Civil Rights in the Postmodern Era: An Introduction

Steven R. Goldzwig

Marquette University, steven.goldzwig@marquette.edu

CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE POSTMODERN ERA:
AN INTRODUCTION

STEVEN R. GOLDFZWIG

According to Aldon Morris, "The modern civil rights movement fulfilled one of the unfinished tasks of the Civil War. It increased the freedom of the descendants of former slaves by overthrowing legalized Jim Crow and a significant amount of the inequity associated with it." Moreover, "The most distinctive aspect of the modern civil rights movement was its demonstration that, through the widespread use of social protest, power could be generated by an oppressed group at the bottom of a modern industrialized society."1 Harvard Sitkoff has labeled the modern civil rights movement "one of the most significant developments in American history" and defined its parameters as "the struggle for racial equality and justice waged between 1954 and 1992."2 If we use Sitkoff's time period as our measure, we have now entered fully into the "post-civil rights era." The meaning of such a designation is itself open to interpretation, if not debate.

Times have changed. In issuing the call for this special issue on "civil rights in the postmodern era," I was simultaneously excited and just a tad wary. After all, whatever the prospects that might lie ahead, I was certain that I was about to enter uncharted territory. Much of my enthusiasm regarding a special issue on civil rights centered on the opportunity to take the contemporary pulse of the transformations in the civil rights movement. Furthermore, President Clinton had announced his initiative on race and I had some hope that a fruitful dialogue on race relations would receive new impetus in the United States. The scandals associated with the administration soon demarcated a misplaced enthusiasm on my part.

My wariness also could be traced to the complexity of the call for essays I was about to undertake. In issuing my call for a discussion on "civil rights" at the beginning of the new millennium, I reflected on a daunting truism: we now live in a very different time than that of the mass mobilization efforts begun in Montgomery in the 1950s and perhaps crowned in the early 1960s at the apotheosis of the civil rights movement represented by the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" address. By employing the term "postmodern era," I was

Steven R. Goldzwig is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

© Rhetoric & Public Affairs
ISSN 1094-8392
merely trying to highlight the distinctly different ground we now traverse. First, there is no longer one, unified civil rights movement, but a series of diverse, successive, ongoing, and complex movements on behalf of equality and justice in the United States. Indeed, we now live in an age of diversity that sometimes seems so fragmentary that it is hard to find common ground. On the other hand, there is a richness in that diversity that can ennoble the whole and whose unique strands give all of us a better sense of the nature of identity and society. In a nutshell, we now live in multiracial and multicultural environments. Those environments are complicated further by social, political, and legal constructions of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and religion, among others. The rich complexities of these additional variables and the rich traditions and unique problems associated with each gave me pause; for in attempting to add to our scholarly and communal knowledge about these issues, I knew I would likely encounter some rather controversial essays. As one colleague of mine at Marquette advised upon learning of my assignment for this special issue, “Don’t be afraid to take a risk!” I was buoyed by that advice but convinced that my acceptance of this project had itself already indefatigably drafted me into the risk-taking mode.

The call for papers for this issue was both wide and deep. I had contacted scholarly communities in the disciplines of communication, political science, history, and specialized areas such as African American and women’s studies. The call indicated that I was willing to interpret the term civil rights broadly. That is, papers regarding race relations, class, gender, affirmative action, and immigration, among others, were solicited. I also sought essays that would interpret the unique rhetorical practices of minority communities of every origin and anticipated receiving a variety of critical analyses whose foci would entertain a host of co-cultural instantiations reflecting the shifting terrain of the 21st century. In addition, I encouraged the employment of studies relying upon multiple time frames and interpretive approaches (from traditional historical/critical work to postmodern). I next assembled an editorial board, set a deadline, and waited anxiously for the essays to come in.

