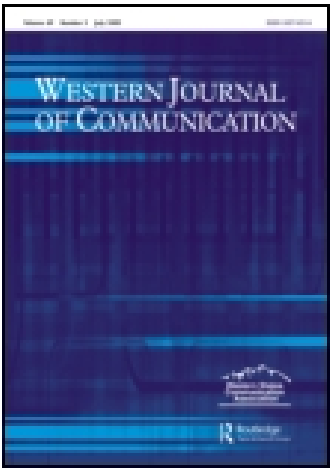

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Politicizing Voice

Bonnie J. Dow

When we speak and write, we do so from social locations that are constituted by discourse and experience. Moreover, because all social locations are not equal, because some are attended by privilege and others by marginalization, our socially located voices have political implications. In this essay I explore some troublesome implications of uncritically equating social location with political position in our evaluation of the voices we create and hear. I argue that crucial to unpacking the politics of social location are (1) an understanding of differences *within* as well as *among* categories of oppression and privilege, and (2) a recognition that the political implications of social locations are not necessarily the same as the political commitments of the individuals who occupy them.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, as a new assistant professor of Communication, I attended a Women's Studies-sponsored lecture by a well-known African-American feminist critic and theorist. She spent some time speaking of the frustrations brought on by functioning in an academic environment that was hostile to her analyses of the intersecting discourses of race and gender and in which she felt the constant presence of racism and sexism, even from white feminist colleagues. During the question and answer period, I raised my hand and asked her how she was able to keep her evident anger from becoming disabling, that is, how she was able to turn her anger to productive use. I thought that I had a sincere motive in asking the question. Even in my short time as a faculty member, I found myself feeling angry and disempowered by my environment in a way that I had not anticipated; I feared that this anger would paralyze me or cause me to retreat into an uncaring cynicism. Rather than answering my question, the speaker turned to the audience and said, "See? This is the kind of thing white women do to me all the time—they call me 'angry' so they don't have to deal with what I'm saying." She proceeded to talk briefly about the ways in which my question delegitimated her analyses by reducing them to manifestations of anger.

I wanted to sink into the floor. I was embarrassed and confused. I thought I had asked a supportive question, only to have it interpreted as a racist reaction. I've thought about this incident a lot over the years, often when I am reading the work of this person, work I admire and use

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in the classroom and in scholarship. With hindsight, I can see how my question could have been interpreted as patronizing, as a reduction of the complexity of the speaker's description of her experiences. Indeed, how many times have feminists of any color been dismissed as simply "angry women?" (see Tomlinson, 1996).

As I began work on this essay, in which I knew I wanted to write about the differences in voices produced from varying social locations, I reread some of the work of Audre Lorde, an African-American feminist critic and poet who talks eloquently about such issues. I was struck by one of Lorde's (1984) essays titled "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism." In it, she talks candidly about anger as "a powerful source of energy serving progress and change," and defends anger as an indispensable resource in dealing with oppression (p. 127). My embarrassing memory came flooding back as I wondered about the differences between Lorde's discussion in a 1984 book and my own experience with anger in the early 1990s. If Lorde could write so passionately about using anger, then why had my question provoked such a reaction from another African-American feminist?

There are several possible answers to this question, some obvious, and some not so obvious. Among them are these:

1) Because I'm not Audre Lorde.[1] She is an African-American lesbian feminist with an impressive body of work treating the intersections of racism, sexism, and sexuality. I am a white, heterosexual feminist who was a stranger to the speaker when I asked my question. At the time, I perceived that I was speaking as a feminist asking about feminist anger, and I assumed she would understand my question in that context. The speaker's reaction reminded me that, to her, I was not only a feminist—I was a white, middle-class (judging by my physical appearance at the time) feminist, a social location that brought with it a host of implications. It is quite possible that the same question, asked by an African-American feminist in the audience, would have been treated very differently. This interpretation is powerful support for the idea that "a speaker's location . . . has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech," and "who is speaking to whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said" (Alcoff, 1991, pp. 7, 12).
2) Because the speaker of whom I asked the question is not Audre Lorde either. Though they are both African-American feminist writers, to assume that they share the same perspective on all issues is the same as assuming that Adrienne Rich and Gloria Steinem, as white feminist writers, would do so. In short, the belief that they would have similar perspectives on anger reflects an essentialism about African-American feminists and assumes that African-American feminists must be somehow interchangeable. As

I've argued elsewhere, essentialist assumptions are impossible to support and are politically and intellectually dangerous (see Dow, 1995; du Cille, 1994).

