This article introduces the concept of identity framing by foil. Characteristics of this communicative mechanism are drawn from analysis of my personal archive of conservative hate mail. I identify 3 key adversarial identity frames attributed to me in the correspondence: elitist intellectual, national traitor, and gender traitor. These identity frames serve as foils against which the authors’ letters articulate identities as real men and patriots. These examples demonstrate how foiling one’s adversary relies on the power of naming; applies tremendous pressure to the target through identification and invocation of vulnerabilities; and employs tone and verbal aggression in what Burke identified as “the kill”: the definition of self through the symbolic purgation and/or negation of another.

doi:10.1111/j.1753-9137.2009.01048.x

I was deluged with so much hate mail, but none of it was political . . . . It was like, “Gook, chink, cunt. Go back to your country, go back to your country where you came from, you fat pig. Go back to your country you fat pig, you fat dyke. Go back to your country, fat dyke. Fat dyke fat dyke fat dyke—Jesus saves.” —Margaret Cho, “Hate Mail From Bush Supporters” (2004)

My question to you. If you was [sic] a professor in Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Palestinian university or even in Russia. etc. How long do you think you would last as a living person regarding your anti government rhetoric in those countries? We have a saying referring to people like you. Only in America. My advice to you since I think you lack sex or engage in lesbian sex, is to get laid with a good wholesome thick cock—Albert, an example of the author’s hate mail (March 7, 2007)

After commenting in a 2004 comedy sketch that Bush was not Hitler—but could be if he applied himself—comedian Margaret Cho was deluged with racist, sexist, and
homophobic hate mail (DeC, 2004). Even though Cho (2005) was able to incorporate
the content of some of her mail into her comedy routines, a contributor to the
American Politics Journal online described how serious the phenomenon was: “It is
obvious to the most obtuse observer that the reservoir of misogyny which overflows
here—in this type of hate mail directed at any woman who ‘steps out of line’—is the
self-same reservoir which fuels the stoning, mutilation, rape, and multifarious other
abuses of women worldwide” (DeC, 2004).

Because sexist speech is constant and mundane and sexism diffuse and under-
recognized, Lillian (2007) observes how difficult it was for her in her research to find a
concentrated, coherent sample of neoconservative sexist speech (p. 737). Here, I offer
analysis of one such sample: the hate mail I received from readers of conservative
publications and listeners to right-wing talk radio (especially the top 10 talk-radio
programs, which include Rush Limbaugh, Laura Ingraham, and Michael Medved; see
“Top Talk Radio Audiences,” 2008). In order to understand the strategies and
consequences of hate mail targeting politically outspoken women, I conduct an
analysis of my archive of hate mail, containing approximately 290 messages, most of
them from 2002, 2007, and 2008 following my participation in antiwar controversies,
inclusion on pundit David Horowitz’s list of “dangerous” professors, and interviews
on right-wing talk radio.

Employing the methods of social movement frame analysis, rhetorical criticism,
and autoethnography, I identify three key adversarial identity frames attributed to
me in the correspondence: the scholar as elitist intellectual, the Leftist as national
traitor, and the feminist/lesbian as gender/sex traitor. These identity frames serve as
foils against which the authors of the letters articulate their identities as real men and
patriots. These examples demonstrate how foiling one’s adversary relies on the power
of naming; applies tremendous pressure to the target through the identification and
invocation of psychological, economic, and physical vulnerabilities; is amplified in its
impact by an intimate mode of address; and employs the resources of tone and verbal
aggression in what Burke identified as “the kill”: the definition of self through the
symbolic purgation and/or negation of another. Even so, engaging correspondents in
dialogue points to the possibility of a solidaristic discourse that interrupts the foiling
process. In contrast to the image of an elitist, traitorous, transgressive woman, the
correspondents secure their symbolic identities as real men and patriots. I call this
process framing by foil, a concept that may contribute to the literature in critical
media studies, rhetorical theories of identification, and social movement studies on
collective identity frames.

I argue that a threatening foil enables the constitution of a conservative ideological
and masculine subject position. As Judith Butler explains in Excitable Speech (1997),
hate speech, as a performative event, constitutes its subjects and its objects in
opposition to one another. I turn then to an analysis of the identity frames exhibited
in my e-mail messages and examine how the alignment of my interlocutors takes the
form of what Kenneth Burke calls the symbolic kill in the conflation of the categories
of woman and traitor. I conclude the essay with a discussion of how forcing a return
to the dialectical moment of engagement between Self and Other by making this e-mail public creates a culture of accountability for engaging mail/male authors in productive dialogue.

**Why autoethnography?**

Investigating my own hate mail affords an opportunity to understand conservative subjectivity formation in mass-mediated social movements. Although I have long been skeptical of autoethnographic methods as licensing and cultivating solipsistic work, I believe that good autoethnography “offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding” (Wall, 2008, p. 39; see also Denzin, 2000; Holman Jones, 2005). In making sense of a victimizing experience (as does Valentine, 1998), autoethnography offers insights akin to what in the women’s movement is called consciousness-raising: conversation allowing one to see that her experience is not peculiar to herself but rather is part of a larger sociopolitical picture in which inequality and injustice condition interaction. Autoethnography is thus the practice of renewed discovery that “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 2006/1970; Holman Jones, 2005). Hate mail originates not in the minds of ordinary people but rather in the political conflicts among contending groups in society. Judith Butler (1997) notes that the process of linguistic subject formation is not under the control of any individual subject who is, rather, “compelled by authoritative interpellations” (p. 160). The personal is political not only for the recipient of hate mail but also for its authors.

**Identity frames and the symbolic kill**

My approach to hate mail as rhetorical text encompasses movement frame analysis and rhetorical criticism. First, I employ identity frame analysis, a method emphasizing how individuals and groups manage their identities in communication. In the present case, hate mail is not the random expression of deviant individuals; rather, the authors are agents of a mixed neoconservative/populist social movement (discussed at more length below) organized around key radio programs and Internet sites (Brock, 2004). Therefore, literature on identity framing in social movements helps to explain the formation of group ideology and belonging and identify how hate mail serves this purpose.

