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 see that Gage and Robinson together are indeed 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 religious references at all.

For the function of such references in general wouldn’t be to furnish the speaker with any theological or supernatural warrants 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, as rhetorical-humanistic investigators, look carefully, we’ll see that the point isn’t actually to perseverate on what the speaker “has done as a woman and suffered as a mother” (Campbell 10). To the contrary, it’s to establish the speaker’s ethos as one who has so fully internalized scriptural values that they saturate her to the core. Certainly, these are the scriptural values which the auditors are supposed to be upholding, too. But the speaker, for one, remains bound to Jesus anyway, even at times when she, our fellow Christian, is left with no more than this faith to share with us. Indeed, it’s her undeniable faith, authenticated in every Judeo-Christian commonplace she cites, that constitutes her as already belonging to the collectivity that she’s addressing. And then there’s simply no reason for the other family members, those who aren’t recalcitrant, to think there’s any fundamental disparity between the speaker’s values and their own.

By now, 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 of agency that leverages convention as a means of altering sociality itself. And it’s worth noting in this connection that the shared values are also a lingua franca for folding “race” and “gender,” maybe even “embodiment,” into the rest of the American collectivity. For all we, as rhetorical-humanistic investigators, 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 still remains to be addressed is the topic of “mind,” together with the complex metaphor (that of the pint and the quart) serving as the vehicle for this tenor, though while remaining consistent with the valuated framing of “work” and “biblical precept.”

Once again, if rhetorical agency really could inhere in the power of a weaker normative discourse to triumph against a stronger, then theory would need only to posit a chimerical rhetorical agent, someone who, in some “performative” way, could just constitute her discourse as more normative than her opponents’ (Campbell 14). Such a chimerical rhetorical agent could then virtually guarantee the extension of equal rights to the disenfranchised as well.

However, if we have really shifted to the rhetorical-humanistic landscape, we will understand that it’s not only with reference to work and biblical precept, but also with reference to mind, that the agency of shared values, gathering speaker and listener into the fold of convention, underwrites the transformative interplay of one discourse with another. For, in this perspective, what makes it possible for social realities to change, to emerge or come into being, is that the present dispensation can be reconfigured, indeed, redeemed through the lingua franca established by shared values. As we’ll see next, it’s the common language of shared values which is going to allow the discourse of natural rights to be translated into commensurability with the discourse of legal rights. For, if we consider the uses of “mind” from a rhetorical-humanistic perspective, we’ll find that the Sojourner Truth speech must be invoking yet another shared value. In this case, the remaining of the shared values is that which accrues to reasoned debate, which is “conventional” in the sense that this is just how we nineteenth-century Americans ordinarily go about negotiating our collective destiny.
Again, if we were to hew to the account provided by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, we would hardly be able to understand how the metaphor of the pint and the quart could ever invoke the shared value of reasoned debate. Fortunately, Nell Irvin Painter takes us much closer than does Campbell toward an understanding of the pint-and-quart analogy. She notes that Sojourner Truth’s almost “craniometric” figure is, in part, to satirize the notion that “knowledge and rights” might be “a zero-sum game” (as if social gains in one place would be social losses in another) and is, in part, though again satirically, to clarify that “as women are in physique or essence smaller than men,” they can hardly take end up taking “too much” (*Sojourner Truth* 127). Still, it seems to me that we can arrive at an even better understanding of Sojourner Truth’s complex comparison if we situate it within the rhetorical-humanistic paradigm, where a metaphor like that of the pint and the quart could readily highlight the agency of collectively shared values.

As I’ve indicated, the discourse of natural rights in isolation ought not to be amounting to so much in the middle of the nineteenth century, where an oppressive sociality would certainly predominate. Yet, at the same time, the political rationale for the existence of the republic has always been to provide an alternative to government by arbitrary power. This alternative is validated not precisely by the people’s right to vote their way into influence, but, rather, by their right publicly to discuss and revise the options presented for consideration. Thus, even in the United States of Sojourner Truth’s day, the value of argumentation is already hybridized with the discourse of civil, or social, or statutory rights. The metaphor of the pint and the quart can therefore speak simultaneously to natural rights and to legal rights. For just as it affirms that reason isn’t, after all, a zero-sum game (everybody can have as much of it as they already do, and without depleting anyone else’s), it also affirms that reason itself is the justification for altering the present dispensation.

So here’s a rhetorical-humanistic gloss of the metaphor in question, a gloss which, rather than having to do with guilt, craniometry, physique, or essence, has only to do with the shared value of reasoned debate. Sojourner Truth is saying, then, that even if she and the members of her constituency were “naturally” endowed with a smaller amount of reason than her politically-enfranchised counterparts, their reason would still be reason, and whether measured by the pint or the quart. Meanwhile, reason is the currency of the republic itself. For the condition which makes American democracy possible is that superior, quart-sized reasons continually be brought into conflict with inferior, pint-sized reasons, so that the former can continually earn their keep. Since it’s obviously the case that the speaker represents those who can lay claim to some amount of rationality, it’s no less than a political failure to drive out of consideration this same constituency, this same under-appreciated reservoir of reason.

Certainly, there’s plenty in it for the social from expanding the range of enfranchisement, thereby benefiting from the currently untapped reservoir. As it is, all of the auditors do appreciate the value of work. As they just need to recall that *intellectual* labor is another form of the work that keeps the nation humming along. On the other hand, there’s also nothing for them to lose when they go ahead and emancipate the marginalized. If any newly-enfranchised intellects ever happen to make their way into the public forum, only to betray or confirm their own half-measured inferiority, as, for example, by evincing some political gullibility, then that’ll be no problem at all. It will just give the status quo something to argue all the way back to the farm, the domicile, the
factory. And this, let’s be assured, is how American democracy already works: by pitting the stronger intellects against the weaker, the better arguments against the worse. But if, perhaps against all odds, any among the newly-enfranchised intellects do turn out to be competent, then there will still be no problem. For this, too, is what it means to have a democracy, a form of sociality in which the better arguments ought to win, anyway.

And, finally, since reason is, in the United States, the very currency of the political marketplace (the very language of the perpetually-revisable social contract), it’s under this particular dispensation that our statutory rights are those that we earn through reasoned debate — not those that we seize or cede with the fluctuation of arbitrary power. In that case, to bar certain intellects on the basis of race or gender, artificially constricting the supply and exchange of this reason-which-earns-rights, is, by definition to vitiate the political process. It’s then 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 forcing it to become normative as well. In this example, the shared values accorded to work, biblical precept, and mind do return the collectivity to a certain social equilibrium, and yet they do not function in a manner that can be called merely conservative. Rather, they effect a collective reconciliation that is, simultaneously, a collective transformation. In linking the alternative discourses that are presently available, they promote inclusion and enfranchisement. For how could we, the undecided, now refuse the extension of equal legal rights to those sharing with us the value of work, biblical precept, and mind? Thus, in broadening the range of the ecumenical family, the shared values make it possible for the collectivity to remain itself by becoming otherwise, in this case, by welcoming into the fold certain constituencies which, up to now, have irrationally been excluded from the ecumenical household.

**What’s 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 undermining) practice, for it frames collectively-held guidelines as resources for reconfiguring rhetorical subjectivity, i.e., for producing an altered way of thinking and acting. Yet the reterritorialization of rhetorical conventionality does require the raising to salience 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, cash money. This implies that rhetorical-humanistic agency must routinely be harnessing rhetoric’s liberatory potential by activating its exploitative potential as well. Yet the only rhetorical-humanistic defense for such duplicity seems to be that the rhetor very well ought to promote the greater good of the community by whatever means possible.

To bring this duplicity more clearly into view, we should, as it were, give it a face, noting its likely impact on the human actors who would be caught up in rhetorical transaction. So I’d like now to introduce the opinion of Emmanuel Levinas, who, even as a philosopher of communication, denies that rhetoric can promote any good at all.

Levinas (1961), citing Plato’s *Phaedrus* as an illustration, maintains that the “specific nature of rhetoric” is to inculcate “propaganda, flattery, diplomacy,” as well as
to effect “psychagogy, demagogy, pedagogy” (70). In short, rhetorical transaction looks to be all “ruse, emprise, and exploitation” (72). Though Levinas omits any actual analysis, his basic complaint seems to pose a problem quite devastating from the perspective of a tradition in which Plato is held to portray rhetoric as redeemable.

After all, while the Phaedrus does take the form of a dialogue, and while it does appear to take up the question of a true art of rhetoric, the true art as uncovered there isn’t dialogic at all. According to Socrates, the true rhetorician ought to aspire to understanding things exactly as they are — to aspire, that is, to grasping a “being that really is what it is” (Plato 33). From then on, given the requisite aspiration as a frame for everything else, the true rhetorician will have his work cut out for him. This will be to ascertain which sorts of subject matter belong in the speech, then to arrange the contents in a suitably methodical manner, and then to consider the different sorts of souls which the discourse is to address, and, finally, to deliver the results so that the subject matter is properly, i.e., instrumentally, articulated with the different sorts of souls.

In that case, rhetorical utterance isn’t conversation, only indoctrination. Its specific nature, then, is to regroup the audience under the sign of the given, the unalterable, the “being that really is what it is.” In a word, there is no provision in the true art of rhetoric for protecting — only for co-opting — the otherness, singularity, and difference of the interlocutor. And this is precisely what, for Levinas, would be psychagogy, demagogy, and pedagogy. It’s difficult to refute Levinas by asserting that, no, regardless of what Plato or Socrates might say about the authoritarian, top-down trajectory of, frankly, the most truly rhetorical communication, rhetoric is, by and large, very much open to radical alterity. Meanwhile the basic criticism even applies to rhetoric which addresses auditors “in the name of their highest good” (Weaver, “Language,” (309). For Levinas is highlighting precisely what I’d call the rhetorical-humanistic tendency to submit the difference of the member under the unifying guidelines shared within the group. Under these circumstances, while there’s a social (indeed, a conventional) rationale for speech, there isn’t a clearly human justification at all.

**Summation**

We’ve seen that rhetorical conventionality, understood in terms of shared values, does help to explain how speech makes things otherwise than they are. Yet we are still missing a human, rather than merely social justification for altering the present dispensation. Fortunately, there’s at least one kind of value that’s immune to any collective constraints. It concerns the non-finessable, non-negotiable, indeed *non-rational* claim of every human being upon a free, authentic, and responsible existence. The claim isn’t to be protected by appeal to pragmatism, nor is it to be referred to any present condition of sociality, for it enters the scene simultaneously with every existential self who’s there to advance it. To understand the sort of agency that could accrue to such a claim, we’ll have to shift our focus away from the conventionality folded into rhetorical agency and toward the transcendence folded into it as well.
Chapter Six: Transcendence in the Existential-Transversal Landscape

Shifting to the existential-transversal landscape, we’ll turn to a perspective where theorists are continually marshalling resources to shore up the centrality of rhetorical transcendence — that is, to (re)territorialize rhetoric’s power to make things otherwise than they are. The locals will maintain that rhetoric’s productivity, or efficacy, belongs to the existential self, whose very manner of being is emergent. Consequently, in this third landscape of agency, a claim like “I am a woman’s rights” will be heard as drawing attention to the “am,” itself bespeaking the ongoing transcendence of the existential self.

In the first half of the chapter, we’ll consider the activity of the rhetorical theorist Calvin O. Schrag as exemplifying the existential-transversal perspective more generally. In the process, we’ll eventually find Schrag to be positing two different styles of transcendence, one kind having to do with human interiority, the other with a fideism which redeems rhetorical transaction whenever the theorist would like it to. However, by taking into consideration the work of the material phenomenologist Michel Henry, we will see that it actually makes more sense to trace rhetorical transcendence to the exteriority — the corporeality — of the interlocutors participating in rhetorical transaction.

Then, in the second half of the chapter, we’ll shift to the (now re-corporealized) practical activity taking place in this landscape of agency. We’ll read the themes and images furnished by Sojourner Truth, our exemplary practitioner, as invoking rhetoric’s ability to promote change transversally, that is, by redistributing the transcendent, albeit embodied claim inherent to each and every human existent.

Existence, Transcendence, and Transversality

As I’ve indicated, some researchers have pursued the senses in which responsibility (Schrag, 1997), conscience, (Hyde, 1994), and questioning (Turnbull, 2004) would be among the sites for rhetorical transcendence. For them, responsibility, conscience, and questioning are among, not the potential, but the actual, irreducible, undeniable affordances available to what — once again repurposing a usage from Anton and Peterson (2003) — I’m calling the existential self.

Since “existentialism” is a constituent of the stance in question, we should note that it’s a philosophy according to which existence precedes essence, where existence is no prior category but, rather, a “self-making-in-a-situation” (Fackenheim 1961; 37). Nevertheless, as Donald E. Hall mentions, existentialism also holds that “human beings came into existence through natural, evolutionary processes, and then created myths and religious beliefs to explain their unique importance” (132). To be sure, we should qualify the term “natural” so it means “contingent” rather than “inevitable,” since most existentialist writers would classify biological determinism among the “myths” they’re rejecting. Even so, considering that what’s called vitalism is the view that life exceeds reduction to the pre-determined, to the mechanistic, then, for terminological reasons alone, existentialism ought also to be vitalism (and probably occasionalism as well). For what does seem most important is the contrast where existence proceeds from life, and essence from social determination. And, insofar as existentialism does tie human
existence to “evolutionary processes,” then it ought to consider the \textit{sine qua non} of this existence to be our living materiality as such.

So, while existentialism is a view in which transcendence (expressed, for example, in responsibility) is inherent for human beings, the moving-beyond at issue must also involve the emergence of authentic human existence out of corporeality, surely its condition of possibility, its enabling constraint.

However, I’ll illustrate the existentialism proper with reference to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre’s colleague, Simone de Beauvoir. In \textit{The Ethics of Ambiguity} (1948), Beauvoir argues that the only absolute value is that of existence, which we ourselves will into being whenever we take a stand in favor of the life-affirming over against the life-deny ing. As Beauvoir implies, we retain our capacity to break away even from socially-determined bad faith, and we can evaluate action by deciding whether it conduces to a free and responsible existence for ourselves and others. Further, Beauvoir illustrates the way in which transcendence can be said to remain ontologically independent of everything else. For she presents “freedom” as a recurrent return “to the positive,” a return which gives existence “a content through action, escape, political struggle, revolution: Human transcendence then seeks, with the destruction of the given situation, the whole future which will flow from its victory” (31). Clearly, this transcendence is an \textit{endless} overturning, an ongoing breaking-up of the given situation.

Doubtless, from a generally existentialist viewpoint, it’s always that "man must . . . assume," that is, not only posit but also embrace, "his finiteness: not by treating his existence as transitory or relative but by reflecting the infinite within it, that is, by treating it as absolute" (Beauvoir 130–31). And yet there are cases in which freedom takes on a negative or reactive complexion. For, while "liberation" is "a movement" which "realizes itself by tending to conquer," action cannot "seek to fulfill itself by means which would destroy its very meaning" (131). Thus, in "certain situations there will be no other issue for man than rejection." Such rejection might include militancy, that is, as folded into "action," "political struggle," and "revolution." But it will contrast with "political realism," where everything is necessarily compromise — as in that viewpoint on rhetorical agency where collective values have always to exert priority over the freedom of any particular group member.

For there is genuine, transcendent "rejection only if man lays claim in the present to his existence as an absolute value," in which case "he must absolutely reject what would deny this value" (Beauvoir 131). Nowadays, as the author explains, more or less consciously in the name of such an ethics, we condemn a magistrate who handed over a communist to save ten hostages and along with him all the Vichyites who were trying “to make the best of things”: it was not a matter of rationalizing the present such as it was imposed by the German occupation, but of rejecting it unconditionally. The resistance did not aspire to a positive effectiveness; it was a negation, a revolt, a martyrdom; and in this negative movement freedom was positively and absolutely confirmed. (131)

In short, political realism is existential-transversal suicide — and the reverse can be true as well. Therefore, if agency is to remain transcendent, conducive to genuine social change, then agency will have to remain ethical. Yet it will have to be ethical in the way
of the responsible, i.e., without reducing to the socially-determined ethics of what the rhetorical theorist Calvin Schrag himself calls (mere) responsivity.

Indeed, implicitly agreeing with Beauvoir’s negative valuation of political realism, Schrag draws a crucial contrast between, on the one side, responsivity and, on the other side, responsibility. To the extent that we’re merely in a “state of affairs” (managing to get by in our more or less pragmatic “being-with-others”), we’re best described as “responsive,” and that’s ethical enough, at least as an adjustment to the status quo (91). But we shift from mere responsivity to genuine responsibility in adopting a particularly insistent kind of “ethical stance” — that which is, more properly, “an ethos, a way of dwelling in a social world that gives rise to human goals and purposes, obligations, duties, and concerns for human rights.”

However, we can further situate Schrag’s affirmation of transcendent responsibility, over against mere responsitivity, by considering the manner in which existentialism proper would typically explain the origins of authentic, genuine, productive transcendence. It would often frame such transcendence as arising not out of, say, the agent’s capacity for rational deliberation, much less out of any socially-determined conditions inherited by or imposed upon the agent, but, rather, out of nowhere: out of out of nothing other than the agent’s inherent purchase on transcendence, the human (or proto-human) way of moving beyond whatever there actually is.

In the illustration provided by Beauvoir, it’s the irrecuperably responsible action of the “resistance,” not the accommodating, political-realist responsivity of the “magistrate,” which exemplifies transcendence. Certainly, a cost-benefit analysis might disclose appeasement to be the most rational course of action. But if such expedients now look practical, that’s only because reality itself has proven unreasonable. Indeed, a local, Vichyite commonsensicality, aiming at the most rational course of action, is already colluding with a local, Nazi violence for which there’s no rational justification at all. This local (dis)ordering, where Vichy appeasement and Nazi brutality together confound the cost-benefit analysis, is then an example of the global or universal contingency which, here to borrow from the philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, bespeaks the “absolute absence of reason for anything” (“Time” 12). All that’s left as an alternative to this absolute contingency is the human (albeit non- or counter-rational) claim to life — to a free and yet responsible existence. And this would be the very point of someone like Schrag’s theorizing rhetorical transcendence to begin with.

Further, the claim to life, arising in what Beauvoir calls “the original helplessness from which man surges up,” must itself be what generates the existential imperatives otherwise missing from the world, including the ethical stance to which Schrag refers (12). For, building on Sartre, Beauvoir notes that there’s “no external justification” whatever for this self-warranting claim upon existence: “no outside appeal, no objective necessity permits of its being called useful. It has no reason to will itself. But this does not mean that it can not justify itself, that it can not give itself reasons for being that it does not have.” This is then a way of saying that, as prior to everything, the transcendent claim to a free, responsible existence precedes any social overlay that might mask it.

Therefore, in tracing Schrag’s discussion of transcendence back to its philosophical support system, we can finally see that rhetorical transcendence is here being constructed, on the one side, as if it’s anchored in nothing (arising from nowhere), but then, on the other side, as if it’s anchored in Sartrean existentialism. And now that we
have perhaps a stronger sense of what’s “existential” about Schrag’s position, we can move on to consider what’s “transversal” about it.

For transversality is the construct that is going to allow Schrag (and, more implicitly, Hyde or Turnbull) to take for granted that transcendence is operationalized in consciousness, creating “unity” as “a coefficient of thought and communication moving across differentiated belief systems, interpretive viewpoints, and regions of concern” (129). Certainly, it’s most of all Sartre — as the author of The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness (1937) — from whom Schrag is deriving the notion of transversal unification: “it was the genius of Sartre to recognize the applicability of the concept of transversality in addressing the problem of the unity of consciousness” (128). And, according to Sartre, “consciousness achieves unification by dint” of a built-in “transversal function, an extending across and revisiting of past moments of consciousness without solidifying into an identification with any particular moment” (Schrag 128-129).

By extension, or so Schrag does imply, consciousness must be unified not just at an intra-subjective level but at an inter-subjective level, too. Thus transversality itself would become the royal road for rhetorical transcendence, this latter operating, say, epistemically. And Schrag reinforces this conception by referring to some ostensibly parallel discoveries adumbrated in Guattari’s Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics (1984), with the implication that the more recent foray into transversality must be quite fully consistent with the Sartrean conception.

However, there is a pivotal distinction between transversality as theorized by Sartre and as theorized by Guattari. Since Schrag seems to overlook the distinction, we should take a moment to note that Guattari is actually talking about the movement of subjective resources together with non-subjective resources, so that transversality becomes a linkage between minds and the world, not just between minds and minds.

