



Talking (About) the Elite and Mass: Vernacular Rhetoric and Discursive Status

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ABSTRACT

The rhetorical tradition has long been concerned with how to negotiate the discursive juncture between mass and elite audiences. Such a concern has contributed to what might be characterized as the rhetorical tradition's anxiety with regard to its own status. In this article I suggest that this anxiety parallels an ontological conception of the elite as second-order in relation to the first-order mass. I use the standoff between novelist Jonathan Franzen and Oprah Winfrey in 2001 as a running example of status tensions in the public sphere, arguing for a theory of vernacular as *language that talks* and of specialized language as *language that talks about*. Finally, I suggest that the separate claims to status of vernacular and specialized language might be resolved by thinking further about Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia.

INTRODUCTION

In his 2002 *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, distinguished professor and legal theorist Richard Posner laid out for an academic audience his claim that intellectual engagement and conversation are increasingly the province of the academy and no longer torches carried by intellectual figureheads out into the public sphere. Two years later, in 2004, the best-selling Swiss writer Alain de Botton published a work of accessible nonfiction for a popular audience called *Status Anxiety*. In it, he argues that anxiety about our status—our position in society—“possesses an

exceptional capacity to inspire sorrow” (2004, ix). The two books—one from an elite academic calling fellow cognoscenti to engage the masses, the other from a populist trying to draw the public toward greater equilibrium with the elite—begin to underscore the question this article addresses: if status stratification and its corresponding differences in language create anxieties that burden so-called high and low status groups with trying to negotiate a discourse that can accommodate both public and private spheres, then what can be done when those who are “in” want out and those who are “out” want in?

At least as far back as Aristotle, the division of the polis into an elite and mass has informed our basic understanding of social and cultural stratification. This understanding, which regards the distinguished elite and the popular mass as separate categories, delimits status boundaries that pervade discursive practices even during attempts to overcome the boundaries of an elite/mass distinction. In communication studies, the analytic category of “vernacular rhetoric” has been used as one way to differentiate between these types of discursive status boundaries. Vernacular rhetoric is a dialectical term denoting the local rhetorics of everyday, common folk: how they speak, how they interact, what discourse informs their daily routines in the communities and places they live and work, and how these communities and places likewise inform their discourse. These rhetorics can have tremendous, sometimes subversive power. Yet, as a dialectical concept, the vernacular can meaningfully be understood only in reference to that which it is not: in short, specialized, official, institutional, learned, or elite. Various theories of vernacular across disciplines have thus posited conceptions of the vernacular modeled closely on the elite/mass binary. As Robert Howard notes, most theories regard the vernacular as an agency alternate to dominant power and “assume a strict division between the vernacular and the institutional” (2008, 491). In other words, if the vernacular were mapped onto spectrum of the public ranging from elite to mass, it would conceptually be positioned among the mass, incommensurable with its elite antithesis. I regard this model as potentially problematic and worthy of analysis.

This article attempts to put our understanding of a mass/elite binary in conversation with our understanding of the vernacular. I argue that as a result of narrating our notion of the public along a limited though sometimes blurred binary of elite/mass or high/low, a dialectical tension emerges in the social conversation within the ongoing interplay of vernacular and specialized language. This tension is evident in all fields that purport to generate some public value for communities outside their own. Anthropology,

cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, and rhetoric in particular stand out as areas of epistemic study in which the tension between vernacular and specialized language is embedded in the very nature of their inquiry.

In what follows I attempt to show that the rhetorical tradition is especially fraught with anxiety initiated by the discursive tension of the high/low binary and the related but separate status claims in vernacular and specialized languages. I undertake this argument in three steps. First, I discuss Aristotle's elite/mass stratification; then I offer a narrative account of rhetoric's metadiscursive angst with regard to its own status; and, finally, I engage a more rigorous exploration of a status-conscious theory of vernacular. Throughout, I use the public imbroglio between novelist Jonathan Franzen and popular icon Oprah Winfrey as a concrete example. I hope ultimately to show that what's at stake here is the effectiveness of communication both within and across communities of different discourse and status.

A HIGH/LOW DISTINCTION

In 2001, after the publication of Jonathan Franzen's highly anticipated novel, *The Corrections*, Oprah Winfrey selected his book for her book club. At the time, Oprah's book club was considered a gold mine for publishing companies fortunate enough to have their books chosen for inclusion. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, which published *The Corrections*, immediately printed six hundred thousand clothbound editions of the novel stamped with Oprah's seal of approval, meant to lure readers for whom Oprah's endorsement all but guaranteed a sale. Franzen himself was less thrilled. In various interviews he publicly expressed some reservations about his novel being associated with Oprah's club. The most quoted of these misgivings was the sound bite that caught him saying "I feel like I'm solidly in the high-art literary tradition, but I like to read entertaining books and this maybe helps bridge that gap, but it also heightens these feelings of being misunderstood" (2001b). In other words, he implied that there was an irreconcilable dichotomy—a "gap"—between the elite "high-art literary tradition" to which he claimed to belong and the mass preference for "entertaining books" like those featured on Oprah's popular show. Oprah swiftly disinvited Franzen from appearing on her show and dropped the book from her club, while Franzen was able to preserve his self-image and still go on conveniently to enjoy high sales prompted in part by his early association with Oprah. The ensuing social conversation remains

one of the more trenchant public debates in recent memory about the dichotomous stratification of a high and lowbrow public.

