Counter-Coulter: A Story of Craft and Ethos

Rebecca Jones and Heather Palmer

"If you talk the talk, you have to walk the walk."

While we discourage our writing students from using clichés, we start with a common one. Quite simply, it fits. After years of teaching students about the power of rhetoric and the importance of participating in public discourses, we realized we had been doing a lot of talking and very little walking. What follows is a story about this walk—one that led us into the public world outside our offices and, as we discovered, back to the very core of our discipline.

In the fall of 2009, after months of research, writing and revision, and many sleepless nights, we found ourselves briskly walking over to the Fine Arts auditorium where Rebecca would deliver the speech we worked so hard to write in response to a talk titled, "Evaluating the Change in American Government," given by the Burkett Miller Lecture Series invited guest at our university: Ann Coulter. Outside of the auditorium, we made our way through a meager crowd of anti-Coulter protesters and through the prodigious gathering of her Tea Party fans and community conservatives. For those readers who live outside of the current fray of partisan politics, Ann Coulter is a conservative pundit and self-described liberal hater often featured on FOX News. Since her presentation style of choice is highly vitriolic and invective, we steeled ourselves before walking backstage because we expected her demeanor to reflect such divisiveness.

Before heading onto the stage, we were surprised to find ourselves chatting amiably with Coulter in the wings about rather inane things like whether or not she studied Aristotle in college, how much Sarah Palin makes per speech (not as much as Ann herself, as she regretfully pointed out) and how much she likes the *Grateful Dead* and *Phish*. When out of the spotlight, in the crafty way of artifice, she was personally charming.

However, chatting backstage with Ann Coulter is the end of our story, not the beginning. Before Rebecca walked onto the stage, we had to do all of the hard work. What follows is a story about this experience meant to inspire our colleagues and students to recognize emergent possibilities for ethical discourse even in the most adversarial of rhetorical situations.

We first learned about the event in the spring of 2009 through an email from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga's Probasco Chair of Free Enterprise, Dr. J.R. Clark. He is charged with finding an annual speaker for the lecture series as well as a local respondent. Speakers in the past have included Nobel Prize winners in economics and dignitaries such as the Prime Minister of Estonia. Dr. Clark sent the following email to members of the Women's Studies program:

> Seek [ing] a faculty commentator from any discipline, preferably with views significantly differing from those of Ms Coulter, to offer 8 minutes of commentary/critique on her speech. ...It would seem to be an excellent opportunity to express differing views, gain significant visibility for the women's studies program, and set a positive example of what successful women professionals can do in their careers.

Within an hour, in our roles as Rhetoric, Writing, and Women's Studies professors, we separately sent response emails claiming interest in the project along similar lines: we wanted to address how Coulter's divisive rhetoric is pernicious for a vibrant deliberative democracy and to offer a healthy alternative. We wanted to present a lesson on the highly refined 2500 year old art of rhetoric rather than reduce the encounter to a cat fight between professional women. In the past few semesters, Rebecca had taught Introduction to Rhetorical Analysis and Theories and Methods of Argument and Heather several sections of Persuasion and Propaganda. Often, the courses made us feel guilty about our arm-chair lifestyles as academics. In short, since our classes dealt with issues of civic importance, we missed the passion of activism—we felt the lassitude that sometimes comes from too much theorizing from the sidelines as lived history happens outside the walls of the academe.

We found it strange that Dr. Clark targeted the Women's Studies program rather than Political Science, Communication, or even English (with its strong rhetorical emphasis). In talking with Dr. Clark, we came to understand that he simply wanted a female academic representative with a very different ethos than Coulter to represent the university. He hoped we would counter Coulter's sarcastic vitriol with calm rationality. While this is laudable, we know from experience and recent work, such as Sharon Crowley's *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism,* that calm rationality may offer an alternative vision, but it does little to make change or even initiate dialogue with others holding strong beliefs about a particular topic. Additionally, though Dr. Clark did not say it, we imagine he thought there might be something to say about HOW Coulter presented herself, as a woman, in public. There are many inappropriate discussions on the internet about Coulter's masculinity and, ironically, about her weight. We made it clear that we were not interested in discussing these topics or the *ad hominem* attacks

against her, and he happily engaged our services as rhetorical scholars with something to say about the state of public discourse in America.