I was edified by the essays I received. Those that survived the rigors of the review process and appear in this issue have coalesced around, by perhaps a serendipitous but to my mind highly appropriate (and, in retrospect, probably not so surprising), common theme: black-white relations in the United States. Since the state of race relations constitutes the most important key to any further advances on the civil rights front, for African Americans and others directly and indirectly involved in the hurtful machinations of discriminatory practices (and to my mind this includes all of us), it seems that at this juncture reconsideration of histories and cultures that have both promoted and impeded progress in civil rights is most propitious. Indeed, it is my hope that the essays in this volume will contribute to the necessary narratives that are now helping to define and shape a unique historical moment and opportunity. How we construct and experience race has temporal and spatial implications—
and a host of moral, political, and economic consequences. Our attempt to understand the past—both immediate and long-term—is a gesture of hope toward the present and a gentle, if not profound, reckoning with the future.

Race relations is a theme that has dominated public and private discourse in contemporary America. Indeed, the subject of race relations in the United States has received heated discussion and ongoing concern since the founding of the republic. Of late, however, the national mood regarding race relations has turned our attention to a preponderance of negative reports and dire predictions. A few excerpts from recent book titles in the 1990s are telling. For example, Tom Wicker maintains that racial integration in the United States has been a "tragic failure." Andrew Hacker describes a state of unyielding polarization in his chilling book Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal. James Coleman has used my own home base—the city of Milwaukee—to press and sustain his argument that we still have a "long way to go" in America when it comes to race relations. This set of books, of course, only skims the surface.

The essays in this volume address questions intersecting civil rights and race relations by identifying areas of progress and retreat, peace and tension. Herein, both rhetorical and political art and artifice is on unyielding display. The essays also demonstrate that our attitudes toward the "other" make a difference and that in listening to different voices we begin to hear and understand ourselves anew. I hope that the brief preview of the individual essays that follows will be instructive in reinforcing this important point and serve as additional encouragement for scholars to engage each of these essays more fully. If this happens, then each essay also serves as a site for increasing the dialogue on race in the United States.

In a provocative, often chilling essay, Dana Cloud tackles the seemingly oxymoronic but nevertheless significant question of "rhetorical silence" and race relations. Just as John Waite Bowers and Donovan J. Ochs once introduced communication students to the "more than normal discursive means of persuasion" (and nondiscursive elements) in the rhetoric of agitation and control associated with social change in the 1960s, Cloud, in a similar nontraditional vein, gives us additional insight into extra-rhetorical factors through the application of a powerful materialist perspective that uncovers the shadow-world of the "null persona." In her analysis of interviews of black mill workers involved in the general textile strike of 1934, Cloud engages pressing questions of power, hegemony, and agency in the context of race, gender, and class relations. In the process, she demonstrates that racial discrimination and economic exploitation are co-conspirators. In addition, she provides some telling answers to Philip Wander's call for more scholarship that asks questions about who speaks, who is prevented from speaking, and why? Cloud makes a convincing argument on behalf of those who have chosen to remain silent "out of necessity." She also teaches us how to listen to the rich texture and poignancy of such silences. In the process, we gain a better understanding of history
and culture as we divine the evolution, import, and consequences of the social construction of the “null persona.”

Garth Pauley assiduously identifies and explicates a particularly fine moment in the history of the presidency and race relations. Pauley places historical/critical attention on President Harry S. Truman’s February 2, 1948 Special Message to Congress on Civil Rights. With impeccable historical, critical, and archival scholarship, Pauley’s close reading of the text and its context articulates and accounts for Truman’s surprising ability to exercise leadership on behalf of civil rights in America before the mid-century mark. Indeed, as the author notes, “Truman helped bring civil rights to the public sphere as a major topic of discussion after years of neglect” and “committed not only himself to civil rights, but also the office of the presidency.” By so doing, Truman not only advanced the cause of civil rights in the United States, but also tied the quest for civil rights in America to the case for American exceptionalism and posited that solving the race question was just as crucial to U.S. interests in the international Cold War as it was to achieving domestic tranquility. All of this is given early and profound rehearsal in Truman’s address to the NAACP.

