CHAPTER THREE

The Significance of Social Rhetoric

What Is Social Rhetoric?

In a nation that espouses the tenets of freedom of speech and freedom of the press, language and words and images matter. For example, when devastated by the shock and awe of the September 11, 2001 attacks (9/11), everyone told Americans to keep on living, to get out there and boost the American economy. Americans took their children trick or treating that Halloween, and went holiday gift shopping that Christmas and Hanukkah season, all the while terrified that the next major assault was coming. However in true American form, even through the overwhelming fears, Americans continued to consume. Americans soldiered on, not because we had to have another pair of shoes, but because they told us that is how we were going to win the war on terror. We understood that it was our job to set aside our fright and to keep our economy strong at all costs.

How did we know that? Because that is what we were told in every conceivable fashion—news reports, talk shows, newspaper stories, presidential addresses, even situation comedies assured us that consumption was the best way to fix the damage done by 9/11. Remember how angry everyone was? Remember how acceptable it was that the president spoke on television of hunting down evil and killing it? Remember how welcome the war was in the face of all the fanatically anti-Muslim pro-American rhetoric? Remember the Patriot Act? Passed just forty five short days after 9/11, it threatened six different Constitutional amendments with the swipe of a pen, and we barely batted an eye as a nation. Why did it take the sickening images of prisoners being tortured and made sport of at Abu Gharib before we
started to reevaluate? And even then, wasn’t that a well played media blitz? Showing us women taking pictures with men in dog leashes—wow—powerful propaganda images!

Understanding both the role and impact of social rhetoric on society is fundamental to accepting the general assertions of this research. In Aristotle’s critique of social rhetoric, he writes of the role of persuasion in its establishment, implying that the ability to convince one’s audience is the only way to achieve social rhetoric. According to Aristotle, there are effectively three kinds of persuasion in such an exchange. The success of the first sort of persuasion is contingent upon the perceived moral integrity of the speaker. The second form of persuasion relies upon convincing the audience to share in a specific disposition dictated by the speaker. While the third form of persuasion is dependent upon evidentiary support offered within the exchange. Though Aristotle is directing this philosophical analysis solely at the spoken word, his explanation of the role of persuasion within the establishment of social rhetoric is key. Whether addressing a population, a nation, or simply a small crowd, the speaker must draw its listeners in, in order to achieve the goal of spinning a narrative that his or her listeners will accept as a truth.

As we apply this classical critique of spoken persuasion to today’s global context, it seems clear that the three methods of persuasion are no longer mutually exclusive, nor is persuasion solely achieved through lectures and speeches. In applying this analysis to this day and age, when we have a plethora of media resources to turn to, ranging from: Internet to television to music to talk radio, we have many means of reaching a desired population as the persuader, as well as myriad means of accessing information as the persuaded.

Continuing to apply Aristotle’s critical analysis of persuasion to our discussion of the significance of social rhetoric, we must maintain a keen understanding that technological advancements have clearly impacted his original analysis. As such, we must consider Aristotle’s three forms of persuasion both individually and collectively. Essentially Aristotle argues that in order to be persuaded, we must trust the speaker; trust the collective; and/or trust the proof as it is presented. Apply this analysis to the topic of Black women in the United States.

**Trust the Source**

Do Americans typically trust the information source? Do we believe our media, our government? Do we assume that the radio, Internet, television, and elected officials are speaking the truth? Or rather, do