

# bell hooks' Spaces Reimagined: From Textual to Multimodal Rhetoric

By Y. Hope Osborn



At the beginning of a graduate level course on rhetoric theory, the professor asked the students to define what rhetoric is. I was fortunate enough to be exposed to rhetoric in a variety of forms as an undergraduate in a Professional and Technical Writing program, so I understood rhetoric as meaning-making symbols, encompassing photos, websites, links, memes, graphics, etc. However, it was new to another graduate student that rhetoric was more than text. Despite a movement toward an acceptance of transmedia, multimodal, or multimedia rhetoric, this student's response, echoing the rhetoric community's dependence on text in discourse and persuasion, show we do not fully realize the potential of rhetoric in multimodality. In terms of bell hooks' we are constrained in the space of rhetoric by our dependence on text.

Bell hooks, born Gloria Jean Watkins, grew up in a culture that worked to confine her to a space of poor, African American woman. Bell hooks works to reinvent the spaces society constrains gender, culture, and class to, "Growing up in a world where black working-class and 'po' folk,' as well as the black well to-do, were deeply concerned with the aesthetics of space, I learned to see freedom as always and intimately linked to the issue of transforming space" (Hooks, "Vernacular" 147). However, hooks did not only transform the space of gender, culture, and class. In addition to writing poetry and children's books, she used personal stories to analyze rhetoric, costing her some rhetoricians' respect. Hooks transformed the space of rhetoric, "[encouraging] rhetors and rhetoricians 'to engage multiple locations, to address diverse standpoints, to allow us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively'" (Hooks,

“Perspectives” 277). “Engaging in multiple locations” and “diverse standpoints” means not just the “southern working-class black female,” but it means engaging in rhetoric from the diverse standpoints of how different people view or comprehend the world, how they engage in it, or how people may best apply rhetoric in academic and non-academic roles. I propose bell hooks’ ideology of the domination of space in gender, culture, and class may be applied to the exploration of the domination of text in the space of rhetoric

Years ago, in that introduction to the multimodality of rhetoric in a digital narrative class I collaborated with another student in a presentation on an article by bell hooks about the use of space called “Black Vernacular- Architecture as Cultural Practice.” We did not have the context of this reading or maybe bell hooks spoke to us in unfamiliar ways, for my collaborator and I did not even consider gender, culture, and class in our representation of bell hooks’ space. We used slides of memes, images, text, links, web interfaces all presented in complex means of layers and reveals. The professor told us that, in her academic experience, she had not seen the article represented in this way.

We are also inspired by that vital engagement with our work that is critical, that dares to lovingly unmask, expose, challenge. Such engagement is a gesture of respect; it indicates that the work has been taken seriously. Useful critical commentary offers insights that both reveal aspects of a work—how it is what it is, what it does or does not do—as well as suggest new directions, new possibilities. (Hooks, “Perspectives” 281)

Our “new” postulation of bell hooks’ exemplifies crossing over or expanding of a definition of “space”; how dynamic space of any kind may be; and how multimodal rhetoric crosses the boundaries of meaning in rhetoric. Because we were not conditioned to the dominating idea of how to interpret hooks, we were freer to critique and invent ideas of rhetorical space. We were not the first to traverse the rhetoric of textual boundaries though.

The earliest rhetoricians analyzed rhetoric in terms of text. However, the earliest writing forms of cave drawings and hieroglyphics were not textual. The rhetoric of meaning-making or narrative and persuasion depended on imagery. Culture evolved and hieroglyphs became letters in some form or another. By the time of Greek and Roman rhetoricians such as Aristotle

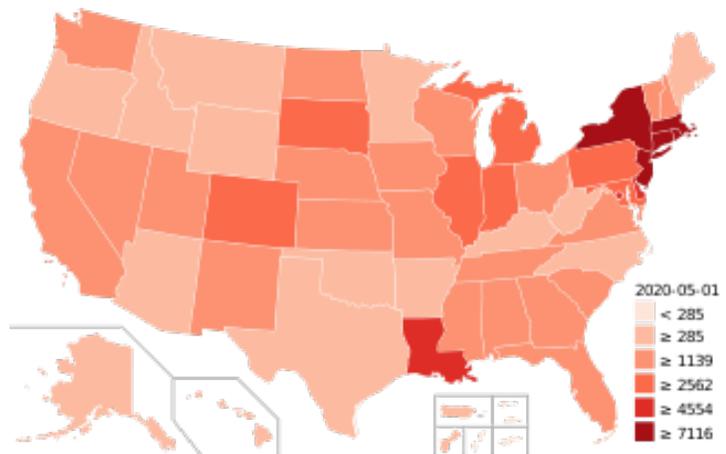


and Quintilian, rhetoric was relegated to writing for the purpose of public speaking. Though the words themselves were considered the rhetoric, the way they were presented, with passion, emphasis, even pauses speaks to a rhetoric of aurality. Additionally, though they did not recognize their music as rhetoric, civilizations from Africa to Europe and around the world have used music to pass down in teaching and telling histories from generation to generation. We continue this tradition of aural rhetoric to this day in the music and lyrics and additionally music videos to share ideas, beliefs, stories, and so on.