In the *Politics*, Aristotle observes that the free population of a polis can be divided into two groups: the mass of ordinary citizens (*demos*) and the elite (*gnorimoi*).¹ In this division, most people belong to the mass; they are “ordinary” and differentiated from the elite precisely for that reason, that is, for their nondistinction, for their ordinariness. The elite, meanwhile, are extraordinary; they are accordingly rare, and because rare, more special. It’s not a big leap to conclude that a division of this sort makes a status judgment that is implicit in its very formulation. To speak about an elite necessarily entails gesturing toward its corollary, a mass, because an elite is defined precisely by its superiority to the mass: by being, having, or knowing what the masses cannot. The same gesturing cannot be said of the mass because the mass can exist prior to and without an elite ever being imagined.

Aristotle iterates the point by dividing the elite into four types: those who gain their elite status from high birth (*eugeneia*), from wealth (*ploutos*), from cultural education (*paideia*), or from virtue (*arête*) (*Politics* 1291b14–30). The first three of these are relatively self-explanatory and still evident today. Certainly family connections, money, and the reputational quality of one’s education continue to distinguish those we regard as elite. Josiah Ober, in his book *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, concedes that “the ancient definitions of elites and elite attributes are collectively similar enough to modern definitions to permit the use of modern analytical categories without immediate danger of anachronism” (1989, 12). As for Aristotle’s fourth category of *arête*, however, there are some complications that call for fleshing out. These complications contribute more than anything else to the limitations of the mass/elite binary, and they complicate the discourse of the rhetorical tradition in particular.

Though typically translated as “virtue,” “excellence,” or “practical wisdom,” *arête* as Aristotle uses it refers, according to David Wolfsdorf, to “the paradigmatic values and conduct of the culture of the leisure class” (2008, 9). In *Protagoras*, meanwhile—the ancient text most concerned with *arête*—Socrates defines it as “politikê technê,” meaning what Wolfsdorf calls “the specialized knowledge of being a citizen” (2008, 10). These two notions may or may not be reconcilable. Taken together, however, they suggest that *arête*, as a distinguishing trait of the elite, involves a way of belonging to that very elite—presumably dressing a certain way, saying certain things, having certain tastes—whereby knowing how to belong is itself a characteristic that

confers belonging. This standard makes *arête* very nearly tautological. *Arête* was socially conferred by the *demos*, but only because the *demos* was able to recognize an elite's difference and superiority. Such recognition is at risk of conflating the mass (the recognizers) and the elite (the recognized) in the same way the unique correlation between *knowing* and *being* conflates epistemology and ontology.

Jonathan Franzen, for instance, knows how to belong (or seem to belong) to both the elite and the mass. His wherewithal in this regard is far from merely an empathetic skill he possesses as a novelist; rather, Franzen can do this because he possesses *arête* in the Aristotelian sense, having gone to Swarthmore, earned a Fulbright scholarship, worked at Harvard, and won numerous literary awards that have presumably made him quite wealthy. He certainly meets the elite standards of *ploutos* and *paideia*. Meanwhile, though, he was born to a nonelite, middle-class midwestern family and can accordingly identify with the so-called vernacular of that region and its populist values. So where does that leave him in the binary system of stratification? And where does that leave his work?

Making *arête* a standard for elite status raises the stakes of the relationship between, on one hand, social stratification or categorization and, on the other, how we speak and what we speak about. When Franzen expressed his qualms about participating in Oprah's book club, knowingly or not he made language a critical juncture of his misgiving. "High-art literary" works rely on language as the medium of their expression. If the "high-art literary" tradition is to be distinguished from other traditions in any meaningful way, its distinction must then come from how it wields language differently from works outside that tradition. Aesthetics and the allusiveness of literary influence become key loci of categorization. Tradition itself becomes a substantive problem.² Franzen's standoff with Oprah both made it necessary to evaluate the standards by which we classify something as high art or not and at the same time opened up a space in which to consider the importance of the way we then talk about something that we've already socially or culturally classified. The implication is that the way we *talk about*—that is, the discourse we use—determines the status value of *being* a subject of such talk to begin with. A discussion of Franzen's novel in a classroom would be very different from a discussion of it on a national daytime talk show, and this difference ratchets the status of his novel up or down in accordance with the status attributed to the discourse used to discuss it.

