

America's Guests: The Uninvited Speakers

By Alfee Enciso

In "Cora Unashamed," Cora, a black nanny, arrives at the funeral of her former white charge, Jessie. Cora declares that Jessie's parents killed their daughter and grandchild. Before she can finish her heart-felt tirade, the shocked white audience drags her out of the church. Why did Cora risk job loss, physical harm and even life to commit this defiant act? Because she, like all passionate speakers, feels that the truth must be told.

Sojourner Truth, Malcolm X and Mario Savio were activists of different hue, gender, epoch, and cause. However, they could all easily fit into the mold of real life Coras. Even though members of their own society rejected their words, these speakers nonetheless delivered crucial messages for their times. Like Cora, they acted as foils to the status quo of conventional thought. Their actions were based on the belief that truth -- a persistent party crasher in many speakers' hearts -- must be heard in all its unabashed certainty.

Click on the links below to explore how these figures conveyed Cora's spirit and commitment to unleashing the truth:

- [Sojourner Truth](#)
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Sojourner Truth

Langston Hughes might not have had any real life character in mind when his fictional character Cora came to being. But Hughes' style and delivery in "Cora" is certainly reminiscent of Sojourner Truth, another in a long line of unwanted or uninvited speakers in American History.

Truth was ahead of her time. She was a feminist in an abolitionist movement and as an activist for African American rights in the suffragist movement in which "woman" typically meant "white middle-class woman." If there was ever a person fit to take on the problem of black female invisibility, it was Truth. Like strong women before her such as Harriet Tubman, Truth's meager beginnings belie her place in our country's history. A former slave, she became a preacher and changed her name from Isabella to Sojourner Truth in response to what she called "a command from God."

At an 1851 women's rights conference in Akron, Ohio, her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech chisled itself into the pantheon of oratorical genius. She attacked the hypocrisies of organized religion, racism and male chauvinism. In a straightforward way, Truth exposed the hypocrisy of the powers that were and, in some cases, the powers that continue to be dominant in modern times. She said:

Well children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the Negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best places! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman too? I could work as much and eat as much as a man -- when I could get it -- and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? (member of audience whispers, "intellect") That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or Negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full? Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.

Malcolm X

Sojourner wasn't the only one to upset conventional thought or to bring unwanted candor into a political setting. Considered by historians like Howard Zinn to be the ultimate outsider in sociopolitical issues, Malcolm X remained the vocal and spiritual naysayer to the established Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. His own race, and well as white society, shunned him. But nonetheless, Malcolm delivered fiery rhetoric and inflammatory allusions to violence. His words struck a deep chord among working class African Americans and the more militant fringes of the left's movement, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panthers. Thus, Malcolm, too, was an unwanted speaker. In this case, his invitation to the dialogue on black/white issues was usually kept on the back streets of Harlem or in the auditoriums of his "Unamerican" Muslim religion.

In contrast to his more formally educated and famous peer, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm communicated in a down-to-earth way. Like Truth, he directed his speeches at everyday people; he spoke in a common language using simple imagery and metaphor. For example, instead of asking government to "hold these truths as self-evident" or to visualize "justice rolling down like a mighty stream," Malcolm instead accused the "white" government of "taking that basket full of money when the sun goes down to another part of the town." He encouraged black people to be self-reliant and not wait on government "crumbs" of welfare and food stamps.

What made Malcolm so accessible was his innate ability to "tell it like it is," even to his own people. In his now famous "Ballot or the Bullet" speech, Malcolm never missed a chance to poke fun at his supporters to rouse their consciousness:

Any time you running around here singing "We shall Overcome" the government has failed us... That's part of what's wrong with you. You do too much singing. It's time to stop singing and start swinging... Cassius Clay can sing, but singing didn't help him to become the heavyweight champion of the World, swinging did.

He also used this patented jab to provoke African Americans who were denying their past: "You wouldn't be here if some enemy hadn't kidnaped you. On the other hand, some of you think you came here on the Mayflower."

If Malcolm's audience would fall prey to the facile victim role, he would again chastise them by saying:

You can't open up a black store in a white community, the white man won't even patronize you. And he's not wrong, he's got sense enough to take care of himself; it's you who's wrong. You'll let anyone come in and take control of the jobs, the housing and your education... Naw, You're outta your mind!...

Only years later, long after his death, was Malcolm welcomed as a guest into the dialogue on race and race relations. Scholars like Cornell West, Bell Hooks, and Henry Louis Gates still extensively quote from him in their scholarly works.

Mario Savio

When the Free Speech Movement (FSM) started on the Cal Berkeley campus in 1964, Clark Kerr, then Chancellor of the university, must have reacted like a guest at Jessie's funeral when Cora made her speech. Kerr probably thought that Mario Savio and other students were out of their minds. They were protesting the actions of Dean Towle who had begun to enforce an obscure ruling that limited students' rights to advocate for political causes or candidates on campus.

After several confrontations, protests and demonstrations -- including Savio and Jack Weinberg addressing students on top of a police car -- the movement became a national *cause* celebre. Savio's actions spawned imitators across the country, setting the groundwork for the Vietnam protests that followed. A website dedicated to Savio's work observes, "...[He] earned the respect and trust of his comrades in the FSM and throughout life, less for the passionate eloquence that brought him media renown than because he spoke from his heart through a powerful mind in a search for moral clarity."

In the final sit-in, when the FSM took over Sproul Hall, Savio spoke these famous signature lines of revolt before getting arrested for yet another time:

There comes a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part, you can't even tacitly take part. And you've got to put your bodies on the gears, and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus. And you've got to make it stop. And you got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all.

Like Dr. King's "I have a dream," Sojourner's "Ain't I a woman too?" and Malcolm's "By Any Means Necessary," Mario's words will last forever in the hearts and minds of any person seeking justice or equality. For these uninvited guests, it took great courage to stand up and speak defiantly against the established views of their times. Although their presence has not always been wanted or invited, America with its storied tradition of free speech, most certainly benefited.

Suggested Class Activities

Below are four assignment questions that serve to draw students into deeper analysis of the issues discussed in the essay.

1. After reading "Cora Unashamed" and the preceding essay, discuss with a classmate a time when you or someone you know stood up and gave an unwanted or unpopular speech or talk. Write an essay that brings the reader to that moment using descriptive verbs and vivid adjectives. Be sure and follow all the standard rules of conventional English spelling, punctuation, and grammar.
2. Imagery is a writer's way to use vivid descriptions or figures of speech to evoke particular emotions from readers. Great speeches all incorporate this literary device to get their messages across. Reread Sojourner Truth's speech and Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech to note examples of imagery that both speakers use. Draw four pictures of imagery, two from each speech. Be sure and write your quote from the speech under your pictures.
3. Read excerpts from Malcolm X's "Ballot or the Bullet" speech and Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Although both men were famous black leaders respected in their community, their proposals and solutions for civil rights varied greatly. Write a compare/contrast essay on these two speeches that reveal the

philosophy and vision of these two men. Be sure to give examples in your essays and quote from both speeches. Your essay should follow all the standard rules of conventional English spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

4. Write a revolutionary speech about a problem at your school. It could be a call to boycott the cafeteria food or protest tests given on Friday. In your emotional plea, make use of figurative language (imagery, metaphor and simile) to convince your audience that the time for action is now! Be sure to offer a solution and or vision in the speech that your audience can "see." When delivering your speech, think about using visual aids to assist you in your address.

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