A concept that may describe the process of identity construction in any social movement (not just conservative ones), a frame is “an interpretive schema that simplifies and condenses the world out there by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environments” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 137). Framing serves three functions for movements regardless of particular ideology: the crafting of identity and maintaining solidarity, providing members of a group with a frame for their grievances and explanation of the problem’s source, and providing members a sense
of potential efficacy in addressing their grievances (Adams & Roscigno, 2005, p. 761). Zald (1996) describes how movements use cultural repertoires (e.g., attitudes about gender) to construct frames and deploy them strategically to advance personal and collective aims (p. 261). Melucci (1996) also calls our attention to how antagonism operates in the formation of identities:

[T]he unity of collective action . . . rests on the ability of a collective actor to locate itself within a system of relations [which] cannot construct [the actor’s] identity independently of its recognition (which can also mean denial or opposition) by other social and political actors . . . Social actors enter a conflict to affirm the identity that their opponent has denied them (pp. 73–74; see also Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1992; Snow & Benford, 1988).

As McCaffrey and Keys (2000) have noted, it is important to understand not only the self-frames of individuals and groups but also how the sense of self often is the product of defining oneself against the characteristics of an antagonist. Authors of political hate mail construct their own identities by framing themselves in terms of their opposite in communication denigrating perceived enemies and threats. This pattern holds for movements across the political spectrum (see also Shibutani, 1997; for a study of this process in white supremacist organizations, see Adams & Roscigno, 2005).

Rhetorical theory has also accounted for the process of self-definition through the negation of the Other. Burke (1969) argues that not only do individuals and groups define themselves in opposition to others, they necessarily do so in a social field organized in terms of hierarchy. Burke describes how there can be no such thing as a purely positive self-definition; rather, self-definition is a process undertaken in dialectical relationship with others. The firmer the identity one seeks, the more polarizing the discourse of self-definition becomes, resulting in what Burke calls ultimate terms that glorify oneself and vilify the Other (pp. 183–197). Urging rhetoricians to notice the dangers in this process of naming: “Consubstantiality is established by common involvement in a killing,” he writes (p. 265).

Burke tells the story of a group of young boys who “stirred up a rattlesnake,” which was then killed by one of the boys’ fathers. Then the boys “had their pictures taken, dangling the dead snake. Immediately after, they organized the Rattlesnake Club. Their members were made consubstantial by the sacrifice of this victim, representing dangers and triumphs they had shared in common. The snake was a sacred offering; by its death it provided the spirit for this magically united band” (p. 266). Like the boys with the snake, movement groups consolidate their identities and purposes around the figure of a threatening but ultimately vanquished foe.

McCaffrey and Keys (2000) point out that social movement scholars have not exhausted the exploration of movement–countermovement dynamics in identity framing, and understanding the role of the personification of the adversary. I believe that Burke’s insight about the dialectical nature of the production of the self may be
a useful supplement to that literature. Out of this combination, I propose to label the exclusive definition of self in terms of an adversary Other framing by foil, or foiling.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online (2008), a “foil” (derived from both the Latin folium, or leaf, and the French fouler, to trample, and feuille, leaf [“foil,” 2008]) is either (a) that which sets something else off by contrast; (b) that which is crushed or trampled; or (c) that which is thwarted. “To foil” something is in a literal sense to press a thin sheet (or leaf) of metal around a shape so that the shape appears in relief. There is potential violence done to one thing or person in the interest of establishing the identity of another; words can make foils that establish a sense of identity by warping and flattening the features of another (thus “foiling,” i.e., impeding or blocking, the target’s agentic momentum).

In the present case, the dominant foils constructed in my hate mail are threefold: the fraudulent intellectual, the national traitor, and the gender/sex traitor. Around these threats, the identities of the authors appear in relief: patriots and men of the people. This process of identity framing can occur across an array of media and settings, from public political oratory to internal movement communication in reports and newsletters, news commentary and coverage, traditional (hand- or typewritten and mailed correspondence), and, of course, electronic mail.3

Such correspondence must be viewed in structural context, in which hate mail addressed to women is a formulaic manifestation of gender discipline experienced by outspoken women in various occupations (see Barnes, 2002; Friedman, 2007; Hanson, 2002; “Hate Mail for Nurse Insisting on Respect,” 2008; Richardson & McGlynn, 2007; Valentine, 1998; Wilkinson, 2004). However, the fact that woman hating has a formula does not mitigate its misogyny; indeed, the near universally available repertoire of sexist tropes is cause for more, not less, alarm. More than the generic or modal characteristics of hate mail, the crafting of identity frames for the author in the condemnation of the target is the primary object of my analysis, which demonstrates hate mail to be a political and ideological intervention on contested terrain. In the present case, the contestation has been over the politics of the academy.

In the company of dangerous intellectuals

In 2006, David Horowitz listed me among the “101 most dangerous” intellectuals in the United States in his book The Professors (Horowitz, 2006). My placement in his book and its sequel (2007), two letters to the editor of the student newspaper (one reworking the Pledge of Allegiance in 2002, the other a group letter protesting the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2007; see Adams, 2006), my two appearances on conservative radio programs (Michael Medved, July 11, 2002; Laura Ingraham, March 6, 2007), and my public protests of Horowitz’s lectures seem to be the major prompts for large volumes of right-wing mail addressed to me. My e-mail address is provided in every article published about me on the Internet and in David Horowitz’s books.
The timing of waves of e-mail with specific events suggests that public expression of my ideas is the prompt for conservative discussion and reaction. The timing of waves of e-mail with specific events suggests that public expression of my ideas is the prompt for conservative discussion and reaction.4

Conservatism is a complex political movement encompassing several tendencies united primarily by aversion to abrupt social change and to socialism, along with faith in established traditions and cultural norms that provide social stability (Dunn & Woodard, 1991, p. 31). The versions of conservatism articulated by Horowitz, Ingraham, and others prominent in conservative talk radio and online forums only partially represent the politics of neoconservatism, a tendency emerging in the 1980s among intellectuals, disillusioned with the New Left (Boot, 2004; Gottfried, 1993, p. 79; Kristol, 2004, p. 33; Muravchik, 2004, p. 244). These leaders aimed to “create a counterestablishment” including publications and think tanks (like the American Enterprise Institute; Gottfried, 1993, p. 85; Kristol, 2004, pp. 34–37) that could, in turn, inform the development of a state buttressed by the family and capable of spreading market-based democracy around the world (Gottfried, 1993, p. 87; Stelzer, 2004). Significantly, Jeane Kirkpatrick (2004) defined neoconservatism as a response to the Left counterculture, which, she argues, constituted “a sweeping rejection of traditional American attitudes, values, and goals” (p. 236).5

