Black Tropes in African-American Rhetoric: Patricia Sullivan's analysis of Jesse Jackson's "common ground and common sense" speech

Oana Georgina Gabor

E-mail: georgina.gabor@e-uvt.ro

Departamentul de Filosofie și Științe ale Comunicării

Facultatea de Științe Politice, Filosofie şi Științele Comunicării

Universitatea de Vest din Timişoara

Abstract: The present study offers an opportunity to emphasize a "problem" of general interest in intercultural communication: the particularity of the theoretical frameworks from the perspective of which discourse may be evaluated and interpreted, in its cultural determination. The study focuses on the problematic of "orality" specific to the discursive tradition of African-American rhetoric. Patricia Sullivan's 1993 article on Jesse Jackson's "Common Ground and Common Sense" speech, the "object" of the present meta-critical essay, manages to "balance" the re-partition of voices within the space of academic discourse. The critical apparatus she documents, which prompts the critic to self-reflexiveness and responsibility for the *particularity* of their subjective positions in relation to the object of their inquiry, makes a step forward in *identifying the political dimension* of the project of intercultural communication. Sullivan legitimizes such a necessity and makes the later articulation of the political project of intercultural research possible. Sullivan's remarkable attempt to confer and legitimize, within intercultural academic research, a place for a

radically different theoretical interpretive model later called "Africalogy" (2000) makes us salute her welcome contribution to the expansion of the possibilities of representation in intercultural communication.

Keywords: intercultural communication, patterns of signification, oral culture, black tropes.

Sullivan's (1993) rhetorical account offers an opportunity to emphasize another "problem" of general interest in intercultural communication: the particularity of the theoretical frameworks from the perspective of which discourse may be evaluated and interpreted, in its cultural determination. The study focuses on the problematic of "orality" specific to the discursive tradition of African-American rhetoric. Sullivan's piece sets out to identify the "African-American patterns of signification" and indicates a theoretical framework which may host an examination of the political discourse of African-American orators who, in their discursive acts, count on such "patterns." To illustrate the thesis above, Patricia Sullivan studies a speech delivered by Jesse Jackson, the 1988 Democratic candidate for the Presidency of the United States, at the Convention of the National Democratic Party. In the study of rhetoric it is known as the 'Common ground and common sense' speech.

Sullivan sets out to demonstrate that Jesse Jackson's 1988 discourse is extremely representative of African-American rhetoric, which requires specific criteria of evaluation. The rhetorical critics and media representatives may use those criteria in comprehending the African-American "patterns of signification." Such patterns of signification include, but are not limited to "set expressions" or "call/response formulas," "lies" or "tall tales," and "common sense stories." The critic notes that the media, and especially newspapers, commented on the unusualness of Jackson's candidacy in the Presidential campaign. Sullivan remarks the "frustration" entailed in media representatives' and political activists' reception of Jesse Jackson's campaign. Even when a *New York Times* article appreciated how far Jesse Jackson had come in terms of surmounting racial prejudice in the United States, the tone remained condescending: "Still, let it be recorded that for at least a week in American history, in a middle-sized Midwestern state, a broad range of white voters took the Presidential

candidacy of a black man *with the utmost seriousness*" (Dionne 1988, 1). Sullivan appreciates that the press and commentators identified Jackson's "difference" in a strictly negative sense. She sets out to illustrate that the media representatives' "discomfort" with Jackson's campaign was due to their own "assumptions" as to what an adequate campaign would mean. Such prejudice revealed the critics' own biased limits of perception as regards Jackson's candidacy. Primarily, press representatives accused Jackson on two counts: that he lacked honesty and that he overbid the emotional side of the human spirit. In both cases, the unasked question or "assumption" read: "Why won't Jackson step aside and let the 'real' candidates fight it out?" (Sullivan 1993, 3). Such type of negative appreciation implied the media representatives' firm conviction that Jackson "had no place on the political stage" (Sullivan 1993, 3).

