



NCA PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2020

CIVIC ACTIVISM AND  
SOCIAL JUSTICE  
LEADING NCA AS/THROUGH CHANGE

KENT A. ONO  
UNIVERSITY OF UTAH



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NATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION  
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## NCA PRESIDENT KENT A. ONO

KENT A. ONO is Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. His research focuses on media representations of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation. Professor Ono has made significant contributions to rhetoric and communication theory in three primary areas: critical rhetoric, race and colonialism, and rhetoric and media. His groundbreaking work with John Sloop (Vanderbilt University) in the highly popular area of critical rhetoric has helped change the field of rhetorical studies. Additionally, he has been a scholarly leader of research on race and colonialism in the field of communication, with the best example of this being his book, *Contemporary Media Culture and the Remnants of a Colonial Past* (2009, Peter Lang), which studies the rhetoric of colonialism in the United States and has been translated into Chinese (Tsinghua University Press). Professor Ono has also contributed to research in rhetoric and media, where his work on television shows such as *Mad Men*, *Star Trek*, and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, for example, and his work on films such as *Pocahontas*, *Avatar*, and *Come See the Paradise*, have had a significant impact on critical media research. He is past editor of *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* and *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (with Ron Jackson). He is also the founding editor of the book series, *Critical Cultural Communication*, at New York University Press (which he edited with Sarah Banet-Weiser).



## CIVIC ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADING NCA AS/THROUGH CHANGE

*Following is a transcript of the 2020 NCA Presidential Address as delivered.*

THANK YOU FOR JOINING ME. I appreciate your making the time to tune in to this streaming Presidential Address and to be a part of this virtual National Communication Association Convention during these challenging and difficult times.

I want to begin by saying that I am recording this address from the University of Utah, which is on the unceded ancestral lands of the Shoshone, Paiute, Goshute, and Ute nations. I honor and give thanks to indigenous communities in Utah for the privilege of being able to live and work here. I also want to thank Routledge, Taylor, & Francis for making this talk, and our awards presentation, possible. Many heartfelt thanks also go out to David McMahon, First Vice President and Primary Program Planner, Kristin Yednock, Convention Manager, and the rest of the National Office Staff for all of their hard work that has made this convention, and this address, possible.

In the 20 minutes I have to deliver this address, I hope to do three things: first, to welcome you to this address, which I have now just done, and if you are a new member, to the association. As Utahns say, “I appreciate you.” If we were gathering in person, I would hope that as a new member, you would introduce yourself to me at the traditional Newcomers Reception, and tell me at least a little bit about what brings you to NCA. And, of course, I would look forward to connecting with old friends and making new ones. We are not in person, though, so as I record this, I must content myself with picturing your faces, and with hoping you will picture me walking toward you, hand outstretched, for a warm greeting.

Second, in this address I want to reflect on the NCA Presidency from the perspective of being a person of color and the first Asian American, first mixed-race Asian American, and first Japanese American President of the Association. Being NCA’s President is both a tremendous honor and a serious obligation. It is an honor, because members entrust a President with the power to lead through this unique role. It is an obligation, because, as a person of color, one strives to do their very best for all members as well as to honor the legacy of other NCA members of color who struggled historically and struggle contemporarily to make this a better Association. Leadership itself can be part of change.

And, third, I will end by talking about activism and leadership, the need for them, and the need for an engaged constituency in this, the largest and broadest Communication professional organization in the world.

“ I remember saying . . . I don't want another student in the field of Communication to have the same experience I have had of finding next to nothing about people who looked like them. ”

While a Master's student in Communication at Miami University, in the great state of Ohio, back in the late 1980s, I realized my passion and my dream, which was to become a rhetorical critic, a scholar, and a professor. The support I received from people including Jack Rhodes, Kathleen German, John Murphy, and Jimmie Trent made it possible for me to envision pursuing a doctoral degree—something I had never seriously considered before Miami—and to be prepared to attend the University of Iowa as the first in my immediate family to seek a post-baccalaureate degree. My parents, after all, wanted me to get a job, and graduate education was, in my household, an alien concept and promised to be more of a debt creator than a lucrative career.