Guattari’s conception of transversality, though generalizable, originates, as David Cooper mentions, in a critique of “transference,” the psychoanalytic construct initially designed to explain the mechanisms by which feelings and desires can be redirected (3). But, in Guattari’s view, transference itself has become a tool of the status quo. It ensures the perpetuation of normativity not only in vertical impositions from above, but also in horizontal, institution-wide inertia, such that “things and people fit in as best they can with the situation in which they find themselves” (Guattari, “Transversality,” 17). So transversality, Guattari’s experimental alternative to transference, offers an opening onto a “dimension that tries to overcome both the impasse of pure verticality and mere horizontality,” as by permitting “maximum communication among different levels and, above all, in different meanings” (18).

On the surface, Guattari’s transversality might look enough like Sartre’s to explain how Schrag could miss the distinction. Yet Guattari’s formulation involves not only consciousness, but also “things” and “people.” And his emphasis on the non-conscious, non-determined, and non-representational aspect of transversality is clear. He argues that the “best safeguard” against the “danger” of normalization is “to bring to the surface” not, for example, the group’s brightest ideas, but, rather, what Guattari calls, in a phrase invoking both Marx and Freud, the group’s “instinctual demands” (21).

Now, “instinctual demands” are just not the same as, for example, movements of consciousness, and they do have a far more radicalizing effect. More specifically, in
forcing “everyone, whether patient or doctor, to consider the problem of their being and
destiny,” they enable a critique of the group (or institution) by its own members, and no
longer just the other way around (Guattari 21):

The group then becomes ambiguous. At one level, it is reassuring and
protective, screening all access to transcendence, generating . . . a mode of
alienation one cannot help finding comforting . . . But at the other, there
appears behind this artificial reassurance the most detailed picture of
human finitude, in which every undertaking of mine is taken from me in
the name of a demand more implacable than my own death — that of
being caught up in the existence of the other, who alone guarantees what
reaches me via human speech.

To be sure, “instinctual demands” might sound as life-affirming as anything we’d find in
Sartre. And yet “instinctual demands” (which Guattari here associates with our
transversal “access to transcendence”) can evade social determination by harnessing the
irreducible functionality of something — of materiality, corporeality, embodiment.

Thus, in Guattari, transcendence refers to a movement from one positivity, no
matter how finite, to another, and always in resistance against dissolution. By contrast, as
we’ll see next, Sartrean transcendence must somehow be harnessing the notional
functionality of lack, of absence, for it involves only movements within the “no-thing”
which Sartre proclaims consciousness itself to be (Zahavi 136).

For, up to this point, we have primarily been concerned with the local production
(construction, assemblaging) of rhetorical transcendence in an ontological sense — the
way in which it’s posited as inherent to every existential self, prior to any social
determination. But we’ll turn now to the local manufacture of rhetorical transcendence in
a methodological sense — the sense in which rhetorical transcendence is theorized as a
sort of communicative sub-routine. While the ontological explanation derives from
Sartrean existentialism, where transcendence is prior to everything, the methodological
explanation, by contrast, derives from Sartrean phenomenology, which reduces
transcendence to an operation entirely within subjectivity. Thus, given the possibility that
discourses might be constituting the subject to begin with, transcendence itself begins,
 alarmingly, to look socially determined, too.

Philosophizing for the Living by Getting Rid of Their Materiality

Unfortunately, what Sartre is giving with the one, existentialist hand is precisely
the same as what he’s taking away with the other, phenomenologist hand. He’s
observing, as is well known, that social productions are to be overcome when they
exacerbate the material constraints upon human freedom. But then he’s insisting they’re
to be overcome through interiorized transformations lacking in any material dimension at
all. To explain how the project of the existential Sartre is vitiated in the project of the
phenomenological Sartre, I’ll review the steps through which the latter refurbishes the
phenomenology he’s taken over from Edmund Husserl. For that’s how he proposes to
bring philosophy back down to earth: by etherealizing it. And it’s the retro-fitted, de-
corporealized Sartrean phenomenology which theorists such as Calvin Schrag then parlay
into the study of rhetorical transcendence.
Husserl’s major contribution is, reportedly, to have opened the way to the things themselves. But his first step is actually to get rid of the things themselves, i.e., so they don’t interfere with his turning to them. More specifically, his strategy is to bracket all “questions of fact,” including questions concerning the “evidence for one’s own existence as a particular person” (Williams and Kirkpatrick 16–17). As a result, even when Husserl appears to be addressing the things themselves — these famous entities whose task it is for phenomenology to study — he isn’t addressing them at all. He is only addressing the “intended” or “intentional” objects of consciousness. And these are always thoughts considered as objects, without regard to whether they correspond to anything existing independently of the thinker. So the “things” to which Husserl so famously refers are in every respect inherent to “the content of a person’s thought” (Coates).

And then Sartre remains “essentially in agreement” with the “phenomenological program” as laid out by Husserl (Williams and Kirkpatrick 17). He takes for granted that the category of “object” is exclusively filled out by objects of intention. For, astonishingly, Sartre’s response is not to question the idealism of this entire Husserlian tradition, but to embrace it almost without reservation. All he rejects, believe it or not, is the Husserlian notion that there must be a transcendental ego (an “I”) that is building the objects of intention. But what else, if not an ego or an “I,” could possibly be doing all that work? And Sartre’s answer, as Williams and Kirkpatrick present it, is that nothing shall constitute contents of consciousness into intended objects, for the important reason that consciousness has no contents. All content is on the side of the object. Consciousness contains neither transcendental ego nor anything else. It is simply a spontaneity, a sheer activity transcending toward objects . . . a great emptiness, a wind blowing toward objects. (20–21)

Or, as Sartre would have it, the “whole reality” of consciousness is “exhausted in intending what is other,” such that universal (or impersonal) consciousness is never “self-contained,” or “container”; instead, it is always “outside itself” (22).

Sartre must mean to say, however, that this impersonal consciousness is both self-contained and container. For it appears to be constituting its own space, a space within which consciousness blows toward none other than the objects manufactured by consciousness. Sure, if the objects are already there, with all of the content on their side, then that does sound like realism: objects are real, and objects are everything. Meanwhile, if consciousness is content-less, then that does sound like the opposite of subjectivism. As it turns out, though, the only objects in the picture are intended objects, in short, ideas. So, if ideas are everything, and if they’re already there, then this is actually idealism. Meanwhile, it’s clear enough that, from a Sartrean perspective, whatever exists, including whatever sort of consciousness, can only exist in the minds of people. Thus consciousness would be subjectivity, ideas would be everything, and Sartrean phenomenology would be subjective idealism.

The Two Styles of Transcendence

But it’s no wonder that, in the tradition following from Sartre, everything looks immanent to subjectivity, for the latter now seems coterminous with the real. Certainly, “immanence” can be contrasted with “transcendence,” as if these are self-evidently
opposite. Yet the situation is more complicated than that. Writers such as Schrag, Hyde, and Turnbull do understand that transcendence itself can be described as immanent, in the sense that it’s (arguably) enclosed within consciousness. As James Williams mentions, Immanence and transcendence are terms about the relations that hold at the heart of different metaphysics. Are the privileged relations . . . of the form of a relation “to” something, or of a relation “in” something? If it is “to” then it is a philosophy of transcendence. If it is “in” then it is immanence. (“Immanence” 126)

Alas, such an explanation wouldn’t go far enough. The fact remains that if consciousness is viewed as coterminous with the real, then there can be both relations “to” and relations “in,” all of which can be relations “to” and “in” subjectivity as well.

But then the existential-transversal theorists, who do belong to an assemblage for shoring up rhetorical transcendence, are faced with an embarrassing predicament. On the one hand, given their commitment to life (existence, authenticity, responsibility, and the like) they have to keep showing that speech really and truly can alter the present conditions. On the other hand, given their commitment to Sartrean phenomenology, they have to concede that transcendence itself might be an “imminent” operation taking place within consciousness — the latter, in turn, quite possibly an effect of whatever social dispensation needs transcending to begin with. So their current expedient for exiting out of the predicament is to claim that there must, in fact, be two entirely different styles of transcendence. There must be an ordinary transcendence that’s “immanent” within subjectivity, and there must also be an extraordinary, inexplicable transcendence that just irrupts into rhetorical transaction from someplace beyond the world.

By this stage, for the existential-transversal researchers into rhetorical agency, “immanence” is a label for those deplorable eventualities where subjectivity remains its static self, while “transcendence” is a label for those wonderful eventualities where subjectivity changes. In fact, here’s a statement from Grøn and Overgaard to help show that transcendence can be the desideratum for just so long as immanence is the pejorative:

One prominent trend has been to conceive of . . . the movement of transcendence as being constitutive of subjectivity . . . Recently, the seemingly opposite point has been made: subjectivity is to be understood from the transcendence of the other that breaks subjectivity open. (4)

Thus transcendence as “constitutive of subjectivity” simply refers to the humble factory-work taking place inside human interiority, with immanence as subjectivity’s default condition. Meanwhile, the transcendence that breaks subjectivity open has instead to be conceptualized as coming from outside of immanence, the problem then becoming that of wishing precisely such an “outside” into existence.

Within rhetorical studies, the synergy between these two trends is perhaps most clearly instantiated in Calvin Schrag’s The Self after Postmodernity, where communicative interaction is said to be informed sometimes by an ordinary, constitutive, Sartrean transcendence, and sometimes by an extraordinary, Lévinasian transcendence.

By now, there’s a pattern: ordinary communication is irrevocably fallen, i.e., into immanence, but it can still be irradiated with transcendence, anyway — and, if not by chance, then by theoretical fiat. In the writing of Lévinas himself, the opposition is between (alas) “rhetoric,” which is only more of the same, and conversation, which is necessarily different (70). Obviously, though, the rhetorical theorists can’t say exactly
that, even when they are in many respects finding it “prudent” to side with Levinas, the
philosopher who has so fully addressed the relation between speech and transcendence
(Schrag 100, 114, 137-8). Therefore, in Schrag, the opposition is actually between, on the
one side, “pantextualism and linguistification,” which are nowadays everywhere, and, on
the other side, “responsibility,” which must be entering from someplace else (43, 91).
Then, in Hyde, the opposition is actually between a sort of Heideggerian-Sartrean bad
faith, i.e., the story of our collective lives, and “conscience,” apparently no less than the
communitarian variant of grace (375). And, in Turnbull, the opposition is actually
between, over here, a merely interminable discursivity and, over there, the “questioning”
that somehow knows when to stop (207). But there’s always an intervention miraculously
keeping communication transcendent despite itself. It’s this unmotivated intercession
from beyond which I’m characterizing as fideism, and which I’m claiming not simply to
characterize, but utterly to vitiate the existential-transversal account of rhetorical agency.
To be sure, the existential-transversal theorists of rhetorical agency do accept that
there can be a (limited) sort of transcendence taking place within immanence, and without
any special need to posit the inexplicable descent of the Other. For example, Schrag does
sometimes wax sublime on the prospects for an intramundane transcendence. Indeed,
he presents transversality as the solution for a riddle which not even Jurgen Habermas has
been able to explain. This is the mystery as to how selves can become linked to
structures, but without losing their autonomy. Frankly Schrag’s response, while
magnificent, even awe-inspiring, also seems to be reinstating what I’d call the generally
idealist forgetfulness of materiality. But here’s what he actually says:
Radical transcendence operates transversally, and . . . the grammar of
transversality replaces that of universality . . . The concept of transversal
unification . . . illustrates a dynamic . . . process of unifying that allows for
plurality and difference and neither seeks the metaphysical comforts of
stable beginnings and universal telic principles nor displays an
epistemological enchantment with zero-point epistemic foundations. (130)
Thus, if we finally grasp the proper “understanding and application of the transversal play
of transcendence,” we can decide that even social constraint must be merely subordinate
to our built-in transversal functionality, a functionality which unifies us as individual
subjects, and as collective subjects too (133).
Yet there is still the risk that the whole interior of subjectivity might yet turn out
to be another production by social logic. And it’s on this count that Schrag begins to
sound intractable: transcendence (genuine, extraordinary, radical transcendence) cannot
possibly arise from “internal” or immanent critique, which latter still risks reinstating the
immediately-given constraints upon subjectivity (126–129). Instead, according to Schrag,
the only critique adequate to the self after postmodernity will be an “external” critique,
calling for a certain Kierkegaardian, though just as much Lévinasian, leap of faith.

The Fideistic Appeal

So let’s move on to consider the allure which Lévinasian phenomenology must
hold for a thinker like Schrag — i.e., as a way of backing out of the Sartrean implication
that transcendence might very well be immanent entirely within consciousness. We’ll
turn to an overview from Dan Zahavi, paraphrasing an argument central in Lévinas:
When I perceive objects, I am their condition of manifestation, and they consequently appear as my creations. In contrast, my encounter with the Other is not conditioned by anything in my power, but can only offer itself from without, as an epiphanic visitation. (144)

We might say, then, that Lévinas is here inaugurating the recent trend of splitting transcendence into two different styles. There's an ordinary, workaday transcendence, as is to be found in most other phenomenology, and this is the process through which the subject manages to disclose its own intended objects. But there is now also an extraordinary transcendence, shattering all perceptual, conceptual, and interpretative routines. Indeed, as Lévinas puts it, "the absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation" (qtd. in Zahavi 144). And so transcendence (now in the second, extraordinary sense) cannot be socially-determined, after all. For it must surely be irrupting into communication from without, from the absolutely beyond.

Similarly, and not by coincidence, Schrag is also having to split transcendence into two. One of its styles, the Sartrean, is forever to risk recuperation into social logic. And the other of its styles, the Lévinasian, is forever to be protected by fideism. That’s why Schrag’s book has to build up to an argument to the effect that communicative transcendence cannot reduce to the workaday kind of transcendence constructed in the work of Husserl and Sartre, and, by now, presupposed in theories such as that of Jurgen Habermas. To the contrary, communication must also involve that excessive, uncontainable kind of transcendence continually registered, no matter how dimly, in the religious. Thus Schrag all but stipulates that the self (or agent) after postmodernity will have to be conceptualized in terms of exactly that openness to radical alterity presented as theology in Augustine, but reclaimed as philosophy in Kierkegaard and Lévinas.

More precisely, Schrag’s procedure is to say that transcendence can be coupled with alterity in both a stronger sense and a weaker sense — where it’s clearly the stronger sense that Schrag intends to validate by theoretical fiat. Thus the author concedes that, sure, insofar as there’s an alterity (of sorts) everyplace in the social, then this can certainly be a way of “legitimating talk of a transcendence-within-immanence” (122). And who is it that does tend to talk like that? It’s Habermas, who (despite the nobility of his intentions) is clinging to “purchases on concepts of transcendence, rationality, unity, and universality that have outworn their usefulness in the wake of the postmodern challenge” (Schrag 134). For what provokes Schrag’s anxiety, eliciting his protestations, is that even Habermas is unwittingly placing all of human agency within the envelope of transcendent, immanentist subjectivity, leaving it indistinguishable from just anything else that’s kept under the thumb of the social.

Yet Schrag’s alternative is to posit a fideistic, Lévinasian exit from immanence-as-consciousness. And here’s a passage in which he says so:

What is no longer at issue is a transcendence-within-immanence, a transcendence within the economies of the human subject understanding itself in its discourse, action, perception, and communal involvements, but rather transcendence . . . understood as residing on the other side of the economies of human experience. (114)

But isn’t it paradoxical to imply that communicative interaction can be simultaneously constrained by normativity, and also redeemed by some force arriving (gratuitously) from the other side of everything?
Well, if that’s paradoxical, says the existential-transversal theorist, then so be it: the “grammar of faith is the grammar of paradox,” in which case we might as well assert that communication is redemptive, anyway (120). Transcendence can then irrupt into our world so as to rescue us, and all without the least risk of our lapsing into instrumentalism. For a transcendence so paradoxical as that wouldn’t even arise from our own “configurations of experience,” our own “forms of life” (Schrag 138–139). In fact, it would have hardly anything to do with us at all.

The conundrum, though, is that the existential-transversal perspective on agency, with its concern for life, responsibility, conscience, questioning, and the like, ought to be emphasizing not the grammar of paradox, but, rather, the structure of embodiment. Thus we, as assemblage-theoretical investigators, now find ourselves in the position of having to validate a certain stance on agency by recorporealizing it, and all on behalf of some of the local theorists themselves. Yet we don’t have to be arbitrary, for we can simply start deploying an additional affordance of the existential-transversal perspective as such.

Correcting Forgetfulness Through a Material Phenomenology

As it turns out, the other existential-transversal writers do have an ally to help rescue transcendence from social determination. It’s the phenomenologist Michel Henry, though he insists on keeping transcendence immanent — in this way perhaps appearing to jeopardize the very project of protecting (excessive, authentic) existence from (collectively-constituted) essence. Yet Henry also introduces an understanding of embodiment which, correcting the generally idealist forgetfulness of materiality, allows commentators to support the claim that rhetorical transaction can access intrinsic, theorizable (rather than extrinsic, faith-based) resources for effecting social change.

In his translator’s introduction to Material Phenomenology (1990/2008), Scott Davidson portrays the late Michel Henry as articulating a “nonbiological concept” of “life” as a “transcendental auto-affectivity” (ix). Here, it’s the pioneering work of Husserl (and, by extension, of Sartre) that becomes the target of critique: the standard phenomenological understanding of embodiment is that it’s merely a conception. For Husserl treats hyle, or the “non-intentional stuff” entering into awareness — including the stuff of corporeality — “solely as matter existing for the sake of form, that is, for the ek-stasis of intentionality” (Davidson xii). Therefore, even in a philosophy that might seem so attentive to the human being as an embodied creature, what proves to be the case is that the embodiment is only an imagined embodiment, and that consciousness, rather than being scaffolded on any corporeality to speak of, is scaffolded on itself alone.

Thus, as we see from Scott Davidson’s explanation, Michel Henry is rejecting what I myself would call the phenomenality of the Husserlian-Sartrean tradition, where the real itself is only a “transcendent” production from within consciousness: “There are many problems with Husserl’s account of intersubjectivity, but for Henry all of these problems can . . . be traced to Husserl’s decision to promote transcendence over the immanence of life” (Davidson xiii). The analysis captures what we can think of as the problem with very much of Kantian and post-Kantian thinking about embodiment. This is a tradition in which even something so central as materiality has to be hypothesized rather than experienced.
But in marked contrast to Schrag, Hyde, or Turnbull, all of whom do privilege consciousness over corporeality, Henry maintains that transcendent responsibility is grounded in human embodiment, preceding intersubjectivity and persisting within it. Indeed, the “intersubjective community . . . is joined together not through a shared perception of the world . . . but through the pathos of life” (Henry, Material Phenomenology, xiii). For “there exists a more fundamental mode of being, immanence, which is the origin of all transcendence whatsoever” (xi). And Henry offers an uncompromisingly gapless account of this immanence. It’s an account of auto-affection, or auto-affectivity — “an affection of life by life” — as “condition for any actual existence” (Williams, “Critical Contrasts,” 266). In this view, it’s not that “affect B” is transcendentally “caused by external cause A, or determined by condition A.” For example, it’s not that empathy is transcendentally constructed by consciousness. Instead, it’s that life inheres in the affects of life, so that we can say, for short, that “affect B” is “determined by affect B.”

So there’s a continuity between life and its embodied affects, which latter inform communication, intersubjectivity, and all the rest. And the “essential form of affect,” the form which Henry singles out as literally fundamental, is “pathos” as defining the very “auto-affectivity of life.” This pathos is suffering — not as this or that concrete instantiation, but as an “original opening to suffering in life” (Williams, “Critical Contrasts,” 272). Pathos, in other words, is just that kind of “transcendental condition” which would originally belong to human embodiment, rather than to human subjectivity. Thus pathos is immanent not to consciousness but, rather, to corporeality — for it’s simply not to be found in “things which do not live.”

As for the question of responsibility, Henry’s answer will again be that it’s animated by pathos. For pathos, the paradigmatic form of auto-affection, is also an instance of the “free-standing relation of self to self, or better selfhood or ipseity, such as a pure suffering retaining an independence from external causes yet standing as an undeniable ground for all other activities and sensibilities” (Williams, “Critical Contrasts,” 266). This pure affectivity, primitive and invisible as we might take it to be, is accessible to us all the same, gaplessly so, and it links us regardless of our sociality. Indeed, much of Henry’s “political and ethical work” is to “re-establish the primordial status of life as auto-affection,” to “revalue affects — suffering, alienation, bewilderment — in political debate,” and to contest the wrongful as “carried by the distinctions, goals and implications of the turn away from life” (Williams, “Critical Contrasts,” 274).