In the footsteps of Purnick and Oreskes (1987), Sullivan notes Jesse Jackson's "exaggerated stories" (Sullivan 1993, 3) about his personal life. He talked about playing in the football team of the University of Illinois, which he said he left because of racism, although others have suggested it was a matter "of competence"; about the childhood that according to him he spent in poverty, although others have said there was "no way he was a poor man"; and, more importantly, about the moment of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, when according to him he was the last one the King addressed, but according to commentators he was not even there. Reporters regarded with endless suspicion Jackson's qualities as a public orator. The "dramatic, messianic fervor" (Sullivan 1993, 3) emerging from his rhetoric induced fear, as if in front of a danger. The implication was Jackson lacked the ability to control himself and even encouraged others to proceed the same way. The general concern over Jackson's "reasonableness" made the overall "expectations" of his candidacy much higher than those of the other (white) candidates. Sullivan suggests that an explanation for such a reading of Jackson's campaign resides in "a fundamental misunderstanding of the oral tradition he represented" (Sullivan 1993, 4). She draws on Walter J. Ong's (1982) classic text to map the attributes of "oral traditions" and question the privilege "white" culture confers on written discourse.

Sullivan appreciates that *the academic community* deems such "oral traditions" "naive" or "unsophisticated," but "these assumptions are unwarranted and reflect a

misunderstanding of the patterns which characterize 'oral thinking'" (Sullivan 1993, 4). The patterns of signification specific to oral traditions privilege "oral cultures, untouched by writing" (Sullivan 1993, 4). The African-American academic community *values them, rather than others*. Gates (1988) also confirms that authors of color try to "recover orality" within the act of writing and appreciate the "speakerly text" (Sullivan 1993, 4). Such effort describes African-Americans' perpetual attempt to mediate between their own expectations and those of others. Drawing on William Edward Burgchardt (W. E. B.) Du Bois' ideas, Johnson (1984) claims African-Americans, compelled to generate a "double consciousness," produced their own patterns of signification, the so-called "black tropes" (Sullivan 1993, 4). In the face of an urgent need to create "a space for themselves in language," as they "were forced to name themselves" because "their experiences were muted by the dominant white culture" (Sullivan 1993, 4-5), African-Americans appealed to "black tropes" as to a new *axis mundi*. They defined and articulated their experiences in relation to that unique point of reference. Their entire discursive experience transposed itself onto "the Y axis of blackness" rather than "the X axis of white signification" (Sullivan 1993, 5).

In his attempt to identify the African-American "patterns of signification" or "black tropes," Gates appeals to African-American scientific research to find proof in support of Ong's theses. Every source with "authority" agrees upon oral cultures' features: the dynamic character of the statements and the "magical" (Sullivan 1993, 5) potential of the utterances. For instance, in his 1988 speech, Jackson used "set expressions"/"call/response formulas." Sithole (1972) states that preachers or soul singers use call/response formulas to "establish rapport" (Sullivan 1993, 5) with members of the audience. In oral traditions, set expressions convey an orator's attention and care towards the community. They function strategically to remind "oral" communities that they share the same condition and an entire history of common sufferance. Moreover, the call/response formulas make of discourse a performance. The discursive act adapts to the actual audience. Consequently, orators adapt their discourse such that it resonates with audience expectations. Hurston (1978) confirms that oral cultures' supreme desideratum to adapt messages to various types of public produces spectacular effects. When storytellers get together to tell each other "lies," they practice oral tradition. They introduce new elements in older stories, such that "the shape of the subsequent tale is determined by the one which preceded it" (Sullivan 1993, 6). Oral communities give those

who do not readily share these oral traditions a difficult time in their interpretations. In fact, such an effect constitutes the very desideratum of those who surround the patterns of signification with a mysterious aura which connotes the "secret."

