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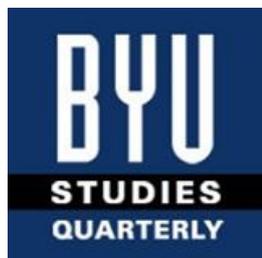
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Romancing the Difference: Kenneth Burke, Bob Jones University, and the Rhetoric of Religious Fundamentalism

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Abstract

In February 2000 George W. Bush made an early campaign stop at Bob Jones University, an institution that until that very year had prohibited its students from interracial dating. The school's community had no idea his visit would thrust BJU into the national gaze, making it a scapegoat for public political anxieties. Republicans (like Bush's opponent John McCain), Democrats, and journalists alike jumped into the mix to assault BJU publicly and thereby make Bush guilty by association. Though revisions of the interracial policy had already been in the works, Bob Jones III, president of BJU at the time, went on *Larry King Live* in March and officially lifted the campus ban on interracial dating. In the process, he told the television audience that though he and his predecessors believed the ban had scriptural warrant, it was ultimately less important than freedom of religion and the overall evangelical message BJU wanted to convey to the secular world.

Jones's rhetorical move on *Larry King* deserves scrutiny, and Camille K. Lewis, Chair of the Department of Rhetoric and Public Address at BJU, gives it and other BJU strategies a thorough treatment in *Romancing the Difference*, an academic monograph that will appeal mostly to scholars of religious communication. Though her position at BJU may compromise her study for some readers, Lewis does what many scholars and media pundits cannot bring themselves to do: give the symbolic messages of a fundamentalist organization a sympathetic and generous hearing. In *Romancing the Difference*, Lewis uses rhetorical theory to account for the way BJU uses its museums and other outreach methods to avoid being victimized by the secular world. In fact these sectarian strategies become more than avoidance; they are, for Lewis, "courtly" in that BJU uses its public discourse to "woo" the secular "Other," ostensibly through conversion. Such a sympathetic study should interest those of us who teach and work in a religious institution that, like BJU, tries to "romance" outsiders, often for similar purposes. Lewis herself believes her study will open a way for us to work for "a more egalitarian public sphere" by including the voice of the "religious separatist."

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argues that fundamentalism is not the angry cry of an outsider, nor is it the mocking of secular culture. Instead, it is an attempt to embody and articulate things that are lovely in order to woo others to an entirely different kind of life. *Romancing the Difference*,¹ examines the rhetoric of fundamentalism as seen through the lens of Bob Jones University. Highlighting the romantic

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