Before we discuss the heart of this essay, the writing and performing of the speech, we have to explain two things: first, the reaction to our acceptance of this task and, second, why we felt so passionately about participating in this project. When news spread that we were going up against Coulter (as if this were a boxing match or a cat fight), we encountered a variety of reactions. Many people wondered what would make a mild-mannered professor pit her shriveled capacity for extemporaneous speech against a public figure known for eating people alive. Some people were actually afraid and quickly transferred their own fears of public speaking onto us. In addition to fearing for our reputations (which we assume they thought would be ruined after we humiliated ourselves), others were angry that we had lowered our standards and had accepted an invitation to be in the same room with someone like Coulter who many on the left and who care about language see as the very root of the problem with politics and partisan discourse in America. This second reaction, anger, we did not expect, especially an anger that seemed to stem from the very fact of participating. We both agree with *Power Politics*, Arundhati Roy's critique of academic abstentionism, which points to much of academic discourse as lacking the "passion, the grit, the audacity, and if necessary, the vulgarity to publicly take a political position" (2001, 23). Her critique is well-founded since it is through such disdain that the divide between the academic and the activist is falsely maintained. However, we could understand our colleagues' reticence, motivated as it was by both concern and respect for our work and academic character (decidedly not as vulgar as Coulter's in their minds).

The primary concern voiced by our colleagues was that, by engaging Coulter directly, we would somehow be condoning her communicative style. For many feminists and rhetorical scholars, it seems that public discourse in America has come to resemble the trash-talking and taunting that now pervade male sports. One sharp objection to this culture of invective and demonization comes from Deborah Tannen, who articulates the problems with such a culture in her 1998 book, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*. Unfortunately, American public discourse did not make the move to "dialogue" and over a decade after publication we were set up to critique a situation worse than the one Tannen describes. Tannen criticizes the "pervasive warlike atmosphere that makes us approach public dialogue, and just about anything we need to accomplish, as if it were a fight" (3). Tannen questions the metaphors of war and combat that unconsciously and automatically shape our thinking. The argument culture, Tannen

writes, urges us to approach our environment with an adversarial frame of mind (3-4). It assumes that opposition is the best way to accomplish anything: As she puts it:

> ... the best way to discuss an idea is to set up a debate; the best way to cover news is to find spokespeople who express the most extreme, polarized views and present them as "both sides"; the best way to settle disputes is litigation that pits one party against the other; the best way to begin an essay is to attack someone; and the best way to show you're really thinking is to criticize. (3-4)

Where some colleagues wanted us to be conscientious objectors in this war of words, others encouraged the upcoming brawl. Those friends and students that admired our gutsy move wanted us to attack her, in fact, and hoped with all their hearts that we would crush her publicly and win one for the team. These reactions are complex and warrant their own article. Suffice it to say that all the reactions were personally and politically motivated, but they also depended largely on perceptions of our ethos (boring, theory-driven professors or radical lefties) and on the speakers' political views. Of course, our individual ethoi are much more complex than these stereotypes. In short, those who loved us as individuals, feared for our lives. Those who created us in their minds as leftist prevaricators either thought we could do better by rising above the situation, refusing to engage such vulgar display, or wanted us to kick butt.

Absorbing all of these reactions forced us to articulate to ourselves why we wanted to participate in this public discussion. So, despite this complex external pressure, we held tightly to our initial gut reaction. We think public discourse is important. We worry, along with many others in the academy and the media, that the partisan brutality has gotten worse and has a corrosive effect on our democracy. We know from our own experience as teachers that students feel disengaged from national politics because they do not see a place for themselves within the vicious back and forth. Ultimately, we both feel that this was an opportunity not only to put our words into action, but also to test the theories of rhetoric and writing that we promise our students daily are useful in the world.

The Work

We were heady with the notion of making a public appearance, but the euphoria of getting the gig did not last long as we began a rather grueling writing process: a process that would lead to an eight-minute commentary on Coulter's presentation. We were diligent scholars and tried to follow our normal academic writing routines. We read and took notes on Coulter's primary works. We read secondary sources on

Coulter, American Conservatism, politics, and contemporary media issues. Rebecca ordered ALL of Coulter's books and read them. Heather started watching Coulter on FOX news and thinking more carefully about her delivery. We logged onto her weekly column and tried to plot out a trajectory in her commentary that might lead to her October 5 presentation. We were entering the turbulent shallows of political punditry, looking for a way to effectively model a counter to Coulter's divisive rhetoric, in both style and content.

Before Rebecca stepped onto the stage, different audiences assigned us different ethoi (academic, liberal feminist, etc...), and we knew that part of the challenge involved crafting an ethos for Rebecca for that particular day. While this issue was unresolved at the start, we understood that we, personally, have very divergent writing and presentation styles. Heather writes/speaks like a scholar, a traditional philosophy scholar. Rebecca enjoys watching people listen to Heather talk about her work with puzzled expressions as they try to follow the quick-paced highly theoretical language. Rebecca worked for a small newspaper for a short time and has a more minimalist approach to language, preferring the practical to the theoretical. These differences posed an initial problem. We had a few arguments about using words like adumbrate or pernicious in the speech. Pernicious made it, adumbrate did not.