The obvious next move is to consider how discourse itself gains status and how such status does or does not displace substance as a measuring

stick of value in public or private spheres. In “Status, Marginality, and Rhetorical Theory,” Robert Hariman does just this. He suggests that “the act of comparing discourses implies both manifest definitions of substance and latent attributions of status for each genre, and the disputes about categorizing discourses often are concerned more with questions of status than of substance” (1986, 38). That is, privileging some genres of discourse with higher status confers more power to those discourses, and, conversely, inferior status indicates social marginality. The same is true for the sociocultural stratification of the elite and the mass: as snobbery attests, status weighs more than substance. The elite wields the power in part because theirs is the language that *talks about*, and such specialized language is the language that confers status, which is then distinguished, in an ongoing cycle, by the language it uses to understand itself and validate (value) the social conversation around it.

Couple this with Aristotle’s lingering system of sociocultural stratification, and we can see that even when a discourse is as concerned as rhetoric has historically been with eradicating the elite/mass binary through the creation of commonality, the elite is always understood for its difference—*almost* always in the sense of its superiority—from the masses. Such a system compels us to conceive of the elite and the mass not just differently but in different ways. While the elite can *only* be understood with reference to the mass, the elite coming into being through its comparative (discursive) “superiority,” the mass requires nothing of the elite to be understood. The mass sets, as it were, the standard for comparison in a dichotomous system of stratification. It functions almost mathematically as the average; it needs no point of reference. This implies what could be called a first-order conceptualization of the mass and a second-order conceptualization of the elite. That is, an ontological problem emerges whereby what it means to be the elite gets refracted through what it means to be the mass, while the mass somehow just *is*. I’ll now try to show how this problem of status plays out in a narrative of the rhetorical tradition’s anxiety.

A NERVOUS TRADITION

From its very beginning, rhetorical studies have been especially preoccupied with vying for the legitimation and acceptance of rhetoric as a high-status genre of discourse. Ever since *The Encomium of Helen* showed the Sophistic notion that any varietal of truth—even the virtue of Helen—can be convincing if a rhetor posits it with the right technical know-how and

Plato's *Gorgias* responded by famously demoting rhetoric to mere cookery, rhetoric has been a contested area of dispute. Indeed, as a professional field of inquiry, rhetorical studies have always been almost nervously concerned with establishing rhetorical studies as a worthwhile enterprise. Certainly what this "worth" might be has been measured variously throughout history. Kenneth Cmiel offers a compelling history of this arc, from the old Ciceronian rhetoric that "taught popular oratory, explaining how to speak before large public assemblies that included many unrefined listeners," to "the new Scottish school [that] rarely discussed how to speak to common people" (1990, 35) on through to the oratorical nineteenth century in America, when democratic ideals took hold and rhetoric's endeavor was to blur high/low boundaries. It is perhaps the variegated nature of rhetoric's past, located crucially at the juncture between high and low audiences, that has created such lingering anxiety.

And linger it has. In the most common version of its history, the origins of rhetorical criticism as a modern academic discipline are traced to Herbert Wichelns's 1925 essay "The Literary Criticism of Oratory." Joshua Gunn locates the apocalyptic "sound of urgency" in the field even here, *at the field's very outset*, when Wichelns "establishes rhetorical criticism on the *dying* art of public speech-making, all the while insisting that 'it's not dead yet!'" (2008, 103). Indeed, in the first paragraph of his essay Wichelns bemoans the "waning influence" of oratory, which has "definitely lost the established place" it once had (1925, 3). He then goes on metacritically to critique the shortcomings in the work of critics who by 1925 were treating oratory as the object of their criticism. In part because this foundational metacritical approach is motivated by a vying for (a perpetually unfulfilled) status recognition and legitimation of the field, a metacritical discourse has at least intermittently continued to characterize rhetorical criticism ever since.

Dilip Gaonkar offers some of the best and most contested explanations of this phenomenon. He argues that "Wichelns sets into motion a particular dialectic between object and method that later critics have had to negotiate" (1990a, 292). As the common history goes, a Neo-Aristotelian approach to rhetorical criticism flooded the discipline after Wichelns until 1965, when Edwin Black published *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*, which intensified the attention critics gave to their critical method and its relationship to the critical object. This relationship between object—the text criticized—and method—the ideological or theoretical approach to the text—has key implications for rhetorical criticism.