In addition to giving expression to this critique of New Left, Ingraham and Horowitz also espouse the ideology of the New Right and its social (rather than strictly economic or intellectual) conservatism in favor of nationalism, conservative heteronormative family values, Christian faith, states’ rights; and against movements for and federal redress supporting racial justice and women’s rights, including and especially abortion rights (see Gottfried, 1993, p. 98). The discourse of conservative media celebrities like Horowitz and Ingraham is, then, a strategic amalgam that aims to discredit the intellectual Left on a basis that finds favor among traditionally conservative media audiences. The primary consequence of this circulation is the mobilization and coaching of a confident conservative base rather than outreach to mainstream media and politicians (see Brock, 2004).6

I first came to the attention of conservatives in September and October of 2001, when I defended my colleague Robert Jensen, also among the 101, in print after he published an antiwar editorial opinion column and the President of the University publicly rebuked him (sources and details withheld pending review). Many of us among the progressive faculty found the President’s emotional, anti-intellectual, public denunciation of a member of his own faculty to be quite chilling. Then, in the summer after the September 11, 2001 attacks, I published a controversial antiwar editorial (citation withheld). This attempt at critical-rational intervention into public discussion was met almost univocally by angry responses by fax, e-mail, and phone. For example, under the heading “Eat a Bag of Shit,” Mark (July 8, 2002) wrote, “How about I print this out and shove it up your ass when I visit (your town) in August?” Tim (July 8, 2002) engaged in name-calling: “Wow, you are a typical liberal jackass.”7

In 2005, I raised the ire of David Horowitz when I took part in a disruptive protest of his appearance on my campus. Far from an exercise in mere hyperbole,
Horowitz’s (2006) book, subtitled *The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*, serves to identify in clear terms the threat against which conservatives in his orbit are to mobilize (see Janisch, 2008). The book itself grew out of his website DiscovertheNetwork.org (2006), an elaborate map of scholars, celebrities, and alleged terrorists and their ostensible links to one another. As Adams and Rosigno (2005) point out, this careful definition of an enemy is a movement resource that aids recruitment, motivates action, and sustains solidarity among those aligned with Horowitz’s views.

Furthermore, Horowitz (wrongly regarded by some as a “crackpot”) has been increasingly successful in garnering publicity for his legislative attempts to pass the Orwellian misnamed “Academic Bill of Rights.” He has national influence as well; Karl Rove and Congressman Tom DeLay helped to distribute copies of Horowitz’s political primer *The Art of Political War: How Republicans Can Fight to Win* (Horowitz’s, 1999) to all Republican members of Congress (Jones, 2006). Rove has referred to Horowitz’s pamphlet as “a perfect pocket guide to winning on the political battlefield.”

Horowitz’s representation of Left intellectuals as “dangerous” provokes movement toward the symbolic kill described by Burke. In this way, the concepts of “danger” and “threat” are the master frames of this discourse (see Landzelius, 2006). Frames of identification and division extend dialectically between public collective self-definition into the interpersonal repertoires of movement participants in their daily lives (Bormann, 1972). In order to discern the unfolding of these frames, I turn now to an examination of my correspondence, attending first to the ways in which it constructs a foil of the elitist Ivory Tower intellectual.

**Foiling “dangerous” intellectuals: Analysis of gender-neutral mail**

In this section, I analyze the first main category of the intimidating private messages I have received, demonstrating how such messages strategically extend the public campaign against public intellectuals into the private realm. The hundreds of messages many critical intellectuals receive causes disruption and inconvenience (by the sheer volume and disturbing character of the mail); in its attempt to provoke insecurity and self-doubt, this form of harassment also cultivates fear of continuing to speak out. Centrally, hate mail *names and pressures* its targets in ways that bring into sharp relief the author’s subject position in the process.

Initially, I sorted my 290 messages (of which nearly all are overtly hostile) into “gender-neutral” (without significant reference to sexual acts or the gender or sex of sender or recipient) and “gender-specific” (referencing sex or gender of sender and/or recipient and/or explicitly sexual references) somewhat overlapping categories, and then performed a content analysis of each piece of correspondence looking for themes (e.g., antiacademic and patriotic) and strategies (e.g., invective, satire, and threat). It is worth noting that, with only one or two exceptions, all of the letter writers are (or identify themselves as) men. Of the 290 messages, about 150 were
both adversarial in tone and sufficiently developed for more detailed consideration as examples of identity framing by foil. The majority of these (120) were more or less gender-neutral; the 30 examples of gender-specific mail represent a minority of my hostile correspondence.

Gender-neutral examples call into question my intelligence, right to teach, patriotism, and national belonging. In language that could be addressed to either men or women, I have been asked to leave the country. I have been called an anti-Semite and the equivalent of Hitler and Stalin; some writers threaten to take action against me. Close analysis of these texts revealed the foiling strategies of my interlocutors as falling into three broad characterizations of me: as a fraudulent Left intellectual, national traitor, and gender traitor. Against these figures, the writers’ identities take shape as those of ordinary people defending the nation and the young against fraudulent, traitorous, and elitist intellectuals.

In accusing scholars of elitism, fraud, and indoctrination, hate-mailers exploit the state of perpetual insecurity and self-doubt common to young scholars. For example, a correspondent in 2007 wrote, “You’re an absurd, fucking fraud! You’d starve in the real world, which is why you’ve fled to the comfort of a college campus.” Often, Horowitz, Ingraham, Ann Coulter, and other conservative voices on the air and on the Internet deride academics as unqualified, out of touch with reality, hypocritical, opportunistic, and threatening to students’ free thought and expression. For example, in a July 9, 2002 online column on (Horowitz’s) FrontPageMag.com, Tammy Bruce charged me with hypocrisy, intellectual dishonesty, incompetence, and membership in a latté-sipping “Academic Elite” out of touch with the sentiments of the honest, hardworking, patriotic, and grateful public at large. Her derision echoes throughout the subsequent letters from her readers. For any critical professor who ever feared not reaching “real people” with their work, this is a stinging rebuke.