Rhetoric is transformed or expanded by the culture each new generation evokes. This is bell hooks' breaking down the walls of cultural spaces such as might be found most significantly between older and younger generations where in one the text ruled and in the other is the influence of a multimodal rhetoric. Even world events such as the pandemic of 2019-2020 transforms what form rhetoric takes. To text, public speaking, and music space this generation has added the capability of ever-growing and -evolving technology that in current circumstances does not compromise the safety of social distancing. This technological culture is one of communication through texts, video conferences, web links, phone camera photos, and back to the hieroglyphs of emojis and texting acronyms. Our world is one of engagement in multimodal means. Rhetoric has outgrown its accepted textual space to protests *and* protestor

signs; YouTube DIY videos; social media posts that include videos, photos, and GIFs. Memes such as the one at the beginning of this paper join text and image to create new meanings.

This is rhetorical persuasiveness in a technological age. Consider during this pandemic how we communicate dangers and spread of pandemic through countless infographics of the US and beyond. This infographic from Wikipedia shows how many confirmed cases of the coronavirus as of May 1, 2020.



These maps are currently a daily, global rhetorical application of multimodal communication where text is no longer centerfield.

Sonia Baelo-Allue writes,

The present interconnection between humans, media and technology and our media-based 'cyborgization' turn the audience into a global online community that makes use of digital technologies to enhance its physical reach and free individuals from the limitations of their minds and senses. ... The media revolution is part of that same technological enhancement that allows people to increase range of what they can see, tell, listen to or write. (126)

More than ever rhetoric expands its boundaries to reach a broader audience. Multimedia or transmedia expands where and how I gather information and narrative and how I distribute it, such as, with people of a variety of physical and mental limitations or means by which students and people in general learn and best find rhetoric accessible. A variety of disability is overcome, or stretches beyond its former spaces, in involving multimodal forms of rhetoric. Just as society has evolved, text evolved technologically, so we must evolve our own use of rhetoric technologically to expand its engagement.

I say expanded because bell hooks realized the importance of not forsaking spaces but by rebuilding them. We do not give up textual rhetoric, but rather use it as a basis or foundation of firm understanding of rhetoric in order to form new ways of using that very rhetoric. We are, in fact, compelled to draw conclusions of the present from the culture of the past. We build on education from early rhetoricians who depended on text and the oratory of that rhetoric in the same way bell hooks' relayed about her own basis of her dream house on the culture of her experienced reality.

While bell hooks was in high school, the teacher asked her and her classmates to design a dream house. Bell hooks shaped a large house with many staircases and reading nooks. This architecture was informed by the reality of her home life of small space, lack of privacy, and difficulty of carving out a space for her to read whether by her father's bias against her education or her family's filling of every space. bell hooks created,

This dream house ... not solely the outcome of abstract musings about dwellings; it was equally rooted in a concrete acknowledgement of my reality. Despite its limitation, this assignment did teach us that, irrespective of our location, irrespective of class, race, and gender, we were all capable of inventing, transforming, making space. (Hooks, "Vernacular" 146)

If the pedagogy of rhetoric allows students to create their dream architecture of rhetoric, the world opens before them as they see rhetoric not just in terms of an essay but also in their cultural reality of audio, video, images, graphics, video games, video calls, phone apps, social media. By doing so rhetoric once again engages the imagination, freeing people to imagine rhetoric anew. Now more than ever in history, this pandemic has taken rhetoric to the web to greater lengths. The things we learned to play with have become a serious lifeline in education, social interaction, exhibit showings, and sharing something as simple as the instructions and patterns face masks through webinars, Facebook posts, and emails. My daily [New York Times headlines](#)



email read on a mobile device allows me to stop or go on via links that take me to the whole article, complete with images. To capture the freedom where rhetoric moves beyond the space of text it is necessary to provide students that space which includes the freedoms they find in their age. It is as much about culture as bell hooks culture of poor African Americans and their longings for a space, a home of their own.

Multimodality or the various means of using rhetorical space continue in traditional need to know your audience but afford a greater amount of connection as the media is suited to the audience. The audience need no longer be tied to reading texts that while still have space in our culture that may not in our culture either connect or fully involve the audience we seek to reach. Additionally, the audience may be afforded more interaction or involvement in that meaning-creating meeting of the audience with the author that engages the array of rhetorical media in order to express how we think, feel, believe, perceive, even to care. In multimodality we seek not to set aside textual rhetoric, but to enlarge it, to see from different perspectives, to see new ways and possibilities of diversely engaging viewers on an individual, choice-driven way. As in bell hooks high school assignment to create her dream house, we empower people to create their dream rhetoric in ways that we, "dared use [our] imagination in ways that were liberatory" (Hooks, "Vernacular" 150).