Which has primacy: the rhetorical object deemed eligible for criticism or the critical method that deems everything rhetorical? Gaonkar claims that the attempt to reconcile object and method henceforth “becomes an occasion for recounting disciplinary history and for legitimating disciplinary autonomy” (1990a, 292). Such an occasion sounds suspiciously similar to an evolved recurrence of the metacriticism with which Wichelns founded the field, and “doing” rhetorical criticism again comes to involve determining what rhetorical criticism is supposed to do.³

Picking up on the field’s strange investment in its own history, Carole Blair notes the proliferation of traditional histories of rhetoric aimed at “the continued enrichment of our understanding of rhetoric” (1992, 404). She further claims that such histories create problems of partiality not least because “historians of rhetoric typically are rhetoricians, not historians” (1992, 404). The problem of rhetoric being unable to escape its rhetoricity begins to look like Virginia Woolf’s “spot the size of a shilling” (1981, 90). For Blair, the importance of rhetoric’s contested histories—their complicity in “the inherent partisanship of language use” (1992, 417)—isn’t so much that those studying rhetoric can’t see the shilling-sized spot but that the partiality of not seeing it forwards politicized histories of rhetoric that conceal their own partiality. As Blair puts it, “histories of rhetoric are themselves rhetorical” (1992, 403). This makes rhetoric a metadiscourse with regard to itself and, conceivably, a metadiscourse with regard to anything it treats under its frame of analysis.

As it turns out, discomfort about the scope of this frame of analysis has been a large source of ongoing status anxiety for rhetorical studies. Not unlike practical rhetorical criticism, which has been troubled by metacritical anxiety, rhetorical theory has exhibited its own metadiscursive anxiety. Around the time of Black’s landmark book, thanks in part to work by Kenneth Burke, Chaim Perelman, and Robert Scott, but also thanks to radical thinking from outside the discipline by the likes of Stephen Toulmin and Thomas Kuhn, rhetorical theory was evolving beyond ancient theories of rhetoric and expanding the notion of what falls under rhetoric’s purview. Just how *big* is rhetoric? Is even science rhetorical? Steven Mailloux observes how what he calls “the intellectual imperialism of rhetoric” has provoked anxieties both epistemological and methodological. Is everything we can know “only” rhetorical, “constituted entirely by language?” Is rhetoric an adequate way to interpret all human action, or “does calling every human production ‘rhetorical’ stretch the term far beyond its serviceable limits (rhetoric becoming

everything and nothing)?” (2000, 5). These and other questions about rhetoric’s scope, which escalated in the 1960s, were by the 1990s exploding into a veritable clinic of status-anxious papers concerning rhetorical criticism and theory alike.

Edward Schiappa notices that “within rhetorical studies, the decade of the 1990s witnessed more challenges to our own origin narratives than have appeared in centuries” (2001, 271). The upshot of these metadiscursive histories in (and of) the discipline was the “big versus little rhetoric” debate concerning the theoretical issue of whether or not pretty much everything could be described as “rhetorical.” At stake in this debate were both rhetoric’s disciplinary jurisdiction and its definitional identity. Rhetorical criticism and theory alike contributed to—and were influenced by—rhetoric’s expansion, raising the stakes for rhetorical studies as the field flailed about, trying to figure out not just what it ought to be doing but how and for what audience. Schiappa nicely summarizes the three main tensions that arose as a result of rhetoric’s expansion:

1. *Definitional*—If rhetoric is everywhere, it is nowhere.
2. *Evaluative*—Big rhetoric contributes to weak scholarship.
3. *Political*—Without a clear disciplinary history and discrete identity, the discipline of rhetoric is threatened. (2001, 267)

Schiappa names Gaonkar (1990b, 1993) as the preeminent spokesman of these critiques and goes on to challenge each of them in turn. I don’t intend here to summarize the extensive literature surrounding these debates or other narratives about rhetoric’s controversial expansion.⁴ I do, however, want to emphasize how rhetoric’s expansion has blurred the discursive boundaries that, going back to the Sophists, once constrained rhetoric as a specialized and learned art. Increasingly, these discursive boundaries have expanded to the point where effective rhetoric is evident even in the untrained vernacular of everyday social exchanges. As a result, rhetorical scholarship has had to find a language that accommodates both a specialized *and* vernacular understanding of what rhetoric is and does.

It’s no wonder then that time and again big rhetoric has been likened to a kind of “vocabulary.” Schiappa calls it a “vocabulary [that] can be used to understand and describe a wide range of phenomenon” (2001, 268). Mailloux wonders if it’s an “appropriate and comprehensive vocabulary for interpreting human practices” (2000, 5). Even Gaonkar refers to the “vocabulary of recognition and legitimation” that a globalized rhetoric would need

in order to operate in both private and public discourse communities (1993, 265). Treating rhetoric as an interpretive vocabulary means the critical work that rhetorical scholars do is “unbound by the traditional paradigm of public address to delimit the realm of rhetoric” (Schiappa 2001, 265). So while the ancients saw rhetoric as practical or productive, the contemporary academic view regards it as a critical and interpretive activity. Indeed, Gaonkar says that the “interpretive turn in rhetoric [is] inextricably linked to an impulse to universalize rhetoric” (1993, 261). Rhetoric now encompasses *all* cultural practices, including science and areas outside the language humanities. As a result, the discipline loses some privileges associated with academic insularity.

