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THE EMBODIED RHETORIC OF HALLIE QUINN BROWN

Susan Kates

In the parlors, clubs, and churches of turn-of-the-century America, rhetorical instruction was popularized for audiences outside the formal academy in numerous guides to speechmaking, composition, and letter writing. Of the many forms of rhetorical instruction that were generated for new audiences none was more popular than the elocution movement (Johnson 141). In this genre alone, a wide variety of texts offered instruction in breathing, gesture, pronunciation, and other elocutionary principles. In addition, collections of stories, poems, and speeches for practice and performance, commonly called “reciter texts,” were also popular cultural artifacts of the time; they were found in many homes throughout the nation where individuals sought to enhance their rhetorical expertise.

Not all forms of elocutionary training disseminated to audiences outside the formal academy were identical in their approach or ideology. In the African-American community in the half century after emancipation many common elocutionary principles were altered in distinctive ways in order to serve African-American students of elocution. Over the course of her long career, African-American elocutionist Hallie Quinn Brown (1845–1949), professor of elocution at Wilberforce University from 1893 to 1923, produced pedagogical materials confronting important issues that educators still grapple with today, such as how rhetorical instruction should address the needs of those who have a different linguistic heritage and culture. She raised questions about the relationship between schooling and social responsibility, using and transforming mainstream elocution theory in order to address these issues. The goal of Brown’s pedagogy was an “embodied rhetoric,” that is to say, a rhetoric located within, and generated for, the African-American community. While other popular elocutionary theorists such as S. S. Curry and J. W. Shoemaker espoused the body as a central component of elocutionary study,

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Courtesy of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, Wiberforce, Ohio.

most aspects of their work were in fact *disembodied* in so far as they presupposed universal principles and ideals while ignoring the social and ideological implications of their pedagogies.

Brown, on the other hand, conceives of rhetoric as fully *embodied* in terms of the particularities of linguistic culture, historical moment, and social responsibility. I follow Donna Haraway in using the term “embody,” both here and in the essay as a whole. Haraway describes the politics embodied in knowledge—“situated knowledge,” she calls it—in which the ideological implications of certain kinds of seemingly “disinterested” knowledge are made explicit. Brown lived in a time when a black woman educator did not have the opportunity of articulating all of the social and political implications of her work for her community. Yet her work embodies pedagogical features that stress the situated nature of the curriculum she promoted in order to recognize the cultural identity of African-Americans in the post-civil war era. Brown’s work raises questions about how educators will address the issue of language and identity in the future, and how, in a new cultural climate, writing and speaking instruction may be reconceptualized in terms of a politics of difference. Moreover, the rediscovery of the goals and methods of rhetorical instruction for disenfranchised students that Brown pursued provides a model for our time. As educators search for new ways to serve a multicultural society, historical accounts of politicized instructional materials such as Brown’s are invaluable to the ongoing reassessment of ideology and schooling and may help us to generate rhetorical curricula that will respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

HALLIE QUINN BROWN: ACTIVIST EDUCATOR

Brown attempted to meet the educational needs of the African-American community in turn-of-the-century America by resisting certain practices of noted mainstream elocutionary pedagogues, leaving her signature on elocutionary theory and curricula in the texts she directed to the African-American community. In *Bits and Odds—A Choice Selection of Recitations* (1880), *Elocution and Physical Culture* (about 1910), and “First Lessons in Public Speaking” (an unpublished manuscript—1920), Brown alters traditional elocution pedagogy in three specific ways. First of all, she engenders pride in the language of the black community by including many selections written in African-American Vernacular English in her reciter text, *Bits and Odds*. Second, Brown promotes African-American history and literature, reclaiming many moments marginalized within American history. In this way, she positions herself ideologically against white editors who simply erase African-Americans from American history. Finally, while many other theorists of Brown’s era advocate elocution for the attainment of taste and a sharper mind, Brown champions elocution for the moral transformation she believed it could bring both to individual character and to the community: elocutionary study, she stresses, heightens social

consciousness. All of these practices—the inclusion of African-American Vernacular English, of African-American history, and of social responsibility as “texts” within her pedagogical guides—situate the individual within larger social formations and in so doing recognize linguistic activity as both individual and social.

Brown sought to make rhetorical instruction available to those who would not have otherwise had the opportunity to study writing and speaking. She committed her life to anti-racist struggles and campaigned vigorously to improve literacy conditions for African-Americans. After graduating from Wilberforce University in 1873, Brown taught both adults and children in a series of plantation schools in the South. From 1885 to 1887 she administered a night school for adults as a dean of Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina, and from 1892 to 1893 she was dean of women at Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute, where she worked with Booker T. Washington. A noted clubwoman, she was instrumental in forming some of the first clubs for African-American women in the nation and held the post of president of the National Association of Colored Women from 1920 to 1924.

