

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Replanting Traditions in Rhetoric

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## **Replanting Traditions in Rhetoric**

In North America, the Western style of rhetoric has remained a dominant force since colonizers decided to forcibly take root on the land. This style of rhetoric derives from the colonizers of Europe and England. When brought to the United States, this style evolved into the Euro-American rhetorical format that is used today. This rhetoric, historically run by the point-of-views of the elite white men, has dominated the world of academia. As a result, the other rhetorics that have not conformed to this conventional Western rhetorical tradition—such as Indigenous rhetorics and Black Feminist rhetorics— are deemed “unfit,” and consequently erased from spaces of scholarship and education. However, recent research efforts have clarified that the traditions within these long-oppressed rhetorics are valuable both for the voices of the cultures that they represent, as well as the academic world as a whole. These traditions need to be replanted into the garden of scholarship to decolonize the rhetorical spaces within today’s scholarly discourse. Voices in the field such as Jacqueline Jones Royster, Adam Arola, Qwo-Li Driskill, and Patricia Hill Collins show not only how these traditions have been held down, but why it is important to bring them back into the field, or as Jones Royster calls it, a “fuller landscape” of rhetoric (149). Voices like these aid in the flourishing of other rhetorics outside of the Euro-American style.

### **A Garden Full of Rhetorical Colonialism**

The oppressions at work within North America bleed through as aspects of life and cultures, including within the rhetoric and how rhetoric is taught. As mentioned earlier, Jones Royster uses the term “landscape” as a metaphor to explain this minimized range of rhetoric represented in countries like North America. The people, and later the institutions, who have built this minimized landscape “have built up a high intolerance to the assigning of value and

credibility to any site, focal point, theory, or practice other than those whose contours are already sanctioned historically within the circle of understanding” (Jones Royster 150). Because the colonial power structures have prohibited the visibility and growth of rhetoric traditions outside of their accepted landscape, many voices, like the voices of Indigenous peoples and Black women, have been stifled into almost nonexistence. In the United states, too many Black women have been hidden from society in the home (pots and pans) and through abuse and subordination (unmarked graves) (Hill Collins 2), and too many Indigenous peoples have been seen as artifacts, and not people living today (Arola 564). They are ignored in all capacities, including within rhetoric.

Although colonization was initiated hundreds of years ago, the infrastructure of colonization still remains within the fabric of many cultures today. Colonization thrives on the destruction of a people or culture (Driskill 57), and the peoples within those cultures are forced into “primitive” representations, or their thoughts discredited. In her work, Hill Collins reflects on the words of Fannie Barrier Williams, who lamented, “The colored girl . . . is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term ‘problem,’ and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelops and obscures her” (Hill Collins 3). When the colonizer mind sees a group as a “problem,” they will seek to suppress their work and their words. Then they will strive to suppress their ways of obtaining knowledge, for that is the weapon of choice to dominate and maintain inequality (Hill Collins 3). The oppressions of today in North America may have moved away from the outright genocide and slavery of the recent past, but they still continue to find other means to keep Black women and Indigenous peoples in the shadows. As Jones Royster mentions in her work, the challenge when facing these injustices is “is to be adventurous enough in our thinking to take a different path, to find a

different viewpoint, and to critique the terms of engagement so that a different sense of the landscape can be made visible” (161). To give other rhetorics room to grow, the current environment must be decolonized.

### **Weeding out Rhetorical Colonialism**

The goal of decolonizing is not an easy one, but it is necessary to bring in other rhetorical traditions into the academic space. Notable scholars have made a number of suggestions and considerations that can assist on this journey. For one, using multiple parameters within rhetorical spaces such as story-telling, theory-making, and history-telling widens the landscape, which allows more voices and traditions to join the conversation (Jones Royster 162–163). When only one of these branches of rhetorical process is used, it can erase certain groups of people from scholarship. Engaging in multiple methods like story-telling and history-telling can decrease his historically narrow lens. These three branches of rhetorical process can be included into certain methods like what Qwo-Li Driskill calls decolonial skillshares, a term referring to Indigenous rhetorics and practices that can teach both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to decolonize their minds (Driskill 58). Driskill provides examples of skillshares like wampum-weaving and root-running basket-weaving that bring both indigenous traditions and indigenous rhetorical styles into the academic space. This may seem like a leap from the “traditional” style of rhetoric known in North America, but that is the point. These differences are what allow disassembling of the narrow learning structure that colonization has grown over the years. Incorporating these traditions is like a fresh tilling to the old, compacted dirt that no longer sustains life.

However, it is important to remember that these new or different suggestions instantly erase the old ways. The older, colonized ways are already entered into the academic spaces of the

world. Yet this also does not mean that they are protected from change. There is another means of decolonizing rhetorical spaces for the sake of including new voices and traditions. Hill Collins explains that the rhetorics of old cannot be erased, but they need to be revisited; these texts need to be revisited in order to reinterpret their words through the lenses of racism, sexism, and classism (14). Colonization thrives in a static society, so when those static spaces are broken, new life can form.

A final suggestion to help deconstruct the colonial mindset is a big one, but it is very crucial for true decolonization in areas like rhetoric. The suggestion involves developing a true understanding of different cultures outside of the narrow Western landscape. It may seem too broad to be related to rhetoric, but it has been the unwillingness to understand the cultures of others that has contributed to the erasure of their traditions in scholarly spaces. This concept is very important, because it will not only encourage the adaptation of new traditions outside of the Western landscape, but it will give the respect and time to understand the different cultures that possess different rhetorics. Branching out in this way can help rewind the centuries of oppression and erasure. When groups and cultures are not given the respect to be understood is when problems arise. For example, in the case of Indigenous peoples in North America, mainstream multiculturalism will focus on the people but not the nation, thus deterring from the native philosophies and misrecognizing the nature of indigenous conceptions and identities (Arola 567). If society cannot even take the time to cultivate a general understanding of a people, then more specific aspects like rhetorical traditions will most certainly be ignored and mishandled. Working on various goals such as these to decolonize the structures of oppression is fundamental for the future of rhetoric.

## **The Goal of Growth**

Society will benefit as it becomes more inclusive and continues the efforts of decolonization. It is also to the benefit of the rhetorical world when these spaces of academia become more inclusive to new rhetorical traditions, but it is not as simple as including a new skillshare or revisiting a single text. To truly decolonize the Western rhetorical spaces, like in North America, it is vital to also remember the bigger picture concepts like respect of identity and inclusion of differences. One needs to plant the seeds that are different from what has been known and taught throughout the years to actually crack open the hard shell of the colonized mind. Scholars like Arola, Driskill, Hill Collins, and Jones Royster are fantastic voices in the realm of rhetoric, but reliance of change cannot be solely based on a few. It must be from the efforts of the collective if the garden of rhetoric is to flourish.

## Works Cited

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