The encompassing view of rhetoric entails seeing it as more than just a prescriptive, skill-based academic pursuit and as more than just a descriptive “practice of everyday life” (de Certeau 1984). A universal rhetoric conceived as an interpretive vocabulary is both and more: it’s prescriptive, descriptive, *and* hermeneutic. It therefore calls for scholarship that uses a language befitting all three. Such a language needs somehow to maintain the specialized status of a disciplinary lens while also cultivating (not just acknowledging or studying) the nonspecialized vernacular discourse whose rhetoric is as pregnant with suasive power as any.

This curious position has not been explicitly unraveled in the field’s literature, either as a byproduct of the big versus little rhetoric debate or as an ongoing part of the rhetorical tradition’s historical status anxiety. Nevertheless, the position maintains that the discourse of rhetorical studies needs to escape its propensity to go “meta,” even though to do so would contradict the claims, so vital to rhetoric’s historical battle for high status *qua* discourse, that rhetoric is universal, that everything is rhetoric. The field’s position is not unlike the dialectic Jonathan Franzen enacted when Oprah invited him on her show. Here was a chance to flaunt the popular, mass relevance of his book but doing so meant potentially losing the purchase of the “high-art” literary-discursive sphere in which the book was written—and in a pernicious knot, *that* meant losing the discursive status that made *The Corrections* universal for the masses to begin with.

Just as, ontologically, a binary system of stratification leaves us a first-order conception of the mass and a second-order conception of the elite, so too rhetoric, according to Gaonkar, entails a “second order discourse” that situates it above or outside that which it interprets, even while rhetoric resides within the object of interpretation (1993, 265). Thus, what I have characterized as the nervous vying of rhetorical studies for status, and

what Hariman calls “a dialectic of authority and marginality” (1986, 51), Gaonkar calls “a dialectic between repression and recognition” (1993, 265). He locates this dialectic not just in historical accounts of rhetoric that have narrated various versions of rhetoric’s discursive prominence over time but in rhetoric’s metadiscursive vocabulary: “In order to disclose its presence in discourse practices, [rhetoric] must reconstitute itself into a second order discourse, an interpretive metadiscourse. Hence the hermeneutic turn in rhetoric is inextricably caught up in a politics of recognition” (1993, 265). This framework and its “second order discourse” invite us to consider potential correspondences with the second-order conceptualization of the elite that I’ve suggested here. If such correspondences exist, rhetoric’s bind within the dialectic of authority and marginality, of repression and recognition, might more ambitiously be understood as a dialectical tension in the social conversation about the high/low or elite/mass binary. The rest of this article elaborates on this important but problematic possibility.

TALKING AND TALKING ABOUT

The narrative I’ve been offering is but one among many that might describe the rhetorical tradition’s trajectory. The anxiety in rhetorical discourse that may still linger from Plato’s broadside against it may or may not mean, as Hariman has argued, that “rhetoric will always have to answer to Plato’s questioning of its merit” (1986, 39). But however you tell its story, whether rhetoric is or isn’t a universally relevant vocabulary, the rhetorical tradition’s historical perspective does make marginality look like “the conventional condition of rhetorical studies” (Hariman 1986, 39). And in that case a problem emerges: while rhetoric vies for status today within the elite, private (institutional or professional) sphere of the academy, it does so by performing a discursive practice both concerned and aligned (partly by virtue of their shared marginality) with the mass in the public sphere.

What I’m suggesting is that the rhetorical tradition is burdened with negotiating both its marginality and authority and that this burden carries with it the challenge to operate within a discursive practice that accommodates both an elite’s specialized discourse and a mass’s vernacular. But I go further. This burden belongs to any field concerned with intellectual miscegenation across spheres and statuses. Schiappa observes that “*any* phenomenon can be described using *any* disciplinary vocabulary” (2001, 268), meaning rhetoric isn’t alone in its universality or the problems tied up with it. The rhetorical tradition just makes a good example. Its interest

in attempting to claim status from a perch of relative cultural authority finds the rhetorical tradition sometimes mistaking a kazoo for a trumpet. The tradition's shared empathy with both sides of the elite/mass binary will require a discourse that is more than reflexive or insular but that is dexterous enough to play both instruments in harmony.