There is a powerful populist appeal in this discourse. As Laclau (2007) has argued, movement leaders may crystallize the desires and ambitions of ordinary people and focus them on a scapegoat. In the context of economic crisis, increasing representation in the workforce of women, minorities, and immigrants, heightened nationalism, and the decline of traditional class-based forms of organizing, these appeals offer attractive scapegoats for working class anxieties (see Fine et al., 1997; Turl, 2008). Bruce’s (2002) caricature taps into and focuses these anxieties, coaching her audience to jab at the qualifications and probe the insecurities of faculty members, especially women and persons of color in what is often a racist and sexist institutional environment. In contrast to the “academic pretender,” the foiling discourse here positions Bruce, her colleagues, and her readers as “real people” with “common sense.”

Some writers escalate this argument by advancing actual threats to my employment. For example, in a letter threatening to petition his church members, the University of Texas Chancellor, and Board of Regents against my continued employment, Gabriel wrote, “Laura made you sound stupid this morning. I would say you need to go back to school and get a bit more ‘edumicated’ before tangling with a
woman like her” (March 9, 2007). In equally threatening manner, a retired infantry colonel wrote (to my Dean):

Just from a communications standpoint, Dana Cloud was crush by Laura. For someone who is in a Department of Communication, she was a failure in the debate. I would hope you will take the same approach to removing her as did the University of Colorado when they removed the tenured Prof Churchill. Just because Cloud is tenured, does not mean that she cannot be removed. Do it!!! (March 7, 2007).

Dan, in a March 29, 2007 letter, crowed that I had been thoroughly rebutted on the radio, adding pointedly, “Let’s just say it was quite surprising that someone who teaches courses on ‘persuasion’ was so unpersuasive in responses. Maybe you should add a course in ‘how to dodge even the most straightforward questions’.” In the same vein, Lance (March 6, 2007) wrote,

Hey there, Dana, heard you on the Laura Ingram program, gotta say, you have guts to go against her... Although you lost... Face it... Laura Ingram buried you! What were you thinking? It sounded like you were dodging all the questions she was asking you, which doesn’t surprise me as all of ‘you people’ dodge questions. . . .

This writer begins his letter with an act of symbolic demotion, referring to me familiarly by my first name, then crows about Ingraham and Horowitz’s success in stumping me with an unanswerable question. Interestingly, his letter also uses the language of “dodging questions,” as do many others, again suggesting that listeners to conservative radio take cues from hosts regarding the best ways to ridicule Ph.Ds.

The strain of populist anti-intellectualism in my mail is prominent, but contradictory when correspondents go out of their way not only to impugn my intellect but also to demonstrate their own alleged erudition. Indeed, a number of the critiques of the “Ivory Tower” are quite eloquent and witty. Vrooman (2007) notes that some rants “make high art of hostility” (p. 55), creating witty and curmudgeonly political, and pedantic personae (see Carroll, 1979). For example, Lawrence (July 2, 2002), wrote that I myself must be a parody, for I was “such an egregious jackass” to actually exist; he concludes that I must be “the Jonathan Swift for our age.” Thus, against my position as a fraudulent intellectual, the author emerges from the foiling process as a lay intellectual with a rapier wit.

Writers comparing me to Hitler, Stalin, or other totalitarians also made use of the parodic style: “Dear Comrade in Arms, I admire and respect your use of intolerance in the name of tolerance. . . . I could have used people like you. Sincerely, Adolf” (Don, March 6, 2007). Of course, the point of such satire is that the writer is not like me, or more accurately, like the persona he has constructed of me. Rather, using me as a foil, writers in this vein establish themselves as ordinary intellectuals: sharp-witted but uncorrupted by the elitism and arcane discourses of the academy,
which are identified as the source of my foolishness. My persona emerges as one that is ridiculous rather than threatening.

Other messages, however, construct me as an earnest threat to students. Typical was that of N.: “I hate that you and your like are indoctrinating young minds at OUR universities and getting subsidized with OUR tax dollars” (July 3, 2002). In the few instances where I have responded to challenges to the accuracy of my evidence, I have received long rants in reply. The identities of the letter writers emerge by contrast: If I am an elitist, intellectual fraud engaged in the indoctrination of youth, then the letter writers appear as the grassroots guardians and protectors of youth from the “leftist animal” (as one letter put it) and its ideology of treason. That I am an outspoken woman compounds the offense, arranging womanhood, incompetence, and treason as the foils, and producing authors characterized by masculinity, judgment, and fidelity.

Sleeping with the enemy: Gender, sex, and treason

The explicitly gendered and sexualized letters are fewer in number than the anti-intellectual letters. However, I remember these with striking clarity. They deployed fear, shame, and disgust in ways that resonate with my, and perhaps many women’s, experiences of sexism, abuse, and gender-related trauma of various kinds. More than any others, these letters were invasions of my private space and self. They also demonstrate that to be a woman critical of the nation is to be both a bad woman and a bad citizen.

The gender-specific mail equates woman with traitor or alien/enemy: “Face it, Dana, you are anti-American,” wrote Lance (March 6, 2007), who continues,

“My suggestion for you . . . Move to another country, maybe England . . . Or better yet the middle east where as a woman, you will be treated like a dog! Sound fun?”

Another writer offered to buy me an airline ticket and $500,000 if I would renounce my U.S. citizenship “and promise never to come back to America. She doesn’t need you anymore. You sleep with her enemy” (March 6, 2007).