From these discussions, key questions arose: 1) how to weave together these style differences, 2) how to choose a credible ethos that answered to the demands of such a unique rhetorical situation, and 3) how to choose a style that adequately projected our chosen ethos. More specifically, we struggled to situate a credible, cohesive voice without fulfilling the largely conservative pro-Coulter audience's expectations that we would live up to the static stereotypes of the liberal humanist professors: on one hand, that we are godless radical activists shaping the impressionable young minds of future generations with our liberal anarchic agendas, or that we are so disengaged from the world as to be completely irrelevant to the concerns of today's world (in short, boring).

In the run-up to the event, these expectations were voiced on a number of platforms, most alarmingly on the Tennessee Gun Owner's website, which posted rather hostile comments about our academic research topics (from women's studies to protest rhetoric) that were listed on the department website, our likely militant liberal views, and even comments about our physical appearance. One comment sums it up rather nicely, "Tolerant liberals - haaa - Frickin fascists is more like it" (tngunowners.com). Clearly, several sectors of the public wanted to turn this into a fight, a spectacle which had clearly delineated losers and winners. And this included many self-declared liberals (on a different forum), who actually threatened to plant bombs that involved excrement in the lecture hall.

We offer this rather lengthy description of the rhetorical backdrop to provide a point of entry into the concerns we had moving into the composing process, since as rhetors we were keenly aware of the kairotic dimension of the event. Our task was to provide an eight minute long response to Ann's speech, itself 45 minutes long, and to possibly participate in a lengthy question and answer session afterwards. But, as we were to find out, the task involved so much more than just the actual writing and delivery of an eight minute long response. In the end, these diverse and impassioned reactions helped us to evolve an ethos that we feel productively engaged many hostilities, fears, and hopes.

A Collaborative Composing Process

While the prep work was daunting and intimidating, it was the writing that proved the most grueling. Feeling confident after our research, we decided to just start writing and see what happened. Our first draft was, well, "shitty"—as Anne Lamott would say (*Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Reading and Life*). After more than ten years of telling students that even good writers MUST revise, we both continued to harbor the secret hope of every writer that *this* first draft would be perfect. We imagined, "certainly, veteran writing teachers can crank out a decent speech in a week or so." Looking back, we were completely delusional.

Our first meeting to discuss Draft I was both casual and exciting. We started with a few pages of paragraphs. When we actually dug into the language, Rebecca remembers feeling her chest tighten with panic. The writing had felt cathartic after so much research and reading, yet we knew it was desperately off track in about ten minutes. While we felt most confident in the general topic we had chosen (the problems with and consequences of combative, partisan public discourse), we were unclear about the shape and scope of the argument and especially about the style in which we planned to deliver it. We had not answered other basic rhetorical questions concerning audience and ethos.

The first draft did many things wrong. The most egregious included a mild insult to the organizers of the event and a sarcastic tone that felt aggressive and peevish. We began like this:

> Before we begin, I do want to note that Ann Coulter is only the third woman invited to be a part of this lecture series that began in the early eighties. While this might not be significant to Ann, it is to us.
>
> I only have 8 minutes, so I'm going to jump right in: here's what I'm not going to do today. I am not going to "take on Ann." Anyone in the audience who wants to witness that kind of spectacle can turn on the TV most nights and see the slaughter for themselves. This Southern daisy does not care to be trashed by the Yankee

> vixen. Stop. That last line does exactly what I don't want to do: stereotype, name call, and reaffirm the strong oppositions we see in the news every day. (Draft I)

We open by insulting the organizers in arguing that they are sexist and whine that we are only given eight minutes to speak. Next, we insult Coulter by assuming she doesn't care about feminist issues ("while this might not be significant to Ann"). Both insults serve to build brick walls between speaker and audience. While these are interesting issues, if we really only had eight minutes, we were wasting them. The southern/yankee dichotomy offers a regional divide and the daisy/vixen a worn-out cliché about the only two choices women have as public characters: angel or devil, and a seductive one at that. Of course, we meant all of this to be sarcastic and serve as an example of bad rhetoric. However, by opening with insults and dichotomies, we severely limit any possibilities we have of connecting to a hostile audience. No matter how many times we say, "We don't want to reaffirm the strong oppositions" we have already done it.