It was at Iowa that I realized how little writing about people of color there actually was in the field, and hence how few lessons about people of color were available to me in Rhetoric and Communication. At the moment I realized this, I committed to fixing it. I remember saying to Bruce Gronbeck, Michael McGee, John Lyne, Kathleen Farrell, and others that “I don't want another student in the field of Communication to have the same experience I have had of finding next to nothing about people who looked like them.” Their support, and especially Bruce Gronbeck's inimitable guidance, set me on a path to writing a dissertation about Japanese American protest rhetoric and to working with other scholars in the field to produce scholarship relevant to people of color and indigenous people, a passion I continue to pursue today.

Like so many of us, I have been overlooked and bypassed many times during my journey. Sometimes, even my mentors abandoned me because of my politics or advised me to set my goals lower. Most recently, I have received hate mail because of my research on critical race theory. And, my reputation has been, at key moments, negatively affected because I am outspoken. I have also felt invisible and not taken seriously. An early memory while on faculty at UC Davis stands out to me: I was at a scholarly talk as an audience member on campus as so very many of us have been, and a fellow faculty member publicly mistook me for an AV tech and would not take my protesting “I am not an AV Tech. I am a Professor” for an answer, insisting I must be “the AV Tech.” Also at Davis: while I was speaking as a representative of faculty of color and indigenous faculty in a meeting with campus administrators in a small room, the Chancellor interrupted my opening statement on behalf of the group and scolded me in apparent fear or worry, proclaiming loudly: “Now, this has got to be a civil discussion.” I tell you these brief stories for three reasons: first, to connect with those of you who have experienced similar things in academia; second, to inform those of you who may not have had experiences like these to hear about them; and third, to preface my suggestion here that NCA is more than just another professional organization for me.

Attending my first NCA Annual Convention in Boston in 1987 was probably pretty much the same for me as it was for most people. The number of people at the convention was overwhelming, but also exciting. I was thrilled to be around so many people like me who were serious about Communication. As a newcomer, I was just a number in a very large crowd of people, and I felt invisible. I knew very few people, but a memory that particularly stands out to me helped change my relationship to NCA. At an early convention, I ran into Tom Nakayama, this year's Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecturer, and Tom showed a genuine interest in me. He told me about the newly formed Asian/Pacific American Caucus, and invited me to the APAC business meeting. While at the business meeting, I began to feel at ease. It was homey, informal, conversational, unassuming, unpretentious, inviting, and relaxed. It was there at APAC that I met Gordon Nakagawa, Casey Lum, and Kate Motoyoma, as well as many others, and ultimately went on to be

an early Chair of APAC. I had found a home, one where I would later meet Rona Halualani, the late Todd Imahori, and so many others. NCA was my first academic home “in the field of Communication”—it was a foothold, a place to be comfortable as a scholar, and a place to grow. APAC connected me to NCA and NCA connected me to the larger field of Communication.

Because of my work in APAC, and later the Affirmative Action and Intercaucus Committee, I met so many people who became my friends, such as the late Lyndry Niles and the late Nacho Cordova. NCA opened my eyes to people like me who were doing work in Communication departments and at universities far and wide. We talked about shared struggles within the field of Communication, and within academia more broadly. I began to see my own experiences and concerns as allied with colleagues throughout the field. I came to understand that the problems each of us experienced within our social bubble extended out to others in their bubbles. Hence, I began to realize how individual concerns were really NCA-wide and even sometimes national concerns, and those concerns could be addressed through policy and legislation (among other things). Indeed, change was possible.

These last few years as an elected leader have been years of significant change. I don’t know how this period compares with other times of change in NCA, prior to the beginning of my membership in the 1980s, but to me these years are memorable. For example, the leadership of NCA changed the way the NCA Distinguished Scholar Awards were handled. The *Journal of Communication* published Paula Chakravartty, Rachel Kuo, Victoria Grubbs, and Charlton McIlwain’s, “#CommunicationSoWhite,” which drew attention to the racial inequities in the spheres of journal editing, editorial boards, publications, and citations. The “Communication Scholars for Transformation” Facebook page was launched. NCA members initiated the “Open Letter on Diversity and in the Communication Discipline,” which garnered 1,000 signatures within two days. The journal, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* was reconceived and reorganized. A new journal also out of Michigan State University Press, *Rhetoric, Politics, & Culture*, was founded. “CRTNET” was retired, and “COMMNotes” was created. Past President Ronald L. Jackson II, initiated an NCA Task Force that resulted in the establishment of the “NCA Center for Communication, Community Collaboration, and Change.” Star Muir headed up NCA’s Task Force on sexual harassment. And, this year, the Legislative Assembly has the opportunity to approve an Indigenous Caucus proposal. These are only a few of the many, many important changes that took place during this period.