Ironically, the phrase “sleeping with the enemy” echoes feminists of the late 1960s, some of whom found sleeping with men incongruent with the radical critique of the sex/gender system. Interestingly, the description of treason as “sleeping with her enemy” underscores how criticizing the nation violates the norms of womanhood. Female dissenters are treated and represented differently both in public life and private correspondence than male dissenters because of the complex interconnections among gender ideology, national identity, the division of labor, and justifications for war in the modern nation state. In prerevolutionary America, the ideology of republican motherhood “attempted to integrate domesticity and politics” (Kerber, 1976, p. 203). “Republican motherhood preserved traditional gender roles at the same time that it carved out a new, political role for women” (Zagarri, 1992, p. 192). Grayzel et al.
D. L. Cloud explain that nationalist discourses figure national geography in terms of the virginal or maternal body, represent the ideal woman as one dedicated to national service and sacrifice, and render women’s capacity to respond to war in almost exclusively emotional terms (see also Gould, 2008; Hansen, 2001; Kaplan, Alarcon, & Moallem, 1999; Ranchod-Nisson, 2000; Rose & Hatfield, 2007; Stoler-Liss, 2003; Werbner & Yuval Davis, 1999; Yuval Davis, 1997).

In summary, national identity is often articulated through gender. McClintock (1997) explains that nationalism constitutes identities in social conflicts that are always gendered; thus, national power “depends on the prior construction of gender difference” (p. 89). McClintock’s analysis helps to explain how it becomes paradoxical and dissonant (for an audience of conservatives) in this frame for “actual” women to mount a critique of nationalism and imperialism, or for any assertive and effective critic of nationalism and war to be, in fact, a woman. A “good” woman defends the nation and reproduces and nurtures its warriors and workers. As a result, women who speak out against nationalism and war pose a dual threat to conventional gender roles and the sanctity of the nation state—and to the potent amalgam that works to secure allegiance to both regimes. In the context of this literature, outspoken women who also reject standard definitions of heterosexual womanhood are doubly traitors to the national order.

A 2002 example exemplifies these interconnections:

You are a scary woman. Scary in the sense that you might reach one student with pro terrorist and communist leanings. A heads up to you, comrade, liberalism and communism died on 9/11. Your email was posted on a very popular website; expect major backlash over your manifesto of America hatred. If you hate America so much, why not move to Indonesia, Palestine or one of the other countries you listed? It would be a good first start, covering your face with a burka. You should be ashamed of yourself. (signed) Patrick: Pro-God, pro family, pro America, and anti communist/terrorist/islam. (July 5, 2002)

This writer explicitly identifies himself by foiling me when he signs off; in contrast with him I am anti-God, antifamily, anti-American, procommunist, and proterrorist. This example figures the female critic of the American nation as “scary” and then aligns the critic with “Third World” nationalism, as if the only way a woman could critique one nation is to become conventionally feminine and obedient to the norms of another country. Thus, the theme of treason intersects vulgar gendered and sexualized language as if for me to criticize the nation is to violate the norms of womanhood is to become monstrous: a “scary woman.”

A second characteristic of the gender-specific mail is the labeling of queer gender identity and/or sexual orientation as threatening, deviant, and disgusting. A letter that opens, “Dear Butch” (2002), combines gender-neutral themes with heavily gendered attacks. The letter reads: “I feel sorry for you. What a warped view of things you have. But I’m sure you think you are ‘enlightened.’ If you hate America so much, hike up your skirts and head for the border.” Here, “Butch” is clearly an insult. The
command to “hike up my skirts” is contradictory in this note, at odds with defining me as a “butch,” a category of lesbians rarely found in skirts. However, hiking up one’s skirts puts one in a position of sexual vulnerability; the image is an attempt at symbolic diminishing through the invocation of the feminine, when all of the other terms in the letter are blunt and, contrary to the author’s statement that he felt sorry for me, agentive (“go,” “head,” “start,” “marxist,” “atheist,” “lesbo-feminist,” and “commune”). Such exclusionary discourse symbolically expels bad women/critics from the national fold. The identity of the conservative writer then emerges as the counterpart to the dangerous, deviant, improper, alien woman. The letter-writer’s masculinity is defined in extreme opposition to the transgressive feminine, again demonstrating the workings of the foil. He is the icon of agentive personhood and arbiter of gender norms and relations.

The third category of gendered hate mail features expressions of pity and prayer for my mental and spiritual health. As Ehrenreich and English (1978) have argued, advice giving to women primarily by men has always been a gendered form of social discipline from the fields of psychiatry to self-help literature. Foucault (1988) likewise describes the history of madness as a social construct that defines disruptive subjects in manageable ways. Similarly, Cloud (1998) calls attention to how the language of healing dislocates political response into the intimate realm. In this context, to say (even sincerely), “I feel sorry for you,” “you need help,” or “I will pray for you” is an exertion of power over the pitiful. I received several letters in which writers, ostensibly perplexed by my attitudes and behavior, have concluded that I am mentally ill or bereft in my godlessness. In addition, these letters often mentioned concern for my daughter. For example, Kathy (July 1, 2002) told me that it was “very sad that you don’t know God, but what’s even sadder is that you aren’t allowing your daughter to know God. My prayers are with you and your daughter.” The mention of my family in such letters suggests that the category of republican womanhood is operative in defining the identity of conservative women like Kathy; she expects me to limit my influence to the spiritual education of my daughter. By addressing me from the stance of a Godly woman, Kathy foils me as adopting a public persona too far removed from the republican vision of influence through maternal care. A more hostile letter stated, “I pledge to pray for your poor daughter. How sad it must be to live with such an angry, confused person” (Robert, July 2, 2002). “What is your major malfunction lady?” begins another of my letters. “Where does your bitterness come from?” (Jon, July 5, 2002).

C. (March 6, 2007) also believes that my problem is emotional, a diagnosis somehow extrapolated from my photograph:

I have come to the conclusion (especially after looking at your picture on the U of T web site) that only someone who was deeply hurt or humiliated (probably early in life) could be bitter towards the country and society that gave you so much. The truth is I am sorry for you. I will pray that your eyes will be opened to the displaced anger or hurt that resides inside you.
This passage is a gendered and paternalistic insult that dismisses bitterness toward one’s country as a product of pathology. For those conservatives who experience cognitive dissonance (see Festinger, 1957; Cooper, 2004) when an educated person makes arguments that are significantly contradictory to their beliefs, it is important to frame their criticism of the United States as something other than a rational, evidence-driven discourse. If an argument constitutes the rantings of a “bitter,” “hurt,” “angry,” or “confused” person, the political threat of a contrary point of view is neutralized in a clear example of denigration of the source of unwelcome information. Beyond serving this dissonance-relieving function, the pathologizing discourse foils me as irrational, not only to discredit my point of view but also to give shape to the writer’s own identity as a rational citizen.