It turns out that this was a strange form of rhetorical imitation. We now know that this gut reaction draft was due to an overexposure to Coulter's rhetoric. In a sense, we had become immersed in the war of words. After reading all of Coulter's books and watching countless hours of "news" talk shows, we were arming ourselves for the fight. When we read Coulter's writing or watched talk news, we felt as if we were being pummeled with words and backed into a corner. Views, beliefs, ideals, and public actions are pulverized and not in an effort to find solutions to an actual problem, but in an effort to humiliate and insult another into submission. Here are the first lines of some of Coulter's books: "Liberals have a preternatural gift for striking a position on the side of treason" (*Treason* 1); "Historically, the best way to convert liberals is to have them move out of their parents' home, get a job, and start paying taxes" (*How to Talk to a Liberal: If You Must* 1); "Liberals love to boast that they are not "religious," which is what one would expect to hear from a state-sanctioned religion" (*Godless: The Church of Liberalism* 1). Al Franken is not much better in his book *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them*. He opens with an insult to Christians: "God chose me to write this book. Just the fact that you are reading this is proof not just of God's existence, but also of His/Her/Its beneficence. That's right. I am not certain of God's precise gender. But I am certain that He/She/It chose me to write this book" (xv). Sure, we get that these openings are jokes. Both writers, whether Coulter admits it or not, are comedians. They are using comedy as a rhetorical strategy to wage war against their opponents instead of actually engaging in a political argument. In our first draft, we felt this drum beat. We felt it so deeply

that we even tried out their war-like wit. While "argument is war" is a difficult metaphor to dislodge (see Lakoff and Johnson *Metaphors We Live By*), the one thing we knew for sure we wanted to do was to offer a different example of argumentation. The first draft fails miserably in achieving this aim.

Witnessing our own devolution on the page, we started to think more about audience and how many different audiences we needed to accommodate in this speech: Coulter, Coulter's "followers," Coulter's dissenters, students, and those who believed in us. We knew that in this draft we were mimicking a negative and aggressive style and limiting ourselves to addressing an oppositional audience. We needed to ask, instead, what ethos could we craft to suit multiple audiences and still be true to our notions of the task at hand? This question guided us in our revision of Draft II.

Draft II

After toning down some of the harshest rhetoric and getting rid of the daisy/vixen sexist remark, in this draft we worked to add more academic components as well as some narrative as alternative ways to make our points.

The first opening was still intact as we, clearly, were not ready to give up our attempts at sarcasm. In this draft, we continue to acknowledge the divide between the speaker and the audience up front as well as the audience's expectation of a fight. We do, however, introduce new images:

> It has become apparent that the expectation for today is yet another polarized debate. Ann says liberals are liars and I say conservatives are crazy (do you like my alliterations). When one person gets 40 minutes and the other 8, the only thing that can happen is she said, she said. So...Ann argues college professors are undercover liberal conspirators brainwashing the nation's youth, I argue they are not. That seems pointless and slightly redundant. And... I mean, come on—the conservative fireball versus the boring commy professor, at High Noon. Can't yall hear the sound track from a Clint Eastwood movie bursting through the speakers? And two women to boot!

Ironically, this cat fight was actually slated to begin at noon. We couldn't pass on the opportunity for humor after so many people had commented on our upcoming "fight." While the metaphor is rather grossly mixed (communists and cowboys), it attempts to acknowledge the divisiveness and obvious feminist issues with a lighter tone. If this were not bad enough, we even added some gun metaphors: "Right now, we have only two sides. Both are pointing guns and firing (even if one side says they don't like guns!). The noise is deafening. And I mean literally, we are

all deaf to any argument that doesn't fit our pattern." The good news is that after the gun metaphors, we begin to dig into a serious and more appropriate discussion about the state of public discourse, our theories about the problems, and some possible solutions.

In one section, we fall into familiar academic discourse: "Our very lives are divided down partisan lines. Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing's *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* argues that we are more segregated in the United States now than ever before." We continue by discussing social psychologist Jonathan Haidt's studies on the divergent moral codes of liberals and conservatives. These sections felt more comfortable to us with their basic logic and argument/proof dynamic. However, we worried that these kinds of sentences would not play well out loud (think about how conference papers sound).