In a well-balanced and carefully researched essay, Martin Carcasson and Mitchell F. Rice turn their attention to President Clinton’s initiative on race relations. Carcasson and Rice draw a stark portrait of a president caught in the dilemma of trying to, as G. Thomas Goodnight suggested to me recently, “build a common ground without a center.” Since this particular strategic rhetorical attempt may be something that is entirely new to the presidency, it behooves us to follow Carcasson and Rice’s account with particular and sustained urgency. We are instructed by Clinton’s failures in this initiative as well as by what the authors deem to be his marginal success. Of particular note is Carcasson and Rice’s depiction of Clinton’s almost insurmountable rhetorical task and the often stark contrast between the president’s discourse on race with that employed by his advisory panel, headed by the noted historian John Hope Franklin, which published One America in the 21st Century: Forging a New Future. Because this scholarship engages the immediate past, it remains to be seen whether One America will have the impact of earlier president-directed reports on race relations such as Harry Truman’s civil rights committee report To Secure These Rights and the Kerner Commission report on violence in America undertaken at the behest of Lyndon Johnson.10

Carrie Crenshaw and David Roskos-Ewoldsen demonstrate convincingly that the environment for race relations can also be shaped and informed by the norms, standards, reports, and actions of the academic community. Academics are not and should not be immune from close scrutiny. In exploring the role of the academic community in formulating and legitimating racist ideologies, the authors caution us that such ideologies can also inspire popular forms of racism. Their case study centers on Herrnstein and Murray’s The Bell Curve, perhaps the most controversial
book to appear in the 1990s. Employing a Gramscian analysis, Crenshaw and Roskos-Ewoldsen aid us in a better understanding of how intellectual and moral leadership is achieved and how processes of hegemonic domination move apace within the academy and without. Their conclusions regarding “racist intellectual rhetoric” are as sobering as they are significant. In identifying “the rhetoric of traditional intellectuals’ attempts to rearticulate a threatened dominant ideology,” the authors map out a “characteristic set of rhetorical strategies.” The choices regarding rhetorical content and tactics highlight the reactionary nature of the academy when it identifies itself as “under siege.” We would do well to listen to the authors’ message as a reflection on the content of our character in the post-civil-rights era.

Victoria Gallagher reinforces the notion that institutions are important in the construction and maintenance of race relations. The “institutionalized public memories” one encounters in a visit to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute are markers of time and recollection. It makes a difference how audiences “re-member” their pasts and how the institutional representation of race relations, in the form of a museum, reshapes and reforms collective memory. Gallagher demonstrates unequivocally that the rhetorical critic’s attempts to interpret the verbal and visual texts contained in such edifices require new critical approaches to oral, written, and visual grammars and new evaluations of the forms and functions of these cultural significations as a set of complex, interlocking institutional narratives. The museum’s material representations help to structure, shape, and define our collective memories of the past while simultaneously rekindling a present that helps sustain or, in some cases, detain a future. In such a hallowed place as a civil rights museum, the depiction of the dream deferred is often a multi-mediated series of images of a dreamed denied. But even these negative images are a part of memory and in memory there is hope against a more dulling cultural anaesthetic—social and political amnesia. The discursive and nondiscursive texts analyzed in Gallagher’s essay collect and recollect the soul of the nation and “re-present” it as a reconstituted implication of the collectivity. Gallagher points to an important observation—what we choose to remember and what we choose to forget about race in America matters.

Finally, our constructions of race and race relations serve as both rationale and context for any presumed future advance in civil rights. So it is altogether fitting and proper that we address the permutations of this topic in this special issue. I believe we will be the better for having grappled with each of these well-crafted and thoughtful essays. I will leave it to the reader to decide if she or he concurs with my judgment.

I would be remiss in concluding these introductory remarks were I not to thank Martin J. Medhurst for his encouragement and assistance throughout all of the phases of this project. Without his generous invitation and attentive care, this special
issue would not have been possible. I sincerely hope that this issue, like the earlier issues of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, will be a continuing force in advancing the cause of interdisciplinary studies. I would also like to thank the gifted colleagues who served as external reviewers for this special issue. While their names are listed in this volume, that list can never convey the scholarly insights, selfless service, and goodwill they continually displayed in helping bring this volume to fruition. I am most grateful for their assistance.

**NOTES**