A fourth suggestion of the gendered e-mails is that a proper woman should discipline her public voice and behavior as well as her private behavior and appearance. I believe that condemnation of indecorum is strongly gendered. The best example from my correspondence of this tendency came from a woman, Wendy (March 6, 2007): “I think it is rude and crude to demonstrate when someone is trying to give ‘another opinion’ on campus. Shame on you . . . . Where are your manners?” For men, it is less of an offense to engage in public demonstration of outrage (even belligerence) than it is for women. It is difficult to imagine a letter addressed to an adult male asking him, “Where are your manners?” Here, the foil is clear: That I lack propriety positions this writer as the arbiter of appropriate gender performance.

The fifth category of gendered mail is composed of dehumanizing messages, which include pronounced appearance-oriented and otherwise aggressive and dehumanizing insults. For example, Peter wrote,

Hello you disgusting pig. . . I feel bad for you that you are such an angry and hateful person, your ugly daughter will end up failing in life like you . . . . How vapid you are to even have a web page, do you really think anybody cares if you live or die outside of your ugly kids and dogs . . . . Lots of love you piece of garbage. God bless. (July 8, 2002)

Another letter called me pathetic, and “an incomprehensible human being” (Frank, date unavailable). To be incomprehensible is to be alien, something less than fully human. Disgusted correspondence also attempts to dehumanize its target by calling them garbage and animals, especially pigs. However, the logic of the foil would suggest that if I am ugly, the author is good-looking, which does not seem to be the point at all. Rather, I believe that this category establishes its target as monstrous, rendering the letter author as a human pitted against an inhuman enemy, thus warranting violence against the monstrous.9 Attacks on personal appearance and sexual orientation are also particularly gendered, given the ways in which U.S. culture encourages women to discipline their hair, faces, and bodies in accordance with stringent norms, cultivating a sense of inadequacy and insecurity around these issues that men do not share (Wolff, 2002). That Peter’s letter mentions my family life makes this insulting in private, invasive terms. Calling my daughter ugly extends the
violation of the personal address into domestic space in a very concrete way and invokes my subversion of the role of the republican mother in both ideology and identity.

Thus, the sixth and threatening gendered mail category deployed accusations of child abuse—both sexual and ideological. The most pronounced example of this is from S., who wrote, “You’re a sexual deviant with a daughter?!! You should be arrested for child abuse!” (March 6, 2007). On the ideological side, Tim wrote, “I ache for your daughter; what life she has in store after years of being spoon fed your distorted, relativist, socialist rhetoric” (July 8, 2002). These writers constitute their identities in relief from mine; if I am a deviant, indoctrinating pedophile (equated with any minority sexuality), they are “normal” people who guard their children from malign influences. Ironically, they insist on their point of view while criticizing my alleged attempts to indoctrinate others. Conservatism is regarded as extraideological in all of this discourse.

The ultimate message of a series of letters in which mostly male authors presume to dehumanize and discipline women in both political and sexual contexts is one that warrants violence. Violence is a sanctioned dimension of hegemonic masculinity in U.S. culture (see Fine et al., 1997); the logical culmination of the adversarial framing strategies in these letters is to mark women like me as violations of the natural order, and such violations may be punished. If outspoken, critical women are the targets of this mail, then its authors become its very masculine weapons, wielding sexual violation as the ultimate correction to female insurrection. Thus, the letter from “Albert” (March 7, 2007) quoted in my epigraph suggests that raping a lesbian (advising her to “get laid with a good wholesome thick cock”) will both restore her to her proper place in the arrangement between the sexes and cure her of her deviant beliefs. The mechanism of foiling reaches its ultimate expression in the logic of the kill, when, in opposition to the target as inhuman and deviant, the authors become the symbolic weapon launched from afar by neoconservative culture warriors.

My outspoken criticism of U.S. wars abroad has been met with a number of sexualized bodily threats. After asking, “Want to see how they treat women over in those countries?” L. appended a URL for a news story about women being gang raped in Pakistan. (An irony of his letter is that his support for war is based on condemnation of the practices of Muslims, yet he would relish the sort of punishment such a regime might levy against someone like me.) K. wrote in a March 18, 2008, obscene, personal, and political rant that he was glad that “it is dangerous for you to speak. . . you love immigrants from the third worlds GO FUCKING LIVE WITH THEM, YOU DUMBASS CUNT DRINK THE WATER” (March 18, 2008).

Ominously, Abu warned me, “My own allegiance is to those who are brave enough to deal with the likes of you, in ways that you richly deserve. Fortunately, they are coming. Look into the camera and say after me: ‘I am an academic.’ My mother was an academic . . . We are truly the daughters of hate” (July 5, 2002).
Strangely, this writer invokes my maternal line as parallel to my academic hubris and my belief system, suggesting that the danger I represent is characteristic of all women and passed down from generation to generation, perhaps since Eve. As Kenneth Burke pointed out, the unchecked impulse to define oneself by purging what one is not—or, as argued in the present article, foiling them—escalates to the contest between absolutes: good and evil, human and inhuman, male and female.

The patterns in my mail reveal how, in the minds and psyches of some conservatives, to be a female critic of the nation is to be doubly traitorous. The line between sexual deviance and ideological treason is very blurry in the letters I have examined, so that the denigration of my gender, my sexuality, my body, my family, and my psyche become interchangeable with condemnation of my beliefs. Because I am a woman, to discipline my appearance and behavior are necessary correlates of falling into line ideologically.

I believe that the impact of such mail on its female recipients—who may have internalized gender-based insecurity about professional qualifications and physical appearance, and who may have real reason to fear workplace discrimination or physical/sexual assault—is compounded in ways that my male colleagues do not experience. One of these colleagues once advised me to ignore my hate mail, saying that he never gave a thought to his own. I found myself starkly reminded that (generally) men and women, by virtue of living in sexist society, experience the world very differently from one another.

