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The Differential Articulation of bell hooks

At the 2018 Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame induction ceremony in Lexington, author bell hooks discusses a “Culture of Fear” in her acceptance speech. Her speech, in regard to Barbara Biesecker’s concept of rhetorical articulation, is not merely a product of the situation she finds herself in, nor does she situate herself via her rhetoric. Rather, analysis of this particular rhetorical situation moves into “questions of process” because “neither the text’s immediate rhetorical situation nor its author can be taken as simple origin or generative agent” (Biesecker 121). bell speaks as a Black female author and a “Kentucky cosmopolitan” (hooks, 00:00:30 - 00:00:32), and as someone committed to love and justice.

The rhetorical dimension, if seen as containing discourses that are processes “entailing the discursive production of audiences” (Biesecker 126), allows for a post-structuralist view of the textual event. The event is differential, due in part to the concept of audience as an “effect-structure” that is constantly shifting, and thus the production of meaning is made possible by “the means by which an idea or argument is expressed and the initial formative intervention” (Biesecker 112). Creator, audience(s), and situation are all processes through which the event is created, as all are considered in the formation and presentation of the text. Biesecker calls this “articulation” (111), as in the “articulation of ties and the construction of contingent relations that obtain between them” (126).

An in-depth analysis of the whole rhetorical dimension centering on her text informs us about the author and the audience(s) as well as textual meaning. hooks' articulation of a "Culture of Fear" allows for an understanding of the anti-racist themes her writing contains, her triumphs against this culture of fear as shown through achievements such as being inducted to the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame as someone grown up in segregation with a genuine fear of white people (hooks, 00:00:18-00:00:25), and her interest in activism by rejecting this culture and calling for others to do so as well. This situation of an acceptance speech historically calls for specific objectives: touching on one's work and purpose in writing, which she does. The interaction of hooks' audience with her text is ever-changing, though these groups do have expectations and are interested. These various expectations and interests interact in the production of the text, and their relationships remain contingent on each other as new contexts create new meanings, to lead to open-ended significations.

Through such an analysis as Biesecker's model, we can understand hooks' speech in myriad ways as our contexts shift. Today the Black Lives Matter movement has increased the public discourse surrounding anti-racism, but it focuses typically on systemic change surrounding police violence acted on Black people, and less on hooks' call for continued resistance but also a celebration of how far Black people like herself have overcome systemic challenges.

The production of meaning is made possible through the articulation of self and audience within the text, and hooks' speech provides an articulation of a victorious Black woman from Kentucky being celebrated for her achievements in a state originally designed to hate her, by that state which could no longer dismiss her.