In rhetorical studies a hybrid discourse that flattens the distinction between specialized language and vernacular—two seemingly incompatible ideas—evokes Burke's notion of the consubstantiality of identification and division. "Put identification and division ambiguously together," he writes, "so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric" (1969, 1022). Responding to this invitation means operating at the intersection of professional and secular spheres, of elite and mass culture, of specialized and vernacular language, by being somehow all at once. Rhetoric constitutes what Bruce Robbins (1990, 1993) might call a "secular vocation," presumably requiring both nonspecialized and specialized language, in its need "to legitimate its existence vis-à-vis other disciplines and society at large" (1993, 116). Robbins claims that rhetoric has great rhetorical power insofar as "it invokes a missing public that all members of all disciplines must respect because, or to the extent that, to enter into a discipline at all seems to mean, by definition, entering into exile from that public" (1990, 114). The exile of a discipline, along with its correspondingly consubstantial relationship to power, is legislated by the fact that disciplines, like publics, have a particular language. Ever since Burke, and ever since Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca posited language as "part of the traditions of a community" (1969), the rhetorical tradition's attention to different public voices—both mass and elite—has been the province of vernacular rhetoric and the study of public spheres.⁵ Indeed, the rhetorical tradition's interest in vernacular has been concerned with those groups who are marked by their alterity vis-à-vis those with power, however that mark be made, and its interest in doing so has in part been inspired by anxiety about being one such group itself. Inasmuch as the burden of the rhetorical tradition, then, is the burden of mapping its language on both mass and elite publics, we need a theory of vernacular and a theory of publics no longer limited by a simplified binary that merely links vernacular with the mass and specialized discourse with the elite.

We should see the elite as a dialectical concept for the same reason we regard the vernacular as such: the very idea of an elite always already gestures toward a mass from which, by definition, it's distinguished. It's the

vernacular and elite that thus share a common structure. Yet our tendency is to treat the vernacular and elite as fundamentally different. Instead we align the vernacular and mass. On one hand, this is a curious alignment given that the mass is not a dialectical concept at all. Indeed, a mass can exist before and without any notion of an elite to speak of. On the other hand, the vernacular and mass are so self-evidently related that to hold them at odds would radically misunderstand the notion of vernacular rhetoric that serves any value. So what's to be done?

To begin with, it's helpful to remember that just because the vernacular is a dialectical concept does not mean that vernacular rhetoric cannot be hybrid. Indeed, Howard (2005, 2008) has made the philological argument that vernacular is precisely hybrid: the term "verna" dates to antiquity and referred to a home-born slave raised to speak both the official language of her owners and the language of her family. Kent Ono and John Sloop (1995) have likewise shown through case studies that what we understand as vernacular often consists in a pastiche of cultural voices, many of them decidedly appropriated from dominant discourses. It's of course also easy to envision the inverse phenomenon, whereby voices of authority—politicians, let's say—utilize "vernacular" language either inadvertently or as a rhetorical strategy to appeal to the masses. Hybridization makes problematic the ongoing characterization of vernacular rhetoric as necessarily alterior from the elite and institutional. Resolving these problems requires attending to the ways vernacular rhetoric helps make sociocultural status and power dynamics more visible.

Ono and Sloop do just that in their 2002 study of California's Proposition 187. On their pragmatic model, discourse exists on a kind of continuum, with vernacular on one end and civic discourse on the other. Civic discourse signifies "those discourses that are either meant to provide information . . . for a large population of people . . . or that a broad-based consumer group purchases or consumes" (2002, 12). Vernacular discourses, meanwhile, "emerge from discussions between members of self-identified smaller communities within the larger civic community" (2002, 12). In a classically rhetorical sense, Ono and Sloop's model thus makes *audience* the distinction between discourses rather than a discourse's content or even its speaker(s). While situating vernacular on a discursive continuum—one bisected in their model by "dominant" or "outlaw" valences—theoretically allows that discourse can have a middle ground that's both vernacular *and* civic, this model neglects the separate status implications its respective poles have historically held.

For one, vernacular culture and its language have always been available to everyone; the vernacular is not only an insular conversation between small communities but also a language available everywhere. Likewise, “high” or elite culture and its language have only been available to the choice few; it doesn’t merely bullhorn to a broad civic audience, it’s also enclosed for the select. Howard argues that these dynamics have made vernacular *both* “subaltern” *and* “common.” It’s a discourse, he says, that “coexists with dominant culture but is held separate from it” (2008, 493). The vernacular is thus seemingly two contradictory things at once; it’s like the rhetorical tradition itself in being somehow both marginalized and pervasive. Ono and Sloop’s axis of “outlaw” or “dominant” intention references the status variables implicit in vernacular or civic discourse, and their model brilliantly accommodates all types of empowered or disempowered vernacular and civic talk, but their graph also suggests that discourses are something to be plotted and fixed. In such a model, vernacular can’t be both subaltern and common because it’s impossible to chart something that’s seemingly two mutually exclusive things at once.