From my standpoint, not only could I not avoid my e-mail, it was also very important to attend to it as a person, a citizen, a woman, an activist, and an intellectual. Such messages address their target not as a political antagonist in an ideological conflict but rather as a private person in an intimate domain. The privacy of the inbox shields these writers from public view and broader accountability. Although I would not equate symbolic violation or the threat of sexual assault with physical sexual assault itself, both threat and act depend on the shield of intimacy. When one strips the shield away, the power of private intimidation is lessened.

**Foiling intimidation in the public sphere**

Cho (2005) describes what happened when she posted her hate mail on her website, including senders’ e-mail addresses and names: After receiving hundreds of messages from Cho’s supporters, the senders began to apologize to her.

I was getting apology emails flooding in so fast, I couldn’t believe it. (In whining voice): “I’m sorry I called you a gook chink cunt. I didn’t mean it. I’m very sorry. Now please make these gay people leave me alone!”

Like Cho, I too realized that I had a great deal of support, and I began sharing my hate mail in public forums, including my blog. Turning the tables on
cyberintimidators and bringing their violations into the light of day has had some unforeseen consequences. Most importantly, many chagrined writers backpedaled on their original positions and/or apologized for the tone of their letters. With two, I engaged in productive, civil correspondence. One is Don, who over the course of three e-mail exchanges, went from comparing me to Hitler to appreciating my point of view and wishing me luck. Similarly, Greg (March 27, 2007) had warned me that I should take the “new McCarthyism” very seriously. On my blog, I posted the complete version of this e-mail under the title “Horowitz minion admits to being a new McCarthyist.” After two more exchanges, I received something like an apology:

Admitting fault is a huge soul reliever. Trust me, I admit fault quite frequently. . . I won’t postulate that you and I can ever see eye to eye but perhaps we can learn from each other. You are obviously an intelligent individual . . . Let’s keep these lines open.

I found these conversations to be remarkable “teaching moments,” examples of what I call “the pedagogy of accountability.” When people’s words are dragged into the light of day, those persons become accountable to a larger community. In spite of the conservatism of commercial mass media and the paucity of real public debate in our society (see Calhoun, 1993; Habermas, 1988; Warner, 2005/2001) one can, if only in a minority of cases, shift personal attacks that attempt to locate power in the intimate realm to a humanizing arena of public dialogue and accountability. Such dialogue is evidence for the possibility of solidarity with fellow citizens whose ideas are necessarily influenced by the partisan rhetorical resources available to explain their uneasiness with the state of the world.

These exchanges show that women assailed in private regarding public matters can reverse the vector of that relationship by going public with their hate mail. It bears saying, however, that this transformation is not the product of reasoned dialogue alone. The pedagogy of public accountability is also the pedagogy of public shaming. My correspondents were deeply embarrassed to find words that they had assumed to be private on public display. Shame can be a powerful motivator, and in deploying it I forced these writers to become accountable to an imagined community of civilized people. In Butler’s (1997) terms, publicity brings the authors-as-agents into relief as part and parcel of a broader sociopolitical context and its relations of power.

The discovery that publicity can be disarming in a culture war may bear upon how we act in public and teach in the traditional classroom. The demands for transparency and accountability are fundamental to the causes of justice and freedom. Asking students to “own up” to the implications of their own common sense in a dialogic process may cultivate democratic habits out of the muck of racism, sexism, nationalism, and homophobia.
Conclusion: Foiling the foils, or, toward solidaristic dialogue

I have argued in this essay that conservative hate mail, particularly that aimed at transgressive women, articulates the identities of its authors against the foils, or constructed personae, of their targets. The mail renders me and other outspoken women as fraudulent, treasonous, and deviant threats to not only the conservative ideology and war efforts, but also to the very self-concept of those efforts’ defenders. Defined in contrast to the dangerous intellectual woman, the authors of my hate mail stand as righteous representatives of the “people” and the arbiters of acceptable masculine and feminine roles and behavior.

My analysis has established the workings of the strategy of identity framing by foil, or foiling. From my analysis we can draw out some of the characteristics of this strategy: First, it is closely tied to naming: the ability to name one’s enemy in political or scatological terms (fraud, traitor, and cunt) focuses self-definition acutely. Second, identity framing by foil applies tremendous pressure to the target through the identification and invocation of psychological, economic, and physical vulnerabilities: self-doubt, internalized oppression, fear of job loss, loss of children, and sexual assault. These vulnerabilities are amplified by the intimate medium of address, in which the writers employ the resources of tone (parodic, belligerent, threatening) and verbal aggression (insult and rant). Third, in the process of establishing the shape of the foil, the rhetor brings him/herself into sharp relief as the antitarget, in other words, as the weapon. This strategy enacts what Burke identified as “the kill”: the definition of self through the total symbolic purgation and/or negation of another.

Finally, although messages are individually authored, they are generated out of an organized political antagonism. That is, Tammy Bruce knows she is arming her readers with the language of anti-intellectualism and patriotism, and misogyny is unfortunately a deep cultural well. Both the political language of mediated conservative ideology and the reservoir of culturally available identities and attitudes are resources for the individual author. Conservatives like Horowitz and Ingraham attempt to put adversarial, irrational demagoguery in place of a real public sphere. As Brock (2004) explains, from their posts behind keyboards and microphones, they marshal spokespersons for impoverished—but effective—ways of talking and thinking about the clash of ideas in U.S. culture.

Further research could explore how the strategy of foiling might be discovered at work in other social movement and political discourse, from Presidential campaign advertising to military training documents, from the anticorporate rhetoric of radical environmentalism to the union steward’s flyer distributed on the shop floor, from the racial exclusionism of far-right discourse to the class antagonism articulated by those on the left, from the pulpits of the Baptists to the mosques of ordinary Muslims, or from the family member of a murder victim to the family member of the criminal awaiting execution. In such contexts, an examination of the texts’ strategies of naming, pressure, identification of the foil, and establishment of the
Foiling the Intellectuals

D. L. Cloud

self in relief may produce new insights about the rhetorical production of identity frames. But are all identity frames and their corresponding foils equally fictive, or are some more faithful to existing social relations than others? Employers and agents of the state (and of their attendant ideologies) do actually threaten and constrain the life chances of many ordinary people around the world. Movements casting oppressive persons and exploitative institutions as foils, then, would find some warrant in the correspondence of the frame to power relations in the material world. In contrast, pointing out when a foiling frame is unwarranted (i.e., when there is no relation of actual enmity or material antagonism) may promote solidarity among people previously at odds.