At the end of this draft, we begin to show some promise. We write ourselves into a possible style. The final paragraph ends with this:

> Here's the problem as we see it. Polemics, demagoguery, attack politics are offered AS IF they are THE NEWS, as if they are researched, thoughtful arguments. It is the AS IF that is so troubling. Sure, it's fun to watch Ann and James Carville talk over each other on *The Today Show*. However, this format, a split screen holding ideologues of a different flavor shouting out platforms, does not help me sort out the issues or help think seriously about social problems. By the way, Ann, are the networks so cheap now that they can't afford to fly their speakers to the same town so that they can be in the same room when they talk? (Draft II)

This paragraph starts off well. It is casual but not as biting as our opening. It is not strictly academic as we experiment with the confluence of witty public speech and academic discourse, "As IF" and "demagoguery" in the same sentence. Toward the end of the paragraph, we dive back into sarcasm. The calling out of "Ann" makes the sentence aggressive when the question should be calling out media conglomerates for creating the expectation of debate and delivering only a simulation.

For this draft, we decided to get outside opinions. We asked two colleagues to listen to what we had and offer suggestions. We sat in a circle at Heather's house, staring at each other in anticipation. When Rebecca read the draft aloud, she could feel a bit of tension, both her own and from our colleagues. This draft was not working either.

The first reaction was a short silence. They clearly thought we could do better. Their major complaint was about the aggressive opening and, to be honest, once we read it aloud we knew that the tone was still too angry. Another complaint, and one perhaps more difficult to take, was that our message was unclear, buried in witticisms. However, as we started chatting and brainstorming about the possibilities

of our little moment in the limelight, it was clear that they too were under the thrall of partisan discourse. At this juncture, we had found a few online forums related to our upcoming speech. When we shared some of the more worrisome ones (something about excrement and the stage), one of our colleagues suggested we somehow incorporate the online angst into our speech. So, while they both seemed to dislike our attempts at sarcasm, they also felt we could not ignore the elephant in the room: when people talk politics in America, it gets nasty. Despite this dilemma, incorporate the ugliness or not, this discussion yielded the most useful advice. One of our friends commented, "you two are teachers, so teach us something." She reminded us of our original goal: show our students how good rhetoric can work, show them there is another option. We still had a long way to go.

Draft III

In some ways, we felt more confused after our second draft than we had at the beginning. We were definitely developing a clearer idea about what we wanted our text to accomplish, but could not quite pinpoint the arrangement and style issues. While we did not want to match Coulter's vitriol, many Americans find her funny and engaging, so we felt a great deal of pressure to deliver both intellectual content AND fabulous form. We think this is why we continued to hang on to many awful lines we thought might be funny. Additionally, we were becoming aware of the real restrictions of an eight minute speech. We were used to leading hour and fifteen minute discussions on particular points or offering three hour graduate classes on one article. Brevity was not our strength. We had about four double spaced pages to accomplish our task, a task we realized included critiquing Coulter's rhetoric without sounding dogmatic, teaching the audience about rhetoric, arguing for an alternative model of public discourse, making ourselves and our students proud, speaking in public in an engaging way, not getting booed (or worse) by the audience, and developing a ethos that could accommodate all of these goals.

Draft III was the draft of hard realities. This is the draft that made us cry and ultimately pushed us to write the version we are proud to have presented. The major change in this draft can be found at the end. We take our friend's advice to "teach us something" and begin to develop a list of the components of a "good argument." This step in the process represents a shift from the defensive rhetoric we had been clinging to toward a more proactive and positive position. Rather than merely "engage" Coulter, we offer an alternative vision of argumentation that certainly functions as a critique but with a very different rhetorical stance. We don't pull apart Coulter's rhetoric. Instead, we attempt to

offer a clear discussion of what we believe is good public argument and let the audience do the critical work. Of course, our still "witty" opening hoped to push them toward a particular kind of critical work.

Our list of "advice" developed from a discussion of the rules for "critical discussion" created by Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck-Henkemans as an alternative way to discuss rhetorical fallacies in their book *Argumentation: Analysis, Evaluation, Presentation* and our own experience teaching and thinking about public argumentation (109). We decided to discuss several rules and to offer both a clear definition of how the rule functions as well as an example of how a party might break the rule. In this draft, we only had the barest of outlines though we had decided to address the following issues: staying on topic, agreeing to the terms of the debate, listening to another's position, and being willing to concede the point. We knew that these would sound very utopian but we hoped that through examples we could demonstrate their necessity and benefits. As the end of our presentation, we knew it was vital to make these four pieces of advice concise, engaging, and, most importantly, clear. This was a very difficult task. We reworked these short passages countless times before the final version felt right.