3) Because I framed the question poorly. By labeling it as "anger," I re-presented her description of her feelings and experiences in an inappropriate way and she called me on it (I have never been able to recall if she ever actually used the term "anger" or "angry" in the course of her lecture). One alternative would have been to describe *myself* as angry and to frame the question as a request for advice on dealing with that anger productively. This would not have been inaccurate—as I said, my own anger was part of my motivation for asking the question in the first place. There are risks to that approach, too, however. By not explicitly connecting my question to something that she had said (or at least to my perception of what she had said), my question might have seemed irrelevant or out of place. Worse, it might have appeared that I was asking her to solve *my* problem. Given the history of white feminists' tendency to see their problems as central or universal (and the resulting marginalization of the concerns of women of color), this framing of the question might not have engendered a significantly different response from the one I received.
4) Because, as a white woman, I should not have spoken at all in this context. My asking of a question was a demonstration of privilege, of my belief that I always had a right to speak and that what I said was always worthy of an ear. There were several people of color in the room (although the audience was largely white), and they had more right to speak in this context than I did. Yet this is tricky, too, because "making the decision for oneself whether to retreat [from speaking] is an extension or application of privilege, not an abdication of it" (Alcoff, 1991, pp. 24–25).

There are many additional ways to think about this experience, but what I would like to do here is to use it as a starting point for discussing the issue of voice and social location. "Voice" is a hot topic these days, particularly within this field. Its literal dimensions work well for our traditional focus on oral communication, and its figurative dimensions work well for interrogation of our identity, as reflected in the "voices" we hear and those we exclude and what that says about us (see Campbell, 1991; Vonnegut, 1992; Wander, 1996; Wood, 1992). Yet the other discipline within which I work, Women's Studies, also has developed a keen affinity for "voice." Here, too, it is connected to traditional concerns (the silencing of women through the suppression of their voices) and to identity issues (our ongoing concern with what "women" means and whose voices have represented that category). In both cases, scholars view "voice" as a political issue; that is, it is about *power.* Linda Alcoff (1991) maintains that "who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle. Simply

put, the discursive context is a political arena" (p. 15). In much the same vein, Phillip Wander (1996, p. 403) argues that "politics begins with rhetoric: what is being said, who is saying it, and for whom" (see also Wood & Cox, 1993).

When we speak of certain voices having more power, or privilege, we are usually speaking in terms of what can be termed "social location," most commonly defined by discourses of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. We tend to accept membership in certain demographic categories as indicators of privilege and membership in other demographic categories as indicators of marginalization or oppression. Using this logic, I, as a white middle-class woman, have more power than the African-American woman of whom I asked the question. Clearly, her response indicated her awareness of this issue as she lumped me into a category labeled "white women" as a way of critiquing what I had said. Because of the difference in power represented by our differing social locations, my position in this encounter was "discursively dangerous," that is, it had the potential "of increasing or reinforcing the oppression" of the other party involved (Alcoff, 1991, p. 7). In fact, that is exactly what occurred, according to the speaker.

Yet there are other indices of power to be considered in this situation as well. If this encounter is viewed as a rhetorical situation, taking into account the dynamics of that room and occasion, I was not necessarily more powerful. In the context of our interaction, she was an admired, famous, tenured scholar who had spoken for an hour about her experiences. I was an untenured, unknown assistant professor (in fact, I felt intimidated about asking a question at all, and only did so after I saw that no one else's hand was up). Thus, in terms of this limited situation, I am willing to speculate that I felt rather more disempowered after the exchange than she did. But is that relevant? That is, don't our differing social locations in the wider world supersede the power dynamic that occurred for an hour in that room? Frankly, I'm not sure, but it bears thinking about because it seems to me to go to the heart of the practice of equating social location with political position.

If my social location as a white, middle-class woman is always determinative of my political position, regardless of what I perceive as my intent and regardless of the particulars of that situation, then I probably should have chosen option #4—not speaking at all. In fact, if I agree that I am incapable of transcending my social location, I should probably add option #5—I should not have attended the lecture, because to do so would be pointless if what I learned there could make no difference in my relationship to the world.

I am not attempting to create a straw person argument here; obviously few would advocate such withdrawal. I am, however, attempting to interrogate some of the troublesome implications of uncritically equating social location with political position in our evaluation of the

voices we create and hear. The notion that social location affects our understanding of knowledge, truth, and meaning is a legacy of the poststructuralist, postmodernist turn in the academy and the deconstruction of the transcendant, autonomous subject. When we produce knowledge, when we speak or write, we do so from social locations that are constituted by discourse and experience. Moreover, because all social locations are not equal, because some are attended by privilege and others by marginalization, they have political implications.