It is for her work as an elocutionist and pedagogical architect of elocutionary theory, however, that Brown is best known. Appointed in 1893 as a professor of elocution at Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio, she combined teaching and performing while traveling with the Wilberforce Concert Company to raise money for the institution. In 1894, Brown traveled in Europe, lecturing for the British Women’s Temperance Association; she acted as a representative to the International Congress of Women in 1897, gave a command performance for King George and Queen Mary, and was a dinner guest of the Princess of Wales (Fisher 176–78). Returning to teach at Wilberforce in 1906, Brown published a number of educational elocution materials that suggest the ideological innovations in her pedagogy.

BROWN’S CELEBRATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH

Brown’s reciter text, *Bits and Odds*, diverged sharply from the tradition set forth by other elocutionary theorists in including passages in African-American Vernacular English. While she also includes pieces found in more traditional books of this nature, the presence of pieces written in African-American Vernacular English represents a recognition, absent in other reciter texts, of the relationship between local communities and elocution. This kind of inclusion suggests that Brown valued her linguistic heritage in ways that white elocutionists did not or could not and that she believed it was important to instill linguistic pride in the African-American community. In the guise of education and entertainment, she was able to present her pieces in ways that educated and challenged her audiences within the modes of rhetoric permitted by white society.

There is a tension, however, between the pedagogical advice Brown offers in her instructional elocution texts on pronunciation and the actual linguistic manifestations that appear in her collection of recitations. In this excerpt from her *Elocution and Physical Culture* (about 1910), for example, Brown articulates a point of view that was quite common in other elocutionary texts that promoted standard English pronunciations, a view that appears to oppose the use of African-American English Vernacular:

Faults in pronunciation early contracted are suffered and gain strength by habit and grow so inveterate by time as to become almost incurable. A mere knowledge of the right way, will not correct the fault. There must be a frequent repetition of the right way until the correct form will root out the wrong way. (19)

The “right way” advocated by Brown in this context appears to be standard English. Yet this advice is contradicted by many of the selections Brown includes in *Bits and Odds*, selections which appear to promote another view of pronunciation entirely. The following is an excerpt from “Apples,” a piece that Brown characterizes as “An Original Negro Lecture” and one of many selections in *Bits and Odds* written in African-American English Vernacular:

Well you all know dat de apple tree was the sacred vegetable ob de garden ob Eden till de sly an' insinuating sea-serpent crawled out ob de river on Friday mornen, bit off an apple, made “apple-jack,” handed de jug to Eve, she took a sip, den handed it to Adam. —Adam took anoder, by which bofe got topseycated an' fell down de hill ob Paradise, an' in consequence darof, de whole woman race an' human race fell down casmash, like speckled apples from a tree in a stormado. Oh! what a fall war dar, my hearers, when you an' me, an' I, an' all drapt down togedder, an' de sarpent flapped his forked tongue in fatissaction. (92–93)

What makes the inclusion of pieces such as this one so remarkable is the extreme rarity of nonstandard English in other reciter texts. Popular reciters such as Elsie M. Wilbor's *Delsarte Recitation Book* and John Coulter's *New Century Perfect Speaker* were fairly consistent in maintaining a canon of works by Shakespeare, Poe, Tennyson, and other authors who wrote from a different linguistic tradition. Brown's selection of works written in African-American Vernacular English indicates her understanding of the difficult linguistic territory African-Americans were forced to negotiate in a racist world. This particular passage illustrates the linguistic collision between pedagogical advice and elocutionary practice Brown enacts time and time again throughout her work. In this excerpt, Brown negotiates the difficult balance between the general and particular by appropriating and transforming a biblical story as a resource for the black community through the use of African-American Vernacular English.

Of course, representations of black dialect circulated in the culture at large, often appearing in mocking and belittling contexts such as minstrel shows. However, Brown, I argue, here reappropriates the vernacular in a complex signifying move. In

his exploration of the rhetorical practice he calls “Signifyin(g),” Henry Louis Gates emphasizes that African-American Vernacular serves unique and specific purposes; he claims that black Americans have revised the language of the dominant culture for their own purposes, often as a means of critiquing that culture and its racism, and he connects this to the subversive role of the Signifying Monkey:

The ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike, the Signifying Monkey, he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus, repeating and reversing simultaneously, as he does in one deft discursive act. (52)

In the case of the “Apples” story, Brown repeats and revises—signifies on—the legend of the Fall: the forbidden fruit is cut down to size as an oxymoronic “sacred vegetable” and then fermented to yield a familiar source of temptation, and the Fall itself is literalized as a drunken tumble. Moreover, the wordplay in “de whole human race and woman race” surely subverts the very notion of race; the implication that the “woman race” is not part of the “human race” may well have brought to the minds of Brown’s audience an equally ludicrous assumption about the races as defined in more conventional terms.

