

4Cs Panel: The Question of “Quality” in Alternative Discourse  
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**Speaking Truth To Power:**

**Social Justice Criteria for the Evaluation of Alternative Discourses**

- Helen Fox

Martin Luther King Day at the University of Michigan is an intellectual feast of ideas and issues and inspiring practices laid out elegantly across a nearly empty campus on one of the coldest days of the year. Since students and faculty are given the whole day to learn something new (and learn it in the most pleasant way possible, since everything is free, accessible, and of the highest quality), I generally choose events that are a little offbeat, a little out of my area, trusting that whatever connections there might be to my work and life will eventually make themselves known.

Hm, here’s one...*Asientos*. Seems to be a Senegalese film. The program notes say: “A young man, traumatized by violence of the world around him seeks refuge in his imagination. But there he finds himself confronted with the history of the *asiento*, the practice of trading captive Africans to the colonies of the New World.” It’s won five international awards. And afterwards, there’s a commentary by Mamadou Diouf, Professor of History. Sounds intriguing.

When I arrive, a few minutes into the film, the auditorium is very dark. There is the sound of a flute, and on the screen, an empty beach. A young African turns graceful summersaults on the sand, then sits quietly and stares out to sea. He seems neither happy nor sad. He gazes into the shimmering haze. An old man appears in the distance; he is sitting under a makeshift shelter of palm fronds. The camera focuses on the old man’s skin; it brings us in, very, very close to an arm or a leg. For long moments we look at the lines and creases, the texture – the traces of slavery on an old man’s body, Professor Diouf tells us later. The camera moves across a piece of weather-beaten wood, its colors and textures like those of the old man’s skin. Slowly, the camera pans the deserted beach, the gorgeous blues and emeralds of the water.

A narrator gives us snatches of the story, the bare facts about what happened on that beach. Slaves were brought there to wait for passage; there was much cruelty involved in their capture, both on the part of the white slave traders and the Africans who profited economically by the demand from the Americas. Human beings had become more valuable than most other commodities, the one exception being ivory. Mothers were sometimes given chunks of ivory to carry on their long march to captivity in exchange for their babies – which were smashed against tree trunks. The narrator is speaking in French. The English subtitles show up garishly white against the wood, the old man’s skin, and the sea.

Night falls. The camera pulls back to higher ground. Flares are lit and carried to the shore by shadowy figures that finally fade into the darkness. For an interminable five minutes, maybe longer, we watch the lights flickering near the now darkened water.

The viewer resists being drawn in.  
(pause)

The viewer thinks about the colors, the lights, the camera angles, the script -- everything but the pain of the people who vanished on that shore.  
(pause)

The viewer – I – recite the standard arguments that help me avoid thinking about the monstrous economic system, buttressed by religious and scientific certainties about the relative worth of human beings, that built our country. “Slavery happened long ago.” “Why dredge up the past?” “Judging our ancestors by modern standards isn’t fair.” “Let’s forget about it and just try to get along.” Stupid arguments. I feel embarrassed for thinking of them.

On the screen, the lights of the torches still flicker against the water.

I think about how I probably wouldn’t be making these arguments if this were a film about Nazi Germany.

I think of the ways I have learned to resist feeling the pain of African slavery and its historical and psychological and economic and social connections with the gate-keeping function I perform as a college teacher. I think of my students who must fight to keep their dignity while withstanding assaults made by the President of the United States on Michigan’s affirmative action program. I think of the “moral economy” of my society, as my public health colleague Sherman James puts it, “the norms . . . that set tight or loose constraints on the ability of dominant groups to treat subordinated others as undeserving of the protections and privileges they accord themselves” (2003).

I tell myself I want to try to feel the pain and loss experienced on that beautiful, deserted beach.

For long moments I watch the lights. I feel nothing.

I argue with the film maker: “This is crazy. This is much too long to be showing us lights milling aimlessly on a beach.”

Still, the flute plays on.

I remember – suddenly – the African graduate students I interviewed for *Listening to the World* and their message about silence and subtlety. Silence, they told me, can give a listener or reader the space and time to think, to reflect, to conclude. The speaker shouldn’t always take complete responsibility for the analysis, for that would be treating the listeners like children, who need to be told every little thing. At times, it can be more dignified, more polite, to let the audience use their own minds to discover what is true.

I feel myself relax, ever so slightly. I think of the modern forms of slavery that I've read about – the 27 million bonded laborers in Asia, Africa, and South America – as well as in Europe and the United States (slavery being defined as “the complete control of a person for economic exploitation by violence or the threat of violence”) (Bales, 2000). I think about people who enrich themselves from that slave labor. I think about the ways that all of us who teach at a university like mine are inadvertently enriching ourselves from the misery of the poor, the poor who are mostly black or brown, and how this glaring detail about race and exploitation is so often ignored or denied.

I think about the old man's skin.

The lights go up on a silent auditorium. Professor Diouf asks: “How do you recreate history -- how do you tell a story in film -- when there are no images left? Are images in fact necessary?” Professor Diouf does not answer these questions.