To demonstrate that the accusation that Jackson overbid the emotional appeal could itself be unsubstantiated, Sullivan points to Kochman's (1981) ethnographic study, which demonstrates that orators who reclaim themselves from the African-American tradition reckon the foundation of knowledge may reside only within human experience. The study sets out to emphasize the differences between the "debating styles" (Sullivan 1993, 7) of white and African-American students. It finds that during a debate, white students support viewpoints based on (re)sources they perceive as "authoritarian." To them, presenting such sources represents the purpose of the debate itself. They do not take responsibility for the ideas they sustain, and avoid taking a "personal stance" on any issue. On the contrary, African-American students "insist" on voicing their personal opinions on the debated issues. They take it as an imperative to have their own views, to convey them, and to take full responsibility for any sustained opinion. They will not engage in any debate unless they feel the position they are called on to take is warranted. Arguing for its own sake, just like knowing for the sake of it, means nothing to them. Sullivan suggests that the emotional "overbidding" the media representatives accused Jackson of followed from the "differences" identified by Kochman. All tributary to their oral culture, Jackson as well as other members of the African-American community believed that "abstract proposals could not be made without references to real people" (Sullivan 1993, 7).

Sullivan proceeds to identify the "patterns of signification" (the "black tropes"). She looks at Jackson's speech through "the critical lens based on the African-American patterns of signification identified *by a number of scholars*" (Sullivan 1993, 7; italics mine – G. G.). This emphasis draws explicit attention to the fact that Sullivan thought it was imperative to document her "opinion" – which we may not call "personal" – on the existence and functionality of the "patterns of signification" of oral cultures by reference to as many "authoritarian" sources. Thus, Sullivan seems to (re)produce what Kochman identified as white people's "style" in debates and argumentation. At this point, Sullivan "looks" at Jackson's speech through the "lenses" the "army" of scholars who support African-American

"patterns of signification" make available. In other words, she analyzes Jackson's discourse according to certain *particular* qualitative criteria (within the theoretical framework of the patterns of signification) and not others. In each instance, the critic rapidly identifies the "patterns of signification": set expressions or call/response formulas, tall tales or stories adapted to audiences, and common-sense stories. Sullivan specifies that African-American patterns of signification are not limited to those she manages to identify. She proceeds to illustrate that what she has identified as "black tropes" are that, indeed: they have all the attributes the pertinent literature states that they should. For instance, she identifies the following call/response formulas: "common ground," "your patch is not big enough," "common sense," "use some of that money," "I understand." Jackson's speech is organized around such repetitive call/response formulas rather than (chrono)logically. These formulas help Jackson to execute smooth, almost unperceived transitions from one unifying call/response formula to another. Thus, the call/response formulas invite participation. They prompt those present to embrace the agenda of the politician. According to Jackson's agenda, the Democrats' "common ground" means "common good." As "common good" represents the "greater good," the Democrats' "common sense" helps them to actuate it through common-sense actions. Choosing the "greater good" requires common sense. The large American quilt sewn of unusable fabric patches, "a thing of beauty and power and culture," helps Jackson to illustrate "common sense" actions. In the logic of democracy, the patch every social community represents does not mean "enough" in and of itself. They only acquire their "true identity" when taking part in a more comprehensive whole, the American nation. The call/response formula at the end of the speech ("I understand") closes the circle of Jackson's demonstration as, at this point, he embodies all the virtues he has placed in his equation. His statement recalls the progression of the argument: common ground is common good; common good is the greater good; it is common sense to do the greater good; so act in the spirit of common sense. In the end, when Jackson urges his audience to keep hope alive, his public remembers his entire argument, because *it actively participated in Jackson's construction.* That proves call/response formulas are indeed African-American "patterns of signification."

As for "lies" or "tall tales," Sullivan identifies and *illustrates the identity of* such tropes in Jackson's speech. The story about his personal life, "an inspiring story" (Sullivan