Gates reads “black vernacular discourse” as “proffering its critique of the sign as the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconscious” (45). The difference that blackness makes, I suggest, is the difference of embodiment, the mark that is both there and not there in a language that is both black and white. By combining community-specific discourse with the standard English pronunciation guides she advocates in her elocution manuals, Brown positions herself ideologically, saying one thing about pronunciation and doing quite another. This is not an uncommon practice within the history of the African-American linguistic tradition, as Gates explains, for the confrontation between African-American culture and racism has historically manifested itself in inventive linguistic strategies that have been generated in somewhat ambiguous terms for the sake of cultural survival.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY IN *BITS AND ODDS*

Brown’s celebration of the linguistic heritage of African-Americans is not the only evidence of her dissemination of an embodied rhetoric. Deeply committed to African-American history, Brown makes it a central feature of her pedagogy, offering African-Americans opportunities to recite revised narratives about their cultural location. In this respect, Brown articulates a pedagogy that highlights the ideology of language and history and its implications for elocutionary study. Throughout *Bits and Odds*, Brown showcases African-American history, including pieces that depict

important historical events such as the Battle of Port Hudson, where black forces helped to defeat the Confederacy, or slave narratives that define the history of black oppression in America. The inclusion of such selections indicates Brown's commitment to keeping this history alive for black and white audiences alike. Perhaps Brown realized, too, that many who might have listened to these selections would never be literate enough to read them; therefore, she may have hoped to pass on African-American history to a less privileged audience.

By including a poem by George H. Baker, for example, Brown insures that her audience will never forget the important contribution black soldiers made to the cause of the Civil War:

"THE BLACK REGIMENT" THE BATTLE
OF PORT HUDSON, 26 MAY, 1863

Dark as the clouds of even,
Ranked in the western heaven,
Waiting the breath that lifts
All the dead mass, and drifts
Tempest and falling brand
O'er a ruined land;—
So still and orderly,
Arm to arm, knee to knee,
Waiting the great event
Stands the black regiment. . . .
"Now," the flag-sergeant cried,
"Through death and hell betide,
Let the whole nation see
If we are fit to be free
In this land; or bound
Down like the whining hound—
Bound with red stripes of pain
In our cold chains again!"
Oh! what a shout there went
from the black regiment!

(*Bits and Odds* 90–91)

Brown presents, in selections such as this one, images of black Americans that are notably absent from other reciter texts that focus on the Revolutionary War, the contributions of the Founding Fathers and other political figures, and a wide variety of other topics that promote an unreflective nationalism. Brown's reciter text is an implied criticism of all that is absent from standard histories and the mainstream reciters. In including numerous selections that offer another version of

American experience, her texts enact the kind of social embodiment that they claim for elocution.

Cornel West has called attention to the damage done by historical narratives which degrade or ignore minorities. West traces a feeling of invisibility and dislocation to narrow cultural representations, noting how new narratives help to disrupt dominant narratives promoting racism and oppression:

Every modern Black person, especially cultural disseminators, encounters this problematic of invisibility and namelessness. The initial Black diaspora response was a mode of resistance that was *moralistic in content* and *communal in character*. That is, the fight for representation and recognition highlighted moral judgments regarding Black “positive” images over and against White supremacist stereotypes. These images “re-presented” monolithic and homogeneous Black communities, in a way that could displace past misrepresentations of these communities. (27)

West is articulating a political goal that Brown embodies in her texts but does not assert outright. Moreover, his description of resistance as “moralistic” and “communal” precisely describes Brown’s pedagogical projects, for her inclusion of important African-American historical events challenges white-supremacist historical narratives that permeated other parts of American culture in turn-of-the-century America.