This solidarity depends upon recognizing that many of my vitriolic correspondents may not even be hardened culture warriors. There can be productive dialogue across ideological positions about what makes a good society. Shifting perspective from the personal to the political—from the interpersonal to the movement and from the self to the society—is a source of agency for the isolated targets of identity framing by foil and for critics working to understand how ideological and political commitments grip us bodily and emotionally, pressing us one against the other in someone else’s fight.

Notes

1 Please go to https://webspace.utexas.edu/clouddl/CloudHateMailTables.doc for a holistic summary in tabular form of all of my hate mail.
2 All spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors are original to the emails from which I quote.
3 Space prohibits a complete discussion of the particularities of electronic mail. Some authors argue that the medium influences the content and impact of hate mail directed at women (see Herring, 2008; Kelley & Savicki, 2000; McGarty & Douglas, 2001; Miller & Durndell, 2004; Monberg, 2005; Morahan-Martin, 2004; Vrooman 2001, 2007).
4 Hits on my blog (withheld) also indicate a pattern of responsiveness to my public activity. Visits peaked on August 30, 2007, in the wake of the letter to the editor against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. As an example of conservative discussion of my activities, see the FreeRepublic.com thread about my revised pledge of allegiance: http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/714618/posts.
5 On the culture war as a strategy of the neconservative movement, see Dunn & Woodard (1991, p. 6); Bloom (1987).
6 Numbers of other scholars on Horowitz’s list received hate mail after such appearances in conservative media. Querying them, I found that frequency and intensity of hate mail depended, with some exceptions, on various factors including overt opposition to Horowitz’s efforts, criticism of Israel, minority race or sexuality, and espousal of militant tactics and revolutionary ideologies.
7 Suggesting the circulation of a form letter, other professors also received letters beginning with the word “Wow,” and containing the epithet “liberal jackass.”
Unfortunately, despite repeated queries to Ingraham’s producers, I have been unable to acquire a recording of the program on which I appeared.

In rhetorical, film, and media studies, the category of the monstrous includes characters whose nature runs against conventional expectations or who embody deep contradictions in popular consciousness from school shooters to lesbian mothers (see Creed, 1993; Gil, 2002; Goc, 2007; Gubrium, 2008; Hoerl, 2002; Wall, 1997; Williams, 1992). Such narratives render those cast as monsters as deserving of death.

References


Carroll, D. (1979). Dear sir, drop dead! Hate mail through the ages. New York: Collier.


Este artículo introduce el concepto de identidad enmarcado por el contraste. Las características de este mecanismo comunicativo son extraídas de un análisis de archivos personales de correo de odio conservador. Identifico 3 encuadres de identidad adversaria claves atribuidos a mí en la correspondencia: intelectual elitista, traidor nacional, y traidor de género. Estos encuadres de la identidad sirven como contraste contra los cuales los autores de las cartas articulan sus identidades como hombres reales y patriotas. Estos ejemplos demuestran cómo el frustrar a uno de los adversarios depende del poder de nombrar; aplican una presión tremenda sobre el objetivo a través de la identificación y la invocación a las vulnerabilidades; y emplea un tono de agresión verbal que Burke identificó como “el matar”: la definición de uno mismo a través de la purgación simbólica y/o la negación del otro.
Dana Cloud

Cet article présente le concept de cadrage identitaire par faire-valoir. Les caractéristiques de ce mécanisme communicationnel sont tirées d’une analyse de ma propre archive personnelle de lettres haineuses provenant de conservateurs. J’identifie trois principaux cadres identitaires accusatoires qui me sont attribués dans la correspondance : intellectuelle élitiste, traîtresse nationale et traîtresse de genre. Ces cadres identitaires servent de faire-valoir à l’égard desquels les lettres des auteurs articulent des identités de vrais hommes et de patriotes. Ces exemples démontrent comment transformer son adversaire en faire-valoir repose sur le pouvoir de nommer, comment cette action exerce une pression énorme sur la cible par l’identification et l’invocation de vulnérabilités et, finalement, comment cette pratique passe par un ton et une agressivité verbale dans ce que Burke a identifié comme « la mise à mort » (the kill) : la définition de soi par la purgation symbolique ou la négation de l’autre.
Die Intellektuellen konterkarieren: Gender, Identitätsrahmung und die Rhetorik des Tötens in konservativen Hassmails

본 논문은 포일에 의해 프레이밍된 동일성의 개념을 소개하고 있다. 이 대화적인 구조의 특징들은 보수적 증오 메일의 개인적 저장소의 분석으로부터 나온 것이다. 나는 편지를 세 가지 주요 적대적인 동일성을 나타내는 메일로 분류하였는데, 그들은 엘리트적 지식인, 국가적 반역자, 그리고 젠더 범죄자들이다. 이러한 동일성 프레임들은 저자의 편지들이 자신들을 애국자로 나타내려고 하는 것에 반한다는 것을 보여주고 있다. 이러한 예들은 어떻게 한사람의 반역을 감싸는 것이 이름회의 과외에 의지하게 되는지, 비난을 받기 쉬운 것들의 동일시와 혁신을 통해 목표에 대한 엄청난 압력에 응용되는지, 그리고 상식적 순수화와 다른사람의 협상을 통한 자아의 동일시로서 Burke가 죽임이라고 동일화한 정도와 언어적 압력을 채용하는가를 증명하고 있다.
本文介绍了“衬托身份认同框架”的概念，通过分析作者个人保留的仇恨邮件的得出这种沟通机制的特点。作者确定了三个在通信中针对我的对立身份框架：精英知识分子，叛国者，性别叛逆者。这些身份框架是信件作者用以明确表明的真正男人和爱国者的衬托。这些例子显示了如何依靠诅咒的力量挫败对手；通过身份认同和诅咒弱点对对方施加巨大压力；并利用如Burke所言的“毁灭性”语调和言语攻击：通过象征性的清洗罪名和（或）对他人的否定进行自我定义。