1993, 11), "an enactment of the American dream" (Sullivan 1993, 10), reveals Jackson's engagement in "improvising upon a given theme" (Sullivan 1993, 10). In telling his story by adapting his speech to the given public, Jackson did exactly what one would expect from an African-American orator. Thus, rather than proof of Jackson's dishonesty or insincerity, his "mystifications" represent as many occasions for him to invite his public to participation and identification. Jackson counts on his public's ability to transcend the literal level of language and elevate themselves to the symbolic level of interpretation. The "lies" he introduces in his discourse function, thus, perfectly, as another "black trope." As for the stories which appeal to the common sense of his public, Jackson maintains that any abstract theory is meaningless if it does not regard real people, people of flesh and blood. Accordingly, he interrogates one of the slogans of the Reagan regime, "Just say no to drugs." Jackson demonstrates such an abstract slogan totally lacks utility, as "common sense" says that simply shouting the slogan does not get anyone out of the impasse of drug use. Jackson "made the audience wonder about bureaucratic logic – logic that was based on the authoritative sources Kochman's young debaters called into question" (Sullivan 1993, 11). Of course, the African-American "young debaters"! Indeed, common sense functions as a "black trope" and illustrates Jackson's commitment to "oral culture."

Sullivan also refers to certain occasions wherein common sense represents a real "bounce" on "the Y axis of blackness." In other words, where the "logic" and "reasonableness" which guide white communities fail – as they comprise contexts too "abstract" and, therefore, too meaningless for the "taste" of African-Americans – Jackson finds specific solutions. He appeals to an embodied type of "reasonableness," based on people's everyday experiences and grounded in common sense. Sullivan appreciates that those who accused Jackson of overbidding the emotional side failed to comprehend Jackson's interrogation of the dichotomy of reason–emotions, as well as the privilege "white" culture confers to the former. He simply chooses something else. The path Jackson himself creates means *redefining "reasonableness" according to the exigencies of "oral culture."* In so doing, he *celebrates* it!

> *It is time for me to make another confession. At the time I was a doctoral*
> *student in the United States, I met a colleague in a class I took for*

methodological reasons. The American educational system prescribes that students "navigate" through the entire curricular offer, guided by an "adviser." Throughout the educational cycle, the student has to acquire a certain number of credits in a certain discipline (their "major") and another, smaller number of credits in a second discipline (the so-called "minor"). I chose the majority of classes in communication studies and accomplished a minor in popular culture. In the fall of 2001, I chose a "big" class which offered me no less than six credits: Theories and Methodologies in Popular Culture. Professor Joe Austin, whose class I had frequented the year before, hosted the class. He also had a decisive role in the writing of my doctoral dissertation in the form in which I defended and published it. He and Al González co-chaired the dissertation committee. Their "intellectual alliance" brought the project to a happy end.

I managed to understand Jackson's discursive undertaking as a unique act of celebration of his oral culture because of an event in Joe's class. I met this colleague who was working on his Ph.D. in American culture studies with a "minor" in history. This colleague dedicated to me a paper he wrote for class. He told me he had written "about me." I am quoting the paragraph I need to carry on with my analysis. I cannot do without it: "Instead of modeling a political project on an admission of lack, which exposes the individual body to discipline as pathological, why not found it on a confession of excess, *of something beyond discourse, such that the individual's deviation from the discursive normalcy becomes the lack of the discourse itself?" The idea helped me to articulate my "voice." I owe everything to my colleague, who urged me to be courageous and overcome the world. Sullivan's article gives me an occasion to pay back some of my debt. Why not?*

Jackson's choice and mine reads, simply: Instead of looking at our "difference" as a "lack," a "shortcoming," a "deficit," or an "absence" from a dominant discourse's "normalcy," why not articulate it as an "excess," an "advantage," "something extraneous" to discursive "normalcy"? I know no other way to make room within the discursive space.

Instead of *endlessly* trying to "align" to the "white" dominant discourse, Jackson *celebrates* his cultural identity. The "black tropes" help Jackson to make his voice heard. He obviously creates an antecedent in political communication. Through a final, meta-discursive "alliance" with James Boyd White (1985) Sullivan concludes that rhetorical critics should interrogate their own theoretical frameworks, those interpretive grills they deem adequate when engaged in discursive analysis. Only by "embracing diversity" (Sullivan 1993, 13) might rhetorical critics understand and accept multiple criteria for "reasonableness." Our "persuasive motions of the mind that we call reason" (Sullivan 1993, 13) help us to relate the rhetorical critics and the object of their inquiry to each other.