It’s also, of course, difficult to understand how a contradiction such as a hybrid vernacular is even possible. What I’ve said about the first- and second-order discourses of the mass/elite binary might help. Consider vernacular discourse as the language used *to talk* as opposed to the language used *to talk about*. In this sense, the idea of a “vernacular discourse” is nearly oxymoronic. Discourse requires a lexicon, a vocabulary, a specialized way of speaking, and this specialized language implicates discourse qua discourse as a second-order language, defined like the elite through the first-order thing that it is not. Such a discourse *talks about*, and the authority it claims to do so is the power it has over that which merely talks. Although vernacular talk certainly has its own series of codes and words, so that a stranger entering into a vernacular conversation, as sociolinguist Basil Bernstein says, “would be struck by the measure of his own exclusion” (1964, 61), this does not mean vernacular is specialized in a way that confers discursive power. Vernacular language isn’t concerned with power because it doesn’t have any, at least not immanently; its “power” derives from establishing and reinforcing communal relations. Elite discourses also establish communal relations, of course, and their specialized language excludes or includes people within the community of that language in the same way vernacular communities do. The difference, though, is that vernacular language is interested in establishing this community as an arena in which, despite its restrictions, it’s still possible to self-express, *not just to speak but to be heard*,

while the specialized language of elite discourses have already secured their privilege of both speaking and being heard and therefore operate within a discourse that cannot exist without simultaneously making a status claim for its superiority. The reason vernacular rhetoric is *necessarily* underrepresented but also pervasive is that it doesn't operate by making a second-order claim to status; that is, it isn't a metalanguage with inherent power and political partiality.⁶ Vernacular is the language of the people, of the mass: a first-order, one might say, "naive" language. It's scarcely a discourse at all.

Yet it's specialized discourses that produce the dominant opinions at play in civic life because they have the power to oppress, or invalidate by means of excluding, the opinions of communities whose communicative strategies operate in a vernacular mode. Insofar as a polis has both elite (here linked to specialized discursive practice) and mass (linked to vernacular) constituents, a theory of public opinion that inclusively represents the public will need to include not just "official" discourses said to represent a unified opinion or to control group behavior of others but also the street-level, vernacular conversations that happen across dinner tables and at barber shops.

Gerard Hauser offers just such a theory in his attempt to "widen the discursive arena to include vernacular exchanges, in addition to those of institutional actors" (1999, 89). Other theorists of the public sphere from Habermas (1974, 1989) to Warner (2002) likewise have suggested parameters for high and low stratification that move beyond ancient conceptions and have axiological implications for public discourse today. As public sphere theories stretch to include less empowered voices, rhetorical studies move toward the democratic aim of inclusivity.⁷ Hauser's approach, for instance, replaces a theory of public opinion that relies on objective datum (polls) or the rational ideal that unrealistically imagines that there could be a single, powerful public opinion with the concept of a plurality of publics whose contextualized vernacular dialogue is included in what we take public opinion to be (1998). This notion of public opinion includes the subaltern, the common, and the elite, but it needs recourse to interpretive measures that are more than mere ideological lenses or new textual objects to analyze.

To this end, Howard (2005) notes that a variety of disciplines, not just rhetoric, have adopted "vernacular" into their terminology less as "an object of study" than as an "approach to studying human behavior" (Howard 2005, 176). The parallels with the tension between object and method in rhetoric are striking. As with rhetoric, a useful theory of vernacular will need to accommodate the complex dynamic whereby vernacular might be both

object *and* method of inquiry. Just as the hermeneutic turn in rhetorical studies is linked, as Gaonkar suggests, to the globalization of rhetoric, so too might vernacular come to signify a kind of universal vocabulary. Indeed, understanding vernacular as “commonplace” makes it a first-order phenomenon. Ono and Sloop (1995) are therefore right to claim that vernacular discourse is both culturally affirming and counterhegemonic and that it is constructed from fragments of popular culture. What they don’t acknowledge is “the ‘vernacular’ nature of even the most empowered or ‘hegemonic’ communications” (Howard 2005, 176). Insofar as the second-order elite can only be understood as refracted through the first-order and commonplace mass, the identification of vernacular within the elite’s specialized discourse seems to be the more vital observation to make, and one that potentially helps resolve the status tensions I’ve been describing.

CONCLUSIONS

What would it mean, then, to resolve the status tensions of rhetorical studies or other disciplines burdened with accommodating both their marginality and the authority of their pervasiveness? How can intellectuals, à la Posner and de Botton, become more public, and how can the public become more intellectual? How can vernacular and specialized language effectively coexist in the same voice? What might this look like? The Franzen example again proves apropos.

One reason Franzen’s novel *The Corrections* gained such publicity to begin with goes back to an essay he wrote for *Harper’s* magazine in 1996, well before he had any interaction with Oprah. In the essay, he did for literature what a lot of rhetoricians were doing for rhetoric in the 1990s: he expressed his anxiety about where the dying field was going and contemplated ways that literature could still have social purchase while maintaining its integrity and authenticity. Literature’s apparent impotence to galvanize the public it portrayed and engaged, he concluded, was a problem best resolved by its language: by writing “sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them” (1996, 49). His next novel, what would become *The Corrections*, therefore came to be anticipated as his solution—the correction, if you will—to the anxieties he’d so cogently expressed about writing contemporary American fiction.