While we felt good about the end of the presentation in terms of our message, the opening of our speech still had major style issues. We read this draft to Heather's husband because he is a local performance artist and has a background in public presentation and teaching. The draft we read to Dennis was a toned down version of earlier drafts, but it still started in a confrontational manner. We continued to address our differences with Coulter up front while claiming we were not equipped to meet her using her weapons of choice: "I realize (from friends, a few really scary forums, and excited students) that the expectation today is for me to stand here and "take on Ann." I can only assume we are supposed to engage in a brawl in which one opponent vanquishes the other." We then move to a description of what current political discourse looks like using words like "spectacle," "memorable soundbites," and "cable news mayhem." We end the opening with a much smoother version of the Clint Eastwood/high noon joke.

When we read this to Dennis: he balked. His basic complaint, "this isn't you." For Dennis, we had a major ethos problem. He did not have a problem with the language per se, but he had a problem with Rebecca delivering it. For one, he did not envision a professor being so sarcastic and secondly did not think that Rebecca, personally, could get on stage and pull it off. This was another difficult criticism to deal with. As scholars of rhetoric, we knew that getting our ethos wrong was the beginning of the end. Dennis's comments made us ask ourselves the big questions again: what is our aim, what ethos helps us achieve this

aim? We also had to admit that this snarky beginning made it seem as if we did not respect our audience. In our efforts to match Coulter's thrilling delivery, we had lost sight of our own goals that simply could not be accomplished by mimicking her style, even in a milder form.

We stepped back and began to think about ethos, as a concept. In some ways, this project called for basic Aristotelian rhetoric: a speaker uses her personal credibility to talk to a particular audience about a particular topic. For our student audience, this conception might work. However, in terms of the pro-Coulter audience, we had no credibility in the classical sense (as professors and even as women) because of the negative ethos they conferred on us. These complications required newer notions of ethos. Bitzer's "rhetorical situation" where ethos and response arises "naturally" (5) or even Vatz's response that focused on the speaker were too discrete (as Biesecker complained) and did not offer a complete vision of what we needed. We needed a feminist approach that went beyond invitational rhetorical and allowed us to take a strong position without becoming incendiary (as Nancy Welch argues in "Taking Sides"). We were two women trying to combine our styles, we had a mixed audience in terms of age, race, gender, and political belief, and we had pressure from many different fronts to "be" a certain kind of public speaker.

As we look through the notes we made on this draft, we read our own strong admonitions: "Get to the point. One sentence that gets to the seriousness of the work. Be more factual. Be straightforward. So, don't be flippant (Draft III)." We realized that a more serious paragraph that clearly demonstrated the problem we hoped to address should go first and that the cowboy-shoot-out-high-noon joke was the end of our speech and not the beginning. Additionally, we started to see important arguments we had left out. We wanted the audience to know that this was not about advocating the opposite of agonism. We had been so concerned about not living up to the audience expectations about a cat fight, we forgot that they might also expect us to make a "let's all hug instead of fight argument." We did not want that ethos either.

Even though we were disheartened when we realized we still needed major revisions, the shape of the speech seemed clearer and within reach.

Final Draft

In the end, we crafted an ethos that fit a teacher. However, this teacherly ethos was not a stereotype (either radical or boring) but felt, at least to us, rhetorically savvy and even a little funny. We wrote brand new paragraphs for the opening that were unlike anything we had written so far. It was a radical revision in the strictest sense in that we

reimagined our ethos. We had been "crafting" too much in the beginning and needed to find a more comfortable style, for us and for the audience.

Here is what Rebecca read as the opening on October 5, 2009[1]:

> I'm here today in my role as a professor of rhetoric and argumentation. I'm concerned about the divisive tone and timbre of political discourse because it negatively affects students' willingness to participate in the political process.
>
> The university setting offers a unique space for people from different points of view to engage with one another in the open exploration of arguments. I see productive thoughtful argumentation in my classes every day. Unfortunately, this type of interaction is not reflected in the current model of political discourse we see on network and cable news and hear on talk radio. (Final Copy)

While this opening lacked the punch of early drafts, it was an opening that met audience expectations for a professor while also challenging the speech we had all just heard. We continued with a critique of war rhetoric from both sides of the aisle and spoke from the heart by including more subjective observations and sentiments. We found ways to "confront Ann" by challenging her style rather than copying it:

> Few people hear someone like Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, James Carville or Al Franken and think, "Hey, I'd love to hash it out over coffee with them. This sounds like fun!" I mean, who is crazy enough to try and argue with Ann? This is precisely because this kind of discourse doesn't leave space for argument. It's not meant to. (Final Copy)

Finally, we emphasized our passion for the deliberative process that served as the primary reason for participating in this event:

> We've come to a place where a "good" argument doesn't seem to matter, where we are more interested in politics as a zero sum game, in who can embarrass the other more thoroughly with vicious language, in politics as spectacle, than political engagement as a way to solve problems critical to our future. We are here to say that it *does matter* that public figures offer ethical, thoughtful discourse because whether they want to or not, they serve as models for young people about how to participate as citizens in America. (Final Copy)

The lines above were particularly poignant after Coulter's speech because it was especially divisive on this occasion as she used the Roman Polanski rape case in an ethically questionable argument about politics.

