

The Arrangement of Robert Kennedy's Eulogy for Martin Luther King

Introduction (Exordium, Partitio): What can be learned from the 1960s

In August 2015, Fox News Insider reported that a high school textbook on the #blacklivesmatter movement would “indoctrinate” students (n. pag.). Fox News Insider crassly attempted to heighten the emotional response of their audience by likening the book to a gun pointed at school children, punning in the headline that the book is “aimed at 6th grade students” (n. pag.). Taryn Finley, in *The Huffington Post*, responded by describing the positive aspects of the textbook and quoting the textbook's author, Sue Bradford Edwards. In the interview Edwards did little to bring together opponents in the debate about the #blacklivesmatter campaign, characterising all discussions prior to hers as “A lot of emotions running strong and not a lot of actual information” (Finley n. pag.). There are heated divisions in the #blacklivesmatter debate that are typical of discussions about how students are taught about race and history. Can rhetorical strategies of arrangement quieten aggressive arguments in discussions about race and history? This essay analyses a famous conciliatory speech, Robert F Kennedy's eulogy for Martin Luther King Jnr, to reveal how Kennedy arranged his speech to calm a potentially hostile, overly emotional audience. Kennedy's speech successfully uses Rogerian communication strategies to validate violent responses to the news of King's death before advocating for a non-violent response. The speech has been described as a key reason people in Indiana did not engage in violent riots following the assassination of King. As such, his speech can serve as a rhetorical model for responsible journalists and critics debating the implications of the #blacklivesmatter campaign.

Paragraph 3 (Confirmatio): Analysis of Kennedy's Rogerian strategies

In his first sentence, Kennedy creates a nonthreatening atmosphere. According to Kearney's description of Rogerian counselling, "to create a nonthreatening environment [...] the counselor needed to be empathetic and understanding" (170). When applied to communication, the author can create a nonthreatening environment by, for example, removing any indication of self-interest. Kennedy does just this, asking "Can you lower those signs, please? I have some very sad news for all of you" (n. pag.). By requesting placards in support of Kennedy's political campaign be lowered, he creates a persona that is not self-serving. In fact, the appeal to ethos here might be called an indirect form of "signalled ethos," where the author's "persona is moved toward the forefront of the message" with locutions such as "I" and "This author" so that the audience can assess the speaker's persona (Beason 328). Professional communication theorist Beason analyses direct forms of signalled ethos (a speaker's reference to himself); had Beason also included Rogerian techniques in his analysis, he might have acknowledged indirect appeals to ethos, such Kennedy's reference to "you" (the audience) and Kennedy's positioning of himself ("I") as acting in the audience's interest (bringing "sad news for all of you"). In Rogerian terms, Kennedy is not judging the audience. He is certainly not condescending toward his audience's likely emotional response, as has happened in the #blacklivesmatter debate. Instead, Kennedy arranges his speech strategically to establish a trustworthy persona who understands how emotions shape reactions to traumatic information, and, in doing so, he takes the first steps toward a mutually advantageous outcome.

Works Cited

Beason, Larry. "Strategies for Establishing an Effective Persona: An Analysis of Appeals to Ethos in Business Speeches." *Journal of Business Communication* 28.4 (1991), 326-346. Print.

Finley, Taryn. "Why People are Criticizing a 'Black Lives Matter' Book for Kids." *The Huffington Post (Australia)*. 15 Sep 2015. Online. 3 Feb 2016.
<<http://insider.foxnews.com/2015/08/23/new-black-lives-matter-textbook-aimed-6th-grade-students>>

Fox News Insider. "New Black Lives Matter Textbook is Aimed at 6th Grade Students". 23 Aug 2015. Online. 10 Feb 2016.
<<http://insider.foxnews.com/2015/08/23/new-black-lives-matter-textbook-aimed-6th-grade-students>>

Kearney, Julie. "Rogerian Principles and the Writing Classroom: A History of Intention and (Mis)Interpretation." *Rhetoric Review* 28.1 (2009), 167-184. Print.

Kennedy, Robert F. "Remarks on the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jnr" [1968]. *American Rhetoric*. No date. Online. 3 Feb 2016.
<<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkonmlkdeath.html>>