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This is alternative discourse that speaks truth to power. Or at least it spoke truth to me. But I want to argue not only that speaking truth to power can be elegant and instructive but that it should be a necessary criterion of “quality” in alternative discourse. I want to argue that ALT DIS that is merely clever, or fun, or different for the sake of variety -- even if it is done with great skill, even if it demonstrates some new and important form of intellectual work – should not be considered top quality. In my scheme of things, ALT DIS that does not in some way speak “truth” would be like a master carving worked in pine or ash rather than oak or mahogany. Or it might be like a *copy* of a master carving that a skilled, but uninspired artist passed off as the real thing.

This is not easy to argue, of course, because of the problem of deciding whose “truth” is true. As liberals or progressives (or simply as writing teachers) we say that truth is socially constructed, influenced by a writer's or researcher's identities and experiences and the historical and political context. We tell our students daily that there are many views that intelligent people might hold, and that those views must be supported by evidence, and open to challenge. The university is, after all, a place where minds meet to argue and clash, where competing analyses can lead us to greater understanding – not of a single “truth” but of partial truths that can forever be challenged, improved upon, or revised as new information is discovered and the nature of the context changes.

I value this practice, of course. It's the way I've been brought up; the way things make sense to me. But alongside this belief I have always had a “felt sense” that there is a more valid and eternal “truth” out there, especially when it comes to the truth about the inherent equality, or maybe the inherent “quality” of all human groups. For what does the word “truth” in the phrase “speak truth to power” refer to but the humanity, the dignity, and the spiritual connectedness of all people everywhere, a truth that has been revealed and taught and lived for thousands of years by prophets and teachers across vastly different cultures and historical periods. Speaking *this* truth to power would mean facing and defying the institutions and individuals that have created false barriers between

people. It would mean exposing the ways that universities exclude and deny the dignity, the worth, the means of expression, the personalities, the cultures, and the human essence of not only many of their students, but of the surrounding sea of human beings who were never considered university material at all. Speaking truth to power would mean refusing to be content with helping so-called disadvantaged students take their place in the main stream, refusing, as Carmen Kynard says, to “liberal humanize our doo-rag wearing, walkman-chanting students so we can marvel at our new de-niggerfied, and de-spiced products.” Discourse that speaks *that* truth, and speaks against *that* practice, is of a higher “quality,” I want to say, than discourse that does not.

I used to be hung up on the following conundrum: Should we teach students from “ALT” cultures and backgrounds to succeed in “mainstream” institutions? Or should we work to free the universities not only from their narrow conception of thinking and communicating, but also, as Chris Schroeder (2001) says, from their particular “versions of who to be and how to see the world”? (6) I used to say we need to do both: encourage universities to open up to a wider variety of intellectual styles and structures and meanwhile (while we’re waiting), teach students the language and skills they need to be accepted and respected by the powerful institutions that will decide their life chances. But I’m beginning to understand that this response reveals my continuing difficulty with racism and elitism, as well as my lack of faith in the “truth” I’ve described above. If I really believe that every style of discourse that human groups have devised is a miracle of complex, subtle, logical, poetic, communicative communication, then how can I say to students, “Put the norms and values of your home communities aside, learn to speak “articulately,” practice writing clearly and cogently, learn to cite and quote accurately, express your views forcefully and with originality (within reason, of course) so that people who doubt that the ways you’ve learned to communicate are as smart or creative or beautiful as any other won’t have reason to oppress you”?

This is a pretty radical reading of speaking truth to power -- that one must always act in accordance with one’s beliefs and values, even if the result is impractical or potentially embarrassing, or puts our students – or ourselves – “at risk.” I’ve been reading Gandhi lately and I’ve found he has an unusual argument for why truth – the eternal truth about humanity, which he equates with God or “pure knowledge” – must be the goal of all struggle and all action. Liberal democratic institutions, with their insistence on either positivist “facts” or social constructivism, create “a false and intolerant universalism,” says Gandhi. Because they are founded on the premise that truths are merely “limited” and “workable,” any unity they attempt to create cannot be grounded in the only truth there is about humanity, that the world is one. Any politics that tries to operate outside Gandhi’s “truth” can provide “no systematic reasons – only tactical or contingent ones – for tolerating the heterogeneous,” which ultimately leads to the possibility, even the inevitability, of someone or some group or some institutional practice destroying those who, in Gandhi’s words, “create difficulties for me.” (Skaria, 971). I understand the word “destroy” here as meaning the destruction of the spirit as well as the body – and not only the spirit of the marginalized student, but the spirit of tolerance itself. If I equivocate, if I say “well, in this case,” or “for these reasons,” or “because of this reaction” I will agree to treat a marginalized form of communication as “less than” or “outside the boundaries

of” or “best kept to one’s home community,” then I’m not discerning or practicing the truth. I’m not “experimenting with truth” as Gandhi put it. So with Gandhi, I would argue that the dignity, intelligence, and worth of all people is best taken on faith rather than on facts, and that to work in any context that denies that truth makes speaking truth to power an everyday necessity.