For instance, on Henry’s view, “an economically successful state that lead to greater divisions between its citizens would be a failure,” since such division would bespeak “the falseness of, for example, affects connected to wealth where these run counter to a shared original suffering and an original equality in such shared affects” (Williams, “Critical Contrasts,” 274). Henry himself writes, for example, that “equality” is not the product of an evaluation, nor in consequence is it the product of a possible counter-evaluation . . . freedom and equality can only be actualized in the reactivation of the internal link that connects every living being to life. (qtd. in Williams, “Critical Contrasts,” 274)

We might say that Henry is holding forth the clearest promise for de-subjectivizing rhetorical agency. In respecifying transcendence as immanent before consciousness (though, by implication, still operating transversally — in the auto-affectivity linking all
the existential selves) he neither ties it to any “historical idea,” nor invites it into the world by fiat, but rather, refers it to human corporeality (Beauvoir, qtd. in Gothlin 54).

Borrowing now from Michel Henry’s *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body* (1965/1975), we can finally start making full sense of the existential-transversal landscape. For, fleshing out Beauvoir’s analysis of the relation between existence and transcendence, we can restore the corporeality otherwise missing from this perspective.

Because Henry’s argument may be misconstrued if quoted out of context, I’ll cite one of the relevant passages at some length:

> Man is not essentially an historical being. He is always the same. Since it is here a question of the body . . . it will be objected that the human body presents . . . characteristics which have varied throughout the course of history . . . However, this is not the original body, but various ways in which man represents this body to himself and behaves toward it. What is historical are the cultural or human objects and the different human attitudes related thereto. But the ontological basis which founds both objects and attitudes is indifferent to this evolution; the latter always presupposes the ontological foundation. (*Philosophy* 4)

Thus Michel Henry really is advancing a philosophy for the living human being — not for the cerebrating subject of the social, or the transcendental jackalope, or some similarly neo-Kantian entity. Indeed, his very differentiation between the “original body” and the “ways in which man represents this body to himself” can stand as a shortcut to material phenomenology’s reversal of the figure-ground relationship presupposed in conventional phenomenology. There, consciousness is the grounding determination of materiality in re-presentation. But, for Henry, consciousness is only the figural continuation of materiality by other means.

At this point, we can start bringing into sharper relief the version of agency that’s to be found — if we work hard enough at it — in the existential-transversal landscape. We can now say we’re in a place where rhetoricity, if it ever does conduce to the life-affirming (even for no necessary reason), must be accessing an agency that’s intrinsic to the human being to begin with. This is an agency which arises not from conventionality or sociality or identity, but instead from the claim upon existence which is inherent in everyone’s irreducible embodiment.

In this particular landscape, if nowhere else, the agent’s imperative is to *ek-sist*. But this word doesn’t mean, for example, to subsist, let alone to desist. It means to "stand out" against absence. Lewis R. Gordon (2006) makes that point when he argues that, for persons of color, what precedes even the problem of representation (including in the political sense) is the task of emerging beyond "indistinction" — of coming to stand out as present, visible, participating in the world (20). But Gordon also explains that this is the task not just for certain, specially-designated social groups, but for everyone. And what this means is that it’s actually our sharing in ek-sistence (and in the original body, the latter’s condition of possibility) that must, in fact, be connecting us all.

So, yes, as Schrag would agree, this is the sort of sharing that unifies us by way of a transversal linkage, a linkage passing through any number of social or cultural or historical compartments. Yet transversality begins with auto-affection; it’s authorized by the original body, and manifested (as Guattari would say) in such “instinctive demands,” as travel everywhere, right along with the existential selves who transport them.
Rhetorical Agency and the Existential Self

By this point, having found a re-corporealized explanation for rhetorical transcendence, we can return to the Sojourner Truth archive. We’re now in the company of Sojourner Truth, who has carried her speech (the claim “I am a woman’s rights,” plus the package made up of race, gender, work, mind, biblical precept, and embodiment, as well as the metaphor of the pint and the quart), all the way into the existential-transversal landscape of agency.

Clearly, from an existential-transversal perspective, there’d be nothing particularly salient about the “I” of “I am a woman’s rights,” for the human claim to exist would already be universal. Meanwhile, the “woman’s,” though it might remain of some interest, could hardly be central, since it’s never the original body, but only the latter’s secondary, social determinations that can have any gender. As for the “rights,” they, too, would refer to something peripheral, for — in the existential-transversal world — any collectively-held values will come and go with every alternative version of sociality.

This time, then, it’ll be the “am” which is salient. And that’s because it refers to the agency (factual, situated, irreducible) of an existential self always in the process of emergence. In that case, let’s start asking how communication about an “am” could ever, even as far back as 1851, afford an opportunity for certain existential and ethical imperatives to come into contact, to begin interacting synergistically, and then to give rise to just the sort of rhetorical agency that would conduce to genuine social change.

Here, the work of the historian Nell Irvin Painter helps us see that our exemplary speaker becomes a rhetorical agent by linking social identities, rather than by setting them at odds, and that the identities in question include feminist and abolitionist. In the following passage, Painter is explaining the historical significance of Sojourner Truth’s statement. She writes, integrating a slightly different form of the rhetorical question so often attributed to the speaker,

One of only a few black women regulars on the feminist and antislavery circuit, Truth . . . was the pivot that linked two causes — of women (presumed to be white) and of blacks (presumed to be men) — through one black female body. (Sojourner Truth, 171)

This passage from Painter helps demythologize the presumption that Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency could somehow derive from her social identity as a “woman.” After all, so far as normative, mid-nineteenth century sociality would be concerned, someone who wasn’t white probably wasn’t a woman, anyway, not in the public forum. Perhaps such a figure might be a female, or a quasi-woman, or something similar, but that’d be about the extent of the status quo’s certainty.

At the same time, we should be able to see from the case of Jane Swisshelm alone (addressed by Painter at some length) that not even the feminists of the day would agree as to what to make of black women’s social identity. Swisshelm — a newspaper editor, and one of Sojourner Truth’s immediate auditors of 1851 — exemplifies that kind of activist who could advocate gender-equalitarianism, but only within the familiar constraints of race and class. Thus, in recognizing only white women’s interests, her editorializing would leave all others out of the loop, framing them, for political purposes, as non-women. So we can’t assume that a speaker like Sojourner Truth could just show
up at some feminist convention in 1851 and already be a woman. Besides, the case of Sojourner Truth is even more complicated than the foregoing might suggest. For it isn’t safe to assume that, in the middle of the nineteenth century (when “women” are “presumed to be white,” and when “blacks” are “presumed to be men,”) Sojourner Truth can be a woman by just wanting to be a woman (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 171).

Let’s note that, in the speech that we’re studying, the speaker is front-stage and center, submitted to all sorts of scrutiny — and not by just anyone, but specifically by those seeking to work out the rights of gender. What’s more, her self-disclosure isn’t for the patriarchs. It’s for the undecided among the feminists. These are the auditors wondering whether to side with the Swisshelm contingent, whether to agree that it would be an error to allow an abolitionist like Sojourner Truth (threatening, by association, to bring along with her the “blacks” who are “presumed to be men”) to speak to, for, about the women’s movement at all (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 171).

In such a setting, even the gender of the speaker’s voice could become an issue. For the historical Sojourner Truth was known for speaking in a voice so “robust” and “deep” that “that some of her enemies suspected . . . she was a man” (Campbell 12). Of course, our Sojourner Truth might have been citing with an ironic difference — speaking on behalf of women, yet appropriating this deep and robust voice in an unruly iteration of masculine social identity. But, in that case, we’d then have to account for a figure even less categorizable as a woman than ever before. As if it’s not perplexing enough that being black disqualifies the speaker from any self-evident status as a woman, since black people are, for political reasons, already “presumed to be men” (even in a good many activist circles), what’s now added to the bewilderments is that she doesn’t even sound like a woman.

So we’ve arrived at a puzzle. For it’s rather unclear as to how, let’s say, so difficult a quantity as Sojourner Truth could ever accomplish, at the women’s rights convention of 1851, either what Karlyn Kohrs Campbell is claiming, i.e. by self-evidently emblazoning the feminist onslaught against male privilege, or even what Nell Irving Painter is claiming, i.e., by becoming, certainly so far as concerns the popular imagination, the “pivot” that links the “feminist” cause with the “antislavery” cause (*Sojourner Truth* 171). However, my own answer — and, under the circumstances, my re-corporealized existential-transversal answer — is that our exemplary rhetorical agent must actually, in speaking to the question of equal rights, be annihilating the presumption that social identity can be any substantive consideration, anyway.

**On Pivoting, Transcendence, and Emergence**

Indeed, if we retain from the Frances Dana Gage account of the speech what is corroborated — not contradicted — in the Marius Robinson account, we notice that the Sojourner Truth who comes into view is a speaker who’s, in some respects, outside all of the then-salient social categories, and yet, in some other respects, inside all of them, too. Therefore, from an existential-transversal perspective, it’s clear that she’s dramatizing, in her own person, the capacity of the existential self not only to exceed any of the given essences, but also to pass through them (transversally) along the way.

To begin with, the speaker describes a present state of division among the then-salient social groups — clearly with the implication that any genuine change will require
the creation, as Kenneth Burke might say, of some consubstantiality or identification to reconcile the currently alienated parties. According to Robinson, the speaker notes that the women are coming up blessed by God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard. (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 126)

And then, according to Gage, what she says is quite like this:

> Well, chilern, whar dar is so much racket dar must be somethin’ out o’ kilter. I tink dat ‘twixt de niggers of de Souf and de womin at de Norf, all talkin’ ‘bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon.

(Campbell, 9)

Where, then, is the diremption that we’re looking for? Well, it’s disclosed in the separation of the terms “man,” “woman,” and “slave.”

On the one side, there’s “man,” and on the other side there’s “woman” and “slave” — the both of them perhaps squeezing in the patriarchal oppressor. Still, while we can see that “man” and “slave” form one clear-cut binary, and “man” and “woman” another, we cannot see any clear-cut relation between “slave” and “woman.” Let’s say that the hawk is a different entity from the buzzard, and that each of the two is mounting its discrete assault. But it’s not the case that “man” is currently having to contend with a hawk-buzzard, or with an alliance of buzzard and hawk. Besides, “man” might not be limited to “flat-out patriarch,” anyway, since the category does seem to include those women’s rights supporters who are male. My own inference, actually, is that the category even includes the preponderantly male abolitionists. And then it’s beginning to seem there might be some diremption inside the category “man” as well.

At any rate, the (white) “men,” the (black) slaves, and the (white) women are described as occupying separate compartments within the social. The distance is geographical as well as ideational — literal, physical, regional, and not only cultural or political. The “men” do seem to be everywhere, so there’s no need for the speaker to be specific. But “de niggers,” come to think of it, wouldn’t exactly be everywhere, but rather definitively in “de Souf.” And “de womin” — the feminists — wouldn’t be exactly everywhere, but rather definitively “at de Norf.” At this moment, then, it’s diremption wherever we turn. It’s alienation between the (white) men and the Northern feminists, and it’s alienation between the Southern slaves and the (white) men, and it’s also, though independently, alienation between the Northern feminists, the Southern slaves, and the (white) men, too.

Even so, as we reflect on the state of separation depicted in both the Gage and Robinson versions of the speech, we realize that the speaker is presenting herself, or constituting herself, as exceeding social categorization. While the white men, the black slaves, and the white women all belong to some prepared-for place, the speaker simply doesn’t. To begin with, the place of the white men is everywhere, evidently unlike the place of Sojourner Truth. Yet this speaker is not (now) a slave, having been “freed by New York law” some twenty-five years earlier (Campbell 8). She certainly isn’t one of “de niggers of de Souf,” since she isn’t even where they are. Instead, she’s up North, and free enough to be among the “regulars on the feminist and antislavery circuit” (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 171). Even so, the North, rather than being the place of the (non)slave,
is actually the place of “de womin.” And, exactly as we’ve noted, the jury’s still out as to whether the speaker properly fits into that category.

We must conclude that nobody can say whether Sojourner Truth is, at this present moment, either a slave or not a slave, either a woman or not a woman, or even, come to think of it, either a man or not a man, what with her voice so “robust” and “deep” (Mabee and Newhouse, qtd. in Campbell 12). That’s what it must mean for somebody, especially _circa_ 1851, to be constituting a liminal site. For, while Sojourner Truth cannot properly be described in keeping with any of the then-salient categories, here she is, anyway. Thus if the speaker is disavowing the salient identities, and if this is still to affirm some consubstantiality with her auditors, then she must be declaring that all the participants can be identified together regardless of any socially-determined essence.

However, if Sojourner Truth is going to speak in a manner that conduces to genuine change, she can’t speak from no place at all. Surely she’s facing the kind of challenge Simon Critchley has in mind today, when (in his advice to progressives disenchanted with most of postmodernism and postmarxism alike) he says, “You shouldn’t meet your enemy on their ground, but on your own, on the ground that you have made your own” (“Problem” 3). Therefore, Sojourner Truth, liminal site as she may be, will also have to _belong_ to the social locations which need transcending in the first place. She will have to demonstrate, in person, that existence not only precedes essence, but also persists after it. She’ll have to show her auditors that it’s as possible for them as for herself _both_ to shift into _and_ shift out of any collectively-determined identity.

Clearly, the Sojourner Truth speech is less about patriarchy, pure and simple, than about the relation (or not) between race and gender. For the question is as to the manner in which this speaker could ever emerge as a “pivot” between two initially-separate movements — the “antislavery” movement, populated primarily, though not exclusively, by males, and the “feminist” movement, where there’d be relatively more women than men (_Sojourner Truth_, 171). Yet the speaker couldn’t very well be a pivot beforehand, since she’d have as it were, no self-evident leverage in either social camp to begin with. So she must be converting herself _into_ a pivot (or a hybrid, a cyborg, or something like that) during the rhetorical transaction itself. We can infer, then, that the speaker is having to _establish_ a simultaneous presence within two very different social compartments, and that this must involve overcoming a different set of problems in each case.

One of the tasks is for Sojourner Truth to verify that she’s qualified to speak on behalf of African-Americans, and, more specifically, in the manner of the abolitionist. But this is not quite so straightforward a matter as may seem. The difficulty is for her to speak as a black person without thereby becoming assimilated into maleness. For (as Painter has been explaining) the social dispensation at this time is such that abolitionism tends, by default, to become the struggle on behalf of black men only, with black _women_ left invisible. Unfortunately, too few of even the activists seem to understand that to advocate for African-Americans’ rights can also be to advocate for women’s rights.

The other task is for Sojourner Truth to verify that she’s qualified to speak for women, and, more specifically, in the manner of a feminist. This time, though, the difficulty would be to speak as a woman without thereby becoming assimilated into whiteness. For — again as we’ve learned from Painter — the social dispensation is such that women’s rights, by default, tends to become rights just for white women, with _black_ women left invisible (in feminism quite as much as in abolitionism). So, from this
perspective, too few of the activists seem to understand that to advocate for women’s rights can be to advocate for the rights of African Americans as well.

It’s as if Sojourner Truth will have to become black before she can speak as a woman, and as if she will have to become a woman before she can speak as a black person. Frankly, this is not the conclusion at which the historian Nell Irvin Painter arrives. For what the historian actually says, at the end of her “Difference, Slavery, and Memory: Sojourner Truth in Feminist Abolitionism” (1994), is that Sojourner Truth, (at least, as we’d know her from the Gage version of the speech) only “asked whether she were a woman,” but “without” going ahead and “making herself into one at the time” (158). But, here in the existential-transversal landscape of rhetorical agency, it cannot be enough for Sojourner Truth merely to ask whether she’s a woman, and then to leave the premises without becoming one.

For the whole point of theorizing rhetorical transaction from within the existential-transversal frame is to construct speech as accessing transcendence, and in a transversal manner, at that. In this instance, what needs (transversally) to be outstripped is, on the one side, the category of gender and, on the other side, the category of race. Thus the speaker has indeed to make herself into a woman at the time, and to make herself into a black person on that occasion, too. Otherwise, she won’t be able to demonstrate, by example, how these categories can be exceeded by the persons occupying them — persons, in all the most important respects, assuredly like herself. Yet this means she does have initially to start speaking as a person, and only later on as a woman and/or an African-American. To do that requires her to clear away any presumptions, on the one side, as to her gender identity and, on the other side, as to her racial identity, leaving in the middle (front-stage and center) only her ontologically prior claim to exist as a human being. Thus she will demonstrate that just any other existential self, whether currently framed as a woman, an African-American, or something else, can always precede, occupy, and transcend that given social identity.

For while both Robinson and Gage do portray the speaker as integrating a number of examples from personal experience, we are still to discover (if we triangulate) that the autobiographical references don't have so much to do with being a woman, anyway. We certainly cannot trust to those various gestures in the direction of womanhood which appear in Gage. Thus, considering that none of the emblems of femininity so routinely sutured to Sojourner Truth’s statement — the mother’s grief, the thirteen children, the part about not being “helped into carriages” — can be found in the Robinson version, only in the fictionalized, melodramatic version from Gage, it turns out that nothing in the speaker’s claim, her advocating on behalf of the disenfranchised, can really turn on her status as a female, rather than as a person (Campbell 9).

Meanwhile, according to Robinson, the speaker never includes any verification as to her gender identity at all. Instead, her strategy is to keep emphasizing that she’s not a man, so that she’s consistently proceeding by negation:

I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? . . . I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too . . . I am as strong as any man that is now. (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 125)
And if we isolate the key terms — muscle, work, plowed, reaped, husked, chopped, mowed, carry, eat, strong — we find they have nothing to do with gender, only to do with being an embodied, suffering, struggling person authenticating her claim to existence.

Again, though, there are two tasks for the speaker, and the second of these is to become a person in order, later on, to become black. So, having dismissed the possibility that Sojourner Truth’s gender might be speaking before she does, we’ll inquire into the possibility that her race might somehow be exerting priority over her humanity.

We certainly notice the markers of race in the Gage version of the speech, so thoroughly saturated with dialect. But there’s no time like the present to recall that the dialect is bogus, anyway:

Truth did not speak in the language that Gage attributed to her; even her most powerful arguments and apt metaphors were by this language deformed, even ridiculed. Note, too, that this is the only extant text or fragment in which Truth uses the n-word. (Campbell 13)

Consequently, if we discount the fabricated dialect, we don’t hear any blackness at all.

Meanwhile, as it turns out, Robinson’s account contains exactly no linguistic traces as to the speaker’s racial identity. His Sojourner Truth doesn’t sound even slightly, let alone essentially, exotically, or authentically black, certainly not by any criterion of 1851. Instead, she sounds just like anybody else. She’s speaking the “standard English” which even Campbell recognizes to have been, “from time to time,” characteristic for her public engagements (Campbell 12).

More intriguing yet, if there’s any hint in Robinson as to Sojourner Truth’s racial identity, it’s at most that the speaker is an “emancipated slave,” which still doesn’t tell us anything specific. Here, we can refer to the work of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth’s colleague (in an occasionally strained relationship) on some of the very same speaking tours. In Chapter 7 of his Narrative (1845), Douglass recalls helping the Irish laborers with their work on the docks. He was asked whether he was “a slave for life,” and this, of course, was for him to discover the reality of indenture. That was a practice in which pretty much anyone of less-than-modest means — say, an Irishman — could end up being a temporary slave, though for perhaps many years at a time. Thus for Marius Robinson to report on the speaker as an “emancipated slave” isn’t, as if by that very token, for him to label her by race.

In short, we can by now rule out any linguistic markers that would bracket the speaker either as female or as black. So we can no longer maintain that her rhetorical agency would inhere primarily in any social identity leaking through her words. But, in that case, if we’re to start eliminating or suspending so much of the language of the speech, then what’s going to be left for us to talk about? Well, it’s not that we have to abandon everything linguistic about the speech. It’s only that we should concede the rhetorical transaction not to be merely verbal. After all, if she’s speaking, in an unexceptionably standard — not in the least slave-like — English, and without even (as it turns out) emphasizing her own gender, then she can’t be speaking in the manner of some identity politician. To the contrary, it’s an existential content, rather than a gendered, racialized, ideologized content that’s reaching her auditors as she speaks. As a person, then, she has gradually constituted herself as standing, in some sense, before the social categories of “woman” and “black.” From this point on, going forward, she can start
dramatizing herself as shifting into any social categories she pleases, from a stance that ontologically precedes them, and without losing herself along the way.

But, when she does shift into this or that familiar identity, what will be already be there, populating the salient categories of the day? The answer is that an array of other existential selves will already be there. These will be all of the persons, whether in the immediate audience or elsewhere, who are quite as capable as Sojourner Truth of stepping into all sorts of social identities, but without losing their inherent personhood in the process. So, collectively, the speaker and the audience will be constituting the entire populace of the existential-transversal world, and then Sojourner Truth will be speaking for everybody in the same breath as she's speaking for herself.