The new media environment ... facilitates digital, many-to-many communication and the active participation of viewers, listeners or readers in exchanging knowledge, discussing the narrative world, producing new content and even influencing the original storytelling or canon. In this sense, transmedia storytelling unfolds across multiple media platforms and each medium contributes in the understanding of the story as a whole. Content travels through social media and fans are involved in its circulation in a more participatory model of culture. They are not simple consumers but shape, share and reframe content (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013:2). (Baelo-Allue' 114)

This quote relates to [Serial](#), the most popular podcast series ever experienced. It used multiple access points for the public to be involved in the process of the narrative it presented.

It reveals not only the means of modality but also multimodality's ability to allow "simple consumers [to] shape, share and reframe content" (114). *Serial* is a podcast covering Sarah Koenig's real time investigation considering whether a convicted killer serving a life sentence was wrongly convicted. However, it is not only a podcast series. The program added the personality of Koenig's beliefs and research methods, the exchanges of ideas with listeners through social media, and interaction with actual evidence online in the form of maps, letters, cell-phone records, and so forth. The narrative evolved with each new edition, idea, and artifact. (Baelo-Allue' 113-121)

Jeff Ritchie affirms the way in which multimodality enlivens rhetoric,

Given cultural and semantic constraints placed on how audiences 'consume' narratives in traditional media such as books and television, digitally mediated stories afford greater interactivity, requiring of the audience a degree of 'nontrivial effort' to bring these stories (the fabula) into being (sjuzet). (56)

We are culturally bent towards, we engage, and we overcome in traversing in a reimagined or enlarged understanding of rhetoric in multimodality. However, is it only an academic application, cultural demand, or situational practicality, or do we still appreciate the pleasure Roland Barthes found in text of which he writes in "The Pleasures of the Text,"

There is supposed to be a mystique of the Text. –On the contrary, the whole effort consists in materializing the pleasure of the text, in making the text *an object of pleasure like the others*. That is: either relate the text to the 'pleasures' of life (a dish, a garden, an encounter, a voice, a moment, etc.) and to it join the personal catalogue of our sensualities, or force the text to breach bliss, that immense subjective loss, thereby identifying this text with the purest moments of perversion, with its clandestine sites. The important thing is to equalize the field of pleasure, to abolish the false opposition of practical life and contemplative life. (226)

Multimodality is not an exemption of text but an enrichment, so that with Barthes we might, “Imagine an aesthetic ... based entirely (completely, radically, in every sense of the word) on the *pleasure of the consumer*, whoever he may be, to whatever class, whatever group he may belong, without respect to cultures or languages” (226). In multimodality we find a harbor for rhetoric in photos as poignant as those posted by the graduating class of 2020 who were denied



the celebratory ceremony of their accomplishment by, and rhetoric in video games in story-telling engaging enough to still the boredom of, and rhetoric in memes as humorous enough to help one another just breathe within a pandemic. Bell

For whoever started this game at the beginning of 2020 please finish it quickly

hooks wrote, “In my imagination, home was a place of radical openness, of recognition and reconciliation, where one could create freely” (“Perspectives” 269). Perhaps hooks would find that this world, through multimodality, is more than ever a home where everyone not only may but do “create freely.”



## Works Cited

“2020 Coronavirus Pandemic in the United States.” *Wikipedia*, 2 May 2020.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020\\_coronavirus\\_pandemic\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_coronavirus_pandemic_in_the_United_States).  
Infographic.

Baelo-Allue', Sonia. “Transhumanism, Transmedia and the *Serial* podcast: Redefining Storytelling in Time of Enhancement.” *International Journal of English Studies*, vol. 19 no. 1, 2019, pp. 113-131.

Barthes, Roland. “The Pleasures of the Text.” *Professing the New Rhetorics: A Sourcebook*, edited by Theresa Enos and Stuart C. Brown, A Blair Press Book, 1994, pp. 221-227.

Hooks, Bell. “bell hooks.” *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*, edited by Sonja K. Foss et. al., Waveland P Inc., 2014, pp. 267-298.

Hooks, Bell. “Black Vernacular- Architecture as Cultural Practice.” *In Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, New York Press, 1995, pp. 145-151.

Mountain View Studio. “Graduation Senior Amid Coronavirus Pandemic.” *Fox 59*, 2 May 2020.  
<https://fox59.com/news/senior-pictures-capture-feeling-of-graduating-in-covid-19-pandemic/>. Image.

Ritchie, Jeff. “The Affordances and Constraints of Mobile Locative Narratives.” *The Mobile Story: Narrative Practices with Locative Technologies*, edited by Jason Farman, Routledge, 2014, pp. 53-67.