I generally agree with this assessment, with two caveats. First, we should avoid essentializing the perspectives associated with social locations. We risk doing so when we make assumptions about the experience and perspective that a location produces and/or when we extrapolate a pre-constituted political position from that experience and perspective. For example, as a white, middle-class female, I share racial and class privilege with other women in that demographic category. Yet how we experience that privilege, how we interpret it, and what we do with it, differs greatly with regard to our personal histories and our daily, material circumstances (just as does our experience of being oppressed or marginalized as women). Understanding differences *within* as well as *among* categories of oppression and privilege is crucial to unpacking the politics of social location. This is a lesson that feminists have learned through long hard struggle over the ways that the political uses of the category of "women" has often elided differences produced by experiences of race, class, and sexuality. This is also a lesson rhetorical critics have learned in the ongoing struggle to emancipate ourselves from an objectivist, Bitzerian view of "exigence," one in which the location (the rhetorical situation) calls forth a "fitting response" (see Bitzer, 1968; Branham & Pearce, 1985; Miller, 1984; & Vatz, 1973).

Second, the political implications of social locations are not necessarily the same as the political commitments of the individuals who occupy them. For instance, persons of a certain race and/or class enjoy the privileges of that race and/or class, whether they want to or not. Persons of a certain gender face the discrimination visited upon that gender, whether they want to or not. These are *implications* of their social locations. Some people choose to turn implications into political *commitments,* dedicating themselves to retaining the privileges of their class and/or race, or dedicating themselves to fighting discrimination. Some people don't. This slippage, between implications and commitments, is the difference between what we are and what we do. Politics is a practice, not a state of being, and although personal experience can be a key ingredient in creating one's political position, it is not determinative. Every woman who is raped does not become a feminist. Many African-Americans who believe discrimination exists do not favor affirmative action.

Of course, we often think of shared personal experience or social location as the foundation for political organizing. For example, as a feminist, I recognize "the personal is political" as a foundational maxim. The saying derives from second-wave feminist consciousness-raising groups, which functioned to create awareness that what women perceived to be personal problems were, in fact, shared by other women and were the product of their positions as members of an oppressed political class. Personal testimony and the sharing of personal experience were vital to the practice of consciousness-raising. Importantly, however, consciousness-raising sought to *transcend* the purely personal; that is, to make it politically relevant by using it to create knowledge about the *collectivity* of women's experience and thus to create feminist theory. The political *implications* of personal experience were used to create political *commitments* for feminism. Assuming a stable political link between social location and political action resists this important move by positing that the personal is always already political in some authentic, rather than constructed, fashion. In other words, it simply transfers the status associated with an "autonomous ego" to a "socially situated subject" and accepts the same linear relationship between individual and voice.

Yet to be a woman, or an African-American, or a lesbian (or any combination of these) is not an automatic route to a political voice. Something more is required, and that something more is the sense of seeing oneself as belonging to a collectivity with political commitments. This requires work and is not just a state of being. As Sandra Harding (1993) puts it, "having women's experiences—being a woman—clearly is not sufficient to generate feminist knowledge; all women have women's experiences, but only at certain historical moments do any of us ever produce feminist knowledge" (p. 155). The difference between the two results from political agency and political work.

If we wish to view "voice" as a political entity, then I suggest we take care with our definition of politics, especially *progressive* politics. My knowledge of feminist history tells me that voices emanating from women do not necessarily recognize the political implications of the social category of "woman" in the same way. From nineteenth and early twentieth century anti-suffragists to the Phyllis Schlaflys or Bay Buchanans of the present, some of the most powerful opponents of feminism have been women. Moreover, in recent years, what better exemplifies the problems of equating social location with political commitment than Clarence Thomas's effective use of autobiography to placate those suspicious of his positions on civil rights? Many who heard Thomas's persistent evocation of his background as a poor, Black, sharecropper's son from Pinpoint, Georgia, assumed that a voice from such a social location must necessarily be politically sympathetic to the disenfranchised, despite evidence to the contrary. This overreading of the politics of social location became a smokescreen that obscured his

lack of traditional qualifications and the ways that his *political work* in the public sector demonstrated hostility toward civil rights (see Kauffman, 1993, p. 274).

I do not mean to imply that our social locations make no difference in the politics we practice or the scholarship we produce. I suggest, however, that the quality of that difference, and its effect on our voices, is by no means as transparent as we might perceive it to be. I also suggest that recognizing the instability of the connection between social location and political commitment is ultimately a positive move, because the obverse is politically disempowering. This is especially meaningful to me as a feminist. If we view social location as totalizing in its effect on our voices and our politics, then the possibilities for feminist collectivity or coalition are truly discouraging. Politically, it is important that we embrace the possibility of dissenting from our social locations. This step means that we recognize the necessity of learning "to think and act *not* out of the 'spontaneous consciousness' of the social locations that history has bestowed on us but out of the traitorous ones we choose with the assistance of critical social theories generated by the emancipatory movements" (Harding, 1993, p. 161). I may always be a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman, but I am not *only* that; indeed, I believe that I make that social location meaningful in different ways. The personal may be political, but it is not *the* political (see Dow & Hogeland, 1997).

For instance, I could make my social location meaningful by claiming that it makes it impossible or unethical for me to understand or to write about or to speak to the experiences or discourse of women outside of that identity (recall options 4 and 5). That choice, however, carries several unsavory implications. If you extend the logic, it allows men a ready excuse to avoid feminist work or work on women that they are supposedly ill-equipped to understand (or to practice) because of their social location. This has the effect of narrowing feminists' audience to the already converted, and it works against what I view as a primary feminist goal: the mainstreaming of our work. We cannot transform the academy by speaking only to each other. Moreover, while such a retreat would seem to recognize differences among women, it does so in a way that fails to make those differences *useful* to feminism, which is what I have always perceived to be the point of recognizing differences in the first place.[2] Outside of political correctness or some abstract ethical motive, this is simply good politics. Put simply, "since lesbian, poor, and black women are all women, feminism will have to grasp how gender, race, class, and sexuality are used to construct one another" (Harding, 1993, p. 153).

Another, and I think more productive, way to make my social location meaningful is to view it as a rhetorical problem that differs with the situations and contexts within which I speak. Such a perspective recognizes the *contingency* of discourse, the ways in which

rhetors must deal with "perishable circumstance, incomplete knowledge, and fallible human action" (Farrell, 1993, p. 78). This means that, in some situations, I should recognize that my voice might have the effect of disempowering another's, and I should choose not to speak or should choose my words very carefully (always aware that these options result from my privilege). In other situations, although my social location might not make me the best person to speak to an issue, I might be the best person *at that moment in that situation.*

The classroom is one such situation. I teach classes in feminism, and I address race, class, and sexuality because those issues are absolutely necessary to understanding feminism. I have taught these classes in universities where there are few (or no) faculty of color or gay or lesbian faculty teaching in that area. In that situation, despite my social location as a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman, I do my best to address those issues in a responsible way, aided by substantial amounts of research. Sometimes I have gay or lesbian students or students of color or students from differing class positions who can provide valuable perspectives on these issues. Sometimes I don't. Sometimes they won't.

Regardless, I believe that teaching about the intersections of race, class, and sexuality in feminism is necessary for reasons of accuracy and ethics. To refuse to do so would be to somehow imply that I (and the white, middle-class, straight students that I teach most of the time) am somehow *not* raced, and classed, and sexualized. Indeed, to the extent that I claim that social location precludes me from speaking or writing about issues with which I have no specific experience, I give students permission to avoid engaging those issues. There is far too much of this going on in classrooms already. Many of my white, middle-class students are only too willing to view racism, sexism, and heterosexism as problems that need only be understood and addressed by those who are "affected" by them (and you can just guess who "those" people are). Some of the motivation for students' retreat from these issues is tied to a desire to avoid politics and the risks that it entails (see Hogeland, 1994). Yet, such withdrawal is not really an indicator of neutrality "since it allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance" (Alcoff, 1991, p. 20).

As a rhetorician and a feminist, I believe that discourse has the power to make changes in the world. One of the ways that it does so is by encouraging persons to transcend their social locations, to view themselves as members of publics that are bound by commonalities of belief and ideology rather than (or in addition to) shared social location or personal experience. Every year, I insist on teaching a course on the history of women's rhetoric. I do so not because I live to teach public address (although I enjoy it), nor because I want to prove my credentials in a traditional academic sense (although I am a realist). I do so because Lucretia Mott and Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony and Ida B. Wells, continue to speak to me each and every year—and, remark-

ably enough, to my largely white, middle-class, postfeminist students, many of whom have never heard of such women before. In short, some, not all, of my students transcend their particular locations to hear and understand voices very unlike their own—or, to put it more simply, they change. As a rhetorician, I know such things can happen. As a feminist, I know they must.

NOTES

[1]Audre Lorde died from breast cancer in 1992. When I speak of her in the present tense in this essay, I am referring to her authorial or discursive persona as revealed in her work.

[2]The dangers of retreating to social location are illustrated by a well-known anecdote (in Women's Studies circles) about white feminist literary theorist Patricia Spacks, who claimed that she did not address the writings of black women in her book titled *The Female Imagination* (billed as a study of 19th century literature by women) because she was "reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences [she hasn't] had" (1975, p. 5). Alice Walker's incisive reply was that "Spacks never lived in 19th century Yorkshire, so why theorize about the Brontes?" (1983, p. 372).

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