Therefore, if it is in fact the case that Sojourner Truth is a rhetorical agent, her auditors (existential selves, every last one of them) will recognize that “the signs to be interpreted” in her message, “however connected to still other signs,” are “nevertheless trying to convey something true” (Grondin 58). They will grasp her statement as an "event of speaking” in which “someone” is “saying something to someone” (Schrag 22). While the someone who does the saying will not be identical with the someone who does the listening, and while the selves engaged in the transaction will, in any case, be “emergent” rather than fixed, each of the participants will nevertheless be an “I,” a somebody (Schrag 22, 26). And all of them will be linked through the temporally-constituted, eventful something that now connects them. That something, will, of course, be an affirmation of the human claim to exist, a claim which, even as it differentiates every speaking self, also hybridizes every “I” with the self of its other.

The Rhetorical Agent and the Original Body

Yet the question arises as to the process through which the exemplary rhetorical practitioner (having, as it were, pre-empted her own reduction to this race, to that gender) could create the identification, or highlight the consubstantiality, obtaining between herself and her interlocutors. Surely the process will have do with human corporeality, which is automatically — Michel Henry would say, auto-affectively — included within just any social identity to which a listener might belong. Yet I don’t think we should jump to any conclusions as to what the audience members would actually be witnessing as they fix their disparate gazes upon the speaker.

Indeed, as we scrutinize the intersection between our two sources, Robinson and Gage, all that comes into view is what Michel Henry calls the original body, and this isn’t a matter of the speaker’s race or gender, not any more than it's a matter of the merely verbal signs through which she’s affirming her own claim upon existence.

For while Gage and Robinson together assure us that the original body is quite actively involved in this transaction, they also confirm that it cannot reduce to symbolism. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell points out, Gage does emphasize Sojourner Truth’s conversion of her own physicality into a non-verbal rhetorical device. So here’s the actual passage from Gage, including the reporter’s authorial intrusion:

“Look at me! Look at my arm!” (and she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power).

(Campbell 10)

Nell Irvin Painter, for her own part, analyzes the scenario as follows:
Gage shines a spotlight on Truth’s body: a massive, towering figure straining upward . . . undressed and on display . . . Gage describes Truth’s disrobing a part of her body. The naked limb is a mighty right arm, the arm of a worker, the arm of a powerful woman. (Sojourner Truth 171)

According to Gage, at least, Sojourner Truth doesn’t vanish into some epistemic wrinkle, disappearing into the recesses of the sign, and we know it because Sojourner Truth is *bypassing* representation (baring her non-linguistic arm), and in no less than the process of verifying her own existence.

Now, having read some of the works of Annemarie Mol, I recognize that all sorts of things (for example, *arteries*) can acquire a gender, maybe even a race as well, and I can agree that Sojourner Truth’s arm might, at some ontologically subsequent moment, take on either or both of those sorts of determination (Mol, 2002). I can further appreciate that Sojourner Truth's arm might well be distinguished from that of someone who’s never so much as lifted a finger in her life. But how can this be the arm of a woman, let alone of a black woman, or even that of a worker, before it's the arm of a person?

It’s as a person, then — not as a social identity — that Sojourner Truth is speaking, and it’s the original body that she’s manifesting in the speech. It’s unlikely that everyone here (whether at the convention in Akron, or encountering the speech in some subsequent era) will be a black woman used to performing manual labor, and therefore inclined to identify with the speaker on just that special basis. Yet everyone will certainly have a share in the original body, whether manifested by way of an arm, a face, or something else. If it’s an arm, though, the arm will be enough like Sojourner Truth’s for everyone, the speaker and the auditors alike, to have something in common. And proprioception alone (returning us to Guattari’s conception of the “instinctive” demand) will mean, for the audience, that the speaker’s body can’t be dismissed as theatricality, written off as pure signification, for this is now a body that’s just as real as mine.

But Sojourner Truth’s original body will then be preceding any sociality (any blackness, femaleness, whiteness, maleness), just as it will be preceding any verbal signs wrapped around it. Therefore, if Gage is affirming that Sojourner Truth bares her arm as part of the performance, then Gage is, by that very affirmation, divulging that there is a dimension to the speaker’s existence which, though it’s palpably contributing to the speaker’s rhetorical agency, simply cannot be represented. Not even Gage can do any more than gesture towards it, and all in an indication that redoubles, rather than interprets, Sojourner Truth’s own gesture: Here’s this material existence which we’re, all of us, sharing together. And so there’s already, by now, at least half a justification for our concluding that some *embodiment* must indeed be folded into the speech, even if it isn’t coming to appearance through any of the signs of social identity.

And then, if we do continue triangulating, we’ll discover that an unrepresentable embodiment is participating in the Robinson version of the speech as well. For, just as soon as we allow that account back into the archive, we discover all the rest of the evidence to the effect that the original body, which Sojourner Truth is bringing into the speech, can’t — not initially — be black, or female, let alone both.

Robinson verifies, even more clearly than does Gage, that Sojourner Truth becomes a rhetorical agent not by virtue of her social visibility but of her irreducible embodiment. So here is the preface to his version of Sojourner Truth’s statement:
One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the Convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gestures, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 125)

And what’s most important, for present purposes, is for us to ask what has happened to Sojourner Truth’s blackness and/or femaleness now.

As we’ve found earlier, the speaker’s racial and gender identity aren’t anywhere in the speech as Robinson presents it. And we see here that they’re not even in the editorial *preface* to the speech. Yes, it’s conceivable that “whole-souled” might, circa 1851, have been a coded way of implying blackness, much as “urban” has been of late. But we can’t determine the speaker’s racial identity even on the basis of “whole-souled” considering that the other term, “emancipated slave,” might, as we’ve seen, just as easily refer to an Irishman. As for any clues to the speaker’s gender, well, those are only side-effects (belonging metadiscursively to the reporter’s “her” and “she”), and they don’t foreshadow anything appearing in the actual argument. So, all we are being given to understand in Robinson’s introduction is that you’d just have to share in the original body to be able fully to grasp what’s happening in the transaction.

Again, Robinson’s preface is to emphasize the speaker’s “gestures” and “tones” and “powerful form,” none of which belong to social identity. Indeed, the latter itself is missing. So my own point is that, in this particular connection, Marius Robinson and Frances Dana Gage happen to be saying exactly the same thing. For Robinson, too, is resorting to language as gesture, as indication rather than symbolization — and this is to dramatize the manner in which Sojourner Truth’s body exceeds reduction to linguisticality. Indeed, the latter itself is missing. So my own point is that, in this particular connection, Marius Robinson and Frances Dana Gage happen to be saying exactly the same thing. For Robinson, too, is resorting to language as gesture, as indication rather than symbolization — and this is to dramatize the manner in which Sojourner Truth’s body exceeds reduction to linguisticality. In Gage, as we’ve discovered, it’s an unrepresentable arm. And now, as we discover in Robinson, it’s an unrepresentable “form.” But there's no socially-recuperable content to the "form" at all. It's just the form of a person, of a human being, of anyone who’s armed with the original body. So it's the original body, whose extra-symbolic form is shared by all the members of the audience, that emerges out of indistinction in Robinson’s account.

From this perspective, what goes for race and gender even goes for “mind,” explaining the functionality of the pint-and-quart analogy. In both the Gage and Robinson versions of the speech, the speaker is portrayed as satirically engaging the then-topical question as to whether women and African-Americans could somehow purchase equal rights on the basis of their intelligence. Let’s consider, though, that the natural-rights position (highlighted in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s analysis) would make equal rights contingent on the possession of at least *some* intellect. Meanwhile, the legal-rights position would make them contingent on the possession of at least *enough* intellect to satisfy those who are folded into the group of the more powerful. Yet both arguments would overlook that one’s claim to a free and responsible existence is entirely self-validating. On the existential-transversal view, then, the metaphor of the pint and the quart would be making this appearance in order to sweep away altogether any preoccupation with “intellect” (along with any comparable preoccupations with race and gender), leaving the audience in direct contact with the fundamental claim of the existential selves on whose behalf the speech is being delivered.
Most important of all, though, is that the rhetorical agent to whom we can attribute this famous speech doesn’t start off as black, or female, or as any pre-determined essence, only as human, mobile, emergent. She’s as human, mobile, and emergent as these auditors with whom she’s linked (by way of the original body, the claim to existence), these auditors who can not only take on, but also transcend any socially-given identities in just the same manner as she can.

**A Re-Corporealized Transversality**

So now we can consider the process through which Sojourner Truth manages to express her own personhood in just such a manner as (transversally) to link the socially recognizable figure of the black person with the socially recognizable figure of the woman, in this way emerging as a pivot between gender and race. Certainly, it’s in order to effect such a connection that the speaker is working race and gender into the speech to begin with. But let’s not overlook that that the avenue for transcendence opens up not at the sites of “race” or “gender,” but, rather, at the site of *biblical precept*. We know it because both Robinson and Gage portray the speaker as repeatedly mentioning Jesus.

It’s true that Christ is associated with just that religion which happens, *circa* 1851, to be the most prevalent within the social dispensation. But, in addition to that, and separately from that, Jesus is also emblematic of the existential self, and this is why you don’t have to be black and/or female to respond to Him. For Jesus bespeaks, and all at one and the same time, such definitively existential-transversal considerations as finitude or lack, the original body, ek-sistence (rather than absence or indistinction), revolution, emancipation, the absolute or unqualified refusal in the face of arbitrary constraint, and the reality of transcendence. By the same token, Jesus acts as an existential-transversal collector, and as an existential-transversal separator, too. He gathers what is prior about the existential self, and distantiates all of that from what secondary about sociality.

So “biblical precept” appears in this speech as a vehicle for bringing Jesus into the transaction. And Jesus in turn (sharing the original body, along with everyone else) becomes a term for translating the speaker into existential commensurability with her auditors — black, white, feminist, abolitionist, or whatever. This is how Sojourner Truth demonstrates that (exactly like Jesus, exactly like herself, and exactly like her auditors) just *anybody* can be an advocate simultaneously for women’s rights and for African-Americans’ rights, but without having to dissolve into any of the social identities in question. Thus, if Sojourner Truth is saying she’s concerned with the present condition of African Americans and of women, then she *becomes*, in the saying, not only an African American but also a woman. It’s not because of any pre-established social slots that she might occupy, but, instead, because of her concern for the persons herded into the collectivities in question. If, incidentally, she happens also to look or sound black and/or female, that might perhaps add to the concrete specificity of her investment. But it isn’t strictly necessary.

What’s, let’s say, crucial about the communicative transaction is that it *redistributes* Sojourner Truth’s concern, her caring about other existential selves, throughout the audience. It’s this concern with the claim shared by such selves (the claim to exist regardless of one’s social identity) that establishes the priority of Sojourner Truth’s own personhood, allowing her to shift into, and also invite the auditors into, the
new, blended category of the “black female,” so that she finally becomes the “pivot” between the initially-alienated constituencies. In this way, she effectively doubles the set of auditors who, in identifying with black people (plus abolitionists) and women (plus feminists), all of these simultaneously, are now prepared to accept this argument for the extension of equal rights to the disenfranchised.

**Summation**

In this chapter, we’ve read Sojourner Truth’s statement (not only the central claim, but also the themes and images bundled along with it) in the light of the existential-transversal paradigm, which is an assemblage for generating rhetorical transcendence. We’ve seen that, here in this theoretical-and-practical landscape, the activity of the practitioner, in this case Sojourner Truth, is indeed being supported, not undermined, by the activity of the theorist. Yet we have noted certain local commentators to be building an entirely disembodied version of rhetorical transcendence. To show them how to recorporealize their own stance on rhetorical agency, or on the rhetorical transcendence folded into it, we have pointed out the work of their under-acknowledged ally, the material phenomenologist Michel Henry, offering resources for re-assembling rhetorical transcendence so as to produce a much more robust version than before.

Yet, from an assemblage-theoretical point of view, we might be left perplexed at the notion that rhetorical transcendence could be constructed on the basis of so few constituents as just one original body and one authentic claim, even if these do belong to every single existential self that there is. So we’ll move on to the fourth and last of the landscapes of rhetorical agency. This will be the material-semiotic perspective, which is the work space for manufacturing rhetorical materiality, and, in consequence, the support system for rhetorical transcendence itself.
Chapter Seven: Materiality in the Material-Semiotic Landscape

The final phase of our investigation takes us into the material-semiotic landscape, populated by theorists and practitioners whose business it is to assemble the rhetorical materiality that they consider to be central to rhetorical transaction. We’ll see, on the more theoretical side, that — with few exceptions — the local perspective is being developed relatively less through the efforts of any rhetorical theorists than through the labor of a number of philosophers and/or social theorists. At any rate, rhetorical transaction will here be theorized as involving a very different sort of agent than in the other three landscapes we’ve visited. For this will be an agent or actor that can take on all sorts of functionalities, depending on the nature of the assemblages in which he, she, it, they, or we might happen to be implicated. Let’s refer to this agent as an ineffable participant, or as a term whose (concrete) materiality forever exceeds the (semiotic) relations in which it’s involved.

Consequently, we’ll see, on the more practical side, that what our exemplary rhetorical agent, Sojourner Truth, is doing as she speaks is to effect tangible connections among participants from different strata, from different social terrains. Under such circumstances, when the speaker says “I am a woman’s rights,” she will actually be highlighting the term woman, referring not to any female, or even to any African-American female, but, rather, to a cyborg. This will be a network emerging from the interaction among constituents initially produced elsewhere, most of all in the strata of biblical precept, race, and gender. As she speaks, then, Sojourner Truth herself will be helping to build an assemblage that is conducive to genuine social change.

A Parable of Materiality-and-Relationality

Although the two terms “material” and “semiotic” are often to be found conjoined in rhetorical studies, relatively few commentators within the discipline actually adopt any material-semiotic approach as such. The label as I’m employing it comes directly from the usage of the actor-network theorist John Law (2009), though it also applies to the work of researchers including Levi Bryant, Gilles Deleuze with Félix Guattari, Donna Haraway, Graham Harman, Bruno Latour, Michael Serres, and many others. While the “material” part does, roughly speaking, refer to objects, tools, things, corporealities, and the like, the “semiotic” part actually refers to relationships. Indeed, Bruno Latour and Madeline Akrich (1992) explain that, in this context, “semiotics is not limited to signs,” for it’s “the study of order building or path building and may be applied to settings, machines, bodies, and programming languages as well as texts” (259). Thus material-semiotics is clearly among the theoretical and methodological sources (along with Deleuzean philosophy and object-oriented philosophy) on which we’ve been drawing in our own, assemblage-theoretical approach to the study of rhetorical agency.

There are indeed some genuinely material-semiotic studies of rhetorical agency. Still, they can be difficult to recognize, particularly when they deploy the needful concepts without employing such labels as “material-semiotic.” An illustration, important enough to keep in mind as a sort of allegory for later on, is offered by Carmen Werder’s “Rhetorical Agency: Seeing the Ethics of It All” (2000).
Addressing the problem of persuasion, Werder distinguishes among power, authority, and influence, showing how each of the three considerations is reflected in the sorts of intra-organizational hierarchies and affordances to be encountered at a present-day university. She explains that rhetorical agency isn’t the same as the factors listed just above, but is the result of their configuration together with the human choice to participate in an ethically justifiable engagement. However, from my perspective, Werder’s discovery has less to do with any particular attributes or properties than with the fact that persuasion ripples across networks gradually built by all sorts of “rhetorical” agents, and not by human actors alone. Thus rhetorical agency turns out to be an internally-variegated alliance, where choice, influence, authority, disparate social roles, technological affordances (involving, in this case, technologies of literacy) and power, including of the “physical” or material kind, are assembled in such a manner as to produce some genuine change within the present dispensation (20).

As the story goes, Werder finds herself tasked with administering a certain proficiency examination, this latter understood — for a number of pedagogical, philosophical, and practical reasons — to be quite a “bad test” (15). In urging the adoption of a better form of assessment, she tries (variously) to exercise power, authority, and influence. Still, the important decision makers remain unresponsive. So she starts helping build what I myself would call a new assemblage. It’s an emergent network that comes to reach so far that even the important decision makers get folded into it as well. More specifically, Werder becomes a consultant to a committee; she joins a task force; she visits thirty-two departments; she meets with follow-up focus groups (17). It’s a question of putting “people in conversation,” and also of working “sophistically” — of “analyzing the situation and taking advantage of . . . kairotic moments.” As we infer, such conversationality does occasion the opportune deployment of power, of authority, of influence, of shared values hybridized with tangible materialities (witness the badness of the test that really has “to go”), and even of free choice (16). And then, although very many participants do contribute, an “economics professor,” someone positioned quite differently from Werder, also becomes enlisted into the cause, drafting what becomes, in the long run, a successful recommendation “for replacing the exam” (17).

Now, the replacement of the undesirable material reality by something better is evidence of social change, and Werder has played an indispensable role. Yet it’s not exactly Werder, but, rather, her assemblage that has done the persuading. In other words, Werder has become a rhetorical agent not primarily because she has a handful of properties, but primarily because she belongs to an alliance whose members are quite different from one another, hailing from disparate social terrains. So let’s at least note, for the sake of an example, that Werder is not actually an economist, and the economics professor is not actually a writing program administrator. They are both stakeholders, but they are not necessarily interested in all the same ways. Perhaps Werder is interested in resolving certain administrative difficulties, as well as in empowering the composition students. And perhaps the economics professor is interested in empowering the composition students, as well as in being able to read some more substantive term papers. If so, then both of these stakeholders (singled out from myriads for inspection) are interacting to generate an emergent, hybridized interest that isn’t the same as the separate, independent interests with which they’ve started.
In short, without so much as dropping the name of any material-semiotic thinker, Werder has illustrated for us everything that’s important about the functionality of the Deleuzean assemblage, the Latourian network, the Haraway-style cyborg — where disparate constituents interact to establish a productive coherence. We should not overlook the heterogeneity of the participants, the difference among the constituents (staff, faculty, documents, fundamental values, educational policies and practices, students, perspectives on the individual and common good) implicated in this enterprise, this project of generating a new reality, a new materiality, which is all the more beneficial to the members of the collectivity themselves. For we’re now seeing in operation what Clay Spinuzzi (another of the few writers in rhetorical studies adopting a genuinely material-semiotic perspective) would call such “network,” such mutually-beneficial “translation” or intermediation, as leads to the production of “composite goals differing from the existing ones” (16, 88).

At the same time, the scenario we find in Werder is quite unlike the scenarios we find among so many now writing about rhetorical agency and/or rhetorical materiality. The humans in Werder’s alliance haven’t become agents by falling into cracks that suddenly appear within social structure (see Herndl and Licona’s “Shifting Agency: Agency, Kairos, and the Possibilities of Social Action,” 2007). And although Werder has uncovered precisely one of those “civic bodies” which Michelle Baliff (1998) has theorized in “Writing the Third-Sophistic Cyborg,” it’s a collectivity that does “remember the past,” and “observe the present,” and “prophesy the future” as well (Baliff 132). True, there isn’t a “One” lurking beneath Werder’s narrative, only an internally-variegated “network” (Baliff 132). Yet neither is there any “ecstasy of communication,” for nobody according to Werder is leaving “meaning . . . dismembered and scattered to the winds” (Baliff 132). And, finally, while it’s not Carmen Werder, but John Sloop (2009) who refers to “material and semiotic conditions,” her explanation doesn’t resemble his (70). In the latter, materiality is a canvas, and semioticity the symbolism spray-painted onto the surface. But in Werder’s treatment, materiality includes, for example, the relative goodness or badness of a concrete, tangible proficiency exam, while semioticity includes all the linkages among the radically heterogeneous participants collaborating to get rid of one material reality and replace it with another.

**Assemblaging, Stratification, and Circulating Reference**

So, in what follows, we’ll investigate the production of rhetorical materiality — in other words, of that which materializes rhetorical transcendence — from a vantage point much more like that adopted by Carmen Werder or by Clay Spinuzzi than that adopted by Herndl and Licona, Baliff, or Sloop. In this case, we’ll follow another rhetorical agent, Sojourner Truth, as she starts entering certain disparate collectivities, and then finds ways to connect them, so that rhetorical agency (i.e., including hers) comes to ripple from one end of the alliance to the other.

However, there are two additional assemblage-theoretical constructs to consider before proceeding, and these involve the concepts of stratification, and of circulating reference. The former leads to a (Deleuzean) explanation for some of the processes involved in social interaction, and the latter to a (Latourian) explanation for the manner in
which communication can take place even among radically heterogeneous actors, constituents, or participants.