Brown’s challenge occurs within the relatively non-threatening site of the reciter manual, and while white audiences may have underestimated the political intentions of such pieces in this forum, the strategic importance of Brown’s dissemination of African-American history cannot be ignored. Consider the last stanzas of “The Dying Bondsman,” for example, by black poet and novelist Frances Harper, depicting the deathbed of a slave (“bondsman”) who had been an “Afric” chieftain:

“Master,” said the dying chieftain,
 “Home and friends I soon shall see;
 But before I reach my country,
 Master write that I am free;

 “For the spirits of my fathers
 Would shrink back from me in pride,
 If I told them at our greeting
 I a slave had lived and died;—

 “Give me the precious token,
 That my kindred dead may see—
 Master! write it, write it quickly!
 Master! write that I am free!”

At his earnest plea the master
 Wrote for him the glad release,
 O’er his wan and wasted features
 Flitted one sweet smile of peace.

Eagerly he grasped the writing;
 "I am free!" at last he said.
 Backward fell upon the pillow,
 He was free among the dead.

(*Bits and Odds* 33–34)

Although Harper's poem is not written in African-American Vernacular English, its historical narrative disrupts a nationalism that erases the historical experience of particular members of a diverse citizenry. The very sentimentality of diction in this piece—multiple modifiers filling the meter and terms like "bondsmen" for "slaves"—enacts the impulses towards generalization and cliché within the context of a specific communal history, an embodied history. These contradictory impulses, found less self-consciously throughout the work of other elocutionists, inform the most global aspect of Brown's transformative enterprise, her explicit articulation of the social and moral purpose of discourse theory.

**"BOUND BY THE STRONG LAW OF OBLIGATION":
 SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AS A PEDAGOGICAL CONSTRUCT
 IN *BITS AND ODDS***

In contrast to other popular reciters, Brown's choices, then, appear to be quite strategic: her emphasis on the linguistic heritage and cultural history of African-Americans fuels her third pedagogical purpose, which is to instill a sense of social responsibility in her audience. By making language and history such important components of her elocutionary curriculum, Brown foregrounds the relationship between the development of cultural pride and social and political action. In this she joined other pedagogues who emphasized the development of a moral consciousness over an aesthetic one. In *The Peerless Speaker*, for example, Frank H. Fenno explains that "an improved style will suggest better thoughts, and as so much of our happiness if not existence itself depends upon a conveyance on our ideas, cultivation in this direction will certainly make us happier, nobler, and better." Another important elocutionary theorist of the period, S. S. Curry points out elocution's role in the development of taste, adding that it provides a "means for the development of the human being" (both qtd. Johnson 150).

In many popular turn-of-the-century elocutionary treatises, theorists such as J. W. Shoemaker draw attention to moral transformation as the primary benefit of rhetorical study:

It is only the *voice* that has reached its best, and the *eye* that beams from the *soul*, and the *hand* of *grace*, and the *attitude* of *manhood* and *womanhood*, that can convey the immortality which has been breathed upon us.

By sin these powers have been enfeebled and deformed and under its burden their deformity increases. Guarded and regulated by the laws of our creation, they may be rescued and made potential in conveying the very mind of the Creator. (17)

Excerpts such as this one were very common in authors' introductions to elocution manuals, frequently highlighting the moral benefits of elocutionary study. But such benefits appear typically to have been advertised in a spirit of sanctimonious self-improvement—promoting the importance of distinguishing oneself from one's less educated peers. In this respect, treatises produced by Shoemaker and others (all presumably white, although this is never specified) emphasize a different relationship between morality and rhetorical study from that described by Brown.

Perhaps Brown's most important transformation of the elocutionary theory of her time can be seen in the ways her texts emphasize elocutionary study not for the sake of individual moral sanctity but for the shaping of a wide social vision and the social uplifting of African-Americans. She broadened the common focus on individual sanctity and self-righteousness to urge devotion to the community. For if "taste" is always described in elocutionary theory in terms of its possession by an individual, Brown makes "moral strength" a quality that manifests itself globally in social action.

Emphasizing the connection between elocution and the development of social consciousness, Brown distinguishes herself from other mainstream elocutionary theorists who were more likely to stress the habits of mind that would separate the person schooled in elocution from a less educated citizenry. In her estimation, elocutionary study promised much for the African-American community, for Brown argues that those educated in elocutionary principles would be inspired to help those less fortunate. Observing that elocution "gives mental and moral strength, great power, and a wide social influence to all who will take the time and patience to master it" ("First Lessons in Public Speaking" 171), Brown stresses that intellect void of character and empathy is less valuable than intellect embodied in community concern:

The intellect is highly trained in our schools and institutions of learning, but little or no regard, is paid to the systematic training of the higher powers. . . . intellect is not the highest gift to man. The business of intellect is simply to know. Above and back of that stands character—the soul that directs and impels both mind and body. Elocution teaches the student that he is to cultivate these higher powers; that he is to quicken his sense of obligation to himself, to his fellow man . . . (*Elocution and Physical Culture* 165)