We even gave ourselves some space for our beloved joke, but it did not come until page four of a five page speech. After we offered our three examples of "good" argument, we added

[1]The full text of the speech can be found in NCTE's Gallery of Writing: http://galleryofwriting.org/writing/1578503.

> I know that many people here today were hoping to see a good fight—the kind of spectacle offered up each night on the "news" shows, where Ann chants "liberal lies" and I say "conservative crackpot." This stuff is really funny. Ann is the master of one-liners. Our fight might have made for an entertaining spectacle—the conservative fireball versus the boring commie professor and at High Noon. Can't ya'll hear the sound track from *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* bursting through the speakers? And two women to boot. (Final Copy)

This is all that remained of the sassy opening we had obsessed over for so many weeks. By prefacing with a more professional ethos, we were able to offer this critical sentiment in the end without seeming too flippant.

While we were tempted to end with the joke, we did not. We ended with an ethos that conjured teacher/activists challenging the audience to be critical of themselves:

> Whatever your emotion, don't let it stop here. Passion is invention. If getting mad or fired up is the beginning, then we've got a good start today. So, don't sit and stew or forget. Do some research, talk to your friends, your parents, your professors. If you are confused about healthcare, ask those working in the trenches, like a nurse practitioner; if you want the pulse of the economy, talk to small business owners.
>
> Decide what you believe based on your own research and not hearsay or one late night talk show. (Final Copy)

As we look back at this process, we cringe at those early drafts. In some ways, this article is embarrassing as we admit our struggles with the very things we teach our students each semester. However, this process has become our best lesson. We both use the early drafts in class to demonstrate how revision works, and we feel so much more prepared to help struggling students move past their own bad joke.

The Performance

While the focus of this paper is the writing, we wanted to comment on the actual performance of the speech: terrifying. True to her normal form, Coulter delivered a scathing discussion of liberal politics, Obama, and anyone else within target range. Rebecca had to sit on the stage while she spoke and noticed that her speech was actually written as one-liners with spaces between each jab. After a rousing applause, Rebecca stepped up to the podium to a restless silence. It turns out that there was some kind of problem with the distribution of free tickets that resulted in an audience primarily made up of local conservatives while most of the students were in an overflow room watching a screen. The animosity was palpable as Rebecca stepped up to the podium. At one

point, early in the speech, Rebecca was describing the shape of current political rhetoric and delivered the following lines: "Negative and polarizing rhetorics guarantee division, entrenchment, argument for argument's sake, yelling or, in the worst cases, silence and, sometimes, even violence (consider the finger biting incident at a recent tea party) (Final Copy)." This line was meant to illicit at least a little chuckle from the audience. There was nothing. Rebecca stopped and commented, "This really isn't my audience, is it?" The remark was spontaneous and more a response to bad energy than anything else. However, it worked to break up the wave of animosity.

After our response, Coulter stepped up to the podium to answer questions. She actually said, "While I would like to comment on Rebecca's response, I really want to focus on the questions from the audience." So, in response to a direct critique of her rhetorical style, she took questions from the audience rather than address the issue. Unfortunately, she continued her vitriol. A young woman in the audience, obviously a Coulter fan, asked Coulter why she often commented that women should not be allowed to vote. Coulter's response was patronizing and did not veer from her regular routine. She received a standing ovation for arguing that the demise of the country started when women got the right to vote in 1920. After her recitation of her argument, the young woman was pointedly ignored as Coulter moved to the next question. Her overall performance can be summed up as a set of biting one-liners that serve to reinforce a particular set of beliefs. She was a powerful speaker, but did not offer anything new.

Ultimately, the whole process of engaging directly with Coulter seemed a way to move our lessons about rhetoric and civic discourse out of the classroom and onto center stage. As the discussion of the final draft explains, we eventually agreed that the event needed to be for our students and serve as an exemplar of our work as rhetors—to engage social action critically and publically.

While we learned many small lessons along the way, it was our understanding of ethos through revision that was the most powerful lesson. The question of character takes up one of the fundamental ethical principles of communication, our need to assign communicative expression in some foundational way to a singular character. In thinking about crafting an ethos to meet the exigencies of such a unique rhetorical situation, we had to carefully tend to the tensions, contradictions, presuppositions, and adversarial ground such a forum presented to us. Instead of crafting a solid, stable, foundational ethos that would simply reflect Rebecca's views on Ann Coulter's politics and appeal to shared audience values, we used an invented ethos which provided us a greater flexibility by recasting the reductive personal agent of language as an exterior force, inseparable from relations with others.