Let’s recall that, for Deleuze, including in his work with Guattari, both “reterritorialization” and “deterриториализация” refer to processes leading to coherence despite heterogeneity. And, from a Deleuzean perspective, an additional, and complementary frame for thinking about coherence-building is to view it as “stratification,” so that territories are also strata: “historical formations . . . made from things and words, from seeing and speaking, from the visible and the sayable, from bands of visibilities and fields of readability, from contents and expressions” (ATP 88). Importantly, though, “content” isn’t limited to meaning, ideation, or the like, for it further implies the materiality at stake in social interchange (i.e., the concrete, tangible visibility of “things”), where interaction is construed as a gathering of “bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another.” Meanwhile, “expression” isn’t limited to linguistic utterance, for it implies the relationality at stake in social interchange. Indeed, the sayable, readable “words” at issue here can include not only “statements,” but also “acts” — both of which might be quite other than symbolistic.

And then, connecting materialities in some unprecedented way, the relation-building functionality of words, acts, statements can give rise, for example, to “incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies” (ATP 88). A fairly straightforward example might perhaps concern the contrast between Gandhi in his earlier role as an activist for a community in South Africa, and Gandhi in his later role as an activist for Indian national independence. It’s in many ways the same Gandhi, but the one undergoing the incorporeal transformation has become multiplied in the interaction among all sorts of “contents” and “expressions” (ATP 88).

But what, on the Deleuzean account, does make it possible for things and words, or for materiality and relationality, to interact in such a manner as to give rise to unprecedented, emergent realities? After all, it’s conceivable that any reconfiguration of the “material” and “semiotic” might simply be doomed to reproduce the conditions already in place, only this time in disguise. The answer, however, would be that terms (bodies, words, etc.) are both irreducible to relations (to structures, regimes, formations), and separable from them: “it is not impossible to make a radical break between regimes of signs and their objects” (ATP 7). This is to say that not even the most langue-like system can dictate any identity between reference and representation. Instead, the “objects” are always detachable from the “regimes.” So it’s the very difference between “material” terms and “semiotic” relations (precluding their definitive assimilation, and allowing for their unpredictable interplay) that leaves us with the promise of genuine social change.

Having considered more closely what’s material-and-semiotic about Deleuzean strata (or, again, territories, assemblages, forms of sociality, and so on), we’ll now turn to the Latourian concept of circulating reference. This latter can be understood as a material-and-semiotic account of the communication taking place among the perhaps radically disparate (for example, human and non-human) agents who are collaborating to build an emergent collectivity.

Latour’s (1999) illustrations concern the work of a small group of researchers, soil scientists who are studying the border between the forest and the savanna in a
particular Amazonian province. The results will be circulated (passed along in a chain, rather than a loop, of mediations), with ramifications reaching potentially everywhere. At any rate, some parts of the savanna become remediated as they mingle with scientific practices, with concepts, with bits and pieces of equipment. They become moisture samples, botanical samples, other sorts of samples, entering into articulation with color codes, charts, photographs, numbers, words. But reference is occurring incrementally, and it’s taking place in both directions.

As Timothy Webmoor explains, the researchers “transubstantiate or translate a given piece of soil into a code on a Munsell soil chart.” The result is that a segment of color-code “takes the place of the original situation” (Latour, Pandora’, 67). And then, as Levi Bryant does point out,

when faced with the finished article of the scientists, we can move backwards along the chain of transformations to investigate their samples, the process they went through, their log of their fieldwork, and ultimately the forest itself. (“Re-Circulating Reference”)

So we might already see what Deleuze means about the separability of objects and regimes. Although there are terms in relation at every point between the savanna and the finished article (Latour would say that form and matter co-inhere at every step), all of the terms are still detachable from all of the relations, anyway.

But, with reference to the point that Latour is making, it’s not going to be the fault of the savanna, or of the soil, or of the pedologist or geologist, or of the sample, or even of the code, if some reader can skim over the scientific article without scrutinizing the quite traceable linkages underlying its construction. And yet each locus of activity (for example, the chunk of the Amazonian region in question) will now be positioned to communicate with, to talk back to, any other investigators who might wish, circulating all the way down the ladder of reference, to interview it for themselves. In short, on the Latourian account, circulating reference, also known as communication, becomes a chaining of interactions, of mediations, that link at least those of the participants who are actually (not to say hypothetically) involved in the process.

We can see, therefore, that circulating reference operates even in the interaction studied by Carmen Werder (2000). There, communication involves the interaction among staff, faculty, documents, values, policies and practices, perspectives, and many other heterogeneous agents. Such communicative interaction is made possible not because the constituents share the same native tongue, but because they can be connected in the incremental articulations (or interstitial mediations) that establish circulating reference. And since Werder’s account is, quite literally, an account of rhetorical agency, we can conclude that rhetorical agency itself is circulating reference, and of the kind that can materialize new connections among quite radically disparate participants. Meanwhile, it’s clearly also the case that rhetorical agency (again, as Werder describes it) is a question of coherence-building, in fact, of reality-building, among the different Deleuzean strata (the alternative assemblages or territories), to which the disparate participants belong.

So, I propose we continue putting together these ideas from Deleuze and Latour, reasoning that any participant within a stratum or assemblage will be located within a chain of mediations, and will therefore be a circulating referent. This participant will in some ways be helping to make up certain local realities (as, for example, a bit of color code might contribute to a finished scientific article), and in some ways helping to
convey or enunciate certain local realities (as, say, a bit of color code might embody a
certain piece of the savanna). And then the work of the circulating referent, involving
both reterritorialization (the shoring up of some local reality already in place over here)
and deterritorialization (the co-construction of some local reality emerging over there),
will be very much the same as the work of the material-semiotic rhetorical agent.

In what follows, then, we’ll start construing rhetorical materiality, the kind folded
into rhetorical agency, as produced in the communicative interaction among participants
who, initially coming from different collectivities, gradually become implicated in the
process of making things otherwise than they are. We’ll treat our representative speaker
as, in some respects, a resident within otherwise separate strata (biblical precept, race,
and gender) and, in some other respects, an envoy, traveling among territories and
connecting them. More specifically, we’ll frame her as a circulating referent who is
creating linkages among her disparately-interested religious, abolitionist, and feminist
constituencies. She’ll be gathering these and other heterogeneous participants into an
emergent collectivity, an assemblage for materializing some genuine social change.

Entering at Biblical Precept

As we’ll recall, our rationale for looking into the activity of Sojourner Truth is
that Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has adduced this figure as, on the one side, exemplifying the
rhetorical agent and, on the other side, confirming that it would be a “miracle” for even
so exemplary an rhetorical agent to be able to speak at all (8). But we can at least
disaggregate the miracle, as by adopting a material-and-semiotic perspective on the
various steps through which the speaker actually becomes a rhetorical agent. To do that,
we should start by working backwards from the speech of 1851, so that we can explore
the processes through which our exemplary rhetorical agent is actually being produced.

Now, if we wanted to go all the way back to the beginning, we could describe our
prospective rhetorical agent as in the condition which the actor-network theorist Bruno
Latour associates with the plasma — “that which is not yet formatted, not yet measured,
not yet socialized, not yet engaged in metrological chains, and not yet covered, surveyed,
mobilized, or subjectified” (Reassembling, 244). An objection might be that the specific
figure we’re studying could perhaps already be formatted as black and female. However,
the material-semiotic rebuttal would be that race, gender, and the like do have, in fact, to
be realized, materialized, enacted (see Mol 2002). And, since we’d be at the very
beginning, none of that would, as yet, apply. However, we don’t really have to go back
that far. We can pick up at a point where our prospective rhetorical agent is a (Deleuzean)
larval subject, one of these “creatures,” as the object-oriented philosopher Levi Bryant
would say, “in a process of becoming or development,” creatures “that have not yet
actualized themselves in a specific form.”

And if we do place Sojourner Truth in this way, we find she hasn’t yet entered
any assemblages to speak of, so that she cannot yet be playing a role in their constitution,
maintenance, or transformation. From this perspective, she isn’t acting as an agent. She’s
just in an ante-chamber to agency, and she’s a term without a relation. How, then, does
she emerge into agency, as by starting to belong to a relation of her own?

Well, it turns out she’s guided out of the ante chamber, all the way into a Christian
assemblage of the earlier nineteenth century, by her immediate family, who are Dutch-
speaking African-Americans, enslaved, living in Ulster County, upstate New York. The young Isabella’s “earliest religious instruction” comes “from her mother,” and she makes “a sanctuary on an island in the middle of a stream,” where she goes “to talk with God and repeat the Lord’s prayer,” which her mother has “taught her” (Painter, “Difference,” 143). In 1826, Jesus appears to her, and she experiences “a conversion.” Her son Peter is illegally “sold South,” yet she successfully sues in court for his return, with the aid of some Quakers and a pair of prominent Dutch lawyers (“Difference” 143; see also Painter, Sojourner Truth 32-37). Around this time, she herself is “freed by New York law” (Campbell 8). She embraces Methodism, becoming friends with a teacher, the Methodist Miss Grear, and she helps found “the Kingston Methodist Church” (“Difference” 143; Sojourner Truth 27). We can say, then, that insofar as the mother, the religious instruction, the conversion experience, the socially-conscientious Quakers, and the Methodists all go together within a certain collectivity, they do co-constitute at least some of Isabella’s rhetorical agency, as by formatting her for the stratum of biblical precept.

Almost right away, in 1828, leaving her “daughters and husband behind” (but taking her newly-recovered son Peter with her), she goes off to New York City in the company of the Grears, who, like herself, are “Methodist perfectionists” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 27). This means they subscribe to a “democratic,” “enthusiastic,” and even “pentecostal” strand of Methodism (Sojourner Truth 27, 37). Yet Isabella’s “religious sensibility” is also becoming just as “syncretic” as that of other “country people” in the region (Sojourner Truth 25). It blends “beliefs and habits from animist West Africa and pagan Europe, the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church and the Arminian Methodists,” to which are “added the enthusiasms of the Second Great Awakening, when Methodist-style camp meetings” remediate many of the “Presbyterians and Congregationalists” as well. As we can see, the stratum of biblical precept is quite heterogeneous. Yet Isabella is beginning to hybridize many of its local patches, as by belonging to them all.

By now, there is, in New York, a white Methodist (John Street) church for Isabella to attend, and, after that, a Zion African church, formed by black Methodists who have “experienced racial discrimination” at the other church (Painter, “Difference,” 143). Either way, Isabella, syncretic religious sensibility and all, has become quite fully folded into a Methodist assemblage. Its “dominant relation” is established by its constituents’ interest, perhaps to some extent in social activism, but mainly in salvation (Baugh 36). Thus Isabella herself starts preaching, Methodist-style, at “camp meetings,” effecting “many conversions,” and earning “great respect in various Methodist circles” (Painter, “Difference,” 143). At this stage, she’s well and truly a circulating referent, and she’s also a rhetorical agent willingly reterritorializing the stratum of biblical precept.

Yet, though she currently belongs to a majoritarian stretch of the terrain, our exemplary agent belongs to some minoritarian stretches, too. For she joins the Latourettes, a “dissident Methodist” couple with their own “disciples” (Painter, “Difference,” 144). And what’s important about the disciples is that they are always “itinerant preachers,” never fully “connected with any formal church.” So now we have an explanation as to Sojourner Truth’s seeming anomalousness among the “nineteenth black woman spiritualists,” who tended to “seek biblical authorization or acceptance from others regarding” their “ministry.” (King, Essence, 137-39). It’s that her pathway has
linked her up with a collectivity that doesn’t merely tolerate but actively supports the work of the itinerant, dissident, and even unauthorized preacher.

What’s more, through these dissident, Methodist, and even socially-conscientious Latourettes (who, while they do oppose “the institution of slavery,” also oppose “the consumption of alcoholic beverages”), Isabella is introduced into the “commune” led by one Matthias (Painter, “Difference,” 144). His “kingdom,” though “Christian” enough, is emphatically apocalyptic (Painter, “Difference,” 144-145). Isabella remains his “supporter” for about a decade, until the kingdom founders, under somewhat scandalous circumstances, and right around the time of a major economic recession.

Isabella is now homeless, almost destitute. But she isn’t left with nothing. By this stage, her wherewithal — her agency — includes access to several types of resources. She’s become an experienced speaker, a fully-competent (if traveling) preacher, a social activist of sorts, and an apocalyptic Christian, all of it picked up, one way or another, through her interaction with other participants in the stratum of biblical precept. That’s why, in 1843, when God speaks to her, “commanding her to quit the city and take a new name,” Isabella can quite rightfully become “Sojourner Truth” (Painter, “Difference,” 145-146). For “sojourner” already means “itinerant,” and “telling the truth” is already “her mission.” But what is the truth that she’s telling? Well, she takes to the road in a year that is the very “apogee of Millerism,” a Christian movement apocalyptic enough for Sojourner Truth to join it, too. So we can be quite sure that it’s a truth about the immanent destruction of the world.

Thus our exemplary rhetorical practitioner, having long since proven capable of speaking among the Methodists, is now to prove capable of speaking among the millenarians as well. She’s currently linked up with as material-semiotic a network as any that a Bruno Latour or a John Law could envision. For the Millerite message, which creates tangible linkages among “hundreds of thousands of people” — if not quite from coast to coast, then at least from “Maine to Michigan” — is being spread through “a series of widely-distributed periodicals,” as well as through “the teachings of scores of itinerant preachers” who are holding forth at “frequent and massive camp meetings” (Painter, “Difference,” 146). And Sojourner Truth herself finds “a ready welcome” when she, too, speaks at these “outdoor meetings,” gatherings in which she participates not just once in a while but “by the score” (Painter, “Difference,” 146, 149).

We can already see that this is a world in which race and gender don’t seem to matter, and our evidence is that Sojourner Truth (whom we might think to categorize as an emancipated slave, and a black person, and a woman) not only meets no resistance, but actually receives, as Nell Irvin Painter says, a ready welcome. Indeed, as one historian explains, specifically with reference to Sojourner Truth, “Agency and independence gained through studying Christian doctrine and active participation in women’s groups combined with their religious faith helped many women to emancipate themselves from society’s oppressive gender conventions” (King 120). And there is, for Sojourner Truth at this juncture, some of almost everything: religious faith, doctrine, active participation, independence, and agency. But where are the “women’s groups”? The answer is that they’re located someplace else, in another social stratum altogether. For this present assemblage is actively excluding both gender and race, and Sojourner Truth herself is caught up in the work of exclusion. Indeed, she is, at this stage, doing
everything she can to materialize salvation, and this requires the de-realization (or un-
production) of race and gender in the very interest of shoring up biblical precept.

We might pursue the point by examining Sojourner Truth’s current audiences all
the more closely. These include “farmers and working people” (Painter, “Difference,”
150). Among them, too, are “camp meeting followers, adherents of strenuous, evangelical
religion, utopian communitarians, and devotees of spirit rappers and water cures” — as
well as many who oppose slavery. As Painter emphasizes, these persons are — “in racial
terms,” at least — “heterogeneous” (Sojourner Truth 81). Still, with respect to the
problem of salvation, they’re a little on the homogeneous side. They all have in common
that they’re expecting the “literal end of the world,” and “momentarily” at that (Painter,
“Difference,” 146). Indeed, these “agitated . . . evangelical Protestants” of the North,
whom Sojourner Truth is now helping tie together, have been hearing from William
Miller himself (for more than a decade by now) that the Second Advent of Christ is to
take place during this very year of 1843. We can infer, then, that our speaker’s tidings
won’t have to do with any merely human agency, just as we can infer that nobody in this
stretch of the stratum can be thinking of race and gender as paramount considerations.

In short, if Sojourner Truth is receiving this ready welcome, and effecting these
conversions, then she can’t be stumping either for abolitionism or for feminism. Instead,
she’s preparing the faithful for an eventuality which is to sidestep race, gender, and
everything else, all in one fell swoop. And then she must be preaching about the best way
to prepare for the imminent end, as by practicing some charity, temperance, and
abstinence — some spiritual, mental and physical hygiene. Meanwhile, the auditor she’s
addressing can’t be the anti-slavery activist, nor yet the women’s rights advocate, but,
rather, must be a figure whom we can describe, in terms borrowed from John Newton’s
“Amazing Grace,” as the sanctifiable wretch: one whose personal experience matters
only as the scaffolding for religious salvation.

We might then contrast the situation of Sojourner Truth with that of other
African-American religious leaders of the day (see Hodges 2010). For, while she’s a
referent circulating within an assemblage that links “hundreds of thousands,” and from
“Maine to Michigan,” this is, as everybody knows, a temporary kind of assemblage
(Painter, “Difference,” 146). It’s quite unlike the networks being built in the city by
sermonizers such as Samuel Eli Cornish, who are striving to create a support system for
lasting and far-reaching social change. And since Sojourner Truth is preaching most of all
to the apocalyptically-minded millenarians, her imperative cannot be to promote either
abolitionism or women’s rights, not in the face of what appears, to her own audience, to
be a foregone conclusion. Instead, her imperative must be to help prepare everyone
(male, female, black, white) for the divinely-constituted Liberia that will, “momentarily,”
be everywhere (Painter, “Difference,” 146).

**Crossing Over to Race**

Importantly, though, as a “gifted preacher and singer,” and with her own
“reputation” to boot, Sojourner Truth finds the Millerites not only receptive to her ever-
emergent rhetorical agency, but also ready, without hesitation, to “recommend her good
preaching” to their non-Millerite “brethren” as well (Painter, “Difference,” 146). And this
is how we arrive at a rather unprecedented juncture. To be sure, it’s not so much a parting
of ways as it is the pursuit of what Steven Johnson, in his *Interface Culture* (1997) would call a “link,” or trail, of “association” (112). And the pathway that our exemplary practitioner is about to follow turns out also to be what material-semiotic researchers (see Strathern, 1991; Mol, 2002) would call a *partial connection* — referring, actually, to the opposite of an impartial, disinterested, or neutral connection.

For, in this case, the brethren to whom Sojourner Truth is being recommended belong to a different stratum altogether, a collectivity where religion is no “dominant relation” unto itself, but, rather, just another plank in the activist’s platform (Baugh 36). The activist in question might very well be a member of the clergy, but this will still be an activist for whom the task is to fold salvation *into* social justice, not to promote it as an exit strategy. Thus, where Sojourner Truth is going now, the dominant relation involves — *much* more than anything else — the logic of abolitionism. And to enter it properly, i.e., as a participant, not just a tourist, our exemplary rhetorical agent will have to commit to reinforcing the materiality of *race*, without whose reality there couldn’t, in the middle of the nineteenth century, be any concerted anti-slavery movement to begin with.

More specifically, it happens that, through “invitations extended” at “meetings” where she has been preaching, Sojourner Truth starts following (what else but) “a Millerite network” on Long Island, crossing over from New York, to Connecticut, and then on to Massachusetts (Painter, “Difference,” 146). The trail leads, all the way across the partial connection of preacherliness, to the “utopian Northampton Association,” where — “for the first time” — she encounters “Garrisonian abolitionism.”

Let’s consider that this second stratum, preoccupied with race, is another of these alliances, networks, cyborgs. It’s a mesh within which are linked the slaves, all the way down South, the free black persons (here and there), and the anti-slavery activists, up North, who do have to make “race” an issue so they can liberate the slaves. For, while slavery and blackness can, in fact, be detached from one another, the abolitionist movement of the day needs to *suture* them together, so that the movement itself can have a legible (rather than nebulous) referent. After all, upholding the dominant relation within this second collectivity are only a couple of categories, and these are thoroughly racial. There are whites who want to emancipate blacks, and there are blacks who want to do as well. Everybody else is an outsider, or an opponent, or ambiguous, or marginal, or an exception to the rule, or an unknown quantity.

That this should be the case becomes more clear when we scrutinize the manner in which Sojourner Truth actually makes the transition (across a partial connection which is also a partial separation) into the stratum of *race*. She hasn’t, after all, been invited on the basis of her blackness, her femaleness, her abolitionism, her feminism, but only because of her “good preaching,” which has never involved any more than guiding the steps of the sanctifiable wretch on to the very end of the world (Painter, “Difference,” 146). Nevertheless, that Sojourner Truth ends up *staying* at the Northampton Association, and for several years, means she must have acquired some abolitionist credentials to go along with her qualifications as a millenarian-and-apocalyptic preacher.