And for the most part, it was. Without veering too much into literary analysis here, we can certainly say that *The Corrections* blends a story of mainstream appeal with coded sleights of hand that showcase its

literary stripes. *The Corrections* crosses over and accomplishes a hybridity of both vernacular and specialized literary language, which is part of the reason Franzen's fiction has been both popular with the public at large and respected among the literati.⁸ Through its characters and its narrating voices as well as the implied authorial intentions at play between the two, Franzen's fiction exemplifies the Bakhtinian principals of dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony. It refuses to be one, monologic voice or formal method and thereby carries the same burden I'm claiming is rhetoric's. Namely, its hybrid discourse tracks across public and private, vernacular and specialized spheres.

Writing novels, of course, is not the same as what academic rhetoricians are expected or ought to do. Bakhtin's (1973, 1981) consideration of discourse in the novel shows, though, that novels can at least theoretically serve as apposite paragons of status-inclusive rhetorical discourse. The face-off between Oprah and Franzen meanwhile underscores how a hybrid discourse and status can sometimes end up at odds in practice. Oprah tried to plot *The Corrections* onto a literary public sphere whose terms she determined, but Franzen wanted to claim for his novel a different kind of literary public sphere. Her discourse occupied an elite position of civic power by virtue of its place in mass-mediated communication, but anyone familiar with Oprah could also recognize the everyday vernacular component of her discourse within that sphere of power. Conversely, Franzen's mass-mediated communication—his bestselling novel—was popular because it exhibited the common humanity of a vernacular language, while his metadiscursive approach to the novel, meanwhile, pitched its tent in the camp of discursive elitism. The dialogue each of them engage in, both internally and with one another, highlights my intimations that Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and heteroglossia might offer some productive synthesis between vernacular and specialized discourse in discursive realms other than the novel. An investigation into if or how this might be so merits a separate inquiry altogether.

So while the "gap" between vernacular and empowered discourse remains to be traversed through some dialectal hybridization, the possibility is as imminent now as ever it has been. Hauser has suggested that internet communication has "opened new avenues for information and participation" that might lessen institutional or corporate discursive dominance (2007, 339). Howard (2008) argues for a hybrid or "dialectic vernacular" based on the web's participatory nature, which finds vernacular and institutional voices often mixed together. Johanna Hartelius, too, identifies Wikipedia as a crucial site of informational production and consumption, where the

“scholars and laypersons are indistinguishable” (2011, 135). The possibilities aren’t just manifested online either. In 2010, almost a decade after Oprah disinvited Franzen from appearing on her show, the unthinkable happened: she selected Franzen’s follow-up novel, *Freedom*, for her book club. Here was another chance for the elite/mass distinction, with all its discursive baggage, to interact in a dialogic way. This time, Franzen graciously accepted.

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NOTES

1. In the *Athenaion Politeia*, Aristotle also uses the word “gnorimoi” to contrast with “demos.” P. J. Rhodes, in his study of the *Politeia* (1981), suggests that Aristotle uses “gnorimoi” in multiple ways, sometimes to denote a class distinction and other times none at all.

2. An excursus into the nature of literary status is tempting but beyond this article’s scope. I’ll mention only that Ortega y Gasset uses the popular/elite distinction as a qualitative measure of art’s status when he claims that “modern art . . . will always have the masses against it. It is essentially unpopular” (1968, 5).

3. The rhetorical connotations of Gaonkar’s choice of the word “occasion” are worth noting. Rhetoricians often speak of an occasion for rhetoric; here unresolved anxiety about rhetoric is a rhetorical occasion for trying to resolve rhetoric’s anxiety.

4. See, for a start, Gaonkar 1990b or the collections edited by Herbert Simons (1990), and Theresa Enos (1997).

5. The explicit treatment of vernacular as a way to look at underrepresented people and communities can be traced to the movement studies of Leland Griffin (1952). For more on vernacular rhetoric as an emergent theme in twentieth-century rhetoric from the mid-1920s forward, see Hauser 2011 and Hauser and McClellan 2009.

6. See McGee 1990. Even in a framework of “criticism,” McGee alludes to the unavoidable second-order nature of professional discourse over secular: “The everyday critic *may* create discourse in response to discourse; but the professional critic *always* creates formal discourse in response to discourse” (1990, 280 emphasis his).

7. See, for instance, Nancy Fraser’s contribution along with many of the other contributions that take up Habermas in Calhoun’s anthology *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1992).

8. See Burn 2009 for an academic accounting of Franzen’s skill as novelist, and see the issue of *Time* magazine (Grossman 2010) featuring Franzen on the cover under the heading “Great American Novelist” for an account of his popular appeal.



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