In addition to these notable changes within the association and the discipline, there have been social changes. Recent events have caused many of us to become active, more active, or active again. At the same time that COVID-19 has changed our lives, sometimes in the most painful and permanent ways, activist movements against police brutality; against the current threat of fascism; and against anti-Black, anti-Asian, anti-Queer, anti-Feminist, anti-Latinx, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Immigrant political currents have been growing apace, and with increasing intensity. These events inspire many of us to become more active and to seek and make change.

For some scholars in the field, making change is part of being us—many among us have a second shift, or even a third one. The “second shift” refers to the work that women so often have to do at the end of the day after their paid jobs outside of the home are done. The “third shift” is the social activist and community work women of color and indigenous women often do, usually after everybody else has gone to bed. To put this another way, social activism and change, and working to improve communities, including NCA, were occupations for scholars of color in the Association long before the most recent horrific events that pain us and depress us, but also remind us, reenergize us, and refocus or redirect our efforts. This, of course, is not to say that we are the only ones engaged in change, just that there is an existential reason for our being engaged in it.

Often, this work we do comes under fire. Our efforts get noticed, but not in the ways we would want. Yes, we are prepared for this; it does not surprise us; and yet, each time it happens, we still feel raw shock. Right now, universities, scholarly associations such as NCA, as well as the work many of us do in those

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universities and associations, are under attack. The Trump administration’s “Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping” banning diversity training, and his calling Critical Race Theory “un-American propaganda,” combined with his announcement that he will “sign an Executive Order establishing a national commission to promote patriotic education” should concern us all, as such top-down executive policy making encroaches on freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and academic freedom and is a troubling entrée into university education and scholarship. So, what do we do about it?

In addition to any advocacy we do after work on our teaching and research days, we must have critical discussions in academia about the role of government and the rights of humans. We must discuss why a free and public press is necessary to any serious vision of social justice and democracy. We must also participate in the governance of our professional associations, organizations that (as NCA does) represent us in Washington, DC and provide information and guidance to the public about communication issues, organizations which encourage and support our scholarship, teaching, service, and careers.

As you reflect on what I have said in this talk—that NCA became a professional academic home for me, in part because I met Tom and attended an APAC business meeting; that I decided long ago to help make the field better for people of color and indigenous Communication students, professionals, and scholars; that I have had the privilege of having been a leader during significant change in the association and field, and that my presence, itself, is both a sign of and an act of change in the association—I invite you to think about leading during a period of change and leading as itself a type of change and to become engaged yourself. See yourself as someone who matters. See your actions and your presence as part of change. I call on you to be part of the field and association’s renewed civic activism, an activism that is premised on a powerful recognition of material reality and the conditions in which people live, an activism that views service on behalf of others as a social good, and an activism that puts the “I” in the service of the “we.” I encourage you not to fall prey to ideas that civic activism in a professional organization is not “real,” for anytime we change peoples’ lives, it is real. And, we are all complex humans, with complex pasts and complex communities, and we play many roles in life. NCA is a place where change happens, and it is a place where futures can be created and sustained. So many past leaders within NCA, far too numerous to name here, have shown us as living examples why it is important to struggle, and what comes of that struggle. They have struggled for what we have now. Honoring their legacies is critical to further humanizing this space we call academia. Simultaneously, struggling ourselves for new change—that is, becoming leaders, and leading—is critical to creating a healthy, vibrant, rich, and lively future. Helping others, and sharing our experiences with them through mentorship, pedagogy, and service is yet another critical ingredient to finding art and beauty—indeed *arête*—in scholarly life. It is time for us to lead. And, by leading, we must share our experiential knowledge with those who will next step into our shoes, make NCA their home, and continue our work of making it a better place.

Thank you!