If so, then we should be looking for the allies who make possible the integration of this (sometime-apocalyptic) Sojourner Truth into the (primarily abolitionist) Northampton Association. There might, of course, be several such allies, but I’ll stick to one that we know about for sure. This is David Ruggles, instrumental in founding the Underground Railway, by now perhaps the most important “black radical abolitionist” of
all, and a fixture, here in this collectivity “dedicated to antislavery issues” (Hodges 38; King, Essence, 137). He’s “content in Northampton,” where he conducts his “antislavery efforts” with the support of an entire network of “white allies” (Hodges 176, 187). After all, he’s not only organizing “meetings of black Americans” but also working closely with the “white abolitionists in the area”; indeed, he’s directly linked with William Lloyd Garrison himself (Hodges 180, 183, 185). So David Ruggles can definitely help integrate Sojourner Truth into a dominant relation to which she’s never yet belonged.

For how else, come to think of it, if not through the intercession of a David Ruggles, could our exemplary practitioner ever fold herself into abolitionism? Sure, she has “changed her name” when God has “told her to preach the truth” (Painter, “Difference,” 147). In addition, she has “gloried in massive outdoor meetings.” And, yes, she has “heeded her inner spiritual voice” and spoken up just as “the spirit” has “moved her.” Still, these are all biblical-precept credentials, and they don’t have the same currency here. Indeed, they are obstacles to acceptance among these social activists who are, frankly, “not particularly enthusiastic about their religion” (147).

So it turns out that David Ruggles is “the right person of color to help Sojourner Truth” gain entrance (Hodges 183). It’s David Ruggles, not Sojourner Truth, who has been urging “blacks to find freedom” for all these many years, and it’s David Ruggles, not Sojourner Truth, who has such “very good relations with Garrison” (183). Besides, Ruggles will “surely” have to “approve of Truth for white abolitionists to trust her” (Hodges 184). This is because the white abolitionists will otherwise have no reason to trust her — not until she can show that she, too, has “embraced abolitionism” (Painter, “Difference” 147). Lest we forget, the abolitionists of the middle of the nineteenth century, who have all sorts of conundrums and entanglements to contend with, can simply look around to see that not all of the black people are, in fact, on their team. For during the period 1790-1860, there are, in Larry Koger’s (1995) turn of phrase, quite a number of “free black slave masters.” Further, as David Ruggles himself reports, there are cases in which an enslaved person turns out to reject the offer of enfranchisement, to insist on remaining in servitude instead (see Hodges 187). So the abolitionists at Northampton can’t very well trust just any African-American, not even a preacher, necessarily to be all that much use as an abolitionist as well.

How, then, does the mediation, the translation, the integration take place? Well, what’s needful here is an abolitionist frame of reference. And that’s precisely what Sojourner Truth acquires when David Ruggles discovers in her a “potential convert to antislavery” — that’s right, a potential convert (Hodges 183). And then it’s David Ruggles — “a man well versed in abolitionist thought and politics” — who becomes the “constant presence for her” (Hodges 183). Further, it’s David Ruggles who has the “major impact on Truth’s developing abolitionism” (yes, her developing abolitionism) and under whose “mentoring” she gradually comes to expand upon her “abolitionist views and methods” (183). And that’s how it comes about (in 1844, at one of these “meetings of black Americans” which David Ruggles has been organizing in Northampton), that Sojourner Truth makes “her first public antislavery address on the practical workings of slavery in the North” (Hodges 183-84).

From now on, Sojourner Truth is no longer just a preacher, someone who’d frame her personal experience in terms of spiritual salvation alone. She is, in addition, an “antislavery lecturer,” for she’s learned also to link her personal experience with the
cause of abolition (King, Essence, 137). And this, as Deleuze and Guattari might say, is an incorporeal transformation — a shift converting her into a circulating referent for two different social strata at one and the same time (ATP 88). As part of the process, though, Sojourner Truth has definitively to become black, whether or not she might have been already. And lest it seem countertuitive to say that Sojourner Truth is only just now acquiring a race, I’ll introduce some evidence from the historians.

For, strangely enough, Sojourner Truth emerges from the Northampton Association not just as the well-trained lecturer but also as the “illiterate, former slave woman” (Campbell 9). Starting in the mid-1840s, she portrays herself as an unmentored innocent, and she now uses “her body in ways” that women who are not “actresses” would never dare (Painter, “Difference,” 155 ff.). Most important, from my perspective, is that the speaker has started to display just the sort of racialized identity that she would previously have rejected.

For even if she does have over fifteen years of preaching under her belt, and even if she’s so recently been learning from some of the greatest minds of her day, she now shows up, not only as somehow quintessentially black, but also, in Nell Irvin Painter’s words, as one of these “naifs” to whom “educated Americans,” the intelligentsia, have “long been attracted” (“Difference” 153). So the ethos of the victim must have arisen from the collaboration between, on the one side, Sojourner Truth and, on the other side, David Ruggles and the others at Northampton, that training-ground not for just any sort of activist, but for the anti-slavery activist in particular. And our exemplary rhetorical agent must have taken on this persona in a strategy designed to appeal to undecided auditors who’d be all ears for the hapless “slave-woman victim,” but no better than ambivalent toward the radical activist (“Difference” 157).

Yet, if Sojourner Truth is strategically harping on her “race,” it’s not in the interest of anyone’s personal aggrandizement. It’s to render visible that very blackness, that victimhood of the slaves without which the abolitionism of that period would have no clear-cut object: “Black slavery, Truth realized, was more memorable than black freedom for most Americans,” and, even for “many white abolitionists . . . free blacks existed in a conceptual limbo,” basically “unseen” (Painter, “Difference,” 154). The irony, then, is that for a “free” black person such as Sojourner Truth to be taken seriously, even among so many of the reformers, she’d have to attach herself not to the personhood of people, but, rather, to the blackness of the slaves.

So, for Sojourner Truth by the end of the 1840s, it’s a far cry from those days among the millenarians, those sanctifiable wretches whose imperative would have been, in the words of one Charles Wesley hymn, to “join the disembodied saints,” back there where corporeality, of whatever kind, would be the least of anybody’s concerns. And we have to accept that it’s only just now, here in the stratum of race, that our thematized speaker can have acquired any “black . . . body” to speak of, let alone any black female body (Painter, Sojourner Truth 171).

For, here she is, famously dwelling on her own blackness. Let’s note, however, that this isn’t a question of race construed as a self-evident matter of fact. Instead, it’s a question of race construed as an unresolved, ongoing matter of concern (see Latour 2008). In this case, the abolitionists, including Sojourner Truth and David Ruggles, are the ones trying to settle the controversy, which has to do with the metaphysical status of slavery in these decades prior to the civil war. Is slavery, then, an evil, or a necessary
evil, or a lesser evil (i.e., in comparison to emancipation), or a good in disguise, or what? Clearly, the abolitionists understand slavery to be simply an evil, and this is their rationale for nation-wide emancipation. Even so their most pragmatic option is to be specific, showing that slavery is an evil primarily for the slave.

To be sure, this is not the only option, not even among the abolitionists. For example, in his own *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass takes the greatest care to emphasize that slavery is, in fact, an evil for the slaveholder — and, by extension, for the nation to which the slaveholder belongs (see especially Chapters VI and VII). Yet, so far as would concern the abolitionists more generally, the last thing they’d need is another self-made man, another Frederick Douglass to reinforce the notion that just any slave with enough gumption could very well emancipate himself. The better strategy, then, is to keep demonstrating that slavery is an evil for the slave. Thus, for the antislavery cause to have a clear-cut referent, it will have to render its object material enough to be visible.

Indeed, to say so is quite consistent with the argument we find adumbrated by the historian Nell Irvin Painter. At this time in the United States, “free blacks” exist in “a conceptual limbo”: they’re “unseen or uninteresting or distasteful,” and this must be for the reason that they’re not victim enough to draw empathy in the manner of the underdog (Painter, “Difference,” 154). And, if the “free blacks” are in some important sense “unseen,” then the only intelligible blackness at this point will be that of slavery. So if the anti-slavery arguments of the day are to be taken seriously (rather than as reflecting some perhaps misguided opinions shared among the abolitionists alone), then they will have to be advanced by someone who embodies abolitionism and victimization simultaneously.

Who is it, then, that’s qualified to act as the link between this (victimized) blackness and abolitionism as such? We might here consider the situation of Sojourner Truth’s numerous “black women contemporaries in feminist abolitionism,” some of them featured in Painter’s essay, but none “on a postage stamp,” as Sojourner Truth has been, and we might ask, “Why this invisibility?” (“Difference” 147-48, 155-56). The answer is that most of the black abolitionists were, then as now, too “free,” too unvictim-like, to be seen (“Difference,” 154). And who else is there to be materializing the blackness of the slave-as-victim? It can’t be the actual slaves, whose visibility has yet to be brought into being — except when they rise up in one of these bloodbaths, these Nat Turner-style insurrections, thereby sending quite the mixed message for the antislavery cause. At the same time, though, “Southern slavery” continues to function during this period as the very “symbol of American slavery” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 8). For the Northern abolitionists quite generally, this “metaphorical slave South,” so “familiar” to them “by dint of having so often been described,” encapsulates all of the oppression they’re contesting, with the blackness of the Southern slave, in turn, emblematizing the metaphorical slave South (9). And, in that case, what’s needed is an envoy who is abolitionist enough to convey the abstractions, but victim enough (metonymically Southern enough) to literalize them, too.

So this is what the radical abolitionists — Sojourner Truth among them — do understand. It’s Sojourner Truth, then, though she’s actually from upstate New York, who is, as one says, positioned to link the relatively privileged abolitionists of the North with the utterly marginalized slaves of the South. For she materializes the abolitionist arguments while simultaneously embodying the experiences of the slaves. She does all of
that by enacting blackness-and-victimization in a newly-emergent, specifically abolitionist form, and this is how she’s reterritorializing race.

Still, it’s not that Sojourner Truth is really exchanging identities, or subjectivities, or social positions as she shifts from the persona of highly-trained lecturer to the persona of “slave-woman victim” (Painter, “Difference,” 157). Nor is it that, in shifting from the stratum of biblical precept to the stratum of race, she’s becoming “two different persons or one person divided into two” (Mol, Body, 80). Instead, as Annemarie Mol might observe, it’s that our exemplary rhetorical agent is becoming more than one but less than many (80). As before, Sojourner Truth does remain a circulating referent. By now, though, it’s for more than one collectivity at a time. She speaks for the stratum of biblical precept, and she speaks for the stratum of race. She’s an abolitionist at home among the Christians, yet she’s a Christian at home among the abolitionists.

From Race to Gender

Is our exemplary rhetorical agent then a speaker who can say just anything among just any group of interlocutors? No, of course not, and this is because she is currently perceived as belonging to the abolitionist track of the “feminist and antislavery circuit” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 171). Thus the problem, from a material-semiotic perspective, is that she can’t yet enunciate any feminism, not until she’s been properly formatted as a circulating referent for gender. For the women’s rights movement of the day is quite internally-heterogeneous, with only some of its members adopting a clear-cut anti-slavery position, and others considering themselves feminists without being abolitionists as well. And it’s as if these latter, more conservative feminists, having formed a Troy of their own, are currently unwilling to let this abolitionist (and, by implication, patriarchal) gift-horse of a Sojourner Truth into the camp.

Let’s consider, as a case in point, what actually happens when, in 1850, Sojourner Truth, wandering off the abolitionist reservation, goes ahead to address a women’s rights convention in Worcester, Massachusetts (see Fitch and Mandziuk 19). It’s an important gathering, the “first such meeting of national scope in the United States” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 114). While we don’t know so much about what Sojourner Truth says at the conference, it appears she’s had in mind to speak “primarily as a preacher” — not even as an abolitionist, much less as a women’s rights activist (Sojourner Truth, 115). What we do know more about, though, is the fallout from that appearance.

For, in response, the conservative feminist Jane Swisshelm editorializes, in her influential Saturday Visiter, that “The convention was not called to discuss the rights of color, and we think it was altogether irrelevant and unwise to introduce the question (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 123). So there, in a nutshell, is the impasse that our exemplary practitioner is facing until 1851, when she “first” gains “prominence as a feminist” (Painter, “Difference” 140). It’s that she’s become so closely affiliated with the abolitionism of the abolitionists, and with the blackness-and-victimization of the slaves, that, no matter what she says, she’s heard as speaking to “the rights of color,” anyway.

To grasp the delicacy of the situation, it’s helpful to recall that, around this time, and at least for political purposes, “women” are “presumed to be white,” and “blacks” are “presumed to be men” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 171). But what goes for “blacks” goes for abolitionists, only all the more so. It’s not that all of the abolitionists are
unsympathetic to feminism; it’s just that more than enough of them are. And then the
women’s rights activists can’t be sure which of the two kinds of abolitionism a speaker
like Sojourner Truth might end up bringing with her, and all into the very heart of their
movement. For there is a very real risk that the most politically-influential version of
abolitionism might yet turn out to be the kind that helps emancipate the slaves without
helping emancipate the women. That alone is enough to explain why a Jane Swisshelm
would think it so “irrelevant and unwise” for the women’s movement to squander its
resources on the “rights of color,” and all at a time when feminism needs to territorialize
itself, to conserve, reinforce, concentrate its energies (Sojourner Truth 123).

Fair enough, Sojourner Truth, she of the Northampton Association, is affiliated
with Garrisonian abolitionism, so famously sympathetic to the women’s movement. Still,
it’s worth noting that when Frederick Douglass finds himself “taken by the equality” at
Northampton, what he emphasizes with such approval is that there’s “no high, no low, no
masters, no servants, no white, no black” (Hodges 181). Despite his own reputation as a
supporter of women’s rights, Douglass doesn’t add that there’s also no male, no female at
Northampton. For that’s a community dedicated even more to the anti-slavery movement
than to the women’s rights movement. So it’s not self-evident, not to the feminists
elsewhere, that to be a crusader for radical abolitionism is to pay any more than lip-
service to women’s rights as well.

Sure, it’s William Lloyd Garrison who, in recent times, has bent every effort to
help align the anti-slavery movement with the women’s rights movement. However, he’s
been so injudicious about it, unfortunately, as to alienate a good chunk of his own
following in the national Anti-Slavery Society. Thus, in 1840, with the election of three
abolitionist women (Lydia Maria Child, Lucretia Mott and Maria Weston Chapman) to
the executive committee of that Society, many among the male abolitionists have
objected. They have clearly been objecting to this promotion of women to leadership
roles, but they have also been objecting to Garrison’s uncompromising radicalism,
including his “contempt for the nearly silent American denominations, his extreme
pacifism, support of women’s rights, and departure from religious orthodoxy,” all of
which alienate “the more traditional antislavery crusaders” (Wyatt-Brown).

Some of the more “religious abolitionists,” breaking away from Garrison in 1840,
have formed the new Liberty Party, and these are specifically the ones who wish to
continue working through the conventional political mechanisms (Wyatt-Brown). But
others have departed to form the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. It’s an
organization in which women are quite pointedly “denied the vote,” so that this is now a
branch of the abolitionist movement which has emphatically renounced all ties with the
women’s movement (Venet 15). We do have available to us a certain Annual Report of
the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society itself, and this — “presented” in New
York, on May 6, 1851 — is from only three weeks before Sojourner Truth gives her
famous speech at the women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio. In other words, just
anybody can look around to verify that these counter-feminist abolitionists are still
abroad, still working as best they can to expand their sphere of influence.

And among this latter group of secessionists, the ones forming the American and
Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, is none other than Samuel Eli Cornish, whom I’ve
mentioned as an example of the very important African-American activists working
among the urban populations of the day. Now, there’s no impeaching this figure on the
basis that he’s lacking in the requisite abolitionist credentials. Everything he’s ever done (as a journalist, publisher, minister, community leader) verifies that he’s among the most abolitionist abolitionists of them all. Yet it’s not the (“religious” and moderate) Liberty Party that Cornish ends up joining after he breaks with the Garrisonians. Instead, and (at the very least) symbolically taking his own constituency with him, he joins the other organization, where women are “denied the vote,” in this way showing quite clearly that not even the black abolitionists can automatically be expected to join the feminist team (Wyatt-Brown; Venet 15). No wonder so “many feminist abolitionists” would come “to advocate women’s rights after experiencing frustration in their antislavery work” — a frustration, one can only conclude, exacerbated by sexism within the antislavery movement as such (Painter, “Difference,” 148). But let’s say that Samuel Eli Cornish — not just an abolitionist, but a black abolitionist to boot — exemplifies a mid-nineteenth century movement to shore up race by separating it from gender.

Yet the commonsensical response by the conservative feminists is to do the same thing, only from the other direction: to shore up gender by separating it from race. We can see this vector at work in the full version of the Frances Dana Gage account, which includes all sorts of details (not that we can simply take them at face value) which rhetorical theorists such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell would evidently prefer to leave out: old Sojourner . . . sat crouched against the wall . . . Again and again, timorous and trembling ones came to me and said with earnestness, “Don’t let her speak, Mrs. G. It will ruin us. Every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed with abolition and niggers, and we shall be utterly denounced (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 167).

Despite Gage’s tendentiousness, her exaggeration, she’s capturing at least some of the sentiment accurately. From the perspective of many women’s rights supporters of the day, the “cause” seems to face enough challenges already, so that it might not be such a good idea to let feminism become tarred with the brush of abolitionism as well.

But this, in the period just before her famous speech, looks to be a bad sign for Sojourner Truth, who risks becoming quite the locus of anxiety. For, after “her stay at Northampton,” her “name” starts “appearing sporadically in newspapers,” not as any women’s rights activist, but only “as an antislavery lecturer” (King, Essence, 137). That’s how she’s listed in 1850, at the Old Colony Anti-Slavery Society meeting in Plymouth, Massachusetts. (Fitch and Mandziuk 18). As for the newspapers in which her name is sporadically appearing, we can see from none other than Karlyn Kohrs Campbell that these include the Liberator, the Anti-Slavery Bugle, and the National Anti-Slavery Standard. Besides, she’s “actively” working with “many abolitionists,” including on tours for the American Anti-Slavery Society” (Fitch and Mandziuk 18). She even appears on a “lecturing tour in Western New York, accompanied by the Hon. George Thompson of England, and other distinguished abolitionists.” This is, of course, an “antislavery tour” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 116). And when she addresses an audience at Rochester, in March, 1851 (just weeks before delivering her famous speech to the feminists at Akron), it’s an “antislavery convention” she’s addressing on that occasion. So, by now, everybody can tell what Sojourner Truth has been doing for abolitionism, but nobody knows what she might do to feminism, if given half a chance.

Meanwhile, another version of the central anxiety is irrupting within the statum of gender itself. Here, Frances Dana Gage can exemplify those feminists who are
advocating unconditional egalitarianism, while Jane Swisshelm can epitomize those who are reproducing inequality, this time in the name of a feminist elite. The question, then, is that as to which of the two contingents can the more rightfully claim “woman” as its referent. For Gage and Swisshelm disagree “fundamentally” as to “whether issues of slavery and race” have a “place in their movement” — and even “whether African Americans” belong “in women’s rights meetings at all” (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 123). Gage says “yes, emphatically,” but Swisshelm says “no, for her concept of women’s rights” extends “only to rights denied women like herself.”

Indeed, according to Swisshelm (as spokesperson for an entire constituency), women’s rights means egalitarianism only at the level of gender, impinging not in the least upon race or class. With reference to “colored women,” she writes that “all the interest they have in this reform is as women. All it can do for them is to raise them to the level of men of their own class” (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 123). And, as if that’s not uncompromisingly feminist enough, Swisshelm is, in her own, influential editorials, actively portraying the women’s rights movement as “a small boat in choppy waters,” a vessel that “may carry woman into a safe harbor,” but that “is not strong enough to bear the additional weight of all the colored men in creation.”

In other words, at this juncture — between 1850 and 1851 — there’s a choice for the women’s rights activists more generally. It’s either to trust in the burgeoning, ambiguous alliance among the radical abolitionists and the anti-slavery feminists, who, between them, risk bringing into the boat not just the blackness of the victimized slaves but, actually worse than that, the male privilege of the patriarchs. Or else it’s to err on the side of caution, casting their lot for the conservative feminists, who, if nothing else, might yet be able to keep the precarious vessel afloat, what with their at least having women’s interests at heart. In sum, while the abolitionists of this period can’t assume just any black person to be particularly good for abolitionism, the feminists can’t assume just any black person to be particularly good for women’s rights.

Earlier, we’ve asked what, if not an ally, could possibly have facilitated Sojourner Truth’s incorporeal transformation from an apocalyptic into an abolitionist, so that she could gradually enter into the Garrisonian fold. And now we can ask the same with respect to her production as a feminist — and not just of any sort, but of the kind that could insert “black women into women’s reform” (Painter, “Difference,” 140).