In dealing with the specific exigencies of the rhetorical situation such as a potentially hostile crowd, expectations and pressure from our colleagues and students, the heightened adversarial atmosphere due to the heated political climate, crafting an effective ethos had to move beyond the standard conception of ethos as representing the character of the speaker. For this situation, *ethos* became a calling of an invented self into being through language.

In order to understand how our sense of ethos evolved, we had to factor in the pathos inherent in such a heated ideological conflict. The intensity of pathos meant that there were many factors that preceded this rhetorical situation and prevented us from following Bitzer's advice to "speaking naturally in the situation": in fact, the question for everybody became how to speak at all, how to find a voice against such odds. Crowley's *Toward a Civil Discourse* was on target for our project in admonishing "liberal" rhetors that pure logic cannot adequately confront fundamental emotionally driven beliefs.

On Courage and Community

We found that putting our rhetorical commitments to work in useful and public ways by engaging with Coulter inspires students to take part in public debate even with voices that are intimidating (and even scary). Re-engaging rhetoric as a practical art in the face of powerful and often antagonistic institutional structures provides the courage necessary for such action. We also realized that engaging in productive rhetorical combat raises some interesting questions such as those Nancy Welch asks in *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*: how do we work in relationship with others and build a rhetoric that values agitation as much as affinity? (70-72). Upon reflection, such a challenging and uncomfortable speech act, speaking in an unfamiliar and adversarial setting outside the classroom or conference hall, pulled us out of our discrete separate identities into a field of intersections with others—we realized in a very real, affective way that ethos occurs in a socially created space, at the intersection between the rhetorical and the personal, reaching outward to a third space, toward community. Since our concern is providing productive examples of rhetoric as a practical and public art for our students, we were pleased to be students of our own lesson about ethos and community—most rhetoric that makes a lasting and useful impact works in relationship with others. This is a particularly valuable lesson for students since, as Nancy Welch also points out, "most of our students' futures will depend on what they learn now about collective, not individual rhetorical strategies" (71). Our relative success at crafting a collective ethos is borne out by the surprising number of favorable responses to our speech, particularly from those who were at first in favor of Coulter and ideologically predisposed to

resist what we had to offer. We conclude with the audience's reactions and written comments sent to us after the event. We received many emails from friends with the general message: "Bravo!" However, by the next day we started getting some unusual emails from strangers with the same general message: "I am a Coulter fan, would probably disagree with you politically, but, despite this, really appreciated your speech." Here are a few excerpts from the surprise emails that landed in our inboxes. This first one is the most articulate:

> My expectations were such that I had pictured you delivering a vigorous and scathing critique of Miss Coulter's rhetoric. Instead, I feel that I learned something from your calm and sensible message about the value of good argument. Admittedly, a word fight would have been very entertaining, however, you rightly pointed out that polarizing criticism is divisive and discourages rational debate. I feel your response was very powerful and effective because you criticized the current climate of political discourse rather than criticizing Miss Coulter's message point by point.

Here's another response that appreciated our educative approach: "Although I won't take you up on your invitation to take a rhetoric class, I will do some research and learn something about the art of good argument." Others offered kind and heartfelt compliments: "I wish her overall presentation had been as professional as yours. I'm thankful the students at UTC are given the opportunity in your class to get beyond entertainment-driven politics. Keep up the good work." However, the following was Rebecca's favorite. The writer explained that he "hated" politics because of the constant bickering and then added, "Both sides of the isle are more interested in discrediting each other than proving their own worth. I did not know how much positive feedback you have received so I just wanted to say your alright for a commie lib (LOL)."

We discovered that meaning was created by us in conjunction with our audience, as adversarial as they may have been, and that it was critical for us to move beyond an understanding of ethos as arising "naturally" from the rhetorical situation. Far from robbing us of our ability to make meaning, and speak this meaning directly, we found that understanding ethos as craft gave us possibilities for multiple types of authorship, and emphasizes our creative potential *as rhetors* to collaborate with the exigencies of the rhetorical situation. The value of such an approach to ethos is what we hoped to communicate to our students, specifically those in our writing classrooms who often struggle with voice. It is this struggle that we want to share with our students—to remind them that the creative process can be a richer ground for invention under such constraints.

Rebecca Jones and Heather Palmer teach at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.

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