She believes intensely in the transformative power of elocution and of education in general, but foregrounds the responsibility of the educated to address the needs of the larger community. In her elocution and reciter texts, Brown suggests that the study of elocution aligns the mind and the body with a spiritual purpose, and she consistently urges those who progress as a result of their schooling to pass that knowledge on:

[W]hen we have mastered these difficulties and made ourselves proficient, we are bound by the strong law of *Obligation*. Obligation to the man who is down. The vision and the cry from Macedonia are as real and vivid today as they were to the

Apostle Paul—They come from those who sit in darkness, not only in foreign field, but at our very door—from the delta, canebrake, cottonfield and rice swamp. (*Elocution and Physical Culture* 176)

Brown's own background and upbringing in the African Methodist Episcopal Church made it difficult for her to forget those in "the delta, canebrake, cottonfield and rice swamp." Her parents' home in Pennsylvania was a central meeting place for ministers, as well as a station for the Underground Railroad (McFarlin 15). It seems understandable, then, that she would have forged an important relationship between oratorical culture and social activism, for throughout her childhood she witnessed an alliance between the oral tradition of the pulpit and political goals. Within many of her texts, she invokes the religious ethos of a minister in order to stress the relationship between education and social responsibility:

Be prepared to carry the message. Give up the pleasure of the *good time*. *Sacrifice!* Sacrifice elevates, service redeems a people. You will hear from time to time that your first duty is to get money, land and houses—to carve your name on the Scroll of Fame—to get learning so that you may have power to control men and measures. When you are obsessed with this idea—when you are carried on by this worldly ambition—the day you make such a choice, the Soul with you dies! ("First Lessons in Public Speaking," qtd. McFarlin 176)

Such calls to social consciousness were certainly not present in mainstream elocutionary texts that promoted elocutionary theory by emphasizing the potential economic and social rewards that could be obtained by the individual skilled speaker. Brown, unlike such popular elocutionists as Fenno and Shoemaker, makes no mention of the connection between elocutionary study and economic gain. Instead, she stresses again and again the importance of the social responsibilities of the educated. By infusing her materials with activist intent, Brown was preparing not only to educate a certain constituency, but to mobilize that constituency for political action.

Because Brown recognized that social change could only come through an educational venture that extended its concerns beyond economic aspirations, it was imperative that her pedagogy confront the social purpose of elocutionary study and contextualize it in terms of the needs of the larger community. This pedagogical construct was, in many ways, the most remarkable of all of Brown's transformations of the traditional elocutionary trajectory, for by emphasizing social concerns, Brown politicized her course of study as no mainstream elocutionist had before, embodying in her work the "Lifting as We Climb" principle that was so much a part of black social movements at the turn of the century.

EMBODIED RHETORIC AND THE ETHICS OF COMMUNITY

For those who did not have the opportunity to study rhetoric in a formal academy, Brown's works offered special promise. Not only did they provide a form of the

education that was often denied to African-Americans, but in her materials an African-American audience was exposed to literature that made use of its linguistic heritage and history.

The emergence of Black Studies, Women's Studies, and Cultural Studies marks a new intellectual climate which provides the opportunity to view a wide variety of cultural practices in terms of a politics of difference. Cornel West has observed that this shifting critical moment has resulted in a new intellectual consciousness that seeks "to undermine the prevailing disciplinary divisions of labor in the academy, museum, mass media and gallery networks" (19). This movement has largely been responsible for national reflection on the ideological nature of schooling and curricula as educators, politicians, and policy makers find themselves immersed in one of the bitterest educational debates in history. While some may assume that the debate over pedagogy and politics is a relatively recent development, the work of Hallie Q. Brown suggests that the sites of learning have always embodied political implications.

But Brown's work teaches us more about the questions and goals we bring to education in America. What is most striking about her work is the place of ethics that she sees within the embodied work of history and politics. Ethics for Brown defines community, and the language of obligation and responsibility she uses is at the heart of her conception of education. I might even say that the very embodiment of education for Brown, beyond "intelligence," "taste," and "discernment," is precisely the ethics of community. For Brown linguistic education is social education: it embodies and preserves a history of community action—whether it be black soldiers fighting for their own freedom, as in George Baker's poem quoted earlier, or the barely remembered "Afric" community in Frances Harper's poem. Such a conception of "embodiment," enacted in her study and transformation of elocution and in her own life as an activist educator, offers an important legacy for us as we reimagine the goals of education and the role of rhetoric in our society.

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