Here, the speaker’s rhetorical agency is becoming a question of the pathways through which she might travel into the still-precarious, still-beleaguered women’s movement. Yet the difference between Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical agency in 1850, when she’s rebuffed, and her rhetorical agency in 1851, when she’s accepted, is also a matter of scale. Her rhetorical agency is as real in 1850 as ever before, but it isn’t yet quite so big or important in the stratum of gender as it is elsewhere. Our exemplary practitioner is capable of facilitating a religious conversion, or of thickening an abolitionist argument with the heft of her personal experience, but not, for now, of forging any connection between, on the one side, the constituencies that she’s collected and, on the other side, the constituency that she’s trying to engage.

Even so, just a year later, the speaker is not only a religious activist, and an antislavery activist, but a women’s rights activist, as well. And this means that, during the interim, somebody or something must have hooked her up, helping to rescale what is still, after all, her own rhetorical agency. But how is it, according to the material-semiotic
perspective, that agency can ever be resized, and how is it that an agent can ever be made equal to a task of which she’s not already capable? The answer is that scale is always the “achievement” of the actors themselves, for “action,” as “a property of associated entities,” is always performed by “Agent 1 plus Agent 2 plus Agent 3” (Latour, Reassembling, 185; Pandora’s 182).

Rescaling the Envoy

If we then start looking at the activity taking place around Sojourner Truth during this period, we find that the support system for rescaling and redistributing our speaker’s agency comprises quite a number of disparate agents, practices, and artifacts, all of which are quite difficult to disentangle from one another. For simplicity’s sake, I’ll arrange the following discussion such that it emphasizes, first, the role of just one exemplary agent, second, the role of just one exemplary practice, and, finally, the role of just one exemplary artifact.

We’ll identify the “agent” in question as Parker Pillsbury, who, right around 1850, is well known all over the Northwest as a minister and social reformer. In addition to his uncompromising abolitionism, though, he’s also quite fully involved in the women’s rights movement. For example, he eventually helps draft the constitution of the feminist American Equal Rights Association (1865), serves as vice-president of the New Hampshire Woman Suffrage Association, and — with Elizabeth Cady Stanton — co-edits the women’s rights newsletter The Revolution. But, here, we’re interested in Pillsbury’s role in helping transport Sojourner Truth’s agency all the way into the stratum of gender. So this is a reminder that agency can indeed be constrained and enabled by one and the same mechanism. For Pillsbury’s response to the indignant editorialist Jane Swisshelm is, in Swisshelm’s own newspaper (where she’s been trying to separate gender from race) to reframe what’s just happened at Worcester, at the 1850 meeting where Sojourner Truth herself has wandered off the abolitionist track and onto the feminist track of the circuit.

To underline the manner in which Pillsbury’s contribution should count as an event, a material-semiotic achievement, I’ll draw on a concept from rhetorical studies proper. Specifically, I’ll describe Pillsbury as leaving Swisshelm and her followers (as it were, constitutively) saddled with the burden of proof, which always “lies on the side of him who would dispute” the “ground,” i.e., the default or status-quo position (Whateley, qtd. in Givens 32). So that’s how we can situate the transaction taking place in the pages of the Saturday Visiter late in the year 1850. It’s all about who is the one advocating, and for no very good reason, a problematic departure from the way that things already are.

For Pillsbury goes on record as if to review an entirely clear-cut state of affairs, a situation which must somehow have slipped the conservative feminists’ minds. Here, to begin with, is how Nell Irvin Painter encapsulates the intervention:

Parker Pillsbury noted . . . that the mere presence of black speakers at the Worcester women’s rights convention in 1850 had not made race an issue. He contended nonetheless that the existence of race within questions of sex must be acknowledged: “That any woman has rights, will be scarcely believed. But that colored women have rights, would never have been thought of, without a specific declaration.” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 123)
Perhaps from a constitutive-rhetorical perspective, everything might appear suddenly to be in Sojourner Truth’s favor, if only because this phrase “colored women” is an eminently possible expression — considering that even Swisshelm uses it (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 123). Yet that’s not quite enough to clarify what Pillsbury is up to.

For Pillsbury is implying that everybody, least among the abolitionists and feminists, already agrees that the rights of colored women are included in the rights of women. All that’s happened at Worcester, then, is that somebody has made a “specific declaration” to just that effect, a declaration aimed, of course, entirely at a public that might not know any better. And then it’s clearly no introduction of the question of color into the woman question. It’s simply the unfolding of the former from out of the latter.

In this way, Pillsbury frames the antislavery feminists, now emblematized by figures like Sojourner Truth, as merely continuing the ordinary, workaday routines of the women’s movement. By contrast, Swisshelm and her followers do look to be making a big deal out of some speaker’s being unexceptionably “specific” about what any abolitionist-and-feminist would already know. So they, over there in the conservative group, must be the ones doing all the needless introducing, fussing, and tampering, thereby taking upon themselves, and so unwisely at that, the very burden of proof.

Thus, the most important part of Pillsbury’s rebuttal is actually this matter of the “specific declaration” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 123). For it’s Pillsbury himself who’s writing the specific declaration into the record — and who’s constituting it as a continuation rather than a departure. So he’s placing a stepping stone just in front of Sojourner Truth, who’s by now making her way from Worcester, where she’s been rebuffed, to Akron, where she’ll be accepted.

So far, we have considered the role of one exemplary agent, Parker Pillsbury, and we have described this as being to help constitute “colored women” as belonging to a sub-category of gender (regardless that it might also be constituted as a sub-category of race). Pillsbury’s statement, in other words, is a way of connecting the activities of a whole host of participants (the Garrisonian abolitionists, the antislavery feminists, and Sojourner Truth herself) to the activities of all the other participants working on behalf of women’s rights — even the more conservative members of the Swisshelm contingent.

Although there must be many other agents in addition to Pillsbury who, right around 1850, are collaborating to make race and gender commensurable, I’ll move on to consider the role of just one exemplary practice. The practice might not sound like much, being simply that of participating at meetings. But, if we recall our parable from earlier on, Carmen Werder’s essay of 2000, we’ll note that rhetorical agency can actually ripple through assemblages which themselves are constructed interactively. Thus a practice which ends up integrating a well-known abolitionist into a women’s rights convention oughtn’t be so trivial a matter, after all.

In this case, the practice has to do, initially, with the interaction between Sojourner Truth and Marius Robinson. Robinson, a clergyman, is not only the editor of the Anti-Slavery Bugle (famous both for trying to “vindicate the Bible against the charge of supporting slavery,” and for “teaching in a school for black children”), but also, together with his wife Emily, the personal friend and host of Sojourner Truth (Baker; Painter, Sojourner Truth, 119). Indeed, the Robinsons are among the families with whom Sojourner Truth stays for extended periods (Sojourner Truth 26). Thus it’s Robinson, recently invited to serve as secretary for a women’s rights convention to be held at
Akron, who now becomes another of the links between Sojourner Truth and feminism, helping create the conditions under which our exemplary rhetorical agent can actually give her (now-celebrated) speech in the first place.

What’s remarkable in the account provided by the historian Wilma King is that Sojourner Truth reacts with some surprise at the prospect that she, an abolitionist, might be able to participate in the women’s rights movement as well:

Truth learned of the May 28, 1851, Ohio women’s rights convention in Akron from Robinson. The subject interested her. She had spoken at the 1850 women’s rights conference in Worcester, Massachusetts. (137)

Thus Sojourner Truth is, at this very moment (having so recently been trounced for her interloper-like appearance at Worcester), discussing her new-found interest, her emergent interest in feminism, with a fellow abolitionist, Marius Robinson, who invites her to the upcoming women’s rights convention where he himself will be officiating. This is the reason for which we can say that even the practice of encouraging participation in meetings may indeed become a plank in the scaffolding of someone’s rhetorical agency.

But what remains to be emphasized is precisely how the practice in question can make the difference between Sojourner Truth’s standing as of right around 1850, when she’s received that drubbing at the hands of Jane Swisshelm, and her standing of 1851, when she’s so “interested” in going back to speak before an audience that will probably include Jane Swisshelm herself. Wouldn’t the practice be exactly the same in each instance, leading to much the same results?

The answer is that, this time, the practice will no longer be operationalized by that rather under-scaled agent who, just last year, had jumped the abolitionist track of the abolitionist-and-feminist circuit. This time, the practice will be operationalized by an upgraded agent who is collaborating with her allies. And the allies now include Marius Robinson, who is, in effect, accompanying her in this transition from race to gender, and therefore helping to underwrite the commensurability of her interests with the interests of all the other feminists. After all, Robinson (like Pillsbury) is already a circulating referent within just the constituencies that Sojourner Truth will be trying to connect when she inserts “black women into women’s reform” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 140). And, if his own, feminist credentials are unimpeachable enough to make him the secretary at this upcoming women’s rights convention, then they’re unimpeachable enough to recommend this Sojourner Truth (his friend, his guest, his colleague) to the others in attendance, too.

By now, we’ve considered the role of one agent and of one practice, so that we have next to address the role of one artifact. Frankly, the choice of artifact will have to be a bit arbitrary, though we’re alerted to its existence in no less than Campbell’s essay on rhetorical agency. For Sojourner Truth’s most “famous line” echoes “a recurring theme,” of “women’s antislavery discourse, where “female slaves” are “given voice” through the question, “Am I not a woman and a sister?” (Campbell 12,17). And Campbell underlines the point by referring us to the illustration of an “antislavery token” from 1838, an artifact we can find reproduced in Yellin and Van Horne’s (1994) collection The Abolitionist Sisterhood. To be sure, if we do retrace Campbell’s steps and consult the source she has in mind, Phillip Lapansky’s “Graphic Discord,” we will find close to thirty of these depictions, all of which have to do with female slaves. They come not only from the pages of books and broadsides, but also from etchings and engravings and woodcuts and lithographs (and even, in one case, from the surface of a pin cushion).
All of these depictions are related to an additional artifact which Campbell cites from Fitch and Manzdiuk. It’s the “banner of white satin” which one reporter notices at an appearance of Sojourner Truth’s in 1853 — a banner on which is inscribed “Ashtabula County. Am I not a Woman and a Sister?” (Campbell 18). And the depictions and the banner themselves are related to a statement from Maria Stewart, another of the “nineteenth-century black women spiritualists,” and an especially “popular speaker”: “What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days?” (Painter, “Difference, 156; see also King 139).

Even so, the artifact on which we’ll concentrate is the anti-slavery token, which we can situate not as an example of unanchored signification, but instead as an example of circulating reference. We see, then, that it reads “AM I NOT A WOMAN & A SISTER,” and also that it features the image of a “female supplicant”: a slave who is kneeling, clasping her hands together, and looking upward in prayer (Lapansky 206, 208). In the nineteenth century, this figure of the female supplicant would typically have been accompanied by “the writings of early female activists, including African Americans Maria Stewart, Sarah Mapps Douglass, and Sarah Forten” (206). For such supplicants adorned countless abolitionist books, pamphlets, newspapers, periodicals, broadsides, letterheads, and printed ephemera. They were also replicated in handicraft goods and even . . . chinaware, tokens, linen, and silk goods sold by the antislavery women at their annual fund-raising fairs. So it turns out that this token, together with all sorts of other objects, is participating in a material-semiotic network. The latter is an alliance, an assemblage in which artifacts (such as antislavery tokens and banners of white satin) don’t exist in isolation, but are folded into practices (like those of holding annual fund-raising fairs), practices which are, in turn, operationalized by agents (for example, antislavery women).

And what is it, in this case, that the agents, practices, and artifacts are accomplishing together? Well, at the very least, we can say that, once they enter into collaboration with the activity of such additional constituents as Parker Pillsbury and Marius Robinson, they are all becoming movable parts in an agencement which is effectively translating the abolitionist Sojourner Truth into a feminist as well. For the antislavery token, like the rest of these “countless” and ubiquitous artifacts, is now, albeit in its own way, helping to literalize, to concretize the commensurability between the interests of the abolitionists and the interests of the feminists.

Thus, it’s only reasonable to conclude that when Sojourner Truth does come to speak at the women’s rights convention of 1851, she will (constitutively) be drawing together the filaments which are already there. That’s how she can promote a massively-scaled incorporeal transformation such that the abolitionists, the feminists, the slaves who are “presumed to be men,” the clearly female supplicants, the whole lot of them altogether, can be seen as belonging to a single collectivity, no matter how internally heterogeneous this might actually be (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 171).

And A’n’t We a Meshwork?

From a material-semiotic perspective, it would seem quite manageable to explain how the (triangulable if hypothetical) speech of 1851 actually works. We know that there’s a central claim, i.e., that the speaker is a woman’s rights, and that it’s
accompanied by a cluster of themes and images: biblical precept, race, gender, and all the rest. So we could unfold the functionality of the speech simply by revisiting and connecting all of the arguments adumbrated in preceding chapters, where we’ve seen that rhetorical transaction can actually involve reterritorialization and deterritorialization simultaneously. If so, we would find that there’s already enough heterogeneity at stake in the Sojourner Truth speech to explain how the speaker could be creating new “semiotic” pathways among all sorts of “material” realities.

To begin with, adopting such a perspective would clearly allow us to draw on various theorizations of rhetorical subjectivity, but without committing ourselves to the view that rhetorical subjectivity is coextensive with all the rest of rhetorical agency as well. For, in this case, there would be at least two modes of this subjectivity, and they would have to do with the interiorities, identities, and ideologies (for example, political imperatives) at least minimally defining the members of the anti-slavery movement on the one side, and of the women’s rights movement on the other.

Yet a material-semiotic perspective would leave us free to consider the manner in which the rhetorical subjectivity could be reconfigured with the aid of rhetorical conventionality, as on the basis of shared values. In this case, we could even add, to the list of shared values adduced in the chapter on the rhetorical-humanistic perspective, the shared value of Christian love, which could easily be shown to be connecting Sojourner Truth with practically all the key players among the abolitionists and feminists, radical and conservative alike (see Bogin and Yellin, 1994; Painter, 1994; King, 2006).

At the same time, a material-semiotic explanation of the speech would leave plenty of room for theorizations in keeping with the existential-transversal perspective (where it’s transcendence that actually makes the difference). Here, we could revisit the argument, presented earlier, that, quite apart from any subjectivities or collective values they might share, all of the (human) participants in the transaction are becoming co-articulated on the basis of the original body they share.

Finally, the material-semiotic perspective would allow for theorizations collocating all of the above. Thus we ought not to have any special difficulty seeing how Sojourner Truth could manage to insert black women into women’s reform, as this would be taking place as the disparate subjectivities, the shared values, and the original body (plus its authentic claim) are being materialized and connected during the interaction among all sorts of heterogeneous agents, practices, and artifacts — precisely as has been demonstrated in this chapter so far.

However, I’d like to go a little further yet, as by adopting an assemblage-theoretical perspective on the material-semiotic analysis itself. For the remaining part of the task is to understand how the rhetorical transaction we’re investigating might also involve the shifting of terms into a new relation.

In this case, we can return to that condition of diremption, or triremption, discussed earlier, so that we can recognize the salient terms to be (white) man, (black) slave, and (white) woman. Thus we can grasp that, if the speaker is to insert black women into women’s reform, she will have to find some rhetorical means for extracting these terms out of such relations as have been keeping them apart, and for transporting them into a new relation where they’re finally drawn together. So I’ll propose that what we have been encountering so far is a set made up of three different relations, each with a different term at its center.
The feminist movement of the day involves a relation whose constituents properly belong to gender. The central term in this relation is *woman*, such that there’s an ambiguity as to whether “black” can apply among the attributes of the term. By contrast, the abolitionist movement involves a dominant relation whose constituents properly belong to race. Even so, the central term is ambiguous in this case as well. For it’s unclear, at least to the undecided auditors, those whom the speaker is primarily addressing, whether abolitionism is only claiming the (black) *slave* as its central term, or whether it’s covertly smuggling in the (white) *man* as its central term instead. If it’s the former, then the undecided feminists can rest easy. In acceding to an alliance with the abolitionists, they will only be helping to emancipate the underdog, and they will have nothing to lose. But if it’s the latter, then the undecided feminists risk empowering the patriarchal oppressor, what with the fact that so much of the antislavery leadership is every bit as sexist as it is abolitionist. However, there is one more of these dominant relations to consider. Its constituents properly belong to biblical precept, and the central term isn’t any of the above, but, rather, *sanctifiable wretch*.

So my (assemblage-theoretical) argument is that, in her speech of 1851, the exemplary rhetorical agent is constitutively — symbolically — shifting the terms into relations that are very different than before. On the one front, leaving *woman* where it is, she implies *slave* to be a near-synonym for *woman*, with the result that the blackness of the slave-victim becomes an attribute of the woman-victim, too. On the other front, leaving *slave* where it is, she implies *man* to be a near-synonym for *sanctifiable wretch*, so that abolitionism, purified of its association with patriarchy, instead takes on an association with salvation. Whereas the term *slave* now belongs both to an abolitionist relation and a feminist relation, the term *man* now belongs to abolitionism, to Christianity, and to feminism, all at the same time, since the religion itself (with its presumption that we, the lot of us, are in perpetual need of redemption) stretches out to include so many of the women’s rights activists to begin with.

From this perspective, if Sojourner Truth is now coming along to say that *she* — a preacher, a (former) slave, and an abolitionist, to boot — is a woman, or a woman’s rights, then she is bringing along with her, into the very heart of gender, on the one side, the *sanctifiable wretch* and, on the other side, the black, victimized *slave*. So it’s true that she’s inserting “black women into women’s reform” (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 140). But she’s actually integrating white men, and black men, and Christians into women’s reform as well. For, in this altered dominant relation, “woman” itself is materialized or enacted as a hybrid, so that *everybody* can now be let into the fold, that is, into the movement for women’s rights. Yes, it’s like Spartacus, with the difference that there’s no colossally, chimerically authentic individual in sight. There’s only an internally-heterogeneous assemblage, a cyborg in which subjectivities (or identities), shared values, existential claims, original bodies, agents, practices, and artifacts can, all of them, play a part.

Therefore, if the speaker is purposefully highlighting all the work, or, actually, all the agricultural labor she can do, and if she’s theatricalizing her own physicality, then it’s to establish — indeed to manufacture — a connection between herself and the “metaphorical slave South” (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 9). And this is to confirm that she’s speaking simultaneously as a representative for abolitionism, and as a representative for the slaves to which abolitionism refers in the first place.
And if she’s emphasizing the exploitation suffered by the slaves, then that’s actually a covert rebuttal argument. It’s an abolitionist apostrophe, and it’s directed at the feminists. More specifically, it’s aimed at the conservative, Jane Swisshelm constituency, the ones who have been saying it’s “unwise” for the other women’s rights activists to allow the “woman question” to become entangled with the “color question” (Painter, “Difference,” 123; Venet 15). Thus the purpose of Sojourner Truth’s dwelling on this victimization, so ubiquitous in the metaphorical slave South, is to pose a question to the more conservative feminists, and all in the full hearing of, say, the more progressive feminists: Don’t you agree that the women’s movement should work on behalf of other rights-less constituencies as well, not just the one constituency which is, in comparison, already privileged by its own race and class? In short, she’s neutralizing that widespread anxiety to the effect that the work of the more radical, anti-slavery feminists might somehow be inconsistent with the work of the woman’s movement proper.

Meanwhile, if the speaker is deploying the metaphor of the pint and the quart (thus bringing “mind” into play, along with “work,” “embodiment,” “race,” and “gender”), then that’s quite another sort of rebuttal argument. This time, it’s an apostrophe directed, as if by the conservative feminists, to the conservative abolitionists. For, as every commentator agrees, the speaker is demystifying the “relevance” of any so-called intellect with respect to the broader struggle for equal rights (Campbell 10). So this is to neutralize that other widespread anxiety, the one to the effect that the sort of abolitionism which prevails might yet turn out to be the kind where women are “denied the vote” (Venet 15). Indeed, the speaker is dismantling the premise according to which only men (whether white or black) may be considered fit, as by virtue of their superior intelligence, for leadership roles within the abolitionist movement. It’s a reassurance that any sexism among the abolitionists isn’t inherent to the anti-slavery cause, or to the arguments recommending it. For such duplicity — easily unmasked, subjected to public ridicule — has no bearing whatever on the goals of the abolitionist movement proper: these remain fully compatible with the goals of the women’s rights movement as well.

Finally, if the speaker is populating her speech with references to scripture (to Jesus, to Eve, to Mary, to Lazarus, to the fowls of the air — depending on which version of the speech we consult), then this must be for her to draw together the religious connections shared by her allies, who prospectively include just about all of the abolitionists, all of the feminists, and all of the Christians, too. These are (and, again, the lot of them) the sanctifiable wretches whom she’s reconciling, as she speaks, under the rubric of the faith that brings them together.