Speaking truth to power can be done in a variety of ways. A writer could use conventional academic discourse, as Jacqueline Jones Royster does when she speaks about academic writing styles as “small boats on a big sea” of discourse, and that they “should...not be perceived as existing apart, above, or beyond the varieties of discourse around them” (25). Or, a writer or artist might use an unfamiliar discourse to summon up a truth from what the audience already knows, as the Senegalese film did for me. Writers might reach outside university walls by simplifying exclusionary language, eliminating jargon, and explaining complicated ideas in ways an that intelligent twelve year old can understand. One might even speak truth by using a marginalized or ridiculed form of discourse in a formal setting where such language or style is considered inappropriate or inadequate.

Too risky, you say? Perhaps. But this point was made to me some years ago when I traveled to the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific to do an in-service training workshop for Peace Corps Volunteers and their local counterparts. Before the workshop started I was invited to explore the island to learn a little about the environment and culture I was working in and to develop an ear for the language – Solomon Islands Pidgin – that all Peace Corps Volunteers learn on their arrival.

As you probably know, a pidgin is a contact language, based for the most part on the grammatical constructions and syntax of the indigenous people and the vocabulary of the sailors – British, in this case – who traded with them. If you want to count to three in Solomon Islands Pidgin, you say: “wan fala, too falla, tree fala. If you want to say “this place” you’d say “dis fala ples.” One day is “wanfala de.” Pigs are “pig-pig.” Livestock is “bulumakau.” My people is “pepul blong mi.” The word for children is still “pickinini.” The word for woman – reflecting later missionary activity – is “meri.” (Nelson, undated). So you can see how this language came to be looked upon by standard English speakers as childish and naïve, adequate for the simple lifestyle of the Islands, perhaps, but hardly useful in polite society or in any dealings with the modern world.

On one of my trips around the island, I found myself riding in an open jeep with the Solomons’ Chief Environmental Officer, who was off to give a talk to Peace Corps teachers stationed some distance from town. He had been born on the island, and was one of the few who had ever left it, doing his undergraduate study in England and his graduate work in Australia. As we drove through the rainforest he pointed out the remnants of ancient irrigation systems, designed and constructed by the indigenous people thousands of years before, as well as some more recent relics – palm trees with cylindrical holes in their trunks, left WWII artillery.

When we arrived at the conference center, he went up to the podium and began his address on environmental policy while I settled into the audience. He started by speaking as he had to me, in fairly formal British English. As he warmed to his subject, however, he added some Solomon Islands Pidgin expressions for local plants and animals; then, whole sentences in the inverted grammatical form that I found so confusing – until finally I could only catch scientific terms like osmosis or photosynthesis. The Peace Corps teachers were nodding and smiling, totally charmed by this urbane scientist speaking to them in the language of the children and families they worked with. In that half hour, my idea of Pidgin as an incomplete or “simple” communication system had vanished. And the volunteers had heard a message as well, not only one about science teaching and environmental preservation, but also about the capacities and dignity of the common people they served. For in their work as teachers they were expected to uphold standard English as the norm, evaluate children’s progress through tests designed in Australia, and in fact, fail the vast majority of Solomon Islands children, who not only had trouble with the language of school and examinations, but also, for some unknown reason, could not seem to make any sense at all of mathematics or science. Did the Environmental Officer change this system with his address? Not drastically. But he did speak truth to power – and in a “Quality” way.

Now we don’t need to insist on such dramatic or direct challenge to power when we use alternative discourse. In fact, if we are realistic, we might even agree with Noam Chomsky, who argues that that speaking truth to power is a pointless self-indulgence, since power never listens. I don’t think he would argue with Gandhi so much about what “truth” is, but rather where and how to express that truth. “It is a waste of time and a pointless pursuit to speak truth to Henry Kissinger,” Chomsky (1996) says,

or the CEO of General Motors, or others who exercise power in coercive institutions, truths that they already know well enough, for the most part . . . Insofar as such people dissociate themselves from their institutional setting and become human beings, moral agents, then they join everyone else. But in their institutional roles, as people who wield power, they are hardly worth addressing, any more than the worst tyrants and criminals, who are also human beings, however terrible their actions

Instead of wasting our breath, Chomsky argues, we should seek dialogue within “a community of common concern in which one hopes to participate constructively,” speaking *with*, not *to*, people who can hear and contribute equally.

If we agree with Chomsky, then we should practice speaking truth to power within safe spaces where we can fully be ourselves, and where we can learn how to listen to silence, or to unfamiliar dialects or accents or languages, or to stories that obliquely make a point, or to “inverted” constructions or organizational schemes, or to new uses and forms of evidence. Within these communities of common concern we might even be able to express and fully hear “unprofessional” emotions, like anger and love and faith – and finally, begin to trust each other.

This appeals to me, too. Either way gives us the opportunity to live our values, open up our practice and use social justice criteria to help guide us in our perception of quality.

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