> *Every time I explain to my students the "object versus subject of inquiry" question, they stir with unrest and confusion. Many times, in their attempts to address the question, my students articulate answers such as "In this study, the object of inquiry is the film* City of Joy," *or "The object of Sullivan's inquiry is Jesse Jackson's speech." I have no choice but to write the word I dislike most on their papers: "No." Not because I assume a "correct answer" to my questions exists. In fact, I only wish to emphasize that such answers lead to paths without perspective or dead ends. While the critical intention of such a question is clear, they try to relate the subject and the object of inquiry in the same manner in which the philosopher interrogates the relation between being and knowledge.*

So no, the film *City of Joy* is not the "object" of Shome's inquiry; "whiteness" is. Raka Shome contributes to the discursive production and deconstruction of "whiteness" by positioning in relation to it in a particular way. The object of inquiry and the subject engaged in it relate through a cognitive act whose meaning challenges the rhetorical critic. Given that a *particular* territory, the territory of communication studies, hosts this particular process of knowing, critics' effort to *stick to it* displays higher or lower heuristic value. How does Sullivan position herself subjectively in relation to the object of her inquiry? We read that she got her Ph.D. in Communication Studies in 1983 at the University of Iowa. At the moment of publication of her article in *Communication Quarterly*, she was an assistant professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz. She initially presented the study at the 1989 Speech Communication Association convention in San Francisco. So much for the author.

The "author," though, reveals her political identity in the most eloquent way. Whether a member of the African-American community or not, Sullivan "makes room" in the discursive space for Jackson's different "voice." In so doing, she makes room for "oral cultures" themselves.

Sullivan solicits an impressive number of (academic) sources to support and demonstrate the existence and functionality of the "patterns of signification" which help her to name the "oral cultures" of which she must have had experience, *unmediated by a cognitive act*, when she listened to Jackson's speech. That makes me believe that the "author" is "white," according to the credo implicitly conveyed in the citation of the results of Kochman's study. An extra proof resides in the perfect "alignment" to the norms of academic writing specific to communication studies in the United States. Regardless of their cultural-political identity, critics must pay tribute to these norms of academic writing, which vary from one discipline to another, from one culture to another, from one publication to another. For instance, communication studies scholars in the United States respect the norms of academic writing which the American Psychological Association endorses. Yet, if we refer to the "voice" she conveys within discourse, Sullivan felt it imperative to pay tribute to the "dominant discourse," although she *did not have to*. Sullivan is "white" through her discourse and, from that position, she tries to legitimize a problematic specific to a different culture as an issue of general academic interest. She contributes to the expansion of the possibilities of representation by giving voice to a community traditionally left at the margin of culture and by celebrating it through a balancing inversion.

Sullivan manages to "balance" the re-partition of voices within the space of academic discourse. The critical apparatus she documents, which prompts the critic to self-reflexiveness and responsibility for the *particularity* of their subjective positions in relation to the object of their inquiry, makes a step forward in *identifying the political dimension* of the project of intercultural communication. Sullivan legitimizes such a necessity and makes the later articulation of the political project of intercultural research possible. Sullivan's object of inquiry, the "patterns of signification" or "the black tropes," define the "oral cultures" which the African-American community reclaims itself from. An extremely complex discursive construction, Sullivan's "object" of interest (re)produces an entire

academic community's efforts in articulation. For that reason, her subjective position in relation to the object of her inquiry is dual: she speaks *about* the object or, at most, *on behalf of* the African-American community, but not *as one of them*. Sullivan perceives Jackson as responding, within and through his discourse, to what Lloyd Bitzer called a "rhetorical situation." *The critic herself takes a meta-critical stance* in rapport with her own critical undertaking. Sullivan's remarkable attempt to confer and legitimize, within intercultural academic research, a place for a radically different theoretical interpretive model later called "Africalogy" (2000) makes us salute her welcome contribution to the expansion of the possibilities of representation in intercultural communication.

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