**Summation**

If we adopt a material-semiotic (and/or assemblage theoretical) perspective, we no longer need to settle, at least not so quickly, for positing rhetorical agency by fiat. Instead, we can study rhetorical transaction as the production of unprecedented networks, of alternative cyborgs, much as we’ve seen above. Yes, black women have now become folded into the rest of the women’s movement, but, then again, so have white men, black men, slaves, and Christians — participants who, if not for their rhetoricity, their capacity for material-and-semiotic interaction, might yet be left in diremption.
However, there is one last observation to make with regard to the material-semiotic perspective, and it’s the same as applies to the social-structural and rhetorical-humanistic perspectives as well. This is that it’s not quite clear why anybody should care if some hypothetical rhetorical agent can participate in building certain cyborgs, or in redeploying certain shared values, or in reconstituting certain subjectivities, and all in just such a manner as to make things otherwise than they are. Still, the ethical question seems to require a shift to the topic of the rhetorical agent, whether construed as a structural subject, a whole person, an existential self, an ineffable participant, or something else. I’d like to engage that consideration during the next chapter, which concludes this investigation of a four-folded and traveling rhetorical agency.
Conclusion: Agency in the Rhetorical-Theoretical World

We can’t very well exit a study like this without looking over at least some of the main results. And for those to seem worth recounting, we should probably have some indication as to what difference they ought to make. In this case, we can say that the results ought to encourage us to shift away from a view of rhetorical agency as some inexplicably protean fluid, and toward a view of rhetorical agency as at least part of the explanation for incidences of genuine social change.

The investigation has taken us into four different landscapes of rhetorical agency. These are places where the rhetorical forms of subjectivity, conventionality, transcendence, and materiality are being manufactured, i.e., through the efforts of theorists and practitioners collaborating as best they can under the circumstances. While each of the four paradigms does offer an irreducibly different contribution to our theorizing about rhetorical agency (highlighting, for example, structural constraints, or shared values, or authentic claims, or variegated networks), each also threatens to subordinate its others, raising its preferred constituent of rhetorical agency to salience over the rest. Further, each perspective models the rhetorical agent in its own, proprietary, if also indispensable way. So while there are several options for our theorizing the manner in which rhetorical transaction might (or might not) help produce some genuine social change, the options aren’t all available in the same place.

In the social-structural landscape, rhetorical subjectivity is being assembled out of terms that always dissolve into their relations. Utterances disappear into the interplay among signs; resistant or transgressive modes of thought, into their structural or ideological slots; group members, into whatever local logic determines their status and identity; collectivities themselves into the more global social logic upholding the body politic. Thus, the only rhetorical agent is a structural subject, bound to reproduce whatever already is. This must be an agent who is incapable, other than by theoretical fiat, of speaking in such a manner as to make any difference, an agent as closely attached to the side of the state as is a barnacle to the side of a ship. But there’s still no denying that rhetorical subjectivity, the interiority of speakers and listeners, must, as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell indicates, be unavoidably contextualized by the logics and structures that contain, that position these participants in rhetorical transaction. Therefore, it’s probably just as well that so many contemporary theorists are devoted to studying the constraints upon rhetorical subjectivity.

In the rhetorical-humanistic landscape, rhetorical conventionality is being assembled out of at least some terms that don’t merge with their relations. Rhetorical agents can strive to alter the present social conditions, as by manipulating the guidelines acknowledged universally within the group, and regardless of the various interlocutors’ structural or ideological positioning. True, the rhetorical agent — the whole person — is dependent on traditionally-held values that come from who knows where. And this must be an agent too well-acculturated ever to be recalcitrant, ever to flout the collective guidelines whose function, above all, is to keep the group together. Nevertheless, in deploying these collective guidelines anyway, the whole person can also promote some genuine social change, if only in the interest of helping the group recover its longed-for
coherence. Thus we should applaud those theorists and practitioners currently producing a form of rhetorical conventionality serviceable enough for perpetual redirection. Meanwhile, in the existential-transversal landscape, rhetorical transcendence is being assembled *primarily* out of terms that don’t reduce to their relations. For the existential-transversal perspective theorizes social change as attainable despite either rhetorical subjectivity or rhetorical conventionality. Both of these latter can be dismantled under the force of the rhetorical agent’s authentic, embodied claim to a free and responsible existence, a claim distributed transversally during rhetorical interaction.

For better or worse, though, the rhetorical agent here is the existential self, reducing half to lack, loss, or absence, and half — as it seems — to a precariously occasionalist corporeality. Regrettably, then, the corporeal half may yet, for all that anyone knows, come to give up the ghost. For conditions are already such that there is no longer any “self-sufficient agency that can qualify as intentional,” and such that “choice” is “objectively co-caused at the crossroads of chance and determinacy” (Massumi, qtd. in Hall, *Subjectivity*, 120). Even so, it’s the existential self that gives itself “reasons” for being even when it doesn’t “have” any (Beauvoir 12). And that’s already, well, reason enough for us to support the work of those who are so uncompromising in their reterritorialization of rhetorical transcendence.

In the material-semiotic landscape, rhetorical materiality is being assembled *entirely* out of terms that remain separable from their relations. The rhetorical agent is an ineffable participant, which might or might not come with a built-in capacity for choice, intentionality, and so on, but will, in any case, continually be morphing into all sorts of other ineffable participants, thereby forever making things otherwise than they are. And then nobody can say exactly why any of this activity should be going on — or under what circumstances (or to what extent) it should be stopped. So it does seem that the ineffable participant of this landscape has actually to stay in very close communication with the existential self from the other, existential-transversal world. This would be so that the former sort of agent can keep borrowing, from the latter, the “reasons” that neither has to begin with, but that the existential self can at least adduce as *justifying* life (Beauvoir 12). However, apart from this limitation, that of its ethical slightness, the material-semiotic perspective does offer the most capacious (and difference-promoting) view of all, containing resources for materializing everything, even transcendence.

In any case, each of the four different landscapes does exist — and, in some respects, despite the existence of its others. And, again, each landscape is, in its own way, a factory for producing a four-folded rhetorical agency. But this is not to say that there is any theoretical benefit to stapling these perspectives to one another (gathering them into one big assemblage, producing a rhetorical agency more promiscuous and protean than ever before). To the contrary, it’s incumbent upon us to help enact or realize the *incommensurability* among the four perspectives, so that rhetorical agency can continue to remain internally heterogeneous, irreducible, and genuinely four-folded.

Now, one might think, given the sophistication with which rhetorical functionality is currently being theorized, that there can’t be a single commentator left unaware of the sheer complexity, the utter perversity of rhetorical agency. Even so, it does turn out that rhetorical agency is becoming *less* multiple all the time. Indeed, folding rhetorical agency into four, as in the present study, begins to look like the only expedient for holding the
line. For, despite the increasing theoretical sophistication, each of the four co-constituents of rhetorical agency looks increasingly to be losing its difference.

**No More Homogenization Now!**

I’ll dramatize the point by mentioning, in the manner of a cautionary tale, some recent, exemplary work on rhetorical materiality. After all, from my perspective, rhetorical materiality is already folded into rhetorical agency, for which reason the ongoing effacement of rhetorical materiality can serve as an allegory for what’s happening to all the rest of rhetorical agency as well. So, we’ll reflect on two equally sophisticated contributions. One affirms that rhetorical practices should certainly be conceptualized as materially irreducible. The other affirms that theory has certainly moved beyond the naive view in which any tangible signifier can only ever be the figure (the notionally material trace), while ideology must always be the constitutive ground. Nevertheless the very authors advancing these claims are among those currently reducing rhetorical materiality to a mirage, an epiphenomenal production by the status quo.

Let’s revisit some of the work of Ronald Walter Greene, a scholar who “perhaps more than any other” today is “committed to thinking the problem of rhetoric’s materiality” (Trapani 344). In an essay of 1998, Greene chastises Michael Calvin McGee for having developed a “fragmentation thesis” that effectively “keeps a materialist rhetoric locked into a logic of representation” (34). McGee’s claim is that the rhetorical utterances of today must surely mirror the fragmentation that characterizes our multiply distributed sociality more generally. In that case, as Greene explains, McGee’s failing is to have inculcated a view in which

> Rhetorical practices do not exhibit their own positivity, their own unique place in the structure of everyday life, their materiality does not resist but simply reflects what we already know: that we live in a fragmented culture. (Greene, 1998, 34)

We can discern the prescience of Ronald Walter Greene when we grasp that the complaint applies even today, and to the approach adopted by Ronald Walter Greene.

To be sure, Greene (1998; 2009) has become increasingly adamant as to the sheer pointlessness, in theorizing rhetorical materiality, of invoking concepts like representation, influence, coercion, suspicion, and so on. And Greene himself maintains that power operates autonomously, silently, through constitutive-and-productive articulations, in short, *materially*, and not at all in the manner of propaganda. But let me highlight a rejoinder from William Trapani (2009). For in “Rhetorical Pedagogy as a Postal System” (2002), Greene “inadvertently smuggles in an unreconstructed notion of communication as mediation and thus risks losing the very prospect of a new ‘materialist rhetoric’” (Trapani 345). And it turns out that even Greene’s most recent position still relies on the very notion of representation — communication, mediation, and so on — that he has so vociferously been contesting.

For example, Greene is the one who can continue to write, in his very essay on rhetorical materialism (2009), passages like this, where rhetoric’s materiality is framed as that of some delivery system, dutifully channeling the interests of the status quo:
The need to govern the rhetorical subject is due to how a generalized rhetoricality infuses capitalism with its dynamic energy to produce and appropriate the social wealth of communicative labor (2009; 61). So, in Greene, rhetorical materiality isn’t irreducible, after all. It’s reducible to capitalist automatism. For while capitalism is nowadays governing the subject by other-than-symbolistic means, it’s also communicating (or expressing) itself perfectly, if not through signification, then through the rhetorical materiality that it’s so definitively appropriated.

Here, my point is that although Greene is correct (about theory’s need to acknowledge rhetoric’s irreducible positvity), it doesn’t help for him to be correct, since not even Greene is clear as to how rhetorical materiality could resist, rather than simply reflect, what we already know. In this case, we do know we’re living in a capitalist society. And that, according to Greene, is what rhetorical materiality tells us, too! But where, in that case, is rhetoric’s material difference, its irreducible heterogeneity?

Maybe it’s in the work of Christian Lundberg, also representative of the scholars committed to thinking the problem of rhetoric’s materiality. In his “On Missed Encounters: Lacan and the Materiality of Rhetoric” (2009), Lundberg characterizes the two most salient versions of “the materiality of rhetoric thesis” as inadequate (162). Theorizing about rhetorical materiality has led to certain “advances,” and yet these don’t register the “irreducible plurality and specificity of rhetorical events, texts, and practices” (161, 163). One advance has been “beyond an object-centered view of rhetoric as durable effect against an ideational bias” and “toward an ever more expansive view of discourse constituting the subject” (163). Another has been “beyond the critical categories of representation and interpretation” and “toward attention to logics of power and articulation that produce reality.” But that’s not all there is to the advances.

In Lundberg’s view, actually, the latest advance looks to be that of suturing the other two advances, as by recruiting “articulation theory” to serve as a “principle” of order — a principle “mediating the divide between the order of discourse and the order of reality by reading them as simultaneous” (Lundberg 163). And what bothers Lundberg is precisely the seamlessness presupposed in this suturing, this convergence, which is why he protests that the two advances, especially when put together, would amount to the effacement of rhetoric’s “irreducible plurality and specificity” (161).

By reading Lundberg a little against the grain, we can perhaps more easily see how this would be the case. For the shift “beyond an object-centered view of rhetoric as durable effect” is actually to deny that objects, things, corporealties can ever have any materiality of their own (Lundberg 163). Currently, discourse matters, objects don’t. Meanwhile, the shift “beyond the critical categories of representation and interpretation” is actually to deny that signification matters, either (161). For the “logics of power and articulation” can “produce reality” all by themselves (163). So of course the suturing of the two advances would leave out any irreducible plurality and specificity. It would obviously reduce everything (events, texts, practices, objects, durable effects, and so on) to an epiphenomenal byproduct of a single, homogeneous, all-encompassing social logic.

But what, at any rate, is Lundberg’s own suggestion, i.e., for re-admitting rhetoric’s irreducible plurality, specificity, and heterogeneity? Well, it’s to refer rhetorical materiality to a linguistic loop. To be sure, the argument is that rhetoric remains material because, on the one side, rhetoric is animated by a material drive operating out of awareness, and, on the other side, rhetoric (all of it) is the material trace
left in signification by the resurgent drive itself. But what, precisely, would be material
enough for this drive to work with, i.e., so it could insinuate itself into “practice”
(Lundberg 162)?

Actually, there are two sorts of material available for reworking by the drive. The
one sort of material is linguistic, and it’s continually reconfigured during the ordinary,
trope-deploying processes of communicative interchange. And the other sort of material
is linguistic, too, for it’s the extraordinary content of the unconscious, which latter itself
is only the “reservoir of all the possible metonymic associations potentially inhering in a
signifier by way of past usage” (Lundberg 171). Coming or going, then, Lundberg’s
version of rhetorical materiality does look indistinguishable from signification, what with
some of it inhering in signs which are familiar because they’re new, and the rest of it
inhering in signs which are uncanny because they’re old.

Of course, there’s also, in Lundberg, the question of the material drive that
animates all these processes of signification. Oddly, though, the material drive can’t
actually matter. When it’s not limited to working with linguistic devices that are brand-
new, then it’s limited to working with linguistic devices that are second-hand. Either way,
rhetorical materiality continues to look like yet more signification.

Thus it seems that the solutions from Greene and from Lundberg are equally
reductive, only in opposite directions. Greene must be denying that rhetorical materiality
can ever involve representation, and this regardless that his rationale for saying so seems
to be that rhetorical materiality is already capitalism’s proprietary medium for self-
representation. And Lundberg must be denying that rhetorical materiality can ever be
other than representation, other than this subjectivized play of significations which is
making the social-and-linguistic world go round. In both cases, rhetorical materiality is
becoming stripped of its difference, with the result — as I argue — that all the rest of
rhetorical agency is becoming homogenized, as well.

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On Keeping Difference Different

In reflecting on what both Greene and Lundberg have to say, however, we can
still arrive at a couple of clues as to where to find the missing heterogeneity. The clue
from Lundberg is that rhetoric should be theorized as, in some respects, speaking with the
aid of such objects, things, corporealties as are “durable” enough to stick in the gears of
any social machine bent on generating everything in its own image (163). Indeed, to
trivialize the durable and the object-oriented, as by moving beyond them, would actually
be a step in the wrong direction. We should therefore, as even Lundberg suggests,
consider rolling back this notion that rhetorical materiality can somehow be captured in a
reading of “the order of discourse and the order of reality . . . as simultaneous” (163).
Similarly, the clue from Greene is that rhetoric should, in some respects, be theorized as
speaking with its own, resistant positivity (always telling us something different from
what we already know), even if Greene himself hasn’t actually theorized it that way.

However, the main problem uncovered above may be that the local theorists are
not always noticing precisely where they are located, or in keeping with which
assumptions they are proceeding, with the result that they often risk reducing,
homogenizing, effacing the very constituent(s) of the rhetorical agency that they believe
themselves to be investigating. Perhaps it’s the case that both Lundberg and Greene have
immigrated into the social-structural landscape, where rhetorical subjectivity is always the dominant term, and everything else merely a satellite. Perhaps these writers are trying to study rhetorical materiality with the aid of resources which are really only good for studying rhetorical subjectivity. And perhaps such misprisions (e.g., the tendency to look at rhetorical materiality and see rhetorical subjectivity instead) might be minimized were more of the local theorists to take seriously the philosophical, even political commitments defining the paradigm within which they’re situated. That way, such local theorists could at least recognize when they are wandering into a terrain calling for study under the commitments of some different perspective entirely.

Yet the four alternative frameworks are already there, and they do have to be approached in their own terms. Any attempt to blenderize them, or to staple them together, wouldn’t be liberation, only cultural imperialism. So we should probably leave the landscapes alone, i.e., just where they are, right where the local theorists and practitioners are making their locally-ordered contributions to a four-folded rhetorical agency. But, in that case, if the four paradigms do deserve to be kept apart, we’re left with the question as to how resources from all four of them could ever cross the abysses between, so that they could then become folded together in rhetorical transaction.

A Fluctuating Rhetorical Agent

My suggestion (considering that it’d probably be best for rhetorical theorists—and-practitioners to stay put, doing their proper work in their disparate paradigms) is that we ought to consider the possibility of there being a participant of quite another kind, capable of bringing some radical alterity into any given landscape, and even if the locals themselves aren’t up to the task. We could add a fifth figure to the list of those that we’ve been treating as belonging to the category of “rhetorical agent.” We might arrive at a metaphor, a model for a traveling rhetorical agent: a mobile interlocutor, a participant continually on call. She could hold a quadruple passport, citizenship in every quarter of the four-folded world. And she could show up in just any of the four landscapes (in the company of just any local agent), always importing certain tidings from elsewhere.

So, for example, if the structural subject, ensconced in the social-structural landscape, happened at some point to be rehearsing, reinforcing, reinstating the constraints upon everybody’s subjectivity, the mobile rhetorical agent could appear at his side and say, “Yes, but what about transcendence?”

Perhaps a traveler like that could draw the local agent’s attention to connections (as between here and there), linkages that, if not for her reminding presence, might remain impossible to detect. These would remain partial connections, as a Marilyn Strathern or Annemarie Mol would say, and therefore partial separations as well. But they’d be connections, anyway. Doubtless, such a traveling rhetorical agent would be an ontological drifter, a messenger, maybe a sophist — and, if not necessarily a devil’s advocate, then perhaps an angel.

There’s just such a model, a metaphor, in the work of Michel Serres, the philosophical ally of so many a material-semiotic theorist. He has a book about it — *Angels: A Modern Myth* (1995). As for the angels populating the book, they’re of the kind that “fluctuates between the collective and the individual,” bearing “relationships” (293, 295).
Admittedly, the angels haven’t always borne enough relationships. Often, they’ve settled for bearing only selective, elitist types of relationships, such as those featured in “the cry in the desert,” in “the burning prophecy or the psalm,” in “the rustling of crossed wings,” in “the coded message, transported, delivered, received and deciphered,” in “emphatic words and speeches,” in “written law, sign, meaning,” in “the signified and the signifier,” in “speech, language, commentary and interpretation” — “all of which,” to be sure, have been “angelic” enough in their own ways (Serres 284). So the angel of the past probably wouldn’t have been such a good model for any traveling rhetorical agent.

Yes, but even the angels are undergoing remediation. They are becoming freed up to traverse all manner of “paths” and “interlacings,” for their work is now that of “unceasingly drawing up the maps of our new universe” (Serres 293). And they’re heralding the annunciation, when “word” becomes “flesh” (295). This is no triviality — no idle auspication. For communication needn’t be the (let’s say, Kantian, Husserlian, Sartrean) tomb of a “petrified . . . body,” its “tongue and nostrils parched with dialectic,” nor need it be some ritualistic perseveration, the tracing of signifier and signified to one another in an interminable loop (Connor).

The way that Serres actually puts it, though, is that the angels, the fluctuating, relationship-bearing angels coming up today, are

- individual and multiple; messengers that both appear and disappear;
- visible and invisible; constructive of messages and message-bearing systems . . . spiritual and physical; of two sexes and none; natural and manufactured; collective and social; both orderly and disorderly . . . intermediaries and interchangers; intelligence that can be found in the world’s objects and artefacts . . .

What’s more, sometimes they can be very evil! (296).

And, come to think of it, that’s roughly what we’ve been hearing all along. We’ve been hearing it from our exemplary practitioner, the hypothetical rhetorical agent, the preacher who’s accompanied us from beginning to end during this investigation, the speaker who’s borne with her all the “constructive,” if often rather difficult relationships that go to make up a four-folded rhetorical agency.

So there’s a model, a metaphor. With our help, the traveling rhetorical agent, that fluctuating angel, could collect all of the items on agency’s checklist, filling her knapsack with unassimilable supplies, bundling these up into the form of the communicative artifact. Her own speech could then be for carrying around, a gift for unfolding within any collectivity that includes people — participants whom rhetoricity can change. After all, while humans might not be the only agents in town, they do tend to need assistance, i.e., in their own right. And what else, if not the intervention of their allies, could explain why these actors would ever be given